

# Addressing Enduring Ethnocentricities through a Critical Investigation of the Historiography of Chinese Hell

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## Abstract

In this article, which features a focally framed history of Chinese conceptions of hell, I will attempt to provide a critical analysis of the extant historiography while highlighting—and attempting to avoid—some enduring ethnocentricities. These continuing ethnocentricities include the misconception that Chinese and Taiwanese citizens are somehow uniquely predisposed—through cultural emphases on filial piety and the cult of the ancestor—to produce and believe in otherworldly imaginaries, that Chinese and Taiwanese citizens are at some sort of religious or cultural disadvantage in creating conceptions of hell and that they have therefore managed to devise an inconsistent or unworkable system, and, finally, that Chinese conceptions of hell are only meditative tools which are not considered to be ontologically real by collectives or individuals. I propose that by self-reflexively accounting for our own motivations and critically interrogating the history of these cultural conceptions, contemporary scholars can avoid perpetuating ethnocentrically-motivated misconceptions and account for the layers of complexity in historical formulations of the Chinese afterlife.

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## Introduction

In this article, which features a focally framed history of conceptions of the Chinese afterlife, I will attempt to provide a critical analysis of the extant historiography while highlighting—and attempting to avoid—enduring ethnocentricities.<sup>2</sup> Although the majority of modern scholars produce meticulous, ethnocentrically-aware research, some earlier (and more recent) cohorts failed to account for their own preconceptions and motivations.<sup>3</sup> As Paul Harrison proposes of his investigation into the convoluted origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the all-important question, “What are we looking for?” is indelibly influenced by the answer to, “Why are we looking?”<sup>4</sup>

In selecting this topic, I am aware of Pierre Bourdieu’s call for self-reflexivity and Henrietta Moore’s reminder, “We do not spend enough time attending to the fantasies and imaginative images of the anthropologists themselves.”<sup>5</sup> I must admit, my motivation for pursuing a more detailed understanding of the Chinese afterlife is due in part to the fact that I was raised in a strictly religious household in which *Homo mortuus* played an integral part. In my subsequent rejection of these guilt-filled Christian traditions, I may have unconsciously chosen to study a version of the afterlife radically different from my own, often so outlandish I am comfortable it cannot exist. This allows me to feel secure in denouncing representations of the afterlife with which I am more intimately familiar (although unconsciously, I am sure they still scare me to death).

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<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to focus on otherworldly imaginaries themselves, not how religious participants are told they can achieve or avoid residency in these locations. For that topic see Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka, *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); and Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariproccha)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003). I have also chosen to focus on secondary materials because native scholars studying the history of Chinese hell, including Song Guangyu, “Diyu zhi shuo yu daode sixiang de yanjiu (A Study of Hell and Morality),” *Han Xue Yanjiu Tongsu* 3, no. 1 (1984): 3-5, or Zheng Zhi Ming, *Zhongguo shanshu yu zongjiao (Chinese Morality Books and Religion)* (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1988), have largely avoided the three ethnocentricities discussed in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Funding for my research was generously provided by a Fellowship Grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange (*Jiang Jingguo guoji xueshu jiaoliu jijinhui* 蔣經國國際學術交流基金會), a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Award, and an Aisiang Cultural Foundation Su Tian-shui Memorial Fellowship (*Jinian Su Tianshui xiansheng nanying xue yanjiu jiang* 紀念蘇添水先生南瀛學研究獎).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Maxwell Harrison, “Searching for the Origins of the Mahayana: What Are We Looking For?” *The Eastern Buddhist* 28, no. 1 (1995): 48-69, on p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Henrietta L. Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 6.

While researching the history of Chinese conceptions of the afterlife, I came across three ethnocentrically-motivated misconceptions which continue to persist. The first of these misconceptions is the notion that Chinese and Taiwanese citizens are somehow uniquely predisposed—through cultural emphases on filial piety and the cult of the ancestor—to produce and believe in otherworldly imaginaries. James McClenon proposes, “Since ancestral worship was a major component of their religious practice, Chinese people were particularly curious regarding the nature of the afterlife.”<sup>6</sup> This belief in an inimitable eschatological inclination has led some scholars, particularly those of the 1960s and 70s, to propose that Chinese conceptions of the afterlife may actually remedy our own modern malcontents.<sup>7</sup> Yet many Chinese, a citizenry often fallaciously referred to as a homogeneous entity, are not overly concerned with the afterlife and their otherworldly imaginaries can certainly not be imported to solve our everyday problems. What can be gained from studying the history of these religious conceptions is invaluable insight into the worlds of their creators and—peripherally—those who shared these beliefs.

The second misconception is that Chinese and Taiwanese citizens are at a religious or cultural disadvantage in creating conceptions of the afterlife and that they have therefore managed to devise an inconsistent or unworkable system.<sup>8</sup> While some academics propose that the focus of Chinese religion is solely on the affairs of this world,<sup>9</sup> others, such as Carl Becker, rashly suggest that the participants of these systems were unable to focus at all. Becker purports, “The Chinese mind did not separate this world from the next as consciously as do modern thinkers.”<sup>10</sup> Similar ethnocentric stereotypes led French Jesuit Henri Dore (1859-1931) to exasperatedly exclaim of Chinese representations of the afterlife, “The whole system is a bundle of

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<sup>6</sup> James McClenon, “Near-Death Folklore in Medieval China and Japan: A Comparative Analysis,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 50, no. 2 (1991): 319-342, on p. 326.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Bauer, *China and the Search for Happiness*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury Press, 1967); John Blofeld, *Beyond the Gods: Taoist and Buddhist Mysticism* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars, such as J.J.L. Duyvendak, have even proposed that Chinese notions of the afterlife, specifically hell, were completely purloined from Western or Indian representations. See J. J. L. Duyvendak, “A Chinese ‘Divina Commedia,’” *T’oung Pao* 41 (1952): 255-316.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Berling states, “Chinese religion is notoriously this-worldly and pragmatic: Its main concerns were health, wealth, and descendants – in other words, good fortune in its various aspects.” Judith A. Berling, “Death and Afterlife in Chinese Religions,” in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 181-192, on p. 184. Even if one entirely disregards the otherworldly locus from whence this-worldly fortune is beseeched, proponents from every major Chinese religious system have influenced and participated in the creation of depictions of an afterlife.

<sup>10</sup> Carl B. Becker, *Breaking the Circle: Death and the Afterlife in Buddhism* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 48.

inconsistencies and contradictions.”<sup>11</sup> Though Chinese religious structures—similar to many cultural systems—are not always completely consistent, they are certainly not a “bundle of inconsistencies and contradictions.” As Arthur Wolf proposes, “The most important point to be made about Chinese religion is that it mirrors the social landscape of its adherents. There are as many meanings as there are vantage points.”<sup>12</sup> Chinese representations of the afterlife feature levels of complexity which amply account for the disparate concerns and desires of both creators and participants.<sup>13</sup>

The final major misconception concerning Chinese formulations of the afterlife is that they are only meditative tools which are not considered to be ontologically real by collectives or individuals. This ethnocentric error seems to stem from the fact that some scholars have exclusively emphasized the allegorical nature of these otherworldly representations.<sup>14</sup> Judith Berling expresses this position with her comment, “The Pure Land is merely a skillful means (*fang-pien*, or *upaya*) created by the Buddha to help us aspire to spiritual realization; it does not literally exist.”<sup>15</sup> While some religious innovators—and, presumably, most scholars—do not believe that Buddhist representations of paradise or hell literally exist, an emphasis on priest over layperson has unintentionally obfuscated the importance that these formulations hold as reality for many participants.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Henri Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, trans. M. Kennelly (Taipei: Ch’eng-Wen Publishing, 1966), vol. 7, p. 259.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur P. Wolf, ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the conceptual panoply found within Chinese religion see Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> See Daigan Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971); Berling, “Death and Afterlife in Chinese Religions”; and Bauer, *China and the Search for Happiness*. Other scholars, such as Dore, completely misunderstood conceptions of the soul and depictions of the afterlife in Buddhism, proclaiming “What, therefore, suffers in hell, and passes from one existence to another, is impossible to understand, for in reality nothing exists.” Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, vol. 7, p. 259.

<sup>15</sup> Berling, “Death and Afterlife in Chinese Religion,” p. 190.

<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on otherworldly representations as allegory has also confused many modern scholars, such as Richard Dawkins, who believes that Chinese religious traditions are more “ethical system” than true religious structures. Dawkins proposes, “I shall not be concerned at all with other religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism. Indeed, there is something to be said for treating these not as religions at all but as ethical systems or philosophies of life.” Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), pp. 37-38.

## Chinese Conceptions of Hell

The raw scenes of violence featured in textual and visual depictions of hell have lingered in the Chinese aesthetic craw to become forceful religious didactics, entertaining cultural curios, and treasured art objects. As Neal Donnelly states, “Whether one believes or not, hell is presented in attention-arresting fashion.”<sup>17</sup> The destinations presented to those fated for the Chinese underworld range from an avoidance of expiation and immediate transportation to paradise (or a fortuitous rebirth) to eternal residency in the lowest Avīci hell (*Abi diyu* 阿鼻地獄).<sup>18</sup> These myriad options have made it difficult for many Western scholars to determine the appropriate nomenclature for Chinese conceptions of hell. Hell, in Chinese, is literally “earth prison” (*diyu* 地獄) or “netherworld” (*mingjian* 冥間). Both of these descriptions indicate hell’s location beneath the earth, but fail to translate exactly as hell, purgatory, or underworld. While some scholars, such as Wolfram Eberhard and Donnelly, seem recalcitrant to use the term “purgatory” because some denizens of hell are eternal residents and thus never completely purged of all sin, Anne Goodrich, Stephen Teiser, and Dore argue that purgatory is the English word which most nearly agrees with the function of the Chinese underworld.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of its title, historical representations of Chinese hell are simultaneously horrifying, entertaining, and deeply revelatory of collective concerns and individual desires.<sup>20</sup> These complex imaginaries—which draw on elements from

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<sup>17</sup> Neal Donnelly, *A Journey through Chinese Hell: Hell Scrolls of Taiwan* (Taipei: Artist Publishing, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> As Cohen explains, “Incorporated into the image of hell was the possibility that at least a select few might be accorded entrance to the land of bliss shortly after death when, upon entering hell’s first court, they are judged to merit immediate release and salvation; and it is also possible that yet other souls may be granted admittance to heaven after a period of time in the underworld.” Myron L. Cohen, “Souls and Salvation: Conflicting Themes in Chinese Popular Religion,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed. James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 180-202, on p. 186.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfram Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 17; Donnelly, *A Journey*, p. 9; Anne Swann Goodrich, *Chinese Hells: The Peking Temple of Eighteen Hells and Chinese Conceptions of Hell* (St. Augustin: Monumenta Serica, 1981), p. 67; Stephen F. Teiser, “The Ten Kings of Purgatory and Popular Belief,” *Study for Chinese Studies Research Series* 4 (1994): 621-653, on p. 624; and Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, vol. 7, p. 258. I have alternately referred to Chinese conceptions of the underworld as hell, netherworld, purgatory, and infernal realm in the belief that each of these terms conveys an adequate sense of this location’s form and function.

<sup>20</sup> Eberhard proposes, “The Tibetans and Mongols seem to have believed more in the idea of cold hells, while the Chinese seem to have developed mostly the ideas of hot hells, because, perhaps, exposure to cold was well known to Tibetans and Mongols and as much

Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Chinese popular religion<sup>21</sup>—serve as a record of sociocultural, economic, political, and religious change, while periodically allowing glimpses of their authors' personal desires. These desires are often exhibited in the wish to see one's social antagonists gruesomely tortured in hell or in the longing to avoid this infernal realm altogether (it is rare that a tale's protagonist actually receives purgatorial punishments). From grossly embellished tortures to bloody ponds and ox-head, horse-faced demons, Chinese conceptions of hell are certainly depicted in attention-arresting fashion and it is to the early history of these representations that I will now turn my attention.

## Early History of the Chinese Underworld

Depictions of a Chinese underworld can be traced back to commemorative inscriptions found on bronze vessels in Shang and Zhou tombs (c. 1600-256 BCE) which reference an “underground” realm inhabited by the deceased. Though the historical details of this underworld are absent, there is textual and archeological evidence of the practice of human sacrifice at these tombs to provide the deceased with servants in the afterlife.<sup>22</sup> Yet some scholars, such as Hu Shih and Joseph Needham, obdurately propose that the Chinese lacked any formulations of the underworld before the arrival of Buddhism.<sup>23</sup> Although the ingress of Buddhism into China did prompt major changes in representations and conceptions of the religious afterlife, an influential and creative period of underworldly development preempted its arrival.

More detailed references to this underground domain populated by the deceased are extant from the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-256 BCE), where it was alternately referred to as the “Yellow Springs” (*huangquan* 黄泉) or “Dark City” (*youdu* 幽都).

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dreaded by them as exposure to extreme heat was by the Chinese.” Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Duyvendak explains, “Buddhist ideas of Hell were amalgamated with old Chinese notions, thus creating a system in which Buddhistic, Taoistic, and even Confucianistic elements freely intermingled.” Duyvendak, “A Chinese ‘Divina Commedia,’” p. 258.

<sup>22</sup> Chou Poo Mu, “Afterlife: Chinese Concepts,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), pp. 169-172, on p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Though, as Ying-Shih Yü explains in “‘Oh Soul, Come Back!’ A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (1987): 363-395, Hu Shih later recanted his position, this lingering misconception still persists. Donnelly has recently proposed, “The concept of Hell came rather late to China. It arrived in the first century A.D. with the spread of Indian Buddhism which in turn borrowed the idea from Brahmanism.” Donnelly, *A Journey*, p. 8. This type of statement ignores the fundamental contributions to the form and function of contemporary conceptions of the underworld provided by these early Chinese formulations.

The *Chronicle of Zuo* (Zuozhuan 左傳),<sup>24</sup> a narrative history which details this Eastern Zhou period, mentions the underworld in a tale about the Duke of Zheng. Laurence Thompson explains that this Duke, angry with his disloyal mother, threatened not to see her until they met again at the Yellow Springs.<sup>25</sup> After his mother's death, the contrite Duke dug a tunnel in hope of reuniting with his mother at this sulfurous aquifer but the status of his success—or any additional information concerning this underground realm—has not surfaced within the known historical record. The term Dark City, which evokes images of an underground tomb or netherworld, first appeared in an anthology of poems from the Warring States period titled *Songs of the South* (Chuci 楚辭). Here, the poem “Summons of the Soul” (Zhaohun 招魂), based on the attempted ritual resuscitation of a deceased body by the capture of its soul, implores:

O soul, come back! Go not down to the Land of Darkness,  
Where the Earth God lies, nine-coiled, with dreadful horns on his  
forehead,  
And a great humped back and bloody thumbs, pursuing men, swift-footed:  
Three eyes he has in his tiger's head, and his body is like a bull's.  
O soul, come back! Lest you bring on yourself disaster.<sup>26</sup>

As Mu states, this lyrical portrayal reveals an aversion within early representations of an underworld associated with death, darkness, and a ferocious demon, but fails to provide a methodical outline of this realm.<sup>27</sup>

Major developments in the systemization of models of the underworld occurred during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). As Eberhard explains, “Chinese folk religion before the Han period (206 B.C.) seems not to have had the concept of sin, although it recognized a great number of supernatural beings.”<sup>28</sup> Although complex demonographies, used by shamans to identify and control harmful spirits, have been

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the *Chronicle of Zuo* see Zuoqiu Ming, *The Tso Chuan: Selections from China's Oldest Narrative History*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Laurence G. Thompson, “On the Prehistory of Hell in China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 17 (1989): 27-41, on p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> Mu, “Afterlife,” p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 16. Though, as Eberhard explains, the Controller of Fate (*Siming* 司命) “is mentioned in pre-Han texts, which give the impression that he is an official who deals out punishments and rewards as officials on earth do,” this seems to leave open the possibility that the underworld may have been a place of punishment before the Han dynasty. Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 17.

dated as far back as the Warring States period,<sup>29</sup> it was not until the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–24 CE) that an official bureaucracy of the underworld was developed.<sup>30</sup> This hellish bureaucracy featured a Lord of the Underworld, an Assistant Magistrate of the Underworld, an Assistant of the Dead, a Retinue of the Graves, a Minister and Magistrate of Grave Mounds, a Commander of Ordinance for the Mounds, a Neighborhood Head of the Gate of the Souls, the Police of the Grave Mounds, a Marquis of the Eastern Mound, a Count of the Western Mound, and an Official of Underneath.<sup>31</sup> This bureaucratic structure, which mirrored the official Han dynasty polity, was controlled by the Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi* 黃帝) from his residence in heaven.<sup>32</sup>

The creation of a bureaucratically-inspired underworld during the Han period was also accompanied by a spatial transformation. By the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE), the sacred Mount Tai (*Taishan* 泰山) became another location of the underworld in popular conception. As Mu says, the most probable process that led to this mountain's consideration as an alternative destination for the deceased began in books like the *Classic of History* (*Shujing* 書經).<sup>33</sup> Written in the sixth century BCE, this book

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<sup>29</sup> An example of one of the earliest of these demonographies, recovered from a third century BCE tomb at Shui Hudi (睡虎地) in Hubei, is entitled *Jie* (誥) and consists of a prologue followed by seventy separate entries that detail a form of demonic aggravation and its ritual resolution. Donald Harper, "A Chinese Demonography of the Third Century B.C.," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45, no. 2 (1985): 459-498, on pp. 460-461.

<sup>30</sup> Although no official bureaucracy of the underworld existed until this time, the third century BCE text, *Chunqiu Affairs and Speeches* (*Chunqiu Shiyu* 春秋事語), is focused on the untimely deaths of political protagonists who were portrayed as having posthumous careers as bureaucrats in the underworld. Yuri Pines, "History as a Guide to the Netherworld: Rethinking the *Chunqiu Shiyu*," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 31 (2003):101-126, on pp. 115-117.

<sup>31</sup> Mu, "Afterlife," p. 170.

<sup>32</sup> Dating the bureaucratization of the netherworld in early Daoism is a difficult task. Chi-Tim Lai has revised Anna Seidel's original proposition that the *Demon Statutes of Nüqing* (*Nuqing guilu* 女青鬼律) is a text which implies a netherworld bureaucracy. See Anna Seidel, "Traces of Han Religion in Funeral Texts Found in Tombs," in *Dōkyō to Shūkyō bunka*, ed. Akizuki Kan'ei (Tokyo: Hidakawa, 1987), pp. 39-41. By mistakenly equating the second century CE *Demon Statutes of Nüqing* with the fifth century CE *Statutes and Ordinances of the Nüqing Edicts* (*Nuqing zhaoshu guiling* 女青詔書律令), a text which does provide the bureaucratic hierarchies of the netherworld and a soteriological conception of underworld demons meant to keep them from harassing the living, Seidel has pushed the date of the bureaucratization of the netherworld back three centuries. Chi-Tim Lai, "The Demon Statutes of Nüqing and the Problem of Bureaucratization of the Netherworld in Early Heavenly Master Daoism," *T'oung Pao* 88, no. 4 (2002): 251-281, on p. 258, explains that though some of the language in these two texts is similar, the earlier *Demon Statutes of Nüqing* is used to ward off demons by calling out their names but does not feature a netherworld bureaucracy.

<sup>33</sup> Mu, "Afterlife," p. 171.

refers to a sacrifice made at Mount Tai by the filial King Shun (*Dashun* 大舜). The sacred nature of this mountain was further solidified because it served as the setting for imperial sacrifices, performed at the mountain since the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), and through the notion that it was the site where the Yellow Emperor performed a sacrifice to heaven which secured his immortality. A funerary text from the Han dynasty reveals, “The living belong to the jurisdiction of Chang’an to the west;<sup>34</sup> the dead belong to the jurisdiction of Mount Tai to the east.”<sup>35</sup> This mountain, thought to be ruled by the Lord of Mount Tai, did not usurp the position of the Yellow Springs or Dark City as the perceived location of the underworld, but merely served as an alternative venue.<sup>36</sup>

While changing conceptions of the underworld in the Han dynasty included a bureaucratically controlled netherworld which was popularly imagined to be beneath Mount Tai, this underworld did not feature the purgatorial punishments so archetypal of later Chinese representations of the afterlife. The *Classic of Great Peace* (Tianguanli Baoyuan Taipingjing 天官歷包元太平經), written at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, divulged that names are catalogued in the afterlife according to the completion of good or evil deeds. Yet as Thompson states, “There is still lacking any indication that the latter receive punishment in the netherworld.”<sup>37</sup> Although karmic retribution based on evil deeds is absent, the deceased were still believed to owe taxes and perform conscripted labor in the underworld. A text found within an Eastern Han tomb claims that its resident was buried with soybeans and melon seeds in order to pay this tax. The deceased was also buried with a lead figurine that could presumably serve as a substitute and perform the odious corvée conscription associated with the underworld.<sup>38</sup> While Buddhist notions of purgatory would soon reshape Chinese conceptions of the underworld, the Yellow Springs, Dark City, and Mount Tai represent the complex mixture of popular beliefs, contemplation of death and psychological inquiry, and socio-political structure that remains a defining characteristic of representations of Chinese hell today.

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<sup>34</sup> The city of Chang’an (Changan 長安) was the capital during the Western Han dynasty.

<sup>35</sup> Mu, “Afterlife,” p. 171.

<sup>36</sup> These alternate locations of the underworld are not exclusive or incongruous, as Thompson explains, “The symbolism is, in either case, the same: Earth is both source and destination; Earth is Mother and Devourer.” Thompson, “On the Prehistory of Hell in China,” p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, “On the Prehistory,” p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> Mu, “Afterlife,” p. 170.

## Introduction of Buddhism

The introduction of Buddhism into China—a complex and contentious process<sup>39</sup>—initiated fundamental changes in formulations of the underworld. These transformations included the introduction of horrific punishments based on a system of karmic retribution, the compartmentalization of this underground realm according to specific penalties, and the staffing of hell with foreign figures. Yü claims, “The idea of heaven and hell as opposing sites of reward and punishment in the afterlife was not fully developed in Chinese thought until the coming of Buddhism.”<sup>40</sup> The Buddhist method of transmission for these representations of hell in didactic tales and visual images was also pervasively adopted (and adapted) by its divergent Chinese audience. I will begin this analysis of Buddhist influences on the underworld with a brief investigation of the Indian traditions which informed early Mainstream Buddhist conceptions of purgatory, before exploring the Buddhist models that shaped Chinese belief.<sup>41</sup>

Since at least the development of the Suttapitaka and Vinayapitaka schools, the teachings of Mainstream Buddhism have included basic descriptions of purgatory. As Teiser notes, “Beginning with the *Nikāyas*, Buddhist sources describe the terrors that await sentient beings whose evil deeds in previous lives result in rebirth in hell.”<sup>42</sup> These Mainstream Buddhist notions of the underworld were largely informed by Indian sources such as the *Mahābhārata* and *Institutes of Vishnu*. The *Mahābhārata*, written through a process of textual accretion which began before the sixth century BCE, includes detailed descriptions of hell and the painful process of metempsychosis which awaits those who commit evil acts. The section entitled “Anusasana-parva,” or “The Book of the Instructions,” includes a description of these purgatorial punishments.

The man who becomes guilty of ingratitude O king, has to go to the regions of Yāma and there to undergo very painful and severe treatment at the hands of the messengers, provoked to fury, of the grim king of the dead. Clubs with heavy hammers and mallets, sharp-pointed lances, heated

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<sup>39</sup> See Kenneth K.S. Chen, *Buddhism in China, a Historical Survey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964); Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Buddhism in China, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); and Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959).

<sup>40</sup> Yü, “Oh Soul,” p. 386.

<sup>41</sup> Mainstream Buddhism is the more appropriate terminology for the sometimes derogatorily labeled Hinayana Buddhism.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen F. Teiser, “‘Having Once Died and Returned to Life’: Representations of Hell in Medieval China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48, no. 2 (1998): 433-464, on p. 435.

jars, all fraught with severe pain, frightful forests of sword-blades, heated sands, thorny Sâlmalis<sup>43</sup>—these and many other instruments of the most painful torture such a man has to endure in the regions of Yâma, O Bharata!<sup>44</sup>

Mainstream Buddhists also borrowed from Brahmanical texts such as the *Institutes of Vishnu* (c. 100 CE) where, if penance was not performed, one was sentenced to punishment in a systemized underworld which featured 21 hells.<sup>45</sup> This text depicts the plight of those suffering in purgatory where, “Casting wistful glances upon the food and drink of others, they receive blows from ministers (of Yâma), whose faces are similar to those of crows, herons, cranes, and other horrid animals. Here they are boiled in oil, and they are pounded with pestles, or ground in iron or stone vessels.”<sup>46</sup> The *Institutes of Vishnu* also outlines a system of karmically-determined rebirths.<sup>47</sup> For example, if one steals meat while they are alive, they are said to be reborn as a vulture. Some basic features of current Chinese conceptions of hell can be envisaged in these early descriptions: the Vedic figure Yâma still serves as one ruler of the underworld, torturers are half-man, half-beast, tortures include blows from heavy hammers and searing hot oil, and undesirable rebirths are promised as a consequence of evil actions.

Buddhists, who borrowed from these Indian traditions, developed their own schema for the realm of hell. The Buddhist term for hell is *niraya*, which as Samuel Beal explains is a Sanskrit word that means “opposed to reason” or “out of the right way.”<sup>48</sup> This definition provides a linguistic clue to the netherworld’s location as hell was thought to be situated beneath Jambudvîpa,<sup>49</sup> the island continent inhabited by

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<sup>43</sup> This is the silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*) which is well-known throughout Asia for its large, thorny trunk.

<sup>44</sup> *The Mahâbhârata*, trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguli (Calcutta: Bharata Press, 1884-1896), vol. 13 sec. 111, p. 230.

<sup>45</sup> These 21 hells are: Tâmisra (darkness), Andhatâmisra (complete darkness), Raurava (place of howling), Mahâraurava (place of much howling), Kâlasûtra (thread of time or death), Mahânaraka (great hell), Sañgîvana (restoring to life), Avîki (unceasing), Tâpana (burning), Sampratâpana (parching), Samghâtaka, (pressing together), Kâkola (ravens), Kudmala (bud), Pûtimrittika (stinking clay), Lohasankti (iron-spiked), Rikîsha (frying pan), Vishamapanthâna (rough or uneven roads), Kantakasâlmali (thorny Sâlmali trees), Dîpanadî (flame river), Asipattravana (sword-leaved forest), and Lohakâraka (iron fetters). *Institutes of Vishnu, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 7, trans. Julius Jolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880), pp. 140-141.

<sup>46</sup> *Institutes of Vishnu, Sacred Books*, p. 143.

<sup>47</sup> *Institutes of Vishnu, Sacred Books*, pp. 144-149.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1871), p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Jambudvîpa means “Rose Apple Island.”

humans and located near Mount Meru on the Kāmadhātu plane of existence.<sup>50</sup> Dore says that, “According to Buddhist cosmogony, the existing universe consists of an infinite number of vast circular planes rising in tiers above Mount Meru, the ideal center of this fabulous world. The hells lie deep down in the system, and are situated 20,000 *Yoganas* (280,000 miles) below the earth.”<sup>51</sup> Hell, imagined deep beneath the human realm, was often portrayed as a threatening city constructed of brass and iron which was surrounded by boiling rivers and trees made of knives.<sup>52</sup>

The disparities between different Vedic and Buddhist accounts of hell have led scholars to disagree on the “standard” number of hells in early Buddhism. Duyvendak explains that the most “orthodox” system includes eight, layered hells, which are each subdivided into sixteen lesser hells for a total of 136 hells.<sup>53</sup> Dore proposes that Mainstream Buddhism initially counted just eight hells, to which Mahāyāna Buddhism later added eight more.<sup>54</sup> Beal claims that the Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism featured eight hot,<sup>55</sup> eight cold,<sup>56</sup> and three frontier<sup>57</sup> hells. Teiser explains that while the earlier versions of hells described in the *Nikāyas*, *Jatakas*, and *Vinaya* of the Pāli Canon were often disorganized, “The system of eight hells was the ‘orthodox’ Buddhist cosmology contained in the scholastic treatises of the Sarvāstivāda school and in all of the Mahāyāna philosophical traditions that developed out of this tradition of dharma-analysis.”<sup>58</sup> The amount of time served in this purgatorial realm was determined by the actual hell to which one was sent and the sentence was often doubled in each successive stratum. Buddhist formulations of hell were not yet solidified by the time they reached China during the Han dynasty and the textual record from this period reflects this continued development.

Some of the earliest translations of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese occurred in the second century CE with the arrival of Parthian monastic An Shigao (安世高). This

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<sup>50</sup> This is the Buddhist “Realm of Desire.”

<sup>51</sup> Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, pp. 253-254.

<sup>52</sup> Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures*, p. 57.

<sup>53</sup> Duyvendak, “A Chinese ‘Divina Commedia,’” p. 259.

<sup>54</sup> Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, p. 256.

<sup>55</sup> The eight hot hells of the Sarvāstivādins are: Sandjīva (Hell of Revival), Kālasūtra (Hell of Laceration), Sanghāta (Hell of Crushing), Raurāva (Hell of Shrieking), Mahāraurāvas (Hell of Great Shrieking), Tapana (Hell of Heat), Pratāpa (Hell of Fire), Avīci (Hell of No Intermission). Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures*, p. 60-62.

<sup>56</sup> The eight cold hells of the Sarvāstivādins are: Avata (Hell of Sores), Niravata (Hell of Scars), A-cha-cha (Hell of Chattering), Havava (Hell of Trembling), Hahaha (Hell of Shivering), Utpala (Hell of Numbness), Padma (Hell of Cold Sores), Pundara (Hell of Frostbite). Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures*, p. 63-64.

<sup>57</sup> These three frontier hells are solitary and located among the mountains, in the sea, and in the wilderness. Beal, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures*, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 181.

monk established a center for the translation of Buddhist texts at the Han dynasty capital of Luoyang, which was responsible for translating thirty-five books from the Mainstream and Mahāyāna schools. One of these translations, *The Sutra of the Buddha's Teachings on Sin, Retribution, and Hell* (Foshuo zuiye yingbao jiaohua diyujing 佛說罪業應報教化地獄經) provides a detailed enumeration of transgressions and their hellish consequences.<sup>59</sup> As Duyvendak explains, this sutra may be “the oldest description of infernal punishments in Chinese.”<sup>60</sup> This text features twenty different types of punishments: torture on Knife Mountain and in the Forest of Swords, being cut from head to toe by infernal attendants, having red hot nails driven into the body, being cooked in a kettle of boiling water, etc. This representation of hell also features the revitalization of the tortured by a cool breeze so that they may receive more torture. These punishments are comprised of an amalgam of the tortures of early Indian traditions, such as the Forest of Swords mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* and *Institutes of Vishnu*; early Buddhist conceptions, like the Sarvāstivāda school's Hell of Laceration; and the exaggeration of other everyday pains, such as being pierced by nails or burned by scalding water.

Another early Buddhist scripture translated into Chinese by An Shigao is the *Sutra of Eighteen Hells* (Shiba nilijing 十八泥犁經).<sup>61</sup> This sutra outlines eighteen specific hells and their punishments, as well as the duration of time which must be served in each. A description of those destined for this infernal realm from this text reads:

In the beginning a person may be evil but then repent and become good. Such do not go to hell. The people who go to hell are those who kill, rob, take another man's wife, who want a person to die so that they can get possession of his property for themselves; people with dirty minds, thieves, people who do wrong; those who curse or are angry, who beat others or tie them up; those who expose the faults of others, who are jealous or who speak in anger. Such people will go to hell, as will those who are domineering or act contrary to the will of the gods.<sup>62</sup>

Much like *The Sutra of the Buddha's Teachings on Sin, Retribution, and Hell*, each agonizing punishment lasts for eons and if the occupants of hell die they are revived to

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<sup>59</sup> This sutra can be found in the *Taisho Tripitaka* (Dazang jing 大藏經), vol. 17 (Taipei: Zhonghua dianzi fodian xiehui, 1998), pp. 450-452.

<sup>60</sup> Duyvendak, “A Chinese ‘Divina Commedia,’” p. 281.

<sup>61</sup> This sutra is located in the *Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. 17, pp. 520-528.

<sup>62</sup> Goodrich, *Chinese Hells*, p. 129.

be tortured again. The eight fiery hells<sup>63</sup> featured in this sutra are located below each other within the earth and the ten cold hells<sup>64</sup> are said to be located where the earth and the sky meet.<sup>65</sup> Though it is unlikely that these early Chinese translations of Buddhist representations of hell were widely read, they prefigure the conceptions of hell that followed and share a similar structure, personnel, and karmically-determined group of punishments.

Some measure of standardization for Buddhist conceptions of hell was achieved three centuries later with the translation of the *Sutra of Stability in Contemplation of the True Law* (Zhengfa nianchujing 正法念處經), said to be translated by Zhu Tan during the end of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 CE).<sup>66</sup> Chen Hong claims that while translated descriptions of hell appeared as early as the second century CE, it was only within the sixth century's *Sutra of Stability in Contemplation of the True Law* that hell

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<sup>63</sup> These eight fiery hells, whose Chinese names are often transliterations of their Sanskrit counterparts or descriptions of the hells themselves, are: (1) Xianjiu hu Hell (先就乎), the denizens of this hell constantly fight each other and the sentence to this hell lasts 135 billion years; (2) Julu cuige Hell (居廬倅脛), occupants of this hell are burned and then fight each other and the sentence to this hell is 270 billion years; (3) Shangju du Hell (商居都), the residents of this hell are burned before being enticed to mountains which crush them and a sentence to this hell lasts 540 billion years; (4) Louni li Hell (樓泥犁), souls in this hell are enticed into a town where they are burned interminably and the sentence to this hell lasts 1,800 billion years; (5) Pangzu Hell (旁卒), occupants of this hell are boiled before being shoved in to a deep pit filled with fire, guards use iron sticks to beat these people within the pit, and a sentence to this hell lasts 2,160 billion years; (6) Caowu beici Hell (草烏卑次), this hell includes a town with walls two thousand *li* high and four thousand *li* wide which is full of fire and denizens are put in to this fire and crushed with iron for 4,320 billion years; (7) Duyi nanqie Hell (都意難且), people in this hell are burned in a fire and then eaten by worms while periodically a door is opened to which all of the occupants of this hell rush only to have it shut in their face and the sentence to this hell is 8,640 billion years; and (8) Bulu dubanhu Hell (不廬都般呼), this hell is filled with fire and its residents are forced to lie on beds of fire from which they cannot leave and the sentence that one serves in this hell is 17,280 billion years.

<sup>64</sup> These ten cold hells are: (1) Wujing du Hell (烏竟都), occupants are burned before suffering in the freezing cold, people are then burned again, split in two, crushed by boulders, and ground in an iron mill. The sentence to this hell is determined by 128 *hu* of mustard seeds with each seed equaling one hundred years; (2) Nilu du Hell (泥廬都), the remaining hells, including this one, feature the same punishments as the first cold hell with the amount of mustard seeds doubled in each succeeding hell; (3) Wulüe Hell (烏略); (4) Wuman Hell (烏滿); (5) Wuji Hell (烏藉); (6) Wuhu Hell (烏呼); (7) Xujian qu Hell (須健渠); (8) Motou ganzhihu Hell (末頭乾直呼); (9) Qubu tu Hell (區逋塗); and (10) Chenmo Hell (沈莫).

<sup>65</sup> Goodrich, *Chinese Hells*, p. 128.

<sup>66</sup> This sutra is located in the *Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. 17, p. 37).

was described in great detail.<sup>67</sup> This sutra's description of eight hot hells reflects the standard Mahāyāna Buddhist representations of the infernal realm.<sup>68</sup> These eight hells are divided into categories of sins committed in action, speech, and mind. The first four hells deal with sins of action: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and the use of intoxicants; the fifth hell administers punishment for sins of speech: lying and calumny; and the last three hells focus on sins of the mind: false views, defilement of religion, and premeditated crimes.<sup>69</sup> This *Sutra of Stability in Contemplation of the True Law* is also significant for the fact that it served as a meditative manual which invited its readers to "contemplate, and perhaps also to visualize the various states of existence to which his karma may possibly lead him."<sup>70</sup> This encouraged contemplation led to further creative developments in conceptions of purgatory and anticipated the contemporary practice of imagining oneself as a protagonist in these otherworldly imaginaries.

While the popularity of these Buddhist conceptions of hell at the periods of their translation is difficult to gauge, these formulations were prevalent enough that, "When Han Ch'in, a minister of the Sui, died (592), the rumor spread that he had become King Yāma in the hells."<sup>71</sup> The basic structure of these Buddhist conceptions of hell has, by and large, remained intact in Chinese representations to this day. Eberhard notes, "Some popular texts occasionally mix up names or sequences, but the general line remained the same from 500 to 1960 A.D."<sup>72</sup> The system of karmically-determined punishments featured in Buddhist representations of hell has also remained a mainstay of contemporary depictions. Although the crimes punished and the method of their expiation have been adapted to suit readers of each particular era—for instance, the

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<sup>67</sup> Hong Chen, "Concepts of Chinese Purgatory in Pu Songling's Fiction *Liaozhai Zhiyi*," *British Columbia Asian Review* 8 (1994-95): 128-149, on p. 129.

<sup>68</sup> The standard system of eight hells featured in this sutra includes: (1) Hell of Repetition (*huo diyu* 活地獄), (2) Black-rope Hell (*heisheng diyu* 黑繩地獄), (3) Crowded Hell (*heda diyu* 合大地獄), (4) Hell of Screaming (*huanzhi diyu* 喚之地獄), (5) Hell of Great Screaming (*dajiaohuan da diyu* 大叫喚大地獄), (6) Hell of Burning Heat (*jiaore zhi da diyu* 焦熱之大地獄), (7) Hell of Great Burning Heat (*dajiaore da diyu* 大焦熱大地獄), and (8) Hell of No-Interruption (*abida diyu* 阿鼻大地獄).

<sup>69</sup> Julian Pas, "Journey to Hell: A New Report of Shamanistic Travel to the Courts of Hell," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 17 (1989): 43-60, on pp. 48-49.

<sup>70</sup> Pas, "Journey to Hell," p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 176. Goodrich writes that in popular conception the office of Yāma was later thought to be held by a Song Dynasty judge named Bao Zheng, recognized for his sense of justice and refusal of bribes. Goodrich, *Chinese Hells*, p. 74.

<sup>72</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 25.

slanderers of Mahāyāna Buddhism,<sup>73</sup> of great concern to the authors engaged in establishing an emerging religious tradition, are no longer punished in the lowest realm of hell—contemporary depictions still feature numerous continuities from these early Buddhist sutras. Yet these influential iterations of the underworld were certainly not ubiquitously or unequivocally accepted by their Chinese audiences.

## Transition from Buddhism to a Complex Mixture

While the arrival of Buddhism was certainly an essential element in the creation of representations of hell in China, many Chinese did not passively accept these foreign delineations. As Buddhist notions of the netherworld spread throughout China, they reciprocally influenced, and were influenced by Confucian, Daoist, and popular religious beliefs. One clear example of the transition from Buddhist conceptions of the underworld to a complex Chinese amalgamation can be charted in the transformation of belief in the ten kings of purgatory.<sup>74</sup> The earliest datable manuscript of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* is extant from 908 CE, yet was probably produced sometime between 720-908 CE.<sup>75</sup> An indigenous Chinese scripture which portends to be from South Asia, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* is both text and ritual process. As Teiser explains, “The long recension involves singing, rhythmic chanting, and worshipping, presumably conducted in unison; the viewing of pictures; as well as the elements more dependant on knowledge of literary Chinese like title, author, and narrative.”<sup>76</sup> These textual, ritual, and illustrative depictions of the underworld serve as an essential element to understanding the union between Buddhist and Chinese conceptions of purgatory.

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<sup>73</sup> See the Mahāyāna Buddhist *Śūrangama Sutra* (Lengyan jing 楞嚴經), trans. Charles Luk (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001), p. 178.

<sup>74</sup> Unlike Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, Kenneth Dean, or Mayfair Yang, who rely on outmoded notions of syncretism or hybridity—each of which possesses deficiencies in their usage—I prefer using the term “complexity” in an attempt to understand the problem of the historiography of Chinese conceptions of afterlife. An excellent example of how the term complexity can be used to explain religious mixture can be found in A. Thomas Kirsch, “Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977): 241-266. See Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Mayfair Yang, “Putting Global Capitalism in its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure,” *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2000): 477-509.

<sup>75</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 628.

<sup>76</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” pp. 627-628.

The nearly thirty surviving copies of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* from the Dunhuang caves<sup>77</sup> provide detailed descriptions of the ten kings of purgatory. As Pas explains, while Buddhist descriptions of the netherworld often divided it into eighteen hells – both hot and cold – or eight hells, “The Chinese chose the latter type and, in good bureaucratic fashion, added two more: one at the beginning and one at the end.”<sup>78</sup> These ten hells are ruled by mythological figures taken from both India and China.<sup>79</sup> Teiser explains that in the combination of Indian deities, like Yāma, and Chinese figures, such as the King of Mount Tai, “The dual provenance of the ten kings is one of the clearest indications that the idea of purgatory is a Sino-Indian synthesis.”<sup>80</sup> This complex mixture, personified by these royal figures, quickly spread across China<sup>81</sup> and even the prominent Song dynasty Confucian Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修)<sup>82</sup> purportedly dreamt of the ten kings. Teiser reveals, “In his waking hours Ou-yang may well have tried to furnish Confucian alternatives to Buddhist rituals, but folklore suggests that the ten kings still exercised a hold upon him when darkness fell.”<sup>83</sup>

Illustrations of the ten kings, which served to propagate their popularity, detail the transition from Buddhist to popular Chinese formulations of the underworld. Early illustrations of the underworld, called “hell scrolls,” did not include the ten kings. Lothar Ledderose explains, “From literary records it is known that pictorial representations of the ten kings existed by the ninth century, and that in the tenth century they had become quite popular.”<sup>84</sup> In the early Dunhuang hell scrolls which featured the ten kings, they are portrayed in a vertical hierarchy beneath—and thus subservient to—the Buddhist ruler of the underworld, Ksitigarbha bodhisattva (*Dayuan dizang pusa* 大願地藏菩薩). These Dunhuang hell scrolls also featured illustrations of one of the Buddha’s sermons, six bodhisattvas, a black messenger, the prison of hell,

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<sup>77</sup> These copies include illustrations and one diminutive, personal copy that could fit within a pocket and was probably used as a talisman or personal study-guide. Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 629.

<sup>78</sup> Pas, “Journey to Hell,” p. 48.

<sup>79</sup> For a list of English translations see Teiser, “Having Once Died,” pp. 433-434.

<sup>80</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 625.

<sup>81</sup> Teiser proposes, “Judging only from unambiguous evidence interpreted conservatively, in the ninth and tenth centuries traces of the ten kings could be found across most of northwestern, northern, central, and eastern China.” Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 647.

<sup>82</sup> Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072 CE), a stalwart anti-Buddhist, served in many different imperial positions. For more on Ouyang see Ronald C. Egan, *The Literary Works of Ou-yang Hsiu (1007-72)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>83</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 643.

<sup>84</sup> Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 177.

and two spirit boys of good and evil.<sup>85</sup> Later hell scrolls from Dunhuang feature the ten kings and representations of the underworld in a different light.

The reign of Ksitigarbha bodhisattva, previously portrayed as the ruler of the underworld, is usurped in these newer illustrations by the increasing power of the ten kings who assume “ever more importance and autonomy.”<sup>86</sup> Teiser explains that while some of the Dunhuang paintings depict the ten kings as entirely subservient to Ksitigarbha, in others, each king is shown governing his own staff and court.<sup>87</sup> The decline of Ksitigarbha’s authority began in the Tang dynasty (618-907), when Daoists presented the Jade Emperor (*Yuhuang* 玉皇) as an alternative ruler of hell.<sup>88</sup> By the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), the ardent Daoist Emperor Huizong (徽宗), whose rule lasted from 1101-1126 CE and was famous for its prohibition of Buddhism, commanded that the Jade Emperor be depicted as the ruler of both the Daoist pantheon and hell itself.<sup>89</sup> Ksitigarbha’s weakening was accompanied by an increase in the ten kings’ influence. Ledderose, who provides a comparison of the hell scrolls produced at Dunhuang with a set mass-produced at the eastern seaport of Ningbo during the thirteenth century, explains that in the Ningbo paintings, the kings are given much more elaborate settings. These newer illustrations feature the ten kings as autonomous rulers, a fact which is emphasized through the inclusion of armchairs, screens, and balustrades in each court, which Ledderose explains “are pictorial formulas that emphasize the authority of each judge.”<sup>90</sup> The illustrators of the Ningbo hell scrolls also omitted overtly Buddhist elements, such as the Buddha’s sermon, the six bodhisattvas, and the black messenger, while transforming figures such as the boys of good and evil into office boys who carry the imperial seals.<sup>91</sup>

The changing role of King Yāma, the fifth king of hell and purgatorial figure most synonymous with Buddhism, also serves as a poignant example of the transition from Buddhist conceptions of hell to the complex Chinese creations which exist today. Yāma, the Vedic god of the dead who was borrowed by Buddhists from Brahmanism,

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<sup>85</sup> Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, pp. 177-179.

<sup>86</sup> Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, p. 179.

<sup>87</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 638.

<sup>88</sup> Goodrich, *Chinese Hells*, p. 21.

<sup>89</sup> Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, p. 256. The ten kings were also replaced by a Daoist set of gods during this period in Daoist liturgies such as the twelfth century *Ceremonial for Deliverance of the Ten Kings of the Dark Prefects* (Difu shiwang baduyi 地府十王拔度儀). See Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 635. This imperially-mandated change was not widely accepted and the ten kings reemerged as the rulers of hell in later representations.

<sup>90</sup> Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, p. 180.

<sup>91</sup> Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, p. 183.

was originally conceived of as a benign, heavenly deity<sup>92</sup> and original ancestor to mankind.<sup>93</sup> Dore outlines another mythic narrative regarding Yāma, who was said to have once lived as a human monarch in the Northern Indian kingdom of Vaisali.<sup>94</sup> On one occasion, when battling a bordering nation, Yāma and his forces were nearing defeat. Yāma vowed to the powers of the netherworld that if he was granted a victory he and his officers would be reborn to serve in hell. Warriors from heaven quickly descended to assist Yāma in defeating his enemies and after his death, Yāma and his soldiers were sent to govern hell. Yāma, who serves as supreme judge of the dead in the Buddhist tradition, does not condemn the deceased but simply ushers them before a karmic mirror which reflects all of their good and evil deeds. Matsunaga explains, “It is said, therefore, that Yāma is really an emanation of the Buddha Amitābha...who, moved by infinite compassion, descends into the deepest hells and through the power of the mirror of knowledge...is able to transform the sufferings into a cleansing fire so that beings can be purified and rise to better forms of existence.”<sup>95</sup> This sentiment can also be found in *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, which discloses, “Underneath their stern appearance and despite their complicity in torture, Yāma and his associates are revealed to be agents of compassion.”<sup>96</sup> This perceived compassion would soon be the ruination of Yāma’s authority as these ideas were transferred throughout China.

As conceptions of the ten kings of the underworld were developed in China, Yāma was incorporated into this system with the name King Yāma (Yanluowang 閻羅王). Teiser proposes, “Although Chinese usage labels him a foreigner by rendering his name in transliteration, it also invests him with an air of local authority by adopting the Chinese word for ‘king.’”<sup>97</sup> Yet this “air of authority” was tempered by the fact that Yāma was now considered just one of the ten rulers of this underground realm. Ledderose explains that by this demotion, “The once powerful and demonic sovereign of the underworld continent has been transmuted into a government official, symptomatic of the transformation that Buddhism underwent in China.”<sup>98</sup> Yāma’s perceived loss of power did not stop there. Known for his compassion towards the deceased, Yāma was said to allow hell’s sinful souls the opportunity to return to earth and redress their karmic indiscretions. Yet this compassion also meant that “the other judges never had anybody come before their tribunals, and the wicked were not

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<sup>92</sup> Bimala Churn Law, *The Buddhist Conception of Spirits* (London: Luzac & Co., 1936), p. 6; Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969), p. 36.

<sup>93</sup> Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 34.

<sup>94</sup> Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>95</sup> Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 35. For more similarities between Yāma and Amitābha see Matsunaga (1969:35-36).

<sup>96</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 623.

<sup>97</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” p. 625.

<sup>98</sup> Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, p. 183.

punished. The Jade Emperor, to chastise him, demoted him from his leading rank and sent him to govern the fifth hell.”<sup>99</sup> This demotion, handed down by a Daoist deity, is also thought to be accompanied by a thrice daily punishment in which Yāma and his lictors are seized to have molten copper forced down their throats.<sup>100</sup>

## Bureaucratic Ambivalences

The compassionate complicity and subsequent demotion of Yāma serves as allegory for the cooptation of Buddhism in China and epitomizes the complex bureaucratic system which representations of hell were modeled after.<sup>101</sup> As Donald Gjertson proposes, “The nether world, at least superficially, was conceived as a construct physically and bureaucratically similar to the world of the living. Death itself is presented as parallel to arrest or official summons in the normal world, and several tales portray people met at the moment of death by men who take them into custody and lead them away.”<sup>102</sup> When sinful souls were brought to trial in the underworld, they sometimes failed to recognize they had passed away because the afterlife’s *yamen* (衙門), local bureaucratic complexes, were said to be so similar to those on earth.<sup>103</sup> Not only were official buildings the same, the infernal court also functioned in similar ways to its counterparts in the mortal world.<sup>104</sup> As Gjertson explains, the infernal

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<sup>99</sup> Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, p. 177.

<sup>100</sup> It is also imagined that Yāma and his officers will eventually be saved and attain the “bliss of Buddhahood.” Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, p. 251.

<sup>101</sup> See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and some of their Historical Factors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 150-165, for more on how conceptions of the supernatural bureaucracy mirror the imperial bureaucracy.

<sup>102</sup> Donald E. Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution: A Study and Translation of T’ang Lin’s Ming-Pao Chi* (Berkeley: Centers for South and Southeast Asia Studies, 1989), p. 135. Kohn explains, “The main difference from the officials in the world is that immortals hold more power and have more ease, that they are unburdened by the sorrows of physical existence, and that they need not to worry about the well-being of either family or ancestors.” Livia Kohn, ed., *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 334.

<sup>103</sup> Gjertson explains that within one tale the “official’s compound in the nether world is indistinguishable in appearance from one in the world of the living.” Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, p. 135.

<sup>104</sup> Gjertson states that in many representations of hell, “The proceedings are carried out in a manner that was conceived to be identical to official proceedings in the world of the living.” Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, p. 136.

complex was often depicted with court recorders writing and distributing documents,<sup>105</sup> clerks shuffling between courts, archivists locating and presenting official papers,<sup>106</sup> messengers ushering in witnesses,<sup>107</sup> and guards leading the condemned to serve their sentence.<sup>108</sup> Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌異) even describes a system of competitive examinations, similar to the imperial examinations on earth, which are held for posts in the underworld.<sup>109</sup>

Though largely patterned after the mortal *yamen* system of trial and punishment, scholars have proposed that some essential differences between the organizations of the living and underworld remained. Eberhard explains, "Folk Buddhism eliminated the caprices or arbitrary reactions of deities, and instituted a religious system that we might call *constitutional monarchism*, that is, the belief in a law that is absolutely binding even for the judge and is administered in an impersonal manner by an appointed heavenly judge."<sup>110</sup> In this new purgatorial system, corruption could be punished even if—as in the case of Yāma—one of the major figures of the system was guilty. Although Eberhard is correct that, in religious conceptions, judgment in hell was

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<sup>105</sup> Gjertson reveals, "Two tales mention chief recorders (*chu-pu* 主簿) at Mt. T'ai, who seem to have had the responsibility of preparing documents for submission to the Heavenly Offices, and in both instances the documents appear to have had an important bearing on whether or not a person was to die." Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, p. 137.

<sup>106</sup> Ledderose explains, "The comprehensive files of the underworld were probably thought to be more like those in the capital, such as the Bureau of Executory Personnel (*liunei quan*), or in the Bureau of Administrative Personnel (*shenguan yuan*), agencies that maintained detailed registers on the performance of all officials in the empire." Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, p. 184.

<sup>107</sup> The testimony of these witnesses, who were summoned from the ranks of the dead, animal realm, and living, was sometimes sufficient to prove a case was without merit, after which it would often be dismissed and the accused was allowed to return to life. Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, p. 136.

<sup>108</sup> These guards are certainly not those found within the earthly Chinese bureaucratic system. These infernal emissaries and torturers were the ox-head (*niutou* 牛頭) and horse-faced (*mamian* 馬面) demons of the underworld. Maspero explains, "They are the souls of those who in life ate beef or maltreated their horses and who, in the other world, receive this form and function as punishment. And that is why they are portrayed in all temples of the Wall and Ditches with a man's body and the head and feet of an animal, sometimes costumed as mandarins' attendants, one carrying the axe and the other the trident, sometimes naked to the waist and bearing instruments of torture." Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, p. 183.

<sup>109</sup> Pu Songling, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, trans. Herbert A. Giles (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1916). The story "Yu Qu-e" features a ghostly candidate who cheats by burning essays and swallowing their ashes and the tale "San sheng" includes a description of candidates who demand that Yāma "pluck out the eyes of an incompetent infernal examiner." Hong Chen, "Concepts of Chinese Purgatory," p. 147.

<sup>110</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 18.

supposed to be impartially administered, he pushes his analysis too far when proposing that “In contrast to the conditions in this world, in the other-world’s hall of judgment there is no consideration of social class, status, sex, or age. Every person is treated mechanically according to the law.”<sup>111</sup> Eberhard further states that “No bribery, no attempt to cheat, no attempt to use social status and influence will help.”<sup>112</sup>

While the possibility for impartiality existed in the netherworld—in a way that it never existed on earth—there are numerous examples of nepotism, corruption, and incompetence in hell.<sup>113</sup> The story “Xi Fang-ping,” located within *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, describes one man’s investigation into the unfair torture of his deceased father in purgatory. Xi Fang-ping travels to hell and finds that demon litigators have been bribed by an enemy of his father to make his father’s torture more unbearable. The judges in hell have also been bribed, and Xi himself is tortured on an iron bed and sawn in two. Though the demons sawing him are eventually impressed with Xi’s filial piety and release him, as Chen explains, “These descriptions of the injustice received in purgatory reflect injustice received in the world of the living. In religious texts...such punishments are always given to sinful souls, but in this story, Xi Fang-ping, the young man who has absolute devotion to filial piety and justice, is cruelly punished nonetheless.”<sup>114</sup> *In Search of the Supernatural* (Soushen ji 搜神記) also contains one particularly poignant tale focused on the influence of familial ties in the story, “A Better Post in the Underworld.”<sup>115</sup> In this tale, a general’s wife dreamt that she saw her dead son who complained that he had received a lowly post in the underworld. Though this general, Jiang Zhi, initially doubted his wife’s tale, his son eventually provided a detailed description of a nearby temple official who was scheduled, on the documents of the underworld, to pass away soon. This temple official agreed to help the general’s son secure whichever post he desired and the general rewards him with many gifts. The temple official soon dies, and one month later Zhi’s son appears in a dream and joyfully reveals, “I have been made Office Manager of the Court of T’ai-shan.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 18.

<sup>112</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 19.

<sup>113</sup> A popular saying illuminates this link between eschatological happiness and social status: “With money it’s the road to heaven, but without money it’s the gates of hell (*youqian jiushi tiantang lu, wuqian jiushi diyu men* 有錢就是天堂路, 無錢就是地獄門).” John S. Rohsenow, *ABC Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs* (Hawaii: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), p. 186.

<sup>114</sup> Hong Chen, “Concepts of Chinese Purgatory,” p. 145.

<sup>115</sup> See Gan Bao, *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record*, trans. Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J.I. Crump, Jr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>116</sup> Gan Bao, *In Search of the Supernatural*, pp. 185-186. As Mu proposes, “If the imagination of man concerning the netherworld was determined by his value system, a netherworld that encouraged personal advancement could only have appeared after such a real

Although Teiser proposes that journeys to the afterlife are viewed as more “bureaucratic experience” than “psychological process,”<sup>117</sup> I believe that historical representations of hell reflect both collective, cultural concerns and individual desires. These individual desires are present as resistances to collective control, a desire to see injustices resolved, and a fear of political caprices and death. Although formulations of hell were often co-opted by the dominant ideology, Emperor Huizong’s Daoist agenda is one example, they can also be employed as a form of individual resistance. Because Chinese representations of the afterlife were based on real historical systems, infernal imaginaries reflected both approbation and disapproval for the organizations on which they were based. Authors like Pu Songling used tales of the underworld, like the story of “Xi Fang-ping,” to satire the Qing dynasty through the portrayal of bureaucratic corruption and the torture of innocent victims.<sup>118</sup> Representations of the underworld also reflect a desire to see the injustices of this world addressed. Some examples of this can be found in the *Chunqiu Affairs and Speeches*, which depicts political figures who died prematurely continuing their careers as bureaucrats in the underworld,<sup>119</sup> and the *Sūrangama Sutra*,<sup>120</sup> which reserves the worst tortures in hell for those who oppose Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, historical representations of hell allow their authors (and, by proxy, their readership) to allay fears of bureaucratic ambivalences and death. Although Yü is correct that hellish tortures were basically a “faithful reflection of the cruel realities of interrogation and torture in the imperial and provincial prisons,”<sup>122</sup> there are some notable exceptions.<sup>123</sup> One of these exceptions is that while the violent *yamen* system

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world had already existed.” Chou Poo Mu, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 176.

<sup>117</sup> Teiser, “The Ten Kings,” pp. 624-625.

<sup>118</sup> See Hong Chen, “Concepts of Chinese Purgatory.” Dore proposes of hell, “The crimes punished exhibit graphically those national failings and shortcomings, which the native administration, owing to its apathy and indifference, its supine habits and traditions, never attempts to suppress or punish here below.” Dore, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, p. 261.

<sup>119</sup> Pines, “History as a Guide to the Netherworld,” pp. 115-117.

<sup>120</sup> *Sūrangama Sutra* (2001), p. 178.

<sup>121</sup> Maspero explains that Chinese conceptions of karma also serve to explain why specific injustices occurred, “In Kiangsu, when an infant is born one-eyed, it is said that he was lecherous in his former life; if he has a harelip, it is because he insulted people without motive; if he is dumb or stammers, it is because he was given to contradicting.” Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, p. 183.

<sup>122</sup> Yü, “Oh Soul,” p. 390.

<sup>123</sup> Another of these exceptions is that, as Ledderose explains, while some of the infernal torture depicted actually occurred, “The torture scenes in the Ningbo painting employ magical and fantastic elements as well, including a fire wheel that rotates by itself and pushes

frequently employed torture to gain confessions from the innocent, journeys to hell in popular literature rarely feature the punishment of the story's protagonist. More often, a case of mistaken identity or clever trickery allows the condemned to walk free.<sup>124</sup> The accused is often not merely released but also rewarded, as in the case of "Wen-ho meets the Shade of His Wife-to-be" and "Swift Traveler, Shih Hsü."<sup>125</sup> These mistaken summons represent both the author's desire to avoid underworldly – and worldly – punishments, and the desire that one's own death may some day be delayed or avoided as a bureaucratic "error."

## Conclusion

In addition to investigating the historiography of Chinese conceptions of hell, one purpose of this article was to highlight and avoid some enduring ethnocentricities. The first two ethnocentrically-motivated misconceptions state that Chinese citizens are either distinctively adept or uniquely ineffectual at formulating conceptions of an afterlife. While early Chinese representations of hell lacked a methodical outline,<sup>126</sup> indigenous conceptions of the underworld have existed since the Shang and Zhou dynasties and were depicted as complex bureaucracies from as early as the Western Han dynasty. These formulations were influenced by the ingress of Buddhism, absorbing the concept of sin<sup>127</sup> and karmically-determined punishments,<sup>128</sup> and reciprocally affected Buddhist conceptions of hell, demonstrated in the shifting role of the ten kings of hell.<sup>129</sup> The processes of continual creation and levels of complexity detailed throughout this paper, disprove notions that Chinese citizens are either adroit or unskilled in formulating conceptions of the afterlife.

While my paper thoroughly addresses the first two misconceptions, I would like to briefly speak to the final misconception, that Chinese citizens considered

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the sinners up into a knife mountain stacked with vertical blades." Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>124</sup> *In Search of the Supernatural* includes a story entitled "The Debater Offers a Substitute to Death." This tale features a youth skilful in theoretical exposition who met a ghost charged with escorting him to the underworld. The youth pled convincingly for his life and the ghost asked him if anyone else in the area resembling him could take his place. The youth told him there was one guard who resembled him and the ghost proceeded to pound the man's head in with a mallet. The guard was dead by mealtime and the youth was free to continue his life. See Gan Bao, *In Search of the Supernatural*, p. 184.

<sup>125</sup> Gan Bao, *In Search of the Supernatural*.

<sup>126</sup> Mu, "Afterlife," p. 170.

<sup>127</sup> Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin*, p. 16.

<sup>128</sup> Thompson, "On the Prehistory," p. 37.

<sup>129</sup> Teiser, "The Ten Kings."

formulations of the afterlife to be mere meditative tools which were not considered to be ontologically real. The biography of monk Jing Ai (靜藹) serves as one illustration of the veracity of these otherworldly representations for some believers. Jing Ai (534-578 CE) is said to have frequented temples to view depictions of hell as a child where, “The sight of sentient beings undergoing infernal punishment for their previous acts had a transforming effect on the boy, who thereafter resolved to leave the householder’s life.”<sup>130</sup> After leading the life of a cloistered monastic, Jing eventually retreated to the mountains where, as Teiser explains, “Convinced that the legacy of Śākyamuni had reached its nadir during the suppression under Emperor Wu, he sat in meditation in the mountains and disemboweled himself, taking care to hang his entrails in the surrounding trees and to expose fully what remained of his impermanent physical self. At the final twist of the knife, his biographer claims, he was sitting calmly facing the paradise of Amitābha Buddha in the west.”<sup>131</sup> This extreme belief in the afterlife was not an isolated incident. Becker reveals that during one of Pure Land Patriarch Shan Dao’s (善道) rousing sermons on the Western Paradise, a listener immediately committed suicide in hopes of attaining residency there.<sup>132</sup> While few believers demonstrated such extreme conviction, Robert Sharf explains that the majority of Chinese Buddhist practitioners considered the afterlife to be a reality as, “To deny the existence of either everyday reality *or* the Pure Land would be to err on the side of nihilism or naive idealism. Ultimately the Pure Land is no less real, and no more real, than this Sahā realm.”<sup>133</sup>

I hope that this paper has exposed these three ethnocentric misconceptions, which are unfortunately still being perpetuated in academic literature, as groundless. I believe that by self-reflexively accounting for our own motivations and critically interrogating the history of cultural conceptions, contemporary scholars can avoid perpetuating ethnocentrically-motivated misconceptions and account for the layers of complexity in historical formulations of the Chinese afterlife.

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<sup>130</sup> Teiser, “Having Once Died,” pp. 437-438.

<sup>131</sup> Teiser, “Having Once Died,” p. 438.

<sup>132</sup> Becker, *Breaking the Circle*, p. 63.

<sup>133</sup> Robert Sharf, “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China,” *T’oung Pao* 88, nos. 4-5 (2002): 282-331, on p. 319. Becker further explains, “Pure Land Buddhists accepted the provisional reality of all experiences, including dreams, visions, and meditative states.” Becker, *Breaking the Circle*, p. 63.