

# WHEN FINEHOUSE LIU MET PROSPER WANG

當劉宅好遇到阿旺\*

Charles D. WANG 王大智

Liu Zhaihao was destined to become a fortune teller, on account of his name. If you reverse the order of the characters in his given name you get Haozhai, which means “good house.” To country folks, it would seem like anyone with a name like that would be good at *feng shui*, at helping a person find a nice place to live. What’s more, his surname has the exact same sound as another character meaning “to keep.” Think about it: how could a name like Keep Finehouse not get people thinking? This, then, was Liu Zhaihao’s fate, and his fate was inseparable from his name. Was there any particular reason why he was called Liu Zhaihao? No reason at all. His father chose his name, and his father was an illiterate coal miner from the town of Jui-fang.

As Liu Zhaihao was called Finehouse from an early age, it was only natural he would take the fortune teller’s road in life. It was not the family business, so he found it tough getting started. His knowledge of the art of fortune telling ended up being kind of a mixed bag. But Liu Zhaihao did not mind. For better or worse, everyone in this line of work was like that. Whose understanding of the shady arts of *jianghu*—the underworld of gangsters and mystics—was not half-baked? One learned the lore little by little. That was the *jianghu*

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way! If everyone had a qualified teacher and a diploma, it wouldn't be *jianghu*. Liu Zhaihao actually did meet a master in the district of Wanhua in Taipei City right after arriving from Jui-fang. But this master turned out to be a swindler. Liu Zhaihao lost quite a lot of money, though he did get a set of the arcane tomes of fortune telling, which the master passed on to him when he didn't have anything better to do. Liu Zhaihao had nothing good to say about the fellow.

Liu Zhaihao wanted to get himself a temple in Taipei, because anyone who wants to make a living by spinning a spiel should have his own "spot" where customers can visit him. Otherwise, he'd be like the street hawkers who call out to passersby. Those people are low class. No fortune teller of any repute would stoop to that. In the movies, a rich man might flag down a fortune teller with nothing more than a banner to guarantee the accuracy of his predictions. He might get the fortune teller to pay him a house call. That would never happen in real life. Why would a rich man go and hire any fortune teller off the street? A fortune teller without a place of his own has no place in society. That's just the way it is. It's simple when you think about it.

But to get a temple up and running would have required resources Liu Zhaihao simply did not have. To take up residence at a temple would have meant soliciting favors, but Liu Zhaihao did not want to be obliged. In the end, he decided to rent a little room in the Lion Grove Garden Building in Ximending. He put an altar in the doorway. This served as a makeshift table for serving tea and chatting with customers. Behind the altar was a large statue, so large that it almost touched the ceiling. Behind the statue there was a small space. On the floor, Liu Zhaihao had arranged what appeared to be precious stones into the Daoist bagua octogram. That was where he practiced the dark arts. Actually, it was also where he slept. But sleeping behind that statue did no harm to his reputation. Most people saw the stones and assumed that anyone who could sleep on them must be very gifted. Most were simply baffled by the statue. How did he get it in there? The statue had been given to him when a temple was demolished, though that still did not explain how he had gotten it moved in. But that's *jianghu* for you. It's a realm of mystery. You can't talk nonsense,

but visitors to *jianghu* don't exactly want to talk sense, preferring to place their faith in the mystery, to suspend their disbelief just for the fun of it. Of course, Liu Zhaihao said that the statue had found its way in there all by itself. He would say that, because this was the way he made his living.

So that is how Liu Zhaihao came to have his own "location." It's funny, but though Ximending is a sketchy part of Taipei, customers still came to see him. Liu Zhaihao's trivial erudition came in handy. He told fortunes and drew lots for people. He put on a good show. Few people realize that fortune telling assumes that fate is fixed, to be deduced based on date and time of birth or determined by the features of face and palm, whereas lot drawing assumes that fate is indeterminate, to be decided by spiritual whim. These premises are contradictory. You might say that if you believe in one, you cannot really take the other very seriously. But that was how Liu Zhaihao operated. If nobody quibbled with his methods, he was not about to quibble with them, either. That was *jianghu*.

By the time Liu Zhaihao's fortune telling studio had been up and running for a few years, business was up and down. One midsummer's day when he didn't have any clients, Liu Zhaihao went back home to Jui-fang to attend the Ghost Festival banquet. Jui-fang was a colliery town that had seen better days, so the food and entertainment were less than satisfactory. But that old-fashioned country warmth had not changed. Old folks and childhood friends sitting round the table saw Liu Zhaihao as a success. Had he not dared to leave Jui-fang and make his way in Taipei? That could not have been easy. Country folks play it safe, but they admire people who take chances. In Jui-fang, unlike in Taipei, Liu Zhaihao was accorded honor and respect. Everyone wanted to talk to him, because it seemed that to talk to him was to be like him, a person with the guts to go out and make something of himself. Liu Zhaihao was too busy socializing to ask himself why the people of Jui-fang were so hospitable. Anyway he was not a very analytical person. But what need was there for him to analyze anything? Worldly wisdom was the whole of Liu Zhaihao's philosophy.

People were chatting after dinner. Things seemed to be winding down. Liu Zhaihao was getting ready to leave, when all of a sudden Prosper Wang arrived. Prosper had been Liu Zhaihao's elementary schoolmate. He had never left Jui-fang. He lived life one day at a time. The other thing about Prosper was that he was known to be not very good looking. In the countryside appearance isn't too important, so if country folks said he was ugly, then he must have been really ugly.

When they were kids, Liu Zhaihao had never considered Prosper unattractive. He never paid any attention to such things. All he remembered was that Prosper's voice was raspy and that he had a bit of a lisp. And he was kind of short. As an adult he was all of five foot five. But it was also true that in elementary school, Prosper had suffered quite a lot on account of his appearance. As everyone knows, without really meaning anything by it, kids can be quite mean to a classmate who looks different by taunting and teasing him. Prosper never stood up for himself when kids made fun of him. Actually, that was how Liu Zhaihao and Prosper made friends. Liu Zhaihao came to Prosper's defense one time by shoving some kids who were calling him names. He had some choice words for them! For that, Liu Zhaihao got a printed commendation in spring of grade three from the homeroom teacher Fat Pig Luo. The commendation was inscribed with the words: Brave Boy Award.

Prosper had not eaten any of the festival feast. He had arrived, seen Liu Zhaihao, and immediately left. It was not that Prosper did not want to see his old friend; he was hoping that Liu Zhaihao would agree to tell his son's fortune. Prosper'd walked all the way home only to find his little boy sound asleep. He'd scooped the boy out of bed and the two of them had walked all the way back to the banquet. By the time they got there the food was almost gone.

Liu Zhaihao was overjoyed to see Prosper. But joy turned to shock when he saw Prosper's son. The boy was about eight or nine, and just as ugly as his father. Perhaps because he was a fortune teller, Liu Zhaihao had a touch of professional intuition whenever he met someone. He was afraid that with those looks the kid would be ill-fated. As he gave father and son the old professional perusal,

he started to feel sad. And somewhat mystified: Why had he never realized how ugly Prosper was? He waved at Prosper and greeted him in a loud voice.

“Prosper! Long time no see!”

Prosper was a bit taken aback by Liu Zhaihao’s genial manner. They had been childhood chums, but now Liu Zhaihao was in business in Taipei while he was doing odd jobs in Jui-fang. Prosper did not feel anything in particular about this discrepancy, but he felt that he had better not be too genial in return, lest people think he did not know his place, lest he cause Liu Zhaihao to lose face.

“Hello.” Prosper’s reply was neither too loud nor too soft. “I’d like to ask a favor if you don’t mind. I wonder if it be too much to ask you to tell my son’s fortune?”

Liu Zhaihao felt that there was a distance between Prosper and himself, and not an emotional distance. It was rather, how to put it, a kind of distance with which Liu Zhaihao was not unacquainted. One time, a gangster had asked him to tell his fortune. The gangster was wearing a second-hand Rolex, his woman a faux fox fur stole. Liu Zhaihao had felt the same kind of distance that time. It must be a kind of status, a kind of social class that was hard to overcome.

This kind of distance didn’t give Liu Zhaihao any satisfaction, not at all. In fact, he now felt a second wave of unhappiness, and some loneliness, too. Making ends meet in Taipei wasn’t always easy. Today, standing on the other end of this kind of distance he just couldn’t get used to it. He wanted to move closer to Prosper, but Prosper kept his distance. Liu Zhaihao felt that this distance gave Prosper a strange kind of control, while he remained passive. And nobody feels comfortable when he is forced to play a passive role.

“Aw, c’mon. Sit down and have a drink with your old friend before you get down to business!” Though Liu Zhaihao had only been muddling along all these years in Taipei, his occupation had given him a certain ability to handle himself in social situations.

“Alright. I would like to drink a toast in your honor.” Prosper sat down on an empty stool and poured himself a glass of beer. Liu Zhaihao immediately lifted his own glass, and in the moment their

eyes met, Liu Zhaihao's heart was filled with good will. Prosper immediately looked away.

"Sit down, Clay. Have something to eat." Prosper dragged his son, who was standing behind him, over by another stool. Obediently, the kid sat down.

"Prosper! You're here too! Taking good care of your wife these days, eh?" This fellow was known as Shit Nit, but everyone would only call him Uncle Nate to his face. He was the local bully. Shit Nit had been a nasty kid, always picking on people. After he grew up he kept up his bullying ways. You know the type: always taking advantage of people, always taking it easy, always letting others do all the work. Liu Zhaihao gave him a professional once over but didn't see anything in particular. That's fate for you! There is nothing wrong with interpreting everything in terms of fate. It helps you accept things the way they are.

"Prosper! I asked ya a question! How's yer wife?" Shit Nit was a bit drunk. He was talking really loud.

"Hey, ya want me to handle her for you? I'll give ya a discount!" Everyone found the idea of handling someone's wife for a discount hilarious.

"What's that supposed to mean? Who'd be paying who here? Huh?"

Talking in a funny tone of voice, a fellow named Big Mouth made a scene. The people at the next table burst out laughing. That's just how it goes. Nobody really understands why we laugh along with others. Laughter can mean many things, but it seldom means we're happy. Mostly it means we're vulnerable and afraid, making the best of a situation while trying to hide the fact from others. At any rate, Big Mouth's boorish quip made everyone laugh. It was like being kids again. Prosper was still the one who was always getting picked on. The others recalled the roles they used to play. Prosper took a swig but didn't say anything. Clay quietly peeled the wrapper off a candy and put it in his mouth, looking as if he had no idea what the adults were saying.

"Hey! Finehouse, my main man! Tell his son's fortune! Tell us

if the kid is really Prosper's!" Shit Nit was talking to Liu Zhaihao like he was telling him what to do. There was another burst of laughter. Liu Zhaihao laughed along with them. But in the back of his mind he already had a plan.

"No problem! But I don't tell fortunes for nothing. I ain't cheap." Liu Zhaihao lit a cigarette and started smoking it in an urbane and sophisticated way that set him quite apart from the folks of Jui-fang. The table quieted down a bit. They suddenly saw this fellow who had gone to seek his fortune in the big city in a different light. He now had a kind of exotic bearing or demeanor. Of course, the very mention of money can shut many people up.

"Sometimes business is slow, I have to say! But I do have some steady customers, all of them CEOs." Liu Zhaihao narrowed his eyes, took another drag, and slowly looked around.

"What I'm saying is that when you do consulting work, there's a regular monthly retainer. When you line up a few corporations it all adds up and it ain't too bad." Liu Zhaihao ashed his cigarette. A few of them managed to observe the flicking motion of his thumb.

"Most of these businessmen have strange dispositions, don't you know? There's this one car dealer who doesn't like to pay in cash. He'll say, 'You fortune tellers are aloof from worldly concerns. You're noble benefactors of the ill-fated. Paying people like you in cash is so vulgar.' So ya know what he does? He gives me a car every year instead! Second-hand, of course. Oh these Taipei city folks talk so polite. He's always saying, 'If that would be alright with you?' 'If you wouldn't find that unacceptable?' And 'Please accept this small token of my appreciation.' Know what I mean?"

"So it sure ain't easy making ends meet. I get the car, but turning it into cash is easier said than done. Now I've got three Mercedeses on my hands that I don't know what to do with. What a headache!" Liu Zhaihao brought out some of the old *jianghu* shtick.

"Ah!" said Big Mouth. You couldn't tell from the abrupt sound he made if he was envious or feeling Liu Zhaihao's pain.

"But everything depends on *feng shui*. When a boss starts a business, the thing he's most concerned about is *feng shui*, because

with bad *feng shui* it doesn't matter how hard he works: he'll just burn through his money!" Liu Zhaihao took another drag.

"Right, *feng shui* is absolutely crucial!" someone said.

"My studio is in Wanhua, by the way. In that part of town it's hard to avoid dealings with the mafia."

"Goodfellas want their fortunes told, too?"

"Do they ever! Your typical gangster is a hard-nosed fellow. He won't get his fortune told until he's gonna get caught or sent to jail. Then he wants his fortune told, to see if he can beat the rap." Liu Zhaihao ashed his cigarette again.

"For these gangsters I always look at the eight characters of fate, you know, two characters each for the year, month, day and hour of birth. I also do physiognomy and palmistry, face and palm reading in layman's terms. They're pretty good to me, these gangsters. With them I don't have to mention money. They'll slip me red envelopes. Thick ones, would you say? Oh these fellows are never tightfisted. We all do our thing in *jianghu*. They're martial, I'm civil. We're all friends!"

"Right, the eight characters are absolutely vital. We should all get our palms read more often!" someone else said.

"To be honest with you, I only read the half of it. Half is for me to read. The other half is for the spirits to reveal."

"Wow! For the spirits to reveal." At the mention of spirits, many people at the table pulled their stools closer.

"I kid you not. For the spirits to reveal. In my studio I've got a statue of the demon queller Nezha, a.k.a. the Third Lotus Prince. It just might be the biggest one in the whole country." Liu Zhaihao opened his eyes wide and suddenly started hiccupping.

"Here they come." Big Mouth showed how well he knew the business.

"They never used to come. But these past few years, they come whenever I think of them."

"Hey son, don't be afraid! You're going to be just fine!" Liu Zhaihao was still hiccupping. The table was quiet. Even people at neighboring tables were looking on. These folks had nothing but

respect for the spirits. And for spiritual specialists like Liu Zhaihao: they all knew that once a person gets to a certain level in his mystical training he's not the same as regular folks.

"Alright, Prosper, I'm going to see what's in store for your son, whether he has any special needs. Be grateful if he doesn't. Otherwise we'll do whatever needs doing!"

Prosper nudged his son in front of Liu Zhaihao.

"Sit down now. I'm gonna take a good look at you and tell your fortune. Your dad and I are old pals. This one's for free, see." People started whispering. Some were looking at Prosper. They had a funny feeling that Prosper had now come under spiritual protection through the intercession of Liu Zhaihao. And they'd just been laughing at him. They wondered if anything might happen to them in the way of retribution.

"Come on now! Sit up straight. You're the same age I was when your dad and I made friends. Alright now! I want to know your eight characters. What's your birthday, my boy?"

Prosper duly reported the year, month, day and hour of his son's birth. Liu Zhaihao raised his hand and started counting on his fingers. He had another attack of the hiccups.

Liu Zhaihao finished reckoning and took a good look at Clay. Woe is me! Not an attractive kid! His eyes were big, but too close together, almost cross-eyed. His eyebrows were extremely sparse, almost non-existent! His nose was huge. A big nose is no big deal, but his was a big, flat nose with upturned nostrils! Worse, he had a big nose and a small, cute, cherry of a mouth! People would have to kick themselves not to laugh at this combination of sparse eyebrows and lazy eyes, a cherry mouth and a big, flat nose. Then there was the shape of his head. Clay's brow was small, but his chin was big. From any angle he looked like a pomelo! The weirdest thing was his ears. He had one big wind-catching sail of an ear. Make no mistake! One of his ears was sticking out, not both! Liu Zhaihao had often gone to Prosper's house to play as a child. He now remembered that Prosper's granny's ears stuck out, but both of her ears stuck out, of that Liu Zhaihao was certain. How Clay managed to get himself a single one Liu Zhaihao

had no idea. The mechanics of fate are truly mysterious!

Liu Zhaihao was about to speak, when suddenly he glanced over at Prosper. Clay and Prosper did not look much alike, but they did have one thing in common: poorly matched features. Many big businessmen were ugly. The worst was not being ugly, it was being funny looking! The person who is both ugly and funny looking is cursed, fated to be picked on from an early age. Soon he's used to getting laughed at. He starts feeling sorry for himself. Eventually he gives up on himself. This was not something Liu Zhaihao had read in a book. He had learned it on his own. The truth is, he'd seen enough people in the big city to know that he didn't really have to do any complex calculations to tell a person's fortune! An old personnel manager once told him: "It's all in the face." It seemed to Liu Zhaihao that these words deserved more consideration, and were of more practical benefit, than all the words written in many books.

Liu Zhaihao's mind was reeling. He now realized why he had felt sad when he took in Clay's appearance and when he saw Prosper's cringing manner. Because: "It's all in the face." Like father like son. Clay and Prosper shared the same fate! They were both born to be bullied; neither would ever be able to raise his head high as long as he lived.

There was now a slight change of plan. At first Liu Zhaihao had just been thinking about the immediate situation. He did not like Shit Nit telling him what to do and had come up with a way of putting him in his place. Now Liu Zhaihao changed his mind. He suddenly had some thoughts that had never occurred to him before, thoughts he had never dared to think. It was like there was something, some enigma connecting a person's character, occupation and even his fate. These fragmentary notions were flashing around in Liu Zhaihao's mind. He ended up finding it all somehow amusing. He put out his cigarette and cleared his throat.

"Hmmm. This kid's fortune sure isn't easy to tell. Hey Prosper! You're sure there's no mistake?"

"No. How could there be?"

"It's so strange. He has the sign of the spirits on his side!" Liu

Zhaihao tilted his head and raised one of his eyebrows.

"The sign of the spirits. Omigod!" The people around the table were in an uproar. They didn't know what to think.

"No mistake! But how could this be? I've never seen anything like it!"

Liu Zhaihao took another look at Clay. He took the boy's chin in his hand and shook it from side to side.

"The boy has what we fortune tellers call a beneficent bearing! See? Big eyes! Big nose! Big chin! If that's not spiritual beneficence I don't know what is! The boy is among the blessed."

Liu Zhaihao slowly released Clay's chin.

"But his eight characters indicate the sign of the spirits. It's bizarre: you can tell from his face that he's one of the fortunate ones. But why the sign of the spirits?" Everyone started whispering. They started to feel the strangeness of it, too, as if it went without saying that Clay was fortunate and that the important question now was: Why the sign of the spirits?

"Aha!" Liu Zhaihao shouted. Everyone jumped in his seat. Big Mouth's stool tilted so far he almost fell over.

"That's it! His ear! Do you see?"

"An ear that sticks out! An ear that sticks out so far it catches the wind like a sail. But only one!"

"Wow!" Amazed, everyone came over to take a closer look at Clay's ears.

"It's true! But only one!"

"No doubt about it! Just so! What about it? You've never seen one before?"

Liu Zhaihao took out another cigarette and immediately someone lit it for him.

"Let me tell you, two is nothing. Wang Yung-ching the plastics industry baron has two."

"Two come from your parents, but one is a gift from the gods!" Liu Zhaihao's voice was deep and commanding.

"It sure is." Someone beside Liu Zhaihao weighed in hastily, lest people would think him an ignoramus or assume he didn't believe in

the spirits.

Clay blinked. He neither knew nor cared what was going on around him. Prosper's brow furrowed, as if he did not know what to do.

"Hey! You hear that, Prosper? You've been cultivating on the sly! No doubt about it! This child is lucky to have a father like you! He's got great things in store for him." Always the big talker, Shit Nit wanted to show that he, too, was on the side of the spirits. But he still wanted to be in charge, to make all the pronouncements. Liu Zhaihao nodded, glanced at the county scoundrel, and smiled.

"He must be carefully molded! When he grows up he will represent the spirits! You must seek a temple for him and a master."

"I should say that his master will come in search of him." Liu Zhaihao had as a matter of course become the local opinion leader. He looked up. Prosper had been squeezed so far back Liu Zhaihao could hardly see him.

"Prosper, don't you worry about a thing. You can't be sure when the spirits will give you a sign. But rest assured. You've fathered a good son."

Prosper's brow was still creased. The outcome had too greatly exceeded his expectations.

"I understand. Alright then." Prosper stood up and looked at Clay.

"Time to go home, son." Prosper took Clay's hand and walked away. He said neither thank you nor goodbye. He didn't know what had just hit him. He had had no idea that this very evening he would meet a spiritual benefactor. His elementary classmate, in less than five minutes, had changed his son's fate and his own fate at one and the same time! Life would be better for the both of them, father and son, in the town of Jui-fang, for the foreseeable future.

Liu Zhaihao took the ten o'clock train back to Taipei. When he went through the gate, the ticket puncher said, "Please." Liu Zhaihao was fairly shocked. When did the conductors start talking so polite? He boarded the train and found a window seat. He started thinking about what had happened this evening, and about his role in life as

a fortune teller. Liu Zhaihao suddenly had an ineffably good feeling about his occupation. He seemed to have reached a new level in his spiritual training. He felt that life was meaningful.

The train slowly started moving. Tired, Liu Zhaihao closed his eyes and dozed off. He kept thinking while he was dozing. He started wondering about the spirits, about *jianghu* and about friendship, too. It seemed that a great many things had new definitions and explanations. He thought and thought. He thought a great deal. But it never occurred to him that this very evening he too had met a spiritual benefactor.

*Translated by Darryl STERK 石岱崙*