

山水

SHANSHUI

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Alessandro Costanza

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Introduction

《淮南子·原道》：「是故圣人将养其神，和弱其气，平夷其形，而与道沉浮俛仰。」

“Thus, the sage nurtures his spirit, harmonises and softens his *qi*, levels his form, and with the Dao sinks and rises, bends and lifts.”¹

In classical Chinese thought, water is often associated with adaptability, balance, and harmony with the Dao. The image of “sinking and rising” (*chenfu* 沉浮) evokes a fluid movement. To move with water is, in this sense, to participate in a broader cosmic (yet pre-established) order.

Yet in Pu Songling's (蒲松龄, 1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异, this fluidity is unsettled. Water becomes a fluid space of tension, suspension, and constraint. Rivers and lakes are not merely natural settings: they emerge as liminal spaces where the boundaries between the human and spiritual merge, and where encounters with the invisible become possible, where natural and supernatural meet.

The story of Wang Liulang 王六郎 included in the collection offers a particularly compelling example. Here, water is at once a site of connection and a form of confinement. The drowned spirit, namely Wang Liulang, lives in the river, he's not simply a ghost but is closely bound to the river, he inhabits a world that is both contiguous with and almost inaccessible to the human realm. Through his relationship with the fisherman Xu 许, the river becomes a space of exchange, where gift and obliga-

¹ *Huainanzi* 淮南子, “Yuandao” 原道, 1. For a complete annotated translation see John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

tion circulate, where human and spiritual meet. At the same time, however, this relationship reveals the ethical tension at the heart of the tale: the possibility of release is conditioned upon the death of another and also, most importantly, the accomplishment of humanity (*ren* 仁).

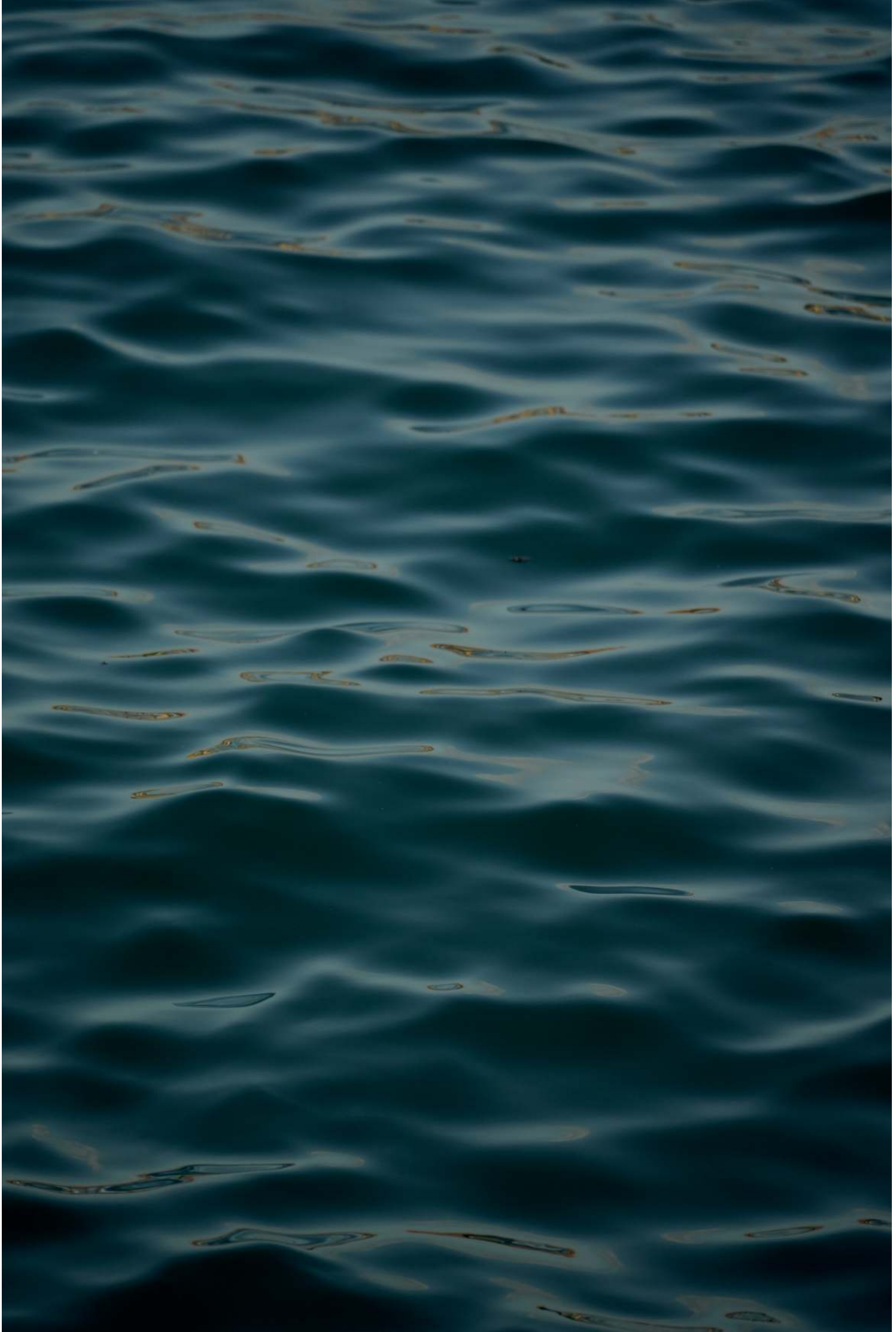
This article explores how water, in Wang Liulang's tale, functions simultaneously as prison, threshold and bridge. By examining selected passages from the text, it argues that the river is not simply a scenario for supernatural events, but an active medium that shapes relationships, moral choices, and forms of attachment. In this sense, water is not only a site of passage, but also a space in which humanity and spirituality emerge and at times even merge.

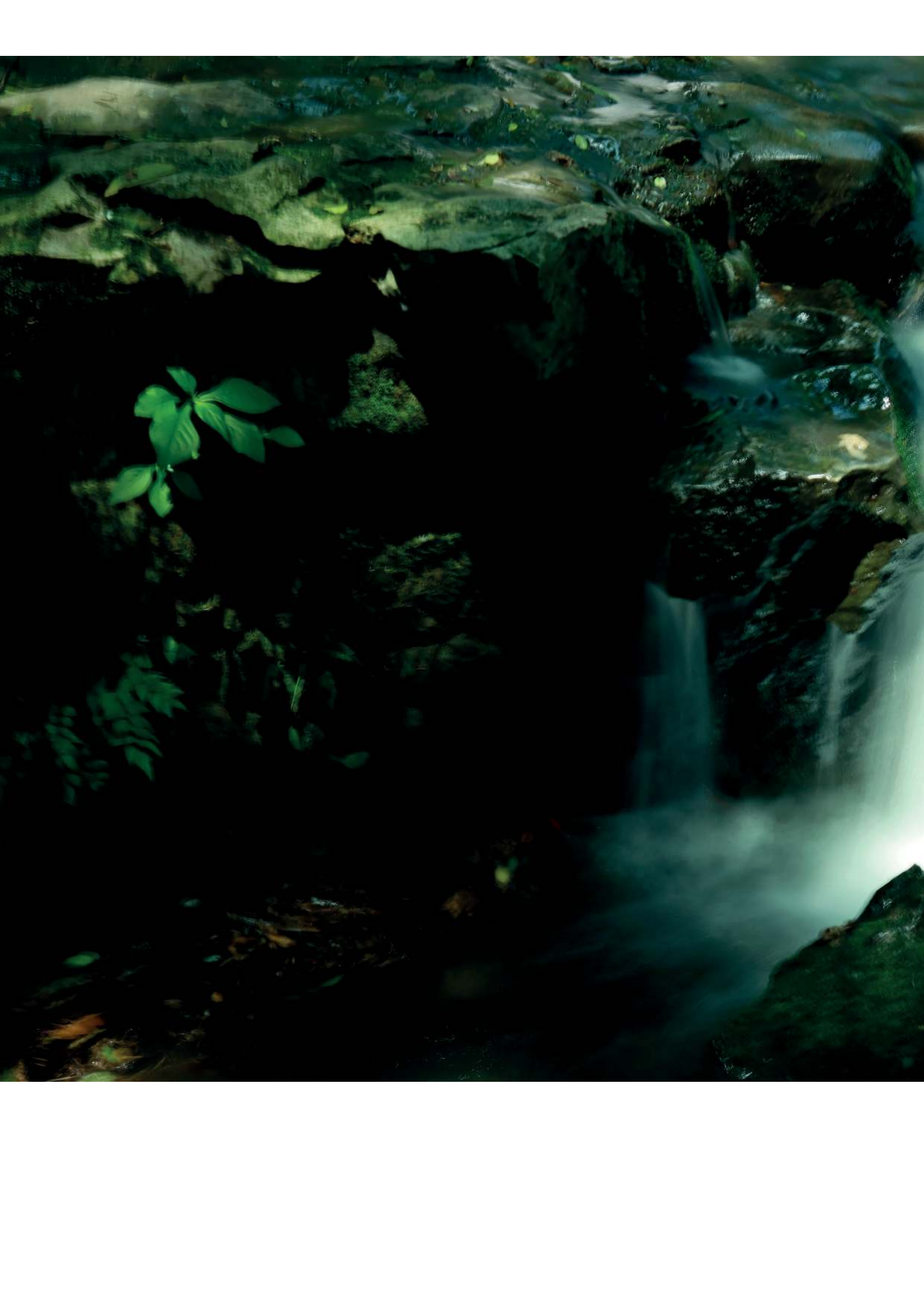
Water as prison

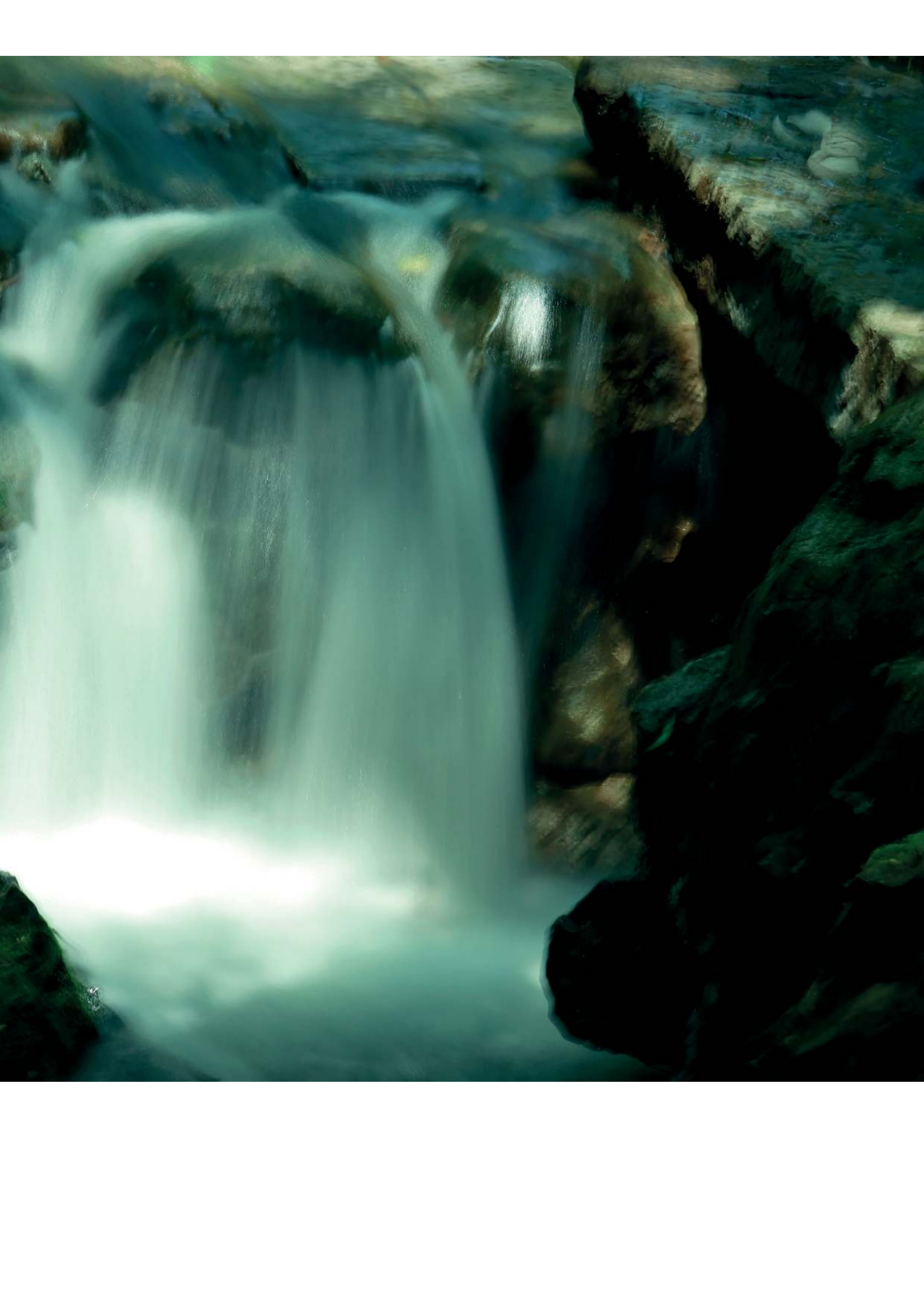
By the riverbank a fisherman by the name of Mister Xu gets in touch with the watery world², from the very first line we understand that mister Xu offers wine to the river spirits as he throws his net into the water to catch fishes in order to sell them at the market and provide for his family: this ritual offer puts him in a special relation with the river and with the spiritual forces that govern it.

Wang Liulang, one of the main characters in the story, is a spirit (*shen* 神) living in the river, he has no proper name, he's called the sixth son of Wang family, as if drowning into the river has stolen his identity, at least his social identity. We don't know where he comes from but the river is his home, his condemnation, he is closely

² “他人渔，迄无所获，而许独满筐”，“While others often caught few fish, he would fill his baskets with fish every day.” (Park 2024)







bound to the river and can't simply leave it. He's thirsty as all the drowned spirits are, they can't drink the water they live in. The environment resembles Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* where women are condemned to inhabit the lake in the form of swans, suspended between two natures, unable to return to their human world unless true love sets them free, or even Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, where the sinners are not able to drink until redemption, that never comes eventually. The parallel with Dante's *Inferno* is here both illuminating and instructive, precisely because it reveals, through contrast, the deeper philosophical stakes of Pu Songling's tale. In Dante's moral universe, the damned are condemned by the logic of *contrappasso*: the punishment mirrors the sin, binding the soul eternally to the cause that destroyed it in its life. Though the specific condition of the drowned in Dante does not refer directly to Wang Liulang's environment, the structural resonance is striking: Wang Liulang inhabits water yet cannot drink it. He is surrounded, immersed, imprisoned by the very element that took his life — and from which he is, paradoxically, excluded. Like Dante's damned, he dwells within his own negation.

Yet this is precisely where the two visions diverge. In Dante's *Inferno*, punishment is eternal: guilt is untransferable, and no virtue — neither human nor divine — can alter the sentence. The *contrappasso* is irreversible. In Pu Songling's river, by contrast, the logic of confinement is not moral but transactional: liberation is possible, but it requires a substitution, another soul must take one's place, or a humanisation. The exit door exists — and this is where the resemblance with Dante ends.

The fisherman's wine — poured as ritual offering into the river — does not merely quench a thirst that water cannot satisfy. It is the medium through which Wang

Liulang develops “humanity” (*ren* 仁), the Confucian virtue of benevolence and compassion. In Dante, no such transformation is possible — the damned remain fixed in their condition, unredeemed and unchanging. In Pu Songling, it is the capacity for moral feeling that ultimately moves the Jade Emperor and opens the way to freedom for Wang Liulang, as we will see later in the article. Where Dante's universe is governed by divine justice, Pu Songling's is animated by Confucian virtue: it is not judgement that saves, but humanity itself.

Water as threshold

As the story evolves, Pu Songling introduces a third character, we can observe that the river here constitutes a proper threshold between the visible and the invisible worlds connected through the gift. The new character, namely a woman with her son, is about to drown into the river and take the place of Wang Liulang to free him. But getting into the river world requires leaving everything and everybody, it is a full and proper commitment, the woman hears her baby crying at the riverbank as she gets into the river, and she is hesitant³, Mister Xu thinks about intervening and rescue the baby but eventually he decides not to interfere in the destiny. The woman can't leave her baby and eventually leave the riverbank and exit the scene.

The spirit bears compassion toward the woman, toward his new human friend, he has human feelings. This compassion makes the crossing of that boundary even more insuperable, as the watery prison re-

3 “妇沉浮者屡矣，忽淋淋攀岸以出，藉地少息，抱儿径去。当妇溺时，意良不忍，思欲奔救。转念是所以代六郎者，故止不救。” “At noon, a woman carrying a baby came to the riverbank and fell into the water. The baby was thrown onto the shore, crying and kicking. The woman struggled in the water several times but eventually crawled ashore drenched, rested for a while, then picked up the baby and left. When Xu saw the woman fall into the water, he felt sorry for her and wanted to rescue her, but he remembered that she was Liulang's replacement and dismissed the thought of saving her.” *The Annotated Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio*, Vol. 1: 1 of 12 (Unabridged Version, The Complete Translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi*), translated and edited by Park Jongho, 2024

quires a full commitment to it, it ignores human feelings, it ignores compassion, it ignores motherhood, it ignores social relations, it ignores the entire human realm. At the same time, it is exactly this compassion, this humanisation that will eventually lead to the spirit liberation and freedom. As we can read in the story, it is this “humanisation” that moves the Jade Emperor, that eventually promotes and rescues him from the river prison. In fact he has been appointed as the local god of Zhuangzhen in Zhaoyuan county, and their combined destiny (*yuan* 缘), that of the fisherman Xu and Wang Liulang, their humanised and benevolent hearts (*ren ren zhi xin* 仁人之心) will make their connection last even after the spirit leaves the river. One could note that a sense of Confucianism triumphs over everything here, the spirit not only gets released but also climbs the ladder of the “spiritual” world.

The distance between the human and spiritual world is evident but, being connected by water, it is not insurmountable.⁴ Wang Liulang leaves his village, his grieving wife and his ordinary life to pay visit to his spiritual friend, to follow his intertwined destiny, his intimate friend (*zhiyin* 知音).

Central to this threshold dynamic is the concept of intertwined destiny (*yuan* 缘). In classical Chinese thought, *yuan* denotes the invisible thread that binds two beings across time, space, and — as in Wang Liulang's case — across the boundary between different worlds. It is not merely coincidence, nor simple friendship: it is a form of cosmic predisposition, the sense that two souls were always meant to meet, regardless of the distance that separates them.

In the story, *yuan* operates quietly be-

neath the surface: the fisherman Xu does not choose Wang Liulang, he pours wine into the water as a ritual offering, without knowing who receives it. Wang Liulang does not choose Xu either: he simply recognises, in that gesture, something that resonates. And yet their bond deepens into what the text calls *zhiyin* — literally “one who knows your sound,” a soulmate in the most intimate sense. That two such different beings, one rooted in the human world of family and labour, the other suspended in a watery existence between life and death, should find in each other a *zhiyin*, speaks precisely to the power of *yuan*: it does not require sameness, it bridges difference.

Water, in this sense, is not only the physical threshold between their two worlds — it is also the medium through which *yuan* manifests. The river does not separate Xu and Wang Liulang: it is the very element that makes their encounter possible, the space where their intertwined destiny takes shape. The wine offered across the riverbank, the fish guided into the net, the long conversations by the water's edge — all of these are not accidental gestures but expressions of a bond that was, in some sense, already there, waiting to be recognised.

The water disappears toward the end of the story and the soul connection happens now through dreams. The spirit of Wang Liulang appears in the fisherman and the villagers' dreams, announcing a special visit from an old friend: once Mister Xu reaches the Zhaoyuan county everybody seems to know him already, he is astonished, he can't understand how could that be possible, this is where he understands that his old friend had informed his people of his arrival in advance. The fisherman is touched, moved and yet continues to make an offering at his altar, once again Mister Xu has nothing to offer but

⁴ “君正直为神，甚慰人心。但人神路隔，即不惮修阻” “You have acted righteously and become a god, which makes me very happy. However, the distance between humans and gods is vast. Even if I am not afraid of the distance.” (Park 2024)

wine, and Wang Liulang can't help to feel rejoiced. The once-river spirit, now god minister rewards him by relieving the fisherman from this hard activity: he would then go back to his wife with nothing in his hands but the end of all the family hardships and pains.

Water as bridge

It is probably worth noting that the fishing in this story is not a "neutral" nor a "human" activity: in order to succeed and catch fishes it needs a connection with the watery world, it requires a "spiritual" approval. The wine presented as a gift, poured into the water constitutes the initial connec-



tion between two distinct worlds. Wang Liulang appreciates the fisherman's act of charity and thanks him by governing and changing the stream of the river, and letting the fishes get finally into his net. The water here ceases to be unrestrained, and one could note that even the stream direction is controlled by the spirits living in the river. The wine, just like the river,

represents a bridge between two distinct worlds, those of Wang Liulang's spirit and the fisherman Mister Xu, it seems that the spirits cannot drink the water they live in and therefore are eager for wine, brought by the fisherman.

There is a scene in the story that at best represents the real connection between





these two worlds: the fisherman and Wang Liulang drinking together sitting by the riverbank, as if entering into a third dimension: the water here is not a threshold anymore, the prison barriers have been cut off, the water and the wine constitute both a bridge between the visible and the invisible, this is the bridge where the two characters are now sitting as if observing

their own lives from a higher perspective, witnessing their own lives from a distance, appreciating their special “human” connection and relation, and it is this humanisation that rescues the spirit as the story unfolds⁵: what does it mean to become human? The character *ren* (仁) might itself of-

5 “吾两人之缘未尽耶？”许感叹曰：“此仁人之心，可以通上帝矣”
“Your kind heart will surely move the Jade Emperor.” From then on, the two continued to drink and fish as usual.” (Park 2024)



fer an answer: graphically, it combines the element for "person" (人) with the number two (二), suggesting not solitude but relation, not immobility but movement toward the other. *Ren* is precisely what generates compassion — the capacity to find oneself in somebody else, to recognise in another's suffering a reflection of one's own. It is through this recognition that Wang Li-

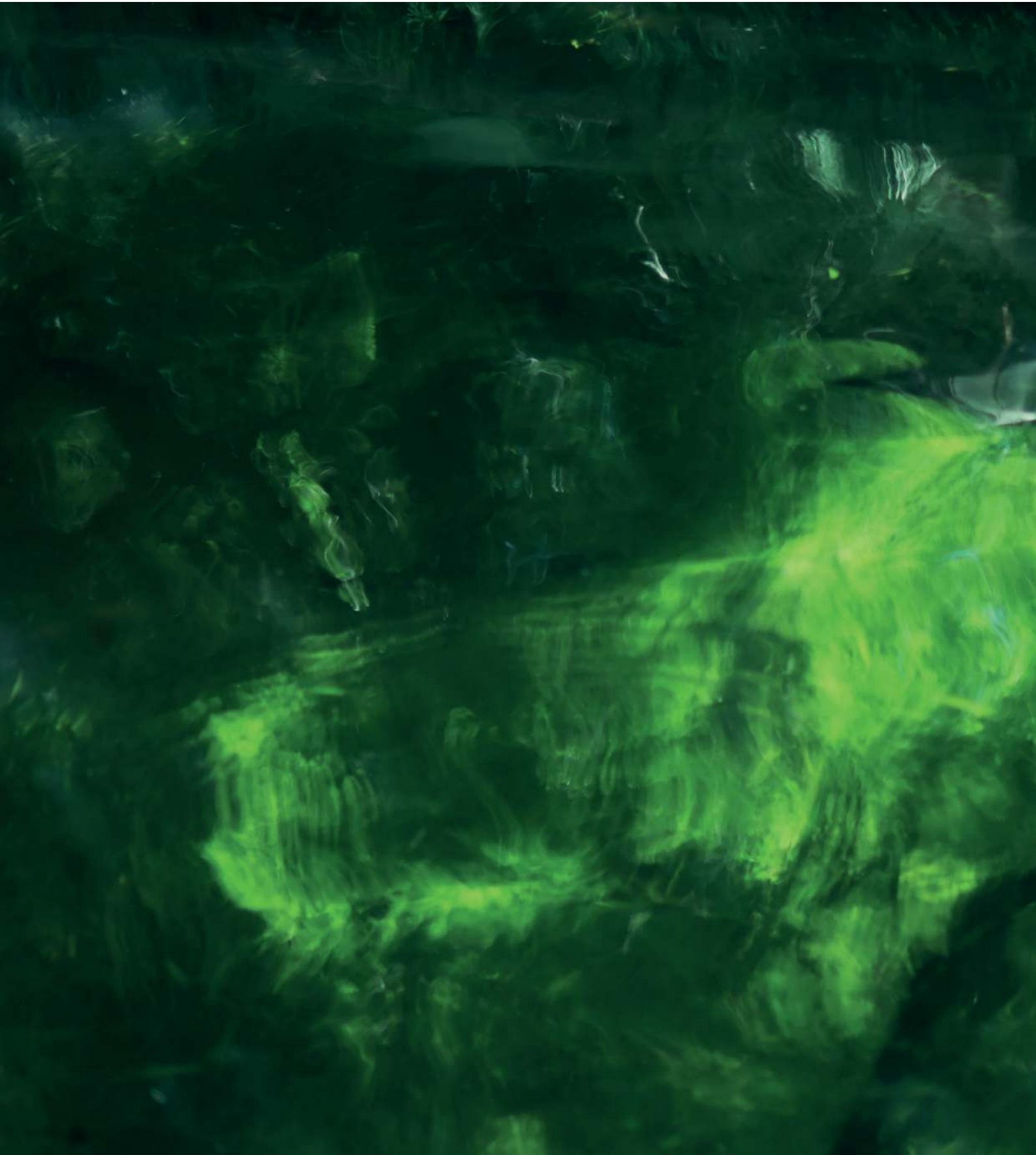
ulang's transformation becomes legible: the spirit does not simply acquire human feelings, he acquires the most distinctly human feeling of all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one could ask what represents the river/water in the story, what

does it symbolise? Water identity in Wang Liulang's tale is very fluid, it separates first, it connects later, it frees and rescues at the end of the story, it is at the same time prison, bridge and threshold. It evolves and changes as the story evolves and unfolds. Water's shape and water's identity are modelled by the reader's imagination.

We can feel a sense of fragile balance in the story, and the water, just like the wine offered as a gift, connects the two world's riverbanks, this ritual offer makes the connection habitual, and not exceptional (*yi wei chang* 以为常). We can finally say that the water separates first, connects later, frees at the end. One can even note that



at the beginning of the story the human moves toward the spiritual, and the end it is the spiritual that moves instead towards the human, that happens through a special fluid watery connection between the visible and the invisible. The fisherman sitting by the riverbank is not external to water, he's deeply connected with it, just

like Wang Liulang, and it's exactly through their intertwined destiny and Dao (道) that this connection happens, survives and lasts, eternally.

