

Thoughts on the Chinese Concept of *Xingling*

i. *Xingling* is a common traditional term for what we would call spirit or soul, with a certain difference of emphasis.[1] I base my discussion on what I learned in the Daoist-influenced group Tiandi Jiao. The *xingling* is a non-physical entity which is attracted to the body by certain laws or forces, which can be described as yin-yang attraction. The Great Treatise of the *I Ching*, Part I Chapter IV, uses the word *youhun* [roaming soul], which is an old synonym for *xingling*. [2][3] *Xingling* is a term which has been used, in a Daoist religious context, to place reincarnation in the natural order. A *xingling* is involved in making the body what it is. The *xingling* is ethereal yet conditioned, changing from forces acting on it and from resonance with other conscious entities. This is unlike the emphasis on timelessness in the Western view of spirit. *Xingling* is yang, and as the *I Ching* tells us, “*qian* [pure yang] knows through change.”

ii. The concept of *xingling* lets us visualize spirit as an animating component of the universe. It acts from within matter like the yeast in bread. It is not separate from the natural realm, because it constitutes part of that realm. Even when it does transcend the material world, it still exists in a state of balance or complementarity with that world.

iii. At every step from minerals up to humans and immortals, the *xingling* allows material, natural evolution to be consistent with spiritual evolution. Evolution continues in the non-physical realm, because *xingling* can master laws of divinity to be active on higher planes. The concept of *xingling* is in many ways compatible with the scientific world-view.

iv. *Xingling* reach higher planes because they are able to harmonize natural processes leading up to the planes they reach. Immortals get to where they are because they make a contribution to life in the cosmos: All higher *xingling* are in a state of resonance with lower levels of existence. At whatever level, *xingling* are local agents of creation.

v. ‘*Xingling*’ fits with the important Asian concept of self-nature. Self-nature (*zi-xing*) and *xingling* are concepts native to Chinese religious thought: they are often used where we would use “soul” or “spirit.” “Seeing into self-nature” is another way of saying “enlightenment” in Chinese Buddhism. Buddhists describe self-nature as infinitely open, or “without fixed substance,” or empty. Because *xingling* exists in interchange with all of nature (broadly defined), it too can be conceived of as empty. But in Chinese religion ‘emptiness’ has a positive sense. Daoists speak of ‘the blast of vacuity’ as a means toward freedom. Daoists also think of non-being (“*wu*”) as a creative source, because the existing universe emerges from non-being. Since existence (“*you*”) is already nailed down within certain forms and laws,

the most creative possibilities always emerge from non-being. Also, emptiness connects with receptivity to higher sources of *CHI*. It is by entering the deepest levels of quietude that we find the *CHI* that emerges from non-being. Thus the concept of *xingling* connects with Buddhist teachings of empty self-nature, and with Taoist ideas of creative non-being.

The open emptiness of *xingling* fits with our natural realization of selfhood being stretched over an abyss of non-being. *Xingling* moves about in a realm having many shades of betweenness---at the interface of the physical and the non-physical, of life and death, of being and non-being.

vi. The concept of *xingling* parallels the Gnostic concept of the divine particle which falls into lower planes and becomes lodged within matter. In Gnosticism and Hermetic doctrine, the divine particle takes on impurities as it descends into material planes. In the Wuwei Lineage of Chinese folk religion, the *xingling* takes on impurities while inhabiting material bodies. In Gnosticism, the divine particle often forgets its origins; to find its way home, it often needs reminding. The way back lies in casting away impure constructs which have bound the soul to fallen creation. This is a gnosis that cuts through worldly knowledge. In the Wuwei Lineage, some *xingling* also forget their origin and may recover it through gnosis. But the creation is not ultimately fallen: rather, conscious *xingling*, as part of ongoing creation, are involved in holding it together. *Xingling* strive and raise themselves through sympathetic resonance with higher levels of reality. The supramental gnosis in Hermetic doctrine corresponds to “mindfulness of highest heaven” in a Daoist context, which lets go of mental constructs and makes one receptive to spirit-yang *CHI*.

vi. There is an area of modern inquiry in which the idea of *xingling* can be applied productively---that is, the *xingling*'s relation to the brain. This area of traditional thought is strewn with pointers (and plenty of unclear places). The brain is a physical organ which can yield an electroencephalogram. The *xingling* is the entity of spirit-consciousness. How do the two relate? Simplistic notions of their relation say that the soul is like a driver, and the body is like an automobile. This is a crude and clumsy metaphor. The body includes a brain which produces complex patterns of waves. So we have to allow the body's ability to produce neurally-conditioned mental states. The brain produces a profusion of electric waves on its own. These brain-waves correspond to many possible directions of thought---therefore notions of all kinds are constantly bubbling up in the brain. The organic brain, not the *xingling*, is the source of random notions. But the *xingling* interacts with the various notions. From its higher vantage point, it harmonizes and mediates the various conflicting notions. If it consistently identifies with morally positive notions, these become highlighted/facilitated, and the brain will produce them more consistently. If the *xingling* identifies with negative notions, the brain will be guided to produce them consistently, and the *xingling* will go down with them. Thus the *xingling*'s role in human thought is like its role in natural creation: to mediate among laws and harmonize natural processes.

Some writings in the tradition describe the *xingling*'s relation to the interlocking organ-based phases (kidney-water, lung-fire, etc.) in Chinese medicine. *Xingling* in the form of *shen* is viewed as related to the vital energy systems of the body.[4] In this context it is interesting to consider that the Daoist system of cultivation speaks of transmuting *jing* (bodily essence) to *qi*, and then *qi* to *shen* (animating spirit). When *shen* is narrowly allied with bodily processes, it is called *yin shen*. But *yin shen* transmuted to a higher energy state is called *yang shen*. This gains impetus from a tempering process which interfuses currents of *jing* and *qi* at progressively higher levels. Thus the body's vitality is seen as useful for refining and tempering *yang shen*, and Daoism goes on to speak of 'refining *shen* back to the void,' or 'ascension of the *yang shen*.' In fact, *yang shen* is another way of talking about the self-realized *xingling*, aware of its place in the cosmos, and able to decide its own comings and goings.

vii. A *xingling* exists in a dynamic balance with a yin substrate. Such substrates are 'matter' in a functional sense, but they can exist at many levels. It is characteristic of yin to coalesce. At relatively lower levels of energy, we see the principle of like-attracts-like in many places. And when the energy level rises, it is common for aggregations of like elements to attract something different. This is not just a sub-atomic phenomenon.

Consider a multicellular colonial organism, such as a volvox: all the cells are alike (like attracts like). When this simple colonial organism reaches a certain level of life-energy, something different enters in. An organizing intelligence changes things, forming tissues and organs. We can say that these material, unorganized cells attracted their opposite---something immaterial---which informs intricate new structures. This fits with the principle of yin attracting yang. If we are talking about attracting a *xingling*, it gets complicated, because any organic thing of respectable complexity should already have *xingling* in it. Maybe lower-level *xinglings* develop to the next stage themselves, and merge to form a new advanced *xingling*. Maybe they develop under influence from yang emanations of higher-level *xingling*. Or maybe a certain object (already containing *xingling*) is yin compared to the higher state it could reach, so it attracts a higher-level (yang) *xingling*. Then the higher-level *xingling* absorbs the one that was already there. All this is intuition, but the distribution of *xingling* in the natural world is a complex mystery. Conventional descriptions of spirit in the material world are cartoonlike (i.e., the spirit gets into its body-car and drives to its destination). But in reality it is more a continuous enfolding and doubling back. In my mind's eye I see a mixing bowl with two colors of batter swirling together. If we ever get a vision of the distribution of *xingling* in the material world, it will convey spiritual awe together with the rigorous intricacy of science.

viii. In the matter of birth and death, the *Yijing* has this to say: "[The yin of] essence and [the yang of] *qi* make a living thing; the roaming spirit causes it to change." Here life and death are being described as a yin-yang change. We do not know what happens, but at birth, we can visualize some kind of yin-yang

attraction. Wherever there is a dynamic balance of polarities, there is a *taiji*. According to Zhu Xi, there is a great *taiji* along which cosmic change unfolds, and every living thing also has a small *taiji* of its own. We can visualize the *xingling* and the body making up a *taiji*. At death there is another change, and why does it happen? From the perspective of that thing's *taiji*, there is no more attraction holding polarities together. The 'roaming spirit' may be driven out by some trauma. Or maybe it gets involved in other dynamics, so it stops clasping this present one. According to my teacher Lee Yuchieh at the Tianren Seminary, after a *xingling* has been incarnated for some time, it takes on a temporal imprint. This becomes like a yin component within the *xingling* itself. The *xingling* becomes a *taiji* unto itself, and having its own yin burden, it is attracted less firmly to the body's yin. Also, it has developed firmer resonances (another kind of yin-yang relation) with higher *xingling*. Thus it is time for the *xingling* to go. The progress of this *xingling* toward another life will be rule-governed, like any natural phenomenon, but the laws of this realm are moral and spiritual, not material. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* talks about the laws of this realm, which it calls the Bardo realm. This realm is very much a part of religious Daoism, and it is implied in practices of Chinese folk religion.

The *I Ching* is present in the background, as a framework which has symbolically defined the great space within which all yin-yang changes take place. I hope to take these ideas about *xingling* gained from my stay at Tianren Seminary, and apply them to my reading of the *I Ching*. For Daoists (and even Buddhists) who read the *I Ching*, it not only represents transformations of the cosmos; it also lets them visualize variables in the study of birth and death.

[1] *Xingling* refers to individual spirit-entities, yet it is also tied to the philosophical idea of *xing* ('fundamental nature'). *Xing* was an important category in orthodox Confucianism.

[2] The relevant passage in Wilhelm's translation, with certain minor revisions (italicized), reads as follows: "Looking upward, we contemplate with its help the signs in the heavens; looking down, we examine *the patterns* of the earth. Thus we come to know the circumstances of the dark and light. Going back to the beginnings of things and pursuing them to the end, we come to know the lessons of birth and of death. The union of *bodily essence* and *vital energy* produces all things; [the escape of] the roaming soul brings about change. Through this we come to know the conditions of outgoing and returning spirits."

[3] This passage seemingly points to a pre-Buddhist, native idea of transmigration. However, later orthodox Confucianism has been reluctant to posit the *youhun* as an entity which moves through cycles of incarnation. It prefers to equate *youhun* with *xing* (fundamental nature), which does not come and go, but is more or less manifest.

[4] Energy in the body is traditionally thought to take one of three forms: *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. *Jing* (bodily essence) is a sublimation of substance, and it is carried in the body's fluids. *Qi* is vital energy or subtle breath, and it circulates in its own meridian systems. *Shen* is the intelligence of the body: it is distributed throughout bodily processes with power to influence and penetrate.