

Xiong Shili Discusses His Life: The Recorded Notes of Li Dixuan

While the Teacher [Xiong Shili 1885-1968] walked leisurely with his cane, I [Li Dixuan 黎澹玄 n.d.] accompanied him and invited him to discuss his life briefly. The Teacher casually discussed his life, and I immediately recorded his words as follows.¹

My ancestors came from a scholar-official family that was in decline. My father, [Xiong] Qixiang (熊其相, d. 1895), studied the doctrines of [the Song Neo-Confucians] Cheng-Zhu.² He had a lifetime of hardship and did not live long. When I was ten years old [in 1895], my father contracted pulmonary tuberculosis, but food and clothing were insufficient. I herded cattle for others [to earn money]. My father often sighed and said: “The expression in this boy’s eyes is special, but I am not able to teach him literacy. What’s to be done?”

My father forced himself to open a private school to tutor students and took me to the school to learn. He started by teaching me the *Three Character Classic* (三字經).³ I read and memorized that book in one day. He then started teaching me the *Four Books* (四書)⁴, and I asked for even more lessons. My father, however, was unwilling saying: “It is better to be more reserved.” I asked to attend his lectures, and he agreed. At the time, my father had among his students many who had passed the county level imperial examinations. I am proud to say that I understood [the lectures] better than most of them. When my father asked questions, I answered immediately. This made my father happy but then he would show a sad expression.

In the autumn of that year, I began studying how to write eight-legged essays [used in the imperial examinations]. Eight-legged essays have a set of rules not easily flaunted so my father was quite surprised [at how well I learned to write eight-legged essays]. A year later, my father’s illness worsened, and he was bedridden. Near the end of his life, he stroked my head and cried saying: “You will eventually have to abandon your studies. It’s fate! You are frail and sickly, however, and not capable of farm work. You should learn to be a tailor as a means of livelihood.” I made a vow to him saying: “No matter what, I will respectfully accept your ambition for me and will not abandon my studies.” My father then passed away silently. I never dared to neglect my studies because during my whole life I never forgot this vow to my father.

My oldest brother, Zhongfu (仲甫), attended school until he was fifteen years old. Due to poverty, he changed from studying to farming. He carried books into the fields, and when he had spare time,

¹ Li Dixuan’s (黎澹玄) Recorded Conversation [with Xiong Shili]; *Collected Works*, XV, Essential Sayings of Xiong Shili 十力語要, *juan* 3, pp. 306-328. There are no dates for Li but he was a member of Xiong’s intellectual circle and was also involved in Liang Shuming’s (梁漱溟 1893-1988) Rural Reconstruction Movement. According to the penultimate sentence, the conversation took place when Xiong was more than sixty, hence after 1944.

² A reference to the Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism founded by Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130-1200) and the brothers Cheng Yi (程頤 1033-1107) and Cheng Hao (程顥 1032-1085). The three purged Confucianism of Daoist and Buddhist concepts and used metaphysics as a method to create a rationalist ethical philosophy.

³ The *Three Character Classic* is a children’s primer written in the 13th century. The text consists of 1,248 characters in couplets of three characters to help children learn Chinese characters and vocabulary.

⁴ The Song dynasty Confucian Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130-1200) selected the *Four Books* to represent the core values of Confucianism.

he read. I imitated him. I previously studied with Teacher He (Bingli 何炳黎, circa 1870-1930) for six months. See the second lecture in the *Essentials for Reading the Classics* (讀經示要).⁵ Apart from Teacher He, I had no other teacher.

When I was around twenty years old (1905), a certain neighboring county successful candidate in the imperial examinations at the provincial level⁶ would board public transportation and go to buy new books, such as *Primers on the Investigation of Things* (格致啟蒙),⁷ and then return home. I would borrow these books [from the scholar-official] to read and found them deeply interesting. I also read the essays and memorials to the emperor of the reformists at that time and knew that the world was changing daily.⁸ I decided to make Fan Zhongyan's (范仲淹 989-1052) statement "To be concerned about the world's troubles before everyone else is" my motto.

When a youth, I liked to remove my clothing and did not practice etiquette and, in imitation of [the Daoist eccentric] Zi Sangbo Zi (子桑伯子 no dates),⁹ I would go outside without clothes or a hat. In the summer, I lived in an abandoned temple and would often go out without any clothes and did not shy away when people passed by. I also liked to smash [statues of] Bodhisattvas. Some people reported this to my older brother [Zhongfu] but he did not censure me. A Mister Yu, who had been a student of my late father, reprimanded me harshly saying: "If your late father knew of your behavior, would he approve?" Chagrined, I dared not act like that again.

At this time, the national situation was getting worse by the day. I was reading some of the [anti-imperial] works written by [Ming dynasty Confucians] Chuanshan (船山 pseudonym of Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 1619-1692) and Tinglin (亭林 pseudonym of Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 1613-1682) and aspired to become a revolutionary. I did not sit the imperial examination; instead, I went to [the city of] Wuchang [now Wuhan] and enlisted as a soldier at the Kaizi Barracks (凱子營) to rally the army [to the republican revolutionary cause].

[Later] I passed the examination for admission to the Army Special School.¹⁰ Gradually, the school's Commander Zhang Biao (張彪 1869-1912) detected [my clandestine revolutionary work] and wanted to arrest me. Upon hearing this news, I managed to escape. Because Zhang Biao offered a reward for my arrest, I fled to my hometown.

⁵ Xiong Shili, *Essentials for Reading the Classics* (讀經示要), *Collected Works*, Vol. XIV.

⁶ Xiong uses the term "xiao lian" (孝廉), a polite way of referring to a "ju ren" 舉人, a successful candidate in the imperial examinations at the provincial level.

⁷ The *Primer* was not a single book but rather a series of books written in Classical Chinese that attempted to explain natural phenomena from a Confucian standpoint. The books also stressed the western scientific method of hypothesizing, demonstrating, and inferring.

⁸ The late Qing reformists were a group of intellectuals and officials led by Kang Youwei (康有為 1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (梁啟超 1873-1929) who sought to modernize China.

⁹ The Han dynasty book *Garden of Eloquence* (說苑) by Liu Xiang (劉向 died 6 BCE) has a story of Confucius' supposed visit to Zi Sangbo Zi. Cf. *Analects*, VI:1, where Confucius speaks approvingly of Zi Sangbo Zi.

¹⁰ These military schools were an outcome of the late Qing dynasty's "self-strengthening movement." The Army Special School taught military science along with western sciences, as well as other subjects.

At the time we were six brothers to feed, and food was often scarce. In the winter cold, our clothing was inadequate; although generally satisfied, our enthusiasm waned. Hearing about the construction of the Nanxun (南洵) Railway, and that De'an (德安) [county in Jiangxi province] had uncultivated land, all of us brothers went to De'an to reclaim land. De'an, however, was having an influx of refugees and, due to the hardships and dangers of the situation, our worry and apprehension increased.

In 1917-1918, the Gui Army (桂軍) joined the Northern Expedition¹¹, and I participated as a member of the civilian militia. Later, I went with my friend Bai Yuhuan (白逾桓 1876-1935)¹² to Guangdong where I stayed half a year. I was undergoing a multitude of emotions. I deeply felt that no one in our party [the ruling Kuomintang] was working hard physically or mentally, so how were we going to bring order out of the country's chaos? I spent time soul searching and thinking about the last thirty years. I felt that I had idled away my time, hadn't been sincere, didn't have true ambition, concealed my personal desire [to pursue learning], and I was embarrassed thinking about it. Led by fate,¹³ I suddenly realized my mistakes, and felt boundless shame. I also realized that I was not suited for practical achievements and not talented enough to lead others so how could I just follow others? I decided at the age of thirty-five (1920) to pursue learning. This was a major change in my life, a time of epiphany. In the future, I intend to write an article expressing my thoughts at that time.

Not long after this, almost all of my brothers had died. I felt fully the melancholy of the world. I traveled to Nanjing to inquire about Buddhist doctrine from Mr. Ouyang Jingwu (歐陽境無 1871-1943).¹⁴ I remained there for over a year deeply researching Buddhist doctrines but ultimately, I could not agree with some aspects of Buddhist thought. If you read my *New Treatise*,¹⁵ you will know why. Members of the Buddhist religion were dissatisfied with me but these [differences of opinion between me and the Buddhists] can be passed on to knowledgeable persons of future generations to dispute. Vulgar monks and laypeople know little about Buddhist doctrines. I always felt that Buddhist thought left many deep problems in my country. Scholars should consider this when they read the Second Lecture in my *Essentials for Reading the Classics*.¹⁶ I am not against Buddhism, but we should take its strengths and discard its weaknesses.

From the age of thirty-five years and after, I daily busied myself exploring [knowledge]. When I was about forty years old, these explorations became urgent, and this caused neurasthenia. After the age of fifty years, although my illness gradually improved, still when the weather was hot and humid, and I was thinking too much about my writing, it was as if a needle had pierced my brain.

¹¹ The National Revolutionary Army of the ruling Kuomintang launched the Northern Expedition in 1926 against regional warlords.

¹² Bai Yuhuan was from Hubei, participated in the 1911 Revolution, and became a Republican era politician and journalist.

¹³ "Heaven" (tian, 天) here is more appropriately translated "fate."

¹⁴ Ouyang Jingwu, a leading Buddhist scholar and Director of the Nanjing Institute for Inner Learning, led the 20th century revival of scholastic Buddhism.

¹⁵ Xiong Shili, *New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness* (新唯識論), *Collected Works*, Vol. VI.

¹⁶ Xiong Shili, *Essentials for Reading the Classics* (讀經示要), *op. cit.*

My temperament became chaotic; I was prone to scolding people; and I did not realize or become aware that I was acting strangely. In fact, neurasthenia is a loss of control, and when one encounters unsatisfactory feelings, then one's speech and behavior will be disordered. I have never been willing to give lectures and, if I speak too much, my nerves become damaged, the speaking severely damages my spirit, my speech becomes chaotic so that those who do not know [about neurasthenia] and hear me, are completely baffled.

Every day that I write or think, the writing and thinking must take place when the weather is good and there is no social contact with other people. If my nerves are comfortable, my head is clear, and my mind is at ease, the argumentation assembles itself without me summoning it.

After forty years of age, I became seriously ill and almost died. I vowed that I would devote my energy to studying the philosophy of the past sages. Every day I was vigilant about this vow, and my spirit did not decline.

I am not without sensual desires, but I force myself to overcome them, and when difficulties arise, I remind myself of my lifelong vow and then look for problems with what I have studied, so that my desires gradually subside. I asked myself: wasn't I someone who could improve himself? As I was alone amidst the decadent customs and practices of troubled times, this fact [that I could improve myself] was a comfort to me.

I feel that people today are indifferent to studying past sages and worthies, they completely abandon the art of "overcoming oneself" (反身克己),¹⁷ and they rely solely on ambition and shallow knowledge to make their arguments. If this trend does not change, then the world will not have a reason to investigate and determine [what is true]. I see the urgent need for lectures [on the past sages and worthies], and indeed today there is nothing more urgent than this.

People today only know to "seek without." They see that everything is not as it seems, but they refuse to seek the [solution] to the problem within themselves. This is why the chaos in the world is endless. The teachings of the sages are vast and profound, yet their essence can be distilled into just these words: "seek within yourself" (反求諸己) .¹⁸ The teachings of the sages have long been despised, and the essence of their teachings was severed long ago. I am over sixty now and, in this time of decline, I only think about the importance of self-reflection. You should know this.

¹⁷ The *locus classicus* for this expression to "overcome oneself" (克己) is *Analects*, XII:1.

¹⁸ The *locus classicus* for this expression to "seek within yourself" (反求諸己) is *Mencius*, Gong Sun Chou, Part I, and Li Lou, Part I.