

MECHANISMS OF VIOLENT RETRIBUTION IN CHINESE HELL NARRATIVES

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Ai! The criminals in this hell have all had their eyes dug out and the fresh blood flows [from them], and each of them cries out, their two hands pressing their bloody eye-sockets—truly pitiful! To the left a middle-aged person is just having an eye pulled out by one of the shades; he struggles unceasingly, screaming; his left eye has already been extracted . . . (56b)

Ai-yah! . . . Each of the criminals is bound to a an iron pillar and the ox-headed demons are in the process of administering punishment—using iron or copper blades they peel the skin of the person's face, just as a butcher kills a pig and then flays it. Each of the criminal ghosts screams in pain . . . (59b)

The criminal ghost's hands are bound about an iron pillar which is entirely red [with heat] and the criminal ghost's two hands are entirely cooked and it is unbearable . . . (126a)

Record of A Journey to Hell

These passages are found, not in some medieval description of hell, nor in a work for sadists, but in a modern and quite popular Chinese "good book" (*shan-shu*) titled *Record of A Journey to Hell (Ti-yu yu-chi)*. *Record of A Journey to Hell* is the most recent work of a genre which emerged in tenth-century China and which may be found throughout Asia from Vietnam to Japan. This persistent fascination with gruesome scenes of torture stands in striking contrast to Michel Foucault's observations that by the first quarter of the nineteenth century "punishment had gradually ceased to be a spectacle" in Europe (9). In *Record of A Journey to Hell* we are not faced with a sea-change in the discourse and practice of a society. Rather, we must come to

grips with and seek to understand the persistence of images of torture as well as actual torture and public execution in some modern Chinese societies.

The Chinese hells—more properly purgatories, as punishment there is not eternal—are a product of cultural adaptation and interaction. Before the first century of our era we have evidence of only the most attenuated notions of the underworld, a "yellow springs" (*huang-yüan*) where "all, good and bad, huddled together in darkness being guarded jealously by the god of the Soil who ended by devouring them" (Thompson 29). The ruling elite avoided this fate through elaborate ancestral ritual indexed by the possession of a surname. Social status was, from the earliest times, "inscribed" on tablets which gave visible form to both social and cosmological hierarchies (Li 247-54). However, the rise of the Taoist Celestial Masters movement (*T'ien-shih tao*, second century) with its heavenly and infernal bureaucracies soon coupled with newly imported Indian Buddhist descriptions of the workings of karma and the hells. The result of this amalgam is the popular Chinese vision of the underworld as a vast bureaucracy centered on ten "courts," and headed by Yama, the South Asian lord of the dead (Seidel). At death the soul is summoned before the lords of hell who administer punishments appropriate to the misdeeds of the soul. After almost interminable periods of suffering, often in all of the hells in succession, the soul is reborn as a human, an animal, or even an insect, to start the whole process again.

By the tenth century this distinctly Chinese version of the underworld had found wide dissemination and was the framework for worship and ritual directed to the recently dead.¹⁸ Unlike the South Asian prototypes, Chinese hells appear to be modeled on the imperial bureaucracy and administered by a hellish staff. The "court" layout often major and numerous subsidiary hells mimics Chinese palace and temple architecture and is quite distinct from the mandala-like layout found in "orthodox" Buddhist prototypes. Taoist priests, Buddhist monks and nuns, and a variety of folk practitioners and mediums act as intermediaries between this world and the other. They grease the wheels of the bureaucracy with their ritual knowledge and with community offerings to obtain release for imprisoned souls. Knowledge of the workings of the underworld is, according to the texts themselves, the result of "near death" experiences, wherein people "die" and are summoned below, and for one

¹⁸ On Buddhist rites for the recently dead and the development of the "Ghost Festival" in medieval times see Steven Teiser (both works). For the development of Buddhist rites from the eighth century onward and their association with esoteric ritual, see Orzech. "Seeing Chen-yen" (especially 101-9) and "Esoteric Buddhism."

reason or another are sent back to the living to report what they observe (see Teiser, "Representations").

The modern *Record of A Journey to Hell* was produced at the *Tien-t'an* ("Celestial Hall") temple of a sectarian group in Taiwan in 1978 and, according to the account given by Julian Pas, has been circulated in more than five million copies. The text consists of some 200 pages produced in seances during which the soul of a certain Mr. Yang from Tai-chung was escorted through the underworld by the popular Chi-kung Huo-fo "Living Buddha Chi-kung." Another divinity, Yu-hsu t'ung-tzu, animates Mr. Yang's vacated body while he is in a trance to produce the written account of the journey. Each journey presents Mr. Yang with opportunities not only to view the hells but also to query both the underworld officials and the incarcerated souls. Thus the text is vaguely reminiscent of the *Petta-vattu* and *Vimana-vattu* of the Pali Canon of early Buddhism (3rd c. BCE).

Although *Record of A Journey to Hell* emulates previous works of the genre it includes numerous innovations or "updates." The use of trance as a vehicle for journeying to the underworld is well known—both in antiquity and in modern China—but it appears to have been little used in the production of the classical hell texts. Further, certain elements of content, as well as the means of production have been changed. "Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are regarded as orthodox teachings," all of which are said to have the same underlying ethical principles (27a). Science makes occasional appearances in discussions with the officers of hell, both as a well understood analogue (karmic law works like gravity), and as a common stumbling block ("during life they didn't believe in spirits and ghosts, nor in the forces of retribution, but once here . . ." (30a). Indeed there is a sort of mechanics or physics of the underworld in this contemporary treatise, and we find a hell with "automatic doors" which changes in accord with new circumstances in the world (35a, 40b; Pas 58-9). There are also certain "karmic" innovations such as the machine which reincarnates particularly disgusting individuals into swarms of five hundred mosquitos (70a). It is evidently important for a modern audience to understand that the underworld is up to speed with regard to science and modern conditions in Asia. Other notable changes from traditional texts involve new social problems such as drug abuse, the sexual exploitation of children, etc. (50a, 57b, 74b, etc.). It is not hard to discern the social and intellectual milieu of the work, for it is clearly sounding a traditionalist warning in the face of a rapidly modernizing and westernizing society.

But these obvious changes are far less significant than the ways in which *Record of A Journey to Hell* closely resembles previous works of the genre.

The hells are the same, down to minute details; the officials in charge are the same, and all of these have a "classical" flavor. Indeed, the paramount question in my mind is not the minor modernizing which has taken place, nor the seance mode of production, but the remarkable persistence of the system of hells and functionaries with their jarringly medieval displays of gruesome torture. How can we account for the vitality of this picture of the underworld with its outdated structure of governance and morally repugnant punishments? Why have the overt mechanisms of karma (karma machines, etc.) been updated while images of a hellish bureaucracy and its cruelty remain unchanged?

"Hell" and Chinese Literature

As a historian of Chinese religions I have long been intrigued by accounts of journeys to hell found in popular and in literate contexts, by accounts of the tortures experienced there, and by the display of "hell scrolls" in community temples. As in Christian accounts of the other world, hells, purgatories, and the sufferings endured there carry a cultural fascination which eclipses descriptions of heavenly realms. Chinese hell scrolls depicting in the most graphic manner the punishments meted out for earthly wrongdoing are ubiquitous. Images of Fan and Hsieh, the two henchmen sent to arrest the dead and bring them to the underworld, are familiar sights in Chinese temples (Fig. 1). Despite over a century and a half of scholarly scrutiny, systematic analysis of the role and meaning of the hells for the construction, maintenance, or deconstruction of Chinese social and cultural institutions is just beginning.

Scholars have put forward three basic explanations for the popularity of the Chinese hells. Within the clerical confines of Buddhism and Taoism, the hells serve as a focus for contemplating human folly. On a popular level, the tortures of hell are said to exhort people to do good and abjure evil. Several scholars, including myself, have written on the linkage between the hells and ritual displays mustered at times of crisis and at death.

In more pointed social analysis, Teiser (*Ghost Festival*) has begun to probe the role of gender in popular accounts of Mu-lien attempting to save his mother from hell, and Gary Seaman has explored the social utility of "blood-bowl" rites and why Chinese men "try to cast a film of negative sentiment over the processes and the very being of the female body" (395).

What I find missing are sustained explanations of the mechanisms of power in the very public discourse about violent retribution in Chinese society. What is missing is an analysis like that put forward by Jacques Le Goff for the European Middle Ages: that the development of purgatory was

intimately linked to the rise of a new merchant class. As a first step in the direction of such a comprehensive explanation I would like to apply some of the insights of René Girard and Elaine Scarry to explore the role of images of violence as displayed in Chinese "hell texts."



Fig. 1. Traditional woodblock from the *Yu-li* (Clarke 218)

Early Chinese Buddhist collections of tales of the hells, such as *Records of Dark Retribution* (*Ming-pao-chi*), present eyewitness accounts as evidence

for the mechanisms and surety of karmic retribution, and thus of the "truth" of Buddhist teachings as a whole (Gjertson, "Study" 49-54). By their own account, traditional descriptions of the hells originate with persons who "die" and tour the underworld only to be returned to the living to disseminate their moral warnings. Sometimes the deaths are represented as the unintended results of infernal bureaucratic bungling.¹⁹ Stories of mistaken identity and "arrest" of the wrong person abound. Of course, these mistakes become opportunities to display the unforeseen consequences of evil acts.

That such public display of torture was meant as a warning seems self evident. Indeed, such warnings are repeatedly made in these texts. Hell scrolls, accounts of hell, and so forth form the accompaniment to Buddhist and Taoist rites for the dead both in mortuary ritual and during the popular "Ghost Festival," and it is not uncommon at such events to see mothers instructing children while examining the depictions of hell.

Yet none of the explanations have yet addressed the deep and continued Chinese fascination with depictions of grisly scenes of torture. Could it be that this fascination with powerlessness before officialdom, official mismanagement, and judicial torture have another story to yield up to us? Could there be some relationship or resemblance not merely between the hells and pre-modern Chinese society, but between the hells and modern Chinese society? It is precisely here that recent work on the violent sacred and its role in maintaining the order of society can be most illuminating.

Mimesis & Obscuration

René Girard's analysis of culture and religion hinges on his notion of mimetic desire. On the smallest scale, two individuals compete for the same object and as "rivalry becomes acute, the rivals are more apt to forget whatever objects are the cause of the rivalry and instead become more fascinated with one another. . . . Each rival becomes for his counterpart the worshipped and despised model and obstacle, the one who must be at once beaten and assimilated" (*Things Hidden* 26). Because of this competitive behavior the rivalry escalates until the rivals mirror one another, blow for blow, and become indistinguishable. This "undifferentiation" (*Essays* 139), often represented in myth and in literature as a plague of unchecked retaliatory violence or of the appearance of monstrosities, threatens the very existence of social and cosmic order (*Scapegoat* 18-22). In defense of social order in the face of violent chaos the society chooses a "scapegoat," an individual who, though innocent, is nonetheless fixed upon as the cause of

¹⁹ See, for instance, Roben Company (108-09) and Teiser, "Representations" (447-50).

disorder. Individuals chosen as scapegoats bear certain stereotypical marks: they are marginal, unusual, deformed. The sacrifice of the scapegoat is thought to prevent "the spread of violence by keeping violence in check," and the rite is seen as the source of renewed social differentiation and thus of order (*Violence* 18). According to Girard, throughout the process "The structuring power of victimage remains hidden" (*Essays* 165).

Descriptions of Chinese hells are structured by resemblances which are markedly mimetic and which point to a preoccupation with "undifferentiation." I would like to examine three forms of resemblance which are central to the depictions of the courts of hell: the depictions of the denizens of hell and the relationship between the type of crime and the type of punishment, the operation of the law of karma, and the resemblance between the real magistrate's office (Yamen) in pre-modern China and the courts of hell. Beyond this I want to suggest that these resemblances play a role in simultaneously bolstering and obscuring the mechanisms of violent retribution among the living.

Crime and Punishment

Beings tortured in the hells display the stereotypical marks of victimage: they are bedraggled, marginal, and somehow odd (monks, quack medicine dealers, women, beggars, itinerant peddlers, and the like). Apprehended from among the living by the henchmen Fan and Hsieh, each person is dragged before the lord of the first hell who is flanked by his horse-headed and ox-headed secretaries (Fig. 2). There they are "examined" in an effort to obtain a confession and their guilt is then confirmed by the 'karma mirror':

The souls of those whose sins are heavier than their virtues are taken to the "Tower of Reflection." which is placed on the left-hand side of this hall. . . . The beholder sees all his former life with its sins and the punishment due to them. . . . Then the guilty, even if they have ten thousand ounces of gold, cannot obtain deliverance from the consequences of their sins. After gazing for a time they are taken to the second hall for judgement and punishment. (Clarke 250-1)

Having confessed (or been shown) their transgressions the "criminals" are subjected to violent physical retribution. In the course of the ensuing punishment the body of the inmate serves as the medium for display of the evils which have spread through the social body (drug dealing, fraud, prostitution, etc.); evil often is portrayed as transgression of proper social distinctions.

The severity and type of punishment in hell is structured symmetrically with the crimes committed in this world. Thus, the Third Hell presided over by "Prince Sung-ti" as described in a popular nineteenth-century *shan-shu*,



Fig 2 *Record of a Journey to Hell* (3)

the "Precious Records," contains the following list of sixteen subsidiary hells and punishments:

brine wells and salt-pits
 torture by twisting ropes
 boring the veins

scratching the face with hooks
 replacing the heart with brass and iron
 gouging out the eyes
 scraping the corpulent
 flaying/chopping off the hands and feet
 tearing out the finger nails
 sucking out the blood
 hanging by the feet
 extracting the bone marrow
 gnawing by worms
 smashing the knees
 extracting the heart (Clarke 288)

The address by the ruler of this hell details the crimes which lead to these forms of retribution:

To scholars or others who seek to obtain government employment for their own profit; scholars and people who are ungrateful for the products of the land . . . unfaithful wives and concubines . . . fraudulent shop assistants; . . . persons who upset existing customs, who hinder people from burying, or who dig open a grave . . . writers of false deeds of land, receipts of payment, or seals to collect another's money . . ." (Clarke 288-9; Fig. 3)

The list of crimes and the retribution ordained leads to the conclusion that these are all crimes of "extraction" that upset social norms by blurring important distinctions of ownership. Thus, retributive extractions must be taken from the body of the perpetrator. Having committed acts while among the living which transgressed social boundaries, the dead are subjected to physical retribution which reflects and reasserts those boundaries by extracting what is not properly one's "own." In hell, as on earth, they take it "out of your hide." Furthermore, the retribution is repetitive; the victims *always* revive to be punished some more in an extended repetition of sacrificial action. In a sense then, the hells resemble a torturer's paradise: There is never the embarrassing and potentially troublesome death of prisoners while in custody. From a Girardian perspective the hells represent an endless repetition of sacrificial action overseen by the monstrous Horse-head and Ox-head demons.

Karma and Obfuscation

Karma, both in its South Asian and its East Asian deployment articulates a resemblance, or as Charles Keyes has put it. as "systems of meaning" (2).

Punishment is not ordained by a god for the transgression of moral precepts. Instead it is the just recompense of deeds set in motion by the victim. Karma is often explained through a common agricultural metaphor as the relation



Fig. 3 Record of A Journey to Hell (*Tu-nu nu chi* 5)

ship between a seed and the fruit it will eventually bring to bear: the sowing of good seeds leads to good fruit; the sowing of bad seeds leads to bad fruit. Thus there is an elision of justice and retribution. Indeed, in some sense the

"victim" is the author of his or her own persecution, and thus this retributive justice is, precisely, just.

Here I want to call attention to a sleight of hand, played upon us in the name of karma. A key issue in Girard's characterization of the sacred is its obfuscation of the innocence of victims of sacred violence. In like manner, Scarry's *The Body in Pain* details the obfuscation of the lines of violence between victims and torturers. Ironically, this obfuscation is intimately linked with strategies of display centered upon the body of the victim and instruments of violence, and these displays are the very body of power and social reconfiguration.

Karma may then be seen as the mechanism of violent retribution and, more to the point, the mechanism for concealing the workings of violence in the very display of that violence. Karma is the vehicle through which a person imitates himself. And so hell becomes a mirror image of this world, with one very important distinction: no further retaliation is possible in hell. Like the ideal sacrificial candidate, the victims in hell resemble us closely but differ in their separation by time and death. The structure of power in hell is obvious and inescapable as is punishment. There are no uprisings, no talking back to the gaolers, only punishment for which no reprisal is possible because this *is* the reprisal. If you are here, you are guilty and you have set in motion the instruments of your own torture and thus, the display of public retribution. The community and its appointed guardians (judges or magistrates) merely carry out the "law."

As with Guillaume de Machaut's description of the persecution of Jews, the notion of "victim" has no place in Chinese representations of hell, though it is hard for us, standing *outside* of the system, not to read these accounts as persecution texts (Girard, *Scapegoat* 1-11).²⁰ Conversely, for anyone who stands *inside* the system, anyone caught in hell or, as we shall see, the magistrates office is "obviously" guilty of wrongdoing of some sort. *Record of A Journey to Hell*, like earlier hell texts, even accounts for "scoff-laws" with its display of the torture of those who thought they stood "outside" the system with an enlightened and "scientific" view of the world. But what does this popular literature which we might be tempted to label as religious fantasy or grotesquerie insinuate about the structure of power and the mechanisms of violent retribution in the world of the living?

²⁰ Clifford Geertz attempts to come to grips with the moral dilemma of the outsider who is witness to a suttee in his "Found in Translation."

Magistrate's Office as Hell

Though early data is spotty at best, by the twelfth century the office of the Chinese magistrate (*yamen*), both in its layout and in what might lie in store for one brought there to answer criminal charges, had come to bear an eerie likeness to the offices below, which are depicted and described in the hell texts and scrolls (Fig. 4). Indeed, confessions of criminal souls in hell include all the marks of victimage outlined by Girard and these accounts are almost indistinguishable from official accounts of apprehension and criminal confession among the living.²¹



Fig. 4 Rpt. from Kuhn (15)

Temples, Magistrates' offices, and palaces are alike set up as a series of courtyards with adjoining rooms one behind the other from south to north. The seat of the magistrate, the god, or the monarch faces south, and is sometimes on a raised platform with a table in front of it. There is often a curtained enclosure over the magistrate. He is flanked by secretaries (Fig. 4). As

²¹ Philip Kuhn (105-18) gives excellent descriptions of the motley Jot caught up in the official dragnet. During the sorcery scare of 1768 officials barely averted several public lynchings of such marginal persons and desperately hoped that apprehending the usual victims would stem the tide of public hysteria.

in the accounts of hell, courtroom procedure consists of questioning with the aim of extracting a coherent confession, as in this account of an interrogation during the great sorcery scare of 1768:

In the great hall, Chu-ch'eng and his companions, chained hand and foot, knelt before the county magistrate, who sat at his high desk flanked by secretaries. The questioning began: "How many queues have you clipped?" The terrified Chu-ch'eng protested that he had clipped none. . . . The magistrate then presented Chu-ch'eng with the evidence . . . four pairs of scissors, one cord for binding a queue, and two short pieces of braided hair. (Kuhn 15)

As Chu-ch'eng could only incompletely account for the contents of his gear, further efforts were made:

Now began the customary courtroom torture. Attendants dragged Chu-ch'eng over to the *chia-kun*, or "pressing beam." We are not told whether this was the regulation ankle-press, a device for crushing the ankles by slow degrees, or an equally fearsome instrument that inflicted multiple fractures of the shinbones. . . . Overwhelmed by pain, Chu-ch'eng eventually declared that all the charges against him were the truth. Still, the magistrate was not satisfied because the agonized monk's story was not sufficiently coherent. Twice more the *chia-kun* was tightened . . ."

(Kuhn 15-6)

As in hell, in the magistrate's office the body becomes the local for the display of the workings of just retribution. In both, crime and punishment have a certain symmetry. Many crimes designated in pre-modern Chinese legal codes are punishable through the medium of the body of the criminal, through beating, incarceration, blows with the bamboo staff, the cangue, branding, amputation of the hands or feet, and so forth.

The three-dimensional hell temples such as the former "Temple of the Eastern Peak" in Peking described by Anne Goodrich drive this point home. The popular, and to some large degree correct, association of both the magistrate's office and hell with searing physical torture was taken as a fact of life and in popular imagination torture and punishment blur together. The word "hsing" designates both "torture" and "punishment," underscoring the operative assumption that all who were hauled in before a magistrate were presumed guilty of something. Little wonder that people tried to settle disputes on their own and were loath to complain to a magistrate. Often as not both accuser and accused were put to torture to extract confessions ! As with

hell, once you enter a magistrate's office you will be lucky to come out with life or limb.

If we treat these descriptions of hell as products of living people intended for an audience of the living, then these texts and artworks must serve the creation and maintenance of the sacred and its power in this world. Just as there is no possibility of reprisal in hell, so too there is no reprisal if one is hauled in before a magistrate. The victim is presumed guilty and this presumption is crucial to the maintenance of authoritarian police states.

Hell then involves a double displacement which blurs the lines of violence between powerful and powerless. In the first case it allows for the display of power which displaces the guilt of victimage onto those very victims. You only are responsible for your own suffering—don't blame the gaolers, they are only doing their duty. Secondly, hell's close resemblance to the magistrate's office and the tortures which occur there serves to deflect any notion of injustice away from worldly powers. The focus is shifted to the victim and it puts what might be called a 'holy terror' into those who get dragged before the magistrate.

The magistrate's pursuit of confessions which are "consistent" conforms to Scarry's observations about torture. "Almost anyone looking at the *physical* act of torture would be immediately appalled and repulsed by the torturers. . . . Yet as soon as the focus of attention shifts to the *verbal* aspect of torture, those lines have begun to waver and change their shape in the direction of accommodating and crediting the torturers (35). Information is the excuse, not the goal of torture. Torture is an exercise in deconstructing the world of the victim and replacing his or her voice with that of the torturer. This is why "confessions" are absolutely crucial to both the workings of hell and the prosecution of "justice" in this world, for they deconstruct any possible challenge to the system by an "outside" or alternative interpretation.²² Descriptions of the underworld and hell scrolls, then, are not merely moral exhortation, but are instruments supporting the structure of authoritarian power. They are displays of the violent sacred in our world.

While the Chinese hells closely resemble the magistrate's office in imperial times we must be careful to grasp the basis of this resemblance and its persistence into modern times. Steven Sangren has asked a similar question with regard to the persistence of temples and gods in Taiwan. All are portrayed on the imperial bureaucratic model. What is being displayed is not

²² Examples that come to mind are the many scenes of public "criticism" and confession during the Cultural Revolution and the press for confessions at the trials of the "gang of four."

the particular dress of this or that official. Indeed, the new *Record of A Journey to Hell* uses old woodcuts from the Precious Records! What is being displayed are certain social boundaries and relationships between those who wield power and those who do not. The boundaries between socially acceptable and socially transgressive behavior are reenforced through an idiom which has been useful in maintaining the sacred order of authoritarian rule for 1,500 years.

In 1979, perhaps in response to the purges, persecutions, and public "criticism meetings" of the "Great Cultural Revolution," the People's Republic of China abolished the necessity of a confession for the certification of guilt in criminal proceedings. Ironically, in the show trials of the "gang of four" the following year, Zhang Chunqiao and Mao's widow Jiang Qing refused to confess their crimes. Jiang Qing threw the proceedings into an uproar when she refused to play the scapegoat and confess. Instead she accused the accusers of being "fascists" and revisionists." Unfortunately, though the outward form of government has changed, the consequences of social transgression in China, Taiwan, and Singapore have not, and the usefulness of sacrificial violence still animates these societies.

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