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Representation of Buddhist Monks in the Underworld from Early Medieval to Song Times

Junqing Wu

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Histories, Languages and Cultures, University of Liverpool, Foundation Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L69 7ZX, UK; junqing.wu@liverpool.ac.uk

Abstract: This essay explores themes in monk–underworld stories from the early medieval to Song periods, shedding light on evolving monastic–lay relations. These tales typically follow an individual who visits the afterlife and returns to share their experience. Monks frequently appear in these narratives, revealing shifting perceptions of the clergy. In earlier stories, monks often serve as underworld guardians or bodhisattvas, but by the Song period they are more commonly depicted as recipients of punishment, often for neglecting their obligations to lay patrons. This shift suggests that Song society increasingly viewed monks through a commercial lens, expecting them to provide specific services. However, these underworld tales do not indicate a decline in respect for the clergy. A broader look at Song literature confirms that monks remained highly regarded, despite changing expectations of their role within society.

Keywords: Buddhist monk; underworld tales; early medieval China; Song China

1. Introduction

This essay examines the representation of Buddhist monks in the underworld from early medieval[1] to Song (960–1279) times, a time that saw the Sinification and flourishing of Buddhism. It aims to shed new light on the evolving lay perception of monastics through an examination of the transmission and transformation of the figure of monks in underworld narratives.

Scholars of Buddhist history often see the Song as a period of drastic change. In previous dynasties, laypeople looked up to monks as spiritual guides and exemplars, to be rewarded with gifts and benefactions but not with formalized payments.[2] This started to change in the Song. The monastic–lay relationship became increasingly a commercial one, with fees offered in exchange for specific ritual services, such as reciting sutras or conducting funerals (Hymes 2005).

Historians including Robert Hymes have argued that commercialisation led to growing lay dominance over the clergy, who were compelled to satisfy the demands of their secular patrons. And the fact that the religious "market" contained many other sellers, including Taoists and individually operating ritual specialists, gave buyers a strong bargaining position: if monks failed to deliver, they could always go elsewhere. This is what Hymes describes as the "laicisation of religion" in the Song (Ibid., p. 596).

This interpretation is supported by Mark Halperin's work *Out of the Cloister*, which draws on what might be called "public" writings about clerics (i.e., obituaries and stele inscriptions) to investigate changes in attitude from the Tang to the Song. Halperin shows that while the Tang literati held Buddhism and Buddhist clerics in profound esteem, their Song counterparts felt uninhibited in expressing criticism. Halperin attributes

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this shift to the ascendancy of the Chan school in Buddhism and the dominance of neo-Confucianism (*daoxue* 道學) in secular intellectual life. The former "turned Buddhism into a self-consciously plural religion, whose clergy members sometimes clashed on basic issues", while at the same time granting literati the liberty to interpret Buddhism and its clergy as they saw fit (Halperin 2006). In essence, the clergy lost their authority to represent the Buddhist faith.

The following essay attempts to re-evaluate these claims through an examination of "underworld tales". These were tales collected by literati from the Six Dynasties onwards, typically involving an individual who visits the world of the dead and then returns to tell what they have seen. Often these tales feature monks, whose representation tells us much about the lay perception of monastics, particularly regarding their salvational roles in afterlife practices.

My review of such tales from the early medieval period onwards suggests that there was indeed a shift in perception in the Song. There are proportionally more stories portraying monks as underworld guardians and bureaucrats in Tang and pre-Tang narratives compared to those from the Song period, which may reflect the changing composition of officialdom in real life, as bureaucratic offices were increasingly monopolized by Confucian scholars. But there is another, more significant contrast. In earlier tales, monks are punished or threatened with punishment for neglecting ascetic practices only, while Song stories additionally depict monks being punished for failing to fulfil their obligations to lay patrons. This suggests that Hymes is correct: monks were viewed by Song lay society through an increasingly commercial lens, as providers of specific services.

However, taken as a whole, the underworld tales do not indicate any great decline in esteem for the clergy, as suggested by Hymes. Monks continue to appear as venerated figures, as incarnations of bodhisattvas, specialists in Buddhist knowledge, and representatives of Buddhist teaching; if we expand our gaze to take in Song stories more generally, this impression is confirmed. It seems that folk tales reveal less of a contrast between Song and pre-Song attitudes than might be gleaned from the sorts of writings focused on by Halperin, which express more purely literati attitudes. Though these folk tales were recorded by elite authors, their transmission and content reflect a wide social spectrum, involving storytellers and audiences from various strata of society. In this sense, they represent a hybridized perspective that blends elite literary concerns with popular religious sensibilities. Overall, the lay perception of Buddhist monks does not appear to have undergone any dramatic transformation during the Tang–Song transition. Certainly, Song tales show nothing of the virulent contempt for the clergy displayed in late imperial stories; this was an entirely post-Yuan development.

In the following essay, I examine and compare various stock themes in monk–underworld stories in sources ranging from the early medieval to Song periods. This is an underexplored field. The most important study is Robert Campany's article focusing on the "return from death" theme in early medieval miracle tales (Campany 1990). Campany has also produced a translated and annotated edition of the fifth-century miracle tale collection Mingxiang ji 冥祥記 by Wang Yan 王琰, which contains many stories about the underworld (Campany 2012b). Similarly, Bryan Cuevas has devoted a monograph to the theme of *de-lok* (literally, "those who have returned from the dead") in Tibetan literature (Cuevas 2008).

2. A Note on Sources

The sources I use include pre-Tang "miracle tales" that survive in the Tang Buddhist anthology *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林and the Song encyclopedia of folk stories *Taiping guangji*

太平廣記, and literati collections or *biji* 筆記. Additionally, I draw upon Sawada Mizuho's noteworthy collection of underworld stories as a valuable reference source (Sawada 1968).

Between the fifth and seventh centuries, a number of "miracle tale" collections were compiled by contemporary literati, such as *Youming lu* 幽冥録, attributed to Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), and the previously mentioned *Mingxiang ji*.[3] These collections serve as records of anomalous events, most of which would have been transmitted by a diverse circle of individuals, including clerics. Some carry a strong Buddhist overtone, but it is important to note that, on the whole, they reflect lay perspectives rather than the canonical/theological interests of Buddhism. To use Robert Campany's term, these stories are "lay-oriented", with karmic retribution being a main theme (Campany 2012b, pp. 17–29). This does not mean, however, that monastics took no interest in this theme; indeed, they were often involved in the transmission of these stories.

None of these collections have survived in their entirety; however, some of the stories in them have been preserved in later compilations. The most prominent of these are the seventh-century Buddhist anthology *Fayuan zhulin*, compiled by the scholar monk Daoshi 道世 (?), and the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, an encyclopedia of Tang and pre-Tang folk stories compiled by Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) at the behest of the emperor of the Northern Song.

The *Fayuan zhulin* is a sutra compendium—an encyclopedic anthology composed of excerpts from a wide range of Buddhist scriptures. Many scholars have examined its nature and purpose, such as (Teiser 1985, pp. 109–28; Zurndorfer 2013, pp. 505–28; Gjertson 1986, pp. 371–72), with the most detailed study perhaps being that of Alexander Hsu. Hsu argues that the purpose of this collection was to condense and reorganize the vast and difficult-to-access Buddhist canon, making it more usable through the strategic excerpting, summarizing, and categorizing of sutras (Hsu 2018).

Within each scriptural category of the *Fuyuan zhulin*, there is a section of "proof-tales" or *ganyin yan* 感應驗—stories that "prove" the teachings of the sutras. Many of the monk-and-underworld stories cited below can be found in these sections.

These stories are copied from the pre-Tang "miracle tale" collections, probably word-for-word. Proof of this is that some tales from the *Fayuan zhulin* reappear, almost identically, in the Song dynasty collection *Taiping guangji*. Its compiler, Li Fang, indicates that his tales are copied not from the *Fayuan zhulin* but from an earlier pre-Tang source, which presumably functioned as the source of *Fayuan zhulin* as well.[4] In short, Daoshi did not engage in significant textual alteration.

The *Taiping guangji* is another source for the monk–underworld stories in this article. This colossal early Song compilation, consisting of five hundred chapters, contains over seven thousand anecdotes divided into ninety-two topical categories and references over three hundred Tang and pre-Tang collections including the above-mentioned "miracle tale" collections and the *Fayuan zhulin*.[5] Its coverage of Tang and pre-Tang works is extensive, if not exhaustive. The monk–underworld stories are found in the categories of "return from death" (*zaisheng* 再生) and "Buddhism proven" (*shizheng* 釋證). The latter category has a more Buddhist flavour than the former.

For the Song-period stories, I rely on contemporary *biji* collections. My primary point of reference is the *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志, a monumental twelfth-century collection by Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202). Although Hong held a high-ranking position as a court historian and official, he did not write the *Yijian zhi* in his official capacity. He spent over sixty years travelling around the country, collecting accounts of anomalous events (both oral and written) from people of all walks of life, including his literati and official friends and relatives, Buddhist and Taoist clerics, servants, merchants, and women.[6] Over 2700 stories in 207 chapters (out of an original 420) survive today.[7] Hong Mai does not select stories with any particular purpose other than his enthusiasm for anomalous tales. He describes him-

self simply as an unbiased "listener" and "recorder".[8] This immense collection provides an extensive and full picture of Song, especially Southern Song, beliefs and attitudes to religious life.

Although modern scholars classify the sources used in this article—the "miracle tales", the *Fayuan zhulin*, the *Taiping guangji*, and the *Yijian zhi*—as belonging to different genres, such distinctions are anachronistic.[9] As shown above, the monk–underworld stories cited in these sources are not distinctively different in nature. They all belong to what might be called *baiguan xiaoshuo* (稗官小說)—stories believed to have truly happened and recorded by literati as a complement to official history. These stories claim less credibility than official history.[10] They are written in classical Chinese, limiting their readership to the educated elite. While they reflect the elite's morality, they do not represent a purely elite perspective, as they would have circulated (often orally) in society more broadly before being recorded.[11] Some stories are more Buddhist-oriented than others, but they still reflect, in Robert Campany's term, the "lay idiom of Buddhism" (Campany 2012b, pp. 30–37).

I have decided not to include nuns in this study, since they appear only rarely in underworld narratives. No doubt this is because monks rather than nuns were the primary bearers of religious authority.

3. The Underworld in the Chinese Imagination

The Chinese underworld, known as the "earth prison" (*diyu* 地獄), is a place where souls go to be punished for sins committed in their lifetimes. It is closer to the Christian concept of purgatory than hell, since souls do not stay there eternally, yet when they depart it is not to go to heaven but to be reborn. For the sake of convenience, I shall use the neutral word "underworld" in most cases but the word "hell" when emphasizing the aspect of suffering and torture.[12]

A concept of the underworld existed in China even before Buddhism was introduced and Taoism was recognized as a scriptural tradition. It was named "nine springs" (*jiuquan*九泉), "yellow springs" (*huangquan* 黃泉), or "dark capital" (*mindu* 冥都), and was presented as a place where everyone, good or bad, goes after death.[13] There have been many suggestions as to where this place might be located, from the Northwest to the Northeast and the Yangtze region (Ibid.). Dead souls there do not have their merits measured, nor are they punished for previous bad deeds. This is simply a place where everyone is destined, though no doubt a grim and unpleasant place.

It was not until the introduction of Buddhism that a fuller image of the underworld as a place of post mortem justice was established. The Buddhist idea of hell (*naraka*) is that of a place where one receives punishment for bad things done in one's lifetime. It is not eternal, since one is released when all one's bad karma has been worked off, but one can spend an enormous period of time there. Nor is it a place where everyone goes. It is the worst of the six reincarnation paths.

Buddhist sutras specifically devoted to the topic of hell were introduced to China at a very early period. The most influential ones include *Saddharmasmṛty-upasthāna* (zhengfa nianchu jing 正法念處經), translated in the Northern Wei (386–534), and *Foshuo shiba nili jing* 佛說十八泥梨經, translated in the Latter Han (947–951). There are also many other sutras, such as the *Dīrgha Āgama* (Chang ahan jing長阿含經), which contain sections about hell. These sutras contributed to establishing the idea of a multi-layered hell, overseen by the Yama King, lord of death. The number of layers varies between eighteen, sixteen, ten, and eight.[14] Hell is composed of both cold and hot prisons.

These Buddhist sutras, combined with elements from Taoism and state bureaucratic culture[15], helped forge the popular Chinese image of the underworld, versions of which can be found as early as the fifth century. It remains unclear whether this underworld

is the destiny of all or just a few. Some stories clearly suggest the former; others leave it vague. The fifth-century work *Youming lu* tells of a "house of merits" (*fushe* 福舍) inside the underworld. This is the only area in the underworld free from punishments and torture, and is reserved for followers of the Buddha.[16] Here, then, is an underworld inhabited by both good and bad people, but dwelling in separate areas. Other stories suggest a "heaven" above.[17]

By the tenth century, the popular image of hell had largely become fixed: a multilayered structure with ten courts presided over by ten officials, including the Yama King, the official of the fifth court. This image was popularized by the Sutra of Ten Kings (*foshuo shiwang jing* 佛說十王經).[18] The Sinification of the Buddhist underworld unfolds before us.[19] The image of the underworld increasingly assimilated to that of a worldly court. Dead souls were believed to be sent to one of the ten courts for trial. If their sins outweighed their merits, they would be "sentenced" to punishment. This remained the most popular image of hell up to late imperial times. The *Yuli baochao* 玉曆寶鈔, a morality book frequently consulted in the Qing, depicts hell in this manner.[20]

Comparing underworld stories from the *Fayuan zhulin*, the *Taiping guangji*, and the *Yijian zhi*, we get the impression that depictions of the underworld are more diverse in the Tang and pre-Tang periods than in the Song, although the courtroom-like atmosphere remains common throughout. In the earlier stories, the underworld is sometimes depicted as being located on Mount Tai 泰山or the Eastern Peak 東岳, governed by the Lord of Mount Tai 泰山府君or the Emperor of the Eastern Peak 東岳大帝. However, in the Song stories, the underworld is consistently depicted as a "great hall" (*dafu* 大府), resembling a magistrate's court, staffed with constables (*li* 吏) and presided over by an official-like figure, often described as a king (*wang* 王) or a lord (*zhu* 主).[21] This might refer to the Yama King or one of the other nine underworld kings. However, stories featuring all ten underworld kings are rarely found in Song narratives. This is probably due to the narrative focus on the experience of a single individual, making it difficult to depict all ten courts.

The stories surveyed in this essay reflect a blend of Buddhist, Taoist, and bureaucratic models of the underworld. Even in stories with a strong Buddhist flavour, various religious elements contribute to the overall imagery. It is crucial not to assume a clear distinction between monastic and lay (or scriptural and popular) understandings of the underworld, as monks were frequently involved in the transmission of these stories—as proven by the fact that several of these tales found their way into the *Fayuan zhulin* cleric-compiled anthology (Campany 2012b, pp. 17–29).

4. Themes in Early Medieval Times

4.1. Common Early Medieval Narratives

Robert Campany has noted the prevalence of "return from death" stories in medieval miracle tale collections (Campany 1990, pp. 95–125). These stories typically feature a protagonist who, often mistakenly, finds himself ensnared by the underworld constables and embarks on a journey to the underworld. After witnessing the dire post mortem consequences of other souls' lifetime sins, the protagonist is granted the opportunity to return to life and is tasked with spreading the insights gained to others. As well as providing entertainment, such narratives had the purpose of convincing people of the reality of karmic retribution and hell.

Buddhist monks play a significant role in a considerable number of stories about the underworld. In some, a monk serves as the traveller who journeys to the underworld, witnessing the torments of sinners and the rewards bestowed upon Buddhist followers, often colleagues or teachers. Such stories may have initially been recounted in the first-person by the monk.

In other instances, monks are observed by the underworld traveller, becoming characters within the larger narrative. This underscores the interconnectedness of lay and clerical experiences in envisioning karmic consequences and the post mortem realm in medieval Chinese society.

Additionally, these stories show that even monks, despite their spiritual status, were not exempt from the need to be warned and reminded of the reality of the underworld and the existence of karmic consequences. The dual function of these narratives—as cautionary tales for monks and as repositories of shared religious experiences for broader society—further emphasizes the pervasive influence of these beliefs in medieval Chinese culture.

4.2. Monks as Underworld Bureaucrats

As previously noted, the Chinese image of the underworld is deeply influenced by the court setting, portraying death as a bureaucratic experience (Campany 1990, pp. 95–125). In this conceptualization, individuals typically undergo a trial of their lifetime wrongdoings or crimes and are dealt corresponding sentences or punishments. However, the fortunate few who have accumulated merits are rewarded with official posts and honour within the underworld hierarchy. Buddhist monks are often depicted as belonging to this privileged group, enjoying an esteemed position in the afterlife.

In many underworld stories, monks fulfil roles as minor bureaucrats serving at the celestial court. For instance, the *Mingxiang ji* recounts Zhao Tai's趙泰observation of numerous monks standing in waiting within the "house of merits" (*fushe*) in the underworld.[22]

Another story from the same collection, which comes down to us through the *Fayuan zhulin*, tells of Ruan Zhizong 阮稚宗, who has journeyed to and returned from the underworld.[23] Ruan reports seeing Buddhist monks as judges and executors. One of the monk officials punishes Ruan for fishing. He is skinned and cut into pieces, just like the fish he has caught. Later, he is pardoned and given a magic drink to help him heal. Before Ruan is released back to life, the monk lectures him about the karmic consequences of fishing and hunting.

In this story, the monk serves not only as an underworld constable but also as an educator.[24] He ensures that Ruan receives a warning but pardons him in the end. This probably reflects how lay society viewed monks: they were guardians of the Buddhist Dharma in the same way that civic officials were maintainers of law and order.

4.3. Monks as Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (Dizang Pusa 地藏菩薩)

Monks are also sometimes associated with Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, a Bodhisattva who vowed not to attain Buddhahood until hell was emptied.[25] This theme existed as early as, if not earlier than, the early Tang (618–907). The surviving Dunhuang ballad, *Daoming huanhun ji* 道明還魂記, tells of a man named Daoming taken to the underworld by mistake. He is eventually allowed back to life and relates meeting Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and other underworld clerks, all in the guise of monks.[26]

The *Taiping guangji* quotes several stories from Tang literary *biji* on the same theme, ranging from the eighth-century collection *Guangyi* Ji 廣異記 by Dai Fu 戴孚 (?) to the ninth-century work Jiwen 紀聞 by Niu Su 牛肅 (?). The popularity of such stories coincided with the period when the *dizang* cult became popular (Ng 2007, pp. 167–96).

The *Guangyi ji* recounts a story about Fei Ziyü 費子玉, who is summoned by the Yama King. Hoping to be released, Fei keeps reciting the Diamond Sutra.[27] Eventually, he sees a monk coming down from the sky who turns out to be Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. He pleads with the Yama King to release Fei on the grounds that the latter has been reciting the Diamond Sutra all his life. The Yama King finally gives in. Upon his release, Fei is warned by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva not to eat meat again. If he can persist in a vegetarian diet, he

will attain longevity. Three years later, Fei is taken to the underworld again for breaking his vow; nevertheless, he is allowed to come back to life a second time, and from then he never touched meat.[28]

The *Jiwen* has two stories on this theme. One tells of Li Siyuan 李思元, who is taken to the Yama King in the underworld where he meets Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva in the form of a monk. When Li hears Buddhist chanting, he breaks down in tears. The Bodhisattva immediately realizes that Li has practiced Buddhism in his lifetime and decides to release him, instructing him to tell the world what he has seen. Li dies again in seven days. The Bodhisattva is angry this time, as Li has failed to educate people about the karmic consequence of eating meat. After receiving some admonishment, Li is again released. From then, he followed a strict vegetarian regime and shared his experiences of the underworld, dissuading many others from eating meat.[29]

The other story tells of the monk Qizhi 齊之 being taken to the Yama King's court after a ghost has wrongly "sued" him for murder. On proving his innocence, Qizhi is released and sees a monk who claims to be Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. The monk tells Qizhi that he did not have enough merits to prevent him from being summoned him to the underworld. When back in the world, he should rigorously follow his clerical vows, remain free from entanglement with the laity, and build Buddhist images. Qizhi follows the advice.[30]

In all the above three Tang stories collected in the *Taiping guangji*, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva exists alongside the Yama King. While the latter always appears as a civic magistrate, the former appears as a monk. The interaction between the two is interesting. The Yama King is the one who summons the protagonist to court for a trial. When the protagonist is about to be sentenced to imprisonment or torture, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva comes to his rescue by presenting a mitigating circumstance, namely that the protagonist has practiced Buddhism during his lifetime. The protagonist is finally released and instructed by the Bodhisattva to follow Buddhist precepts diligently upon returning.

The two different roles of the Yama King and Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva probably reflect different social expectations regarding civic law and religious salvation, as well as the roles of bureaucrats and Buddhist monks.[31] Law punishes one's wrongdoings, but religion can atone for one's sins; civic bureaucrats are ruthless judges who punish the body, but monks are educators who purify the heart.

In certain instances, although the monk is not connected with Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, he fulfils a comparable role. Another narrative from the *Mingxiang Ji* recounts the plight of a monk named Faheng 法衡 who faces imminent torture in hell. During a critical moment, his deceased teacher Fazhu 法柱 comes to his rescue.[32] In this scenario, Fazhu's role parallels that of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva in previous stories.

How should we interpret the association of the image of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva with a monk? Ziru Ng suggests that this association initially reflected a Tang belief that monks played a leading role in the salvation of the deceased. As the Ksitigarbha cult developed, the role of the monk was replaced by the bodhisattva, who still appeared as a monk. This shift indicates "a move from the monastic establishment to the saviour bodhisattva cult as the site of Buddhist afterlife practice" (Ng 2007, pp. 167–96). In other words, this combined monk–Ksitigarbha image indicates a replacement of monastic authority with that of the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva cult.

I do not consider this a satisfactory explanation. If the monk's ritual role had been replaced by that of the Bodhisattva, it is mysterious that Ksitigarbha still consistently appears in the form of a monk. In fact, Ksitigarbha is not the only bodhisattva associated with a monk. Medieval miracle tales often show Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Guangshiyin 光世音, later known as Guanshiyin 觀世音 or Guanyin 觀音) appearing in the form of a

monk to rescue the protagonist from danger after the latter repeatedly recites the bodhisattva's name or the *Lotus Sutra*.[33]

Additionally, the combined monk–bodhisattva (both Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara) image nearly disappears in late imperial narratives, even though both the Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara cults continued to flourish.[34] It seems more logical to view the association of Ksitigarbha with monks as an indication of *continued* rather than diminished clerical authority. The combined monk–Ksitigarbha image demonstrates the representative power of monks, who were seen as embodiments of Buddhist law.

4.4. Monk's Privilege

In other stories, monks feature not as underworld officials but as guests or inmates. Here too, however, they are typically accorded a privileged status. Sometimes they are honoured advisors, imparting wisdom to the underworld lord. In the aforementioned *Youming lu*, Li Tong 李通, having journeyed to hell and returned, reports seeing the famous monk Fazu 法祖 from the Western Jin (266–316) teaching the Śūra◎gama Sūtra (*shoulenyan jing* 首楞嚴經) to the Yama King, while Fazu's Taoist rival, Wang Fu 王浮, the author of the "Laozi Civilizing the Barbarian" (*huahu* 化胡) discourse, is in chains. This story was later incorporated into the sixth-century Biography of Eminent Monks (*Gaoseng Zhuan* 高僧傳) and the aforementioned Buddhist anthology *Fayuan Zhulin*.[35]

In other cases, clerical status functions as a licence with which to avoid hell's punishment altogether. The above-mentioned story about the monk Qizhi is an example. Monk Qizhi is mistakenly taken to hell. At the court of the ghost king (*guiwang* 鬼王), he encounters a former monastic servant who claims that Qizhi is responsible for her violent death. It turns out to be a false accusation. (In fact, the servant had an affair with a young disciple, for which she was sentenced by the abbot to death by caning in public; Qizhi tried to stop the execution, but failed.) The servant then admits that she heard someone pleading for her when dying. Hearing this, the ghost king demands to see the abbot, but is told that he "has too many merits to be taken here". He then demands to see the disciple, but is told that "his life-span is not yet over". In the end, Qizhi is sent back to the world. The two guilty parties have escaped underworld justice.[36] The disciple might still receive punishment when his life-span is over, but the abbot, presumably an eminent monk, has accrued so many merits through religious practice that, in spite of his crime of killing, he cannot be caught even by the hell constables. His position is similar to that of high-ranking Chinese officials, who might commit certain crimes with impunity.

In other stories, it is evident that becoming a monk could serve as a means of atoning for one's sins. In the *Mingxiang ji*, the tale of Liu Sahe 劉薩荷 illustrates this theme. Liu, a man with a passion for hunting, suddenly collapsed and found himself in the underworld, where he was received by two monks who had been his monastic teachers in a previous life. However, because of the crimes he had committed, he was deemed unworthy to receive the precepts. While in the "earth prison" (地獄), Liu witnessed various punishments inflicted on the damned. He also encountered Guanshiyin Bodhisattva, who was reciting sutras and preaching to the suffering souls, urging them to cultivate merit and atone for their sins through meritorious acts—such as feeding monks, constructing stupas, and reciting scriptures. Deeply moved by what he had seen and heard, Liu returned to life, renounced hunting, and ordained as a monk under the Dharma name Huida 慧達.[37] This narrative affirms the redemptive power of monastic life and the moral authority of the sangha. It also reflects the belief that ritual actions—particularly support for the sangha—can be a means of negotiating one's karmic fate.

4.5. A Monk's Sin and Its Karmic Consequences

There exists a group of underworld stories explicitly featuring monks who have sinned and must face karmic consequences. However, more often than not, these monks manage to evade punishment. Only in a very few instances do they actually face retribution.

Notably, the sins attributed to monks in these stories are usually connected to their religious vocation. They include sloppiness in religious practice, violations of vegetarianism, and excessive entanglement with the laity.[38]

The *Mingxiang ji* tells of a monk named Gui 僧規 in the Liu–Song Dynasty (420–479) who receives lavish patronage from a certain Zhang Yu. One day, Gui dies suddenly without any illness. Two days later, he comes back to life and relates what had happened to him. It turns out that he was wrongly captured by ghosts—underworld constables who "catch" peoples' souls to bring them to the underworld—and was eventually sent back by the Heavenly Emperor (*tiandi* 天帝). In the underworld, Gui remembers being taken to a mountain to have his merits and sins weighed on a scale.[39] Initially, his sins outweigh his merits, and he is taken off to receive punishment. But just then, a well-dressed older man says to him: "Since you are a disciple of the Buddha, why not recite his name? I have heard that repentance can save one from the eight sufferings." So Gui does this. After a while, he has his merits and sins weighed again, and this time the scale does not tip. Gui is thus saved from punishment. He is finally taken to the Heavenly Emperor, who says the following to him: "Your allotted life is not over, and you are going home now. You should be diligent [in Buddhist practice] and not frequent the home of lay persons [referring to his patron Zhang Yu]……". Asked by Gui how he can avoid the misfortune of wrongly being "caught" by ghosts, the Heavenly Emperor replies that "In order to avoid the misfortune, the best thing to do is to engage widely with charity. If that is difficult, the second best thing to do is to follow strictly the eight observances" (*baguan zhai* 八關齋).[40]

This story, which comes down to us from the *Fayuan zhulin*, has a few interesting elements. Its "underworld" is not a typical Buddhist multi-court underground prison but located in a mountain instead. This points to an early indigenous Taoist belief—the next world is located somewhere remote, perhaps northwest or northeast, but at any rate above the ground. Certain mountains such as Mount Tai 泰山, the mysterious Mount Luofeng 羅酆山, and Mount Fengdu 酆都山 were associated with the underworld. The underworld lord, the Heavenly Emperor, also has a more Taoist than Buddhist flavour. This shows that early portrayals of the underworld, even in a Buddhist-oriented work, were blended with many Taoist/folk elements. The Saddharmasmṛty-upasthāna, the hell sutra, was translated in the Northern regime probably just a few decades before this story was written, but it clearly had not yet reached the South.

What interests me most is that the monk Gui is initially set to receive punishment for his sin—close affiliation with a lay patron. This relationship kept Gui materially comfortable but interfered with his religious practice. He likely had too many ritual service commitments and neglected his own learning. Although Gui's capture was a careless mistake by the ghost, his negligent ascetic practice made it possible. As the Heavenly Emperor advises, if Gui focuses on his ascetic practices from now on, a ghost will not be able to take him. Gui's sin is monastic in nature: he fails to meet the high moral standards expected of a monk. Indeed, the story about Gui is classified under "devotion to asceticism" (*jingjin* 精進) in the *Fayuan zhulin*.

Another story is on a similar theme. The monk Zhida 智達 from the Suo monastery in Yizhou (modern-day Sichuan) is said to have "mixed with and behaved like layman, but was good at sutra-reciting" (行頗流俗，而善經唄). At one point he is taken to the underworld to be interrogated for his sin. Upon denying having committed any sin, Zhida is challenged by the official: "Have you not been slack in sutra-reciting?" Zhida admits

that he has been neglecting sutra-reciting lately. He is ordered to recite the *Lotus Sutra*, which he gets right only on the third time round. Zhida is then shown an iron cauldron with boiling water inside and told that his punishment is to be boiled. Frightened, Zhida pleads to be spared and promises to "serve the Buddha" diligently in future. Suddenly, he finds himself returned to his own monastery. From then, he was extremely diligent in his devotions. This story is included under the "breaking precepts" (*pojie* 破戒) section in the *Fayuan zhulin*.[41] Like Gui, Zhida's sin is slackness in religious practice and excessive lay entanglement. Also like Gui, Zhida is allowed to redeem or reduce his sin simply by fulfilling his clerical duties. In fact, his journey to the underworld serves only as a warning.

As Robert Campany points out, these stories express lay criticism of clerics for lax observance of religious precepts (Campany 2012b, p. 45). They reflect the fact that, in medieval times, a crucial aspect of monastic–lay interaction was *posadha* or *zhai* 齋, rituals.[42] Rituals included confession, dietary and sexual abstinence, providing meals for monks, and collective nocturnal sutra-reciting, among other practices. In this relationship, monks assumed the role of spiritual leaders for the laity, with lay followers expected in return to provide offerings to the monks. Monks were held to a higher moral standard than the laity. When they fell short, frustration among laypeople was a natural response.

The theme of excessive lay entanglement is intriguing. Presumably, laypersons would seek some level of clerical association for their own religious advancement. However, they harboured mixed feelings about it. When interaction became too frequent, laypersons worried that it might hinder the monks' own religious accomplishments, making them less suitable as spiritual exemplars.

These stories also highlight the high prestige of monks. In the face of judgement, being a monk is likely to serve as protection, potentially leading to exoneration or even a release back to life.

On rare occasions, however, monks are depicted as suffering "real" karmic consequences for their sins. The surviving fragments of the *Mingxiang ji* record three stories of this type.

One story revolves around Jiang Xiaode 蔣小得, who is summoned by the Yama King before his life-span is over. During his journey back to life, while still in the underworld, Jiang encounters the monk Nan 難公 residing in a dilapidated dwelling. Curious about Nan's predicament, Jiang inquires how he ended up in such a place. Monk Nan explains that, despite abstaining from alcohol since becoming a monk, he succumbed to persuasion from the monk Lan 蘭公 during a recent visit and had a small amount of wine. As a consequence, he was summoned by the Yama King and sentenced to dwell in a shabby place; otherwise, he would have ascended to heaven. When Jiang returns, he learns that the monk Nan has died in the abode of the monk Lan earlier that day. The reader later discovers that both monks reside in the Xin Monastery, and that the monk Nan is known for his extreme diligence in practice.[43] We can assume that he is allowed to return to life after serving his short imprisonment.

In this story, although the monk receives a punishment, it is not excessively severe, and he is ultimately allowed to return to life. Other stories depict much more stringent consequences. Monk Huizhi 慧熾 is reported to have died and returned to visit his colleague, warning him against consuming meat. Huizhi then reveals his own punishment for this transgression: he has fallen into the hell of hungry dogs.[44] In another account, the underworld traveller Siniang 四娘 hears monks howling in agony as they are tortured for violating their vegetarian precepts.[45]

Interestingly, all three stories are about breaking dietary precepts, particularly those related to meat-eating. What does this reveal? Was meat-eating considered a particularly

grievous sin compared to other kinds of vow-breaking for clerics in medieval times, and, if so, by whom?

Detailed dietary rules were part of the Vinaya (monastic code) in Chinese Buddhism from the early fifth century, when the relevant sutras were introduced from India.[46] However, according to the Vinaya, dietary transgressions—meat-eating and alcohol consumption—were minor offences, to be forgiven upon confession (Heirman and De Rauw 2006, pp. 57–83).

The drive for a more total renunciation appears to have come from the laity in China (Kieschnick 1997, pp. 23–24). It gained momentum during the fifth and sixth centuries, but it was not until the seventh century that the process was complete (Kieschnick 1997, p. 24). Dietary transgression was considered no minor offence by the medieval Chinese laity. Two lay-orientated fifth-century Chinese scriptures, *Fanwang Jing* 梵網經 and *Youposai Jie Jing* 優婆塞戒經, mention severe karmic punishments for alcohol consumption: those who drink alcohol will go to hell, and those who give alcohol to others will be reborn without a hand 500 times.[47] It is noteworthy that these two scriptures were intended to regulate not only monks but all Buddhist practitioners. The medieval Chinese laity demonstrated a *less* tolerant attitude towards dietary transgression than the monastics.

Why did the laity press for strict vegetarianism?[48] In the eyes of the laity, for whom public feasting was an important part of communal life, forsaking meat and alcohol must have seemed a mark of true social renunciation. This was what distinguished believers from non-believers. It was natural of them to expect monastics, who had already "renounced the world", to take this additional step.

The most prominent and influential lay promoter of vegetarianism was probably Emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–549). He convened an imperial assembly to debate the issue, with eminent monks and nuns of the time participating. However, even the sponsorship of such an eminent personage was not enough to convince all clerics, as we are told.[49] It seems that the early advocacy of lifelong vegetarianism was met with some clerical resistance.

In the period when stories about monks being punished for meat-eating first emerged, complete vegetarianism was neither a widespread clerical practice nor taken for granted, unlike in later periods. Before the seventh century, many hagiographical stories mention monks who were lifelong vegetarians, a theme which almost disappears in post-seventh-century hagiographies. Presumably, clerical vegetarianism was unusual before the seventh century, but after that it became a norm and so was no longer worthy of praise. The aforementioned stories from early medieval miracle tales, vividly depicting the dire consequences of eating meat, should be read as expressions of the laity's high expectations for monastics, rather than as criticisms of monks for breaking their own internal code.

5. Themes in Song Times

5.1. The Song Narratives

"Return-from-death stories also feature prominently in the Song collection *Yijian zhi*. Among the surviving stories, over one hundred depict the underworld.[50] Given the patchiness of the surviving record, we cannot determine whether "return-from-death" stories increased or decreased during the Song period as a proportion of the total. What is clear is that the theme remained popular in Song literati collections.

The *Yijian zhi* stories differ from their predecessors in two respects. First, as mentioned above, they consistently depict the underworld as a courtroom-like place, staffed by constables and overseen by an official figure. Second, compared to Tang and pre-Tang stories, monks now scarcely feature in these "return-from-death" stories, either as underworld travellers or as bureaucrats.[51]

The decline in depictions of monks as underworld travellers is not entirely understood, but one plausible explanation lies in the changing nature of Buddhist practice. With the rise of devotional movements—later referred to anachronistically as "Pure Land" Buddhism—there was a shift away from rigorous doctrinal study and ascetic discipline toward more accessible forms of devotion, such as sutra copying and the recitation of the Buddha's name. In many "return-from-death" narratives from the Song era, protagonists are often saved by the merit accumulated through a lifetime of these practices, especially the recitation of key texts like the *Diamond Sutra*. As merit-making became increasingly available to laypeople, they began to supplant monks as the central figures in these stories.

The reason monks do not feature as underworld bureaucrats might be that, by Song times, civil offices were monopolized by Confucian scholars, excluding monks from the bureaucracy. By contrast, in the Tang period and earlier, monk political advisors were frequently found at court. The underworld bureaucracy was a reflection of its worldly counterpart.

Another possible explanation of the lack of clerical representation in Song underworld stories is the so-called "disenchantment of nature" pioneered in this period by eminent Chan monks, who placed sudden awakening above miracles, thaumaturgy, and ascetic feats.[52] Along similar lines, Mark Halperin observes that the literati-authored hagiographies of eminent monks from the Southern Song rarely feature thaumaturgy. He attributes this to the "heightened Confucian self-consciousness" of the era, during which "literati tended to follow Confucius's example of not speaking of oddities (*guai* 怪) and the unseen world (Halperin 2023, pp. 1–34)".

This observation may be true of the sources Halperin relies on—stupa obituary inscriptions about exemplary masters written by men of letters. These sources, as mentioned above, are what might be called "public writings" and reflect a purely Confucian perception of the monastic elite. My sources, representing a blend of literati and popular perspectives, do not indicate any such "disenchanting" tendency among either monks or laypeople. As I will show later, Buddhist thaumaturgy is a common theme and is largely considered as belonging to the special domain of clerical knowledge.

The monk–underworld stories in the *Yijian zhi* show monks being punished for failing to fulfil their ritual duties to their lay patrons, rather than for failure in personal ascetic practices. This likely indicates a shift in monastic–lay interactions from earlier times. Monks were now involved in local social and religious life by providing regular ritual services rather than leading the laity in the study and practice of Buddhism.

Bodhisattvas, including Ksitigarbha, continue to appear consistently as monks in "return-from-death" and other stories. This shows that, in the Song, monks were still considered as exemplars of Buddhist law. Another piece of evidence pointing to the close association between monks and Buddhist law is that most, although not all, Buddhist-oriented rituals, including Buddhist incantations, are attributed to monks. This is in stark contrast to stories from the Ming and Qing, where Buddhist rituals are often performed by lay-people. But this is out of the scope of this article.

Song narratives show Buddhist merits as being somewhat more accessible to the laity than in previous periods. Lay practitioners could practice Buddhism without being guided by monastics. However, in local society, monks were still seen as the agents and representatives of Buddhist law. Despite the increasing commercialization of the religious market, there was no detectable decline in the respect shown to monks by lay society.

5.2. Punishment of Monks in Song Stories

Out of over a hundred "return-from-death" stories in the Yijian zhi, I have found only five in which monks are depicted as being punished in the underworld. In one case, a monk

is condemned for residing in his own home rather than in a monastery and for engaging in sexual relations with neighbouring women[53] wo stories focus on monks who failed to properly fulfil their religious duties to the laity. Another involves a monk who secretly pocketed donations intended for religious purposes. The final case concerns a monk's misconduct in commercial activities. Illicit sex is a common cause of post mortem punishment in the Yijian zhi "return-from-death" stories, alongside other moral transgressions such as manslaughter, filial impiety, swindling, and the consumption of meat—especially beef. However, only one story attributes this particular sin to a monk. This suggests that, during the Song period, monks were not widely perceived as habitual violators of monastic precepts or social boundaries—unlike in the late imperial period, when such criticisms of the clergy became more prominent.

Two stories from the *Yijian zhi* depict scenes in which monks are punished—not this time for excessive lay entanglement and negligence in ascetic practices, but for failure to complete services for lay patrons. This is described as a "sutra debt" (*jingzhai* 經債)—taking money for sutra recital and failing to carry it out.

In the first story, the head monk Meng 蒙僧首 of the Wuyi prefecture in Wuzhou 婺州 is said to be well-versed in sutras and to have never eaten meat or drunk alcohol. People come from afar to ask him to recite sutras. He has too many commitments and is unable to fulfil them all. Ten years after Meng's death, a person named Xu journeys to the underworld and returns. Xu reports seeing Meng in a large iron prison, surrounded by fire, with a sutra in his hand. He is repaying his lifetime sutra debts by reciting sutras here. Meng implores Xu to invite monks to recite sutras for him. This will speed the process of repaying his "debts".[54]

The other story depicts a prison in the underworld specially assigned to monks with sutra debts. It is called the "prison of soil" (*liniyü* 犁泥獄). The monks are buried up to their heads in soil with only hands sticking out, in which they hold sutras. They are repaying their sutra debts by reciting sutras in this uncomfortable position.[55] This is a lay understanding of the Buddhist hell. *Naraka*, the Sanskrit term for hell, is translated as *liniyü* in Chinese, literally meaning "prison of soil and plough". "Prison of soil" must be an imaginative interpretation of this Chinese term.

The two *Yijian zhi* stories, like the earlier stories about monks receiving punishment, are clearly written from a lay perspective. But this time around, the crime is not meat-eating or alcohol consumption. Monks are punished for having failed to perform services commissioned by lay patrons. This must have been common, especially among adept monks, who were in high demand. The lay expectation of monastics has changed. The overriding worry of the laity is no longer that monks are not holy enough to lead lay practice but that they cannot fulfil their role as service providers. This reflects the Song "laicisation of religion" described by Hymes: monks, together with other religious professionals, started to offer their services to the laity in exchange for fees, and, as a result, would often have to yield to the demands of their lay patrons. A broader survey of the *Yijian zhi* supports this interpretation: numerous stories portray Buddhist monks—alongside Daoist priests and other ritual professionals—as being in high demand for exorcisms and similar services.

Stories of this kind are evidently an expression of anger and disappointment on the part of lay patrons who feel that they have been cheated of their due. Real debts are transformed, in their imagination, into karmic debts. Even when a monk's behaviour is otherwise flawless, he is still not exempt from post mortem punishment.

One important question to consider is whether the punishment for "sutra debts" reflects lay perceptions of monastic responsibility, or whether it mirrors broader societal attitudes toward debt more generally. In other words, was being in debt—regardless of its religious context—perceived as a moral failing grave enough to warrant punishment

in the afterlife? An examination of the *Yijian zhi* corpus suggests otherwise. Among the numerous stories depicting punishments in the underworld, very few involve individuals condemned solely for owing material debts.[56] This suggests that karmic retribution for "sutra debts" is more closely associated with specific expectations of religious service and reciprocity than with any general moral censure of indebtedness in late Song society.

Lay anxieties about monastic responsibility are further reflected in another *Yijian zhi* story, in which a monk is punished in the underworld for embezzling donation money intended for his monastery.[57] This narrative shows that breaches of trust by monastics—especially involving religious resources—were viewed with particular gravity. Such actions were not merely seen as financial misconduct but as serious violations of monastic duty and ethical obligation.

In the last story from the *Yijian zhi*, a monk is rebuked for failure not in religious but in secular economic duties. Mao Lie 毛烈 is a cunning individual who amasses wealth by deceiving people out of their properties. A local man, Chen Qi, mortgages some land to Mao. When Chen is ready to redeem the land, Mao attempts to repudiate the agreement. Chen takes Mao to court, but to no avail, as Mao has bribed the magistrate. Chen finally files a lawsuit in the temple of Eastern Peak, the lord of the Eastern Peak being one of the underworld lords in the Chinese picture of hell. On the same night, Mao Lie, along with several other people involved in the transaction, dies—he is summoned by the lord of the Eastern Peak. Judged guilty, Mao and the magistrate are sentenced to imprisonment in the underworld for cheating and taking bribes, respectively. Among the summoned individuals, we are told that there is a monk who acted as a broker (*yakuai* 牙儈) in the deal. The monk, unaware of the plot, is released, but he is unable to return to life as his body has already been cremated. Consequently, he is stuck in a non-living–non-dead condition. This outcome, while not a direct karmic consequence, effectively functions as a punishment for his part in the illegal transaction.[58] It has nothing to do with religion; it is related to his secular role as a broker.

This story illustrates that monks, as individuals, in the Song dynasty were sometimes actively involved in local economic life. Studies based on Dunhuang 敦煌 documents show that from the late Tang to the early Song period, monks and nuns frequently engaged in economic and commercial activities. The Dunhuang corpus contains numerous commercial contracts—particularly involving land transactions—between monastics, acting in a personal capacity, and laypeople (Hao 2010, pp. 77–95). It can be inferred that such clerical involvement in the economy was not limited to Dunhuang or the Tang–Song transition, but was likely widespread across other regions during the Song period, especially in light of the period's expanding commercial economy.[59]

In sum, the *Yijian zhi* stories depicting monks punished in the underworld suggest a subtle shift in monastic–lay relations during the Song period, moving increasingly toward a client-service dynamic in which clerics were expected to fulfil specific religious and moral obligations. Monks were also actively involved in local economic life. However, these narratives do not indicate a broader decline in monks' religious authority or social standing. On the contrary, stories of monastic transgression are rare in comparison to the overall number of monk-related accounts, the vast majority of which portray monks in a positive light. Furthermore, monks continue to be depicted as spiritually powerful figures, at times even as incarnations of bodhisattvas—most notably Kṣitigarbha, as will be discussed below.

5.3. Monks as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Song Stories

The old theme of monk-as-bodhisattva remains common in a broad range of Song folk stories, not just "return-from-death" stories.[60] This suggests that monks were still widely considered as embodiments of the Buddhist dhamma.

A literary work, *Dongpo zhilin* 東坡志林, by the well-known author Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), records a story on this topic. It concerns a maiden named Li 李氏子, who travels to hell, witnessing various punishments, including those of monks with "sutra debts". However, she is sent back by Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, who appears in the form of a monk.[61]

In the *Yijian zhi* there is another story on this theme. Shen Shijiu 沈十九 earns a living by cooking crabs. Once, he cooks them next to a portrait of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. On the same night, he dreams of travelling to the underworld where he is threatened by being boiled alive in a huge wok, like a crab. Suddenly, a monk with a staff appears and says to the executor, "Only wash his feet in the wok." As Shen's feet are washed in the boiling water, he cannot feel any pain. Upon waking up, he realizes that the monk is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, whose portrait is in his house. Shen immediately resolves to give up his profession.[62]

Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, as usual, displays compassion. He shows Shen the karmic consequences of cooking crabs but does not let him actually suffer. This proves effective, as it deters Shen from cooking crabs. In this story, the meeting with Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva does not take place in the underworld but in a dream of the underworld. But dreams in Chinese religious context "were often regarded as actual encounters with other beings" (Campany 2012a, pp. 99–141; 2020).

Another story from the *Yijian zhi* mentions a monk from the "Guide of Darkness" (*daoming heshang* 導冥和尚) in the underworld, who leads people in their journey through the afterlife.[63] This narrative is likely inspired by the previously mentioned Dunhuang story about Daoming, or its transmitted versions. In the original tale, Daoming travels to the underworld and encounters Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. The term "Guide of Darkness" (*daoming*) appears to be a play on the name Daoming.

In this retelling of the story, the protagonist undergoes a transformation. No longer a mere traveller, he becomes a monk assisting Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and guiding people in their journey through the underworld.

The appearance of Buddhas or bodhisattvas as monks is not confined to underworld settings. It is a common theme of the *Yijian zhi* stories. The story of the peasant Chen Er 陳二 is one example. Chen's wife is pregnant. He goes to monastery and promises a copy of the *Peacock Sutra* to the statue of the Buddha, in return for divine protection of the mother and baby. Chen has a baby boy in the end, but he fails to keep his promise. Mrs. Chen then goes blind. Their son cannot walk but always crawls. One day, Mrs Chen dreams of a monk saying the following to her: "if you give me a thousand teals, I will cure your eyes." The next day, she tells her husband this. The husband immediately realizes this refers to his failure to keep the promise of the sutra. On the same night, Chen Er has the same dream. He later fulfils his promise of the sutra. It costs him roughly a thousand teals. Mrs. Chen's eyes recover and there is no more suffering in the family.[64]

In another story, a man named Li Ba 李八suffers from *dafeng* (probably leprosy), and no medicine proves effective. One day, an itinerant monk visits him and leaves behind a pill. Li casually puts it aside, remarking to his family: "In the past three years, many alms-begging people (i.e., monks) have given me medicines. Have they been effective?" Li refuses to take the pill. Before falling ill, Li used to recite all the sutras of Guanyin Bodhisattva.

That night, Li dreams of the itinerant monk, who says the following to him: "You were willing to recite all my sutras; why are you not willing to take my medicine?" Upon waking up, Li decides to take the pill. After seven days, his diseased skin falls off, and his hair and eyebrows, which had fallen out, regrow.[65]

These two stories are not set in the underworld, but they share the situation of a trance or dream, where the boundary between the real and supernatural becomes blurred. In both narratives, the Buddha or Guanyin Bodhisattva manifest themselves as monks in the protagonist's dream. The monk serves as a divine agent, revealing signs, messages, and warnings to the dreamers.

Indeed, it is not just in the underworld or dreams that a bodhisattva may appear as a monk; it can also occur in real life. One story in the *Yijian zhi* narrates how Guanyin Bodhisattva, appearing in the form of a monk, gives a pious Buddhist woman a pill, which she takes. The narrative leaves the reader to speculate that this pill might possess magical properties. As a result, the entire family is saved from a bandit calamity, suggesting that they might have been fated to die otherwise.[66]

The bodhisattva–monk image is symbolically significant. In Buddhism, all sentient beings are potentially able to become Buddhas or bodhisattvas: there are no absolute boundaries between the divine and the human. Hence it is natural to use the image of a man to represent a Buddha or bodhisattva. The use of monks (and occasionally nuns[67]) for this purpose stems from the belief that these individuals were a crucial step closer to religious enlightenment compared to laypersons; they were therefore particularly well-suited to represent Buddhahood.

Some well-known, sometimes legendary, monks were systematically associated with certain Buddhas or bodhisattvas. A notable example is the cloth-sack monk (*budai heshang* 布袋和尚), who was linked with Maitreya, the future Buddha, from the tenth century onwards. Monks such as Bao Zhi 寶誌 (418–514), Seng Qie 僧伽 (?–710), and Wan Hui 萬迴 (632–711) were associated with Guanyin Bodhisattva, and the popularity of their cults continued into the Song period.[68] Evidently, in the eyes of the Song laity, monks remained representative figures of Buddhism, even if their status had diminished in other ways.

5.4. Buddhist-Oriented Thaumaturgy and the Monk–Thaumaturge

The notion of Song Buddhism exhibiting a tendency toward "disenchantment" is even further dispelled if we broaden our gaze to take in stories of monk wonder-working, or "thaumaturgy". The *Yijian zhi* is replete with such stories. As in tales from the Tang and pre-Tang periods, monks are depicted primarily as miracle workers who alleviate suffering and demonstrate enlightenment. This stands in stark contrast to narratives from the late imperial period, which often portray monks as malevolent magicians who harm people.

Thaumaturgy exists across various ritual traditions, including Buddhism, Taoism, and folk-oriented practices, such as shamanism. It is often difficult to pinpoint the specific tradition from which a particular form of thaumaturgy originates, as it may incorporate elements from various traditions. However, we can still identify certain practices as being Buddhist-oriented or Taoist-oriented.

One example of Buddhist-oriented thaumaturgy is the use of Buddhist exorcist incantations. While incantations exist in all ritual traditions, some incantations derive from specific Buddhist scriptures.[69]

Sanskrit incantations were introduced into China by foreign clerical translators as early as, if not earlier than, the sixth century (Kieschnick 1997, p. 83). New incantations were also created and accepted as part of "Buddhist literature" over time. A body of "incantation scriptures" was thus established; in the Tang and Song periods especially, Buddhist incantations were gradually integrated into the existing incantatory and exorcist tra-

dition. Notable examples include the Vajra-being of Impure Traces Spell (*huiji jingang zhou* 穢跡金剛咒) and the Great Compassion Spell (*dabei zhou* 大悲咒).

My survey of the *Yijian zhi* reveals that these Buddhist incantations still belonged to a special domain of knowledge. This is clear from that fact that most (although not all) Buddhist incantations are attributed to monks.[70] Monks were often invited as experts in particular incantations when clients had exorcist needs.

However, this does not mean that Buddhist monks did not engage in thaumaturgy outside of the Buddhist tradition. On the contrary, they often did, alongside Taoist priests and individual ritual specialists. Similarly, non-monastics sometimes participated in Buddhist-oriented practices. The significant point is that the majority of Buddhist-oriented thaumaturgy was attributed to monks. Although the boundaries between religious traditions were blurred at the social level, ordinary people in the Song period still distinguished roughly between various traditions in their ritual life. They saw religious authority as residing predominantly in the hands of monks, rather than being dispersed indifferently among the laity.

The following stories are good examples.

Zou Zhiming, a wealthy resident of Yihuang in Fuzhou, falls seriously ill with dysentery, losing consciousness and failing to recognize people. During a brief moment of clarity, he asks his wife to summon the abbot of Linjiang Monastery who is renowned for his expertise in the Peacock King Sutra (*Kongque Mingwang Jing* 孔雀明王經).[71] Upon arrival, the monk instructs Buddha statues to be placed in the room while he recites the sutra in front of a chair. After reciting two volumes, the monk leaves for a meal, during which time Zhiming witnesses a peacock—a manifestation of the Mahāmāyūrī—chasing a dysentery demon around the Buddha statues.

Upon completing the recitation and reading a letter of prayer, the monk leaves. As dusk approaches, a small demon informs Zhiming that they will obey the Buddha's order and depart. However, Zhiming still has a nail (possibly a talismanic nail) in the top of his head. The demon offers to remove it if Zhiming will burn as much paper money as possible. Zhiming instructs his servants to buy paper money and burns it in the yard. Ten or more oddly shaped demons dance around joyfully to express gratitude. The chief demon climbs a chair to remove the nail from Zhiming's head, announcing, "Tomorrow, I am going to cause disease in the family of silversmith Zeng in the town."

Shortly after experiencing severe head pain and subsequent relief, Zhiming collapses but manages to rise the next morning. To verify the demon's claim, Zhiming visits the silversmith Zeng and finds that he has indeed been struck by flu as foretold.[72]

Another story tells of a man named Xu Jiping who has purchased a mansion, only to find that a ghost had taken residence and refused to leave. The ghost causes considerable chaos, tormenting the family and guests. Xu invites numerous shamans and Taoist priests, but none can resolve the issue. Hearing of Master Quan, a local Buddhist monk renowned for expertise in the Vajra-being Spell, a spell particularly associated with Tantric Buddhism, Xu seeks his help.

Master Quan arrives at the house and instructs a boy to stand in the middle of the room to observe the ritual. After reciting the spell, a deity enters the house wielding a weapon and flag, bearing the inscription "divine soldier, the Vajra-being". The deity circles the room a hundred times. Fearing the deity's presence, the ghost hides under the bed and only emerges after the deity has departed. The observers notice that the ghost's head now appears several times larger than before. The following day, two ox horns manifest and then vanish. Subsequently, the family is never tormented by the ghost again.[73]

This story raises two interesting points.

First, the monk's expertise in a particular Buddhist incantation is well-known locally, rendering him a sought-after provider of exorcist services. This corroborates the claim, made by many historians of the Song period, that monks' relationship with lay society in this period was primarily based on ritual service provision.

Secondly, both of the Buddhist deities—Mahāmāyūrī and the Vajra-being—have to be summoned with a special spell by the ritual master. Additionally, the image of the two Buddhist deities is that of warriors, echoing the folk practice of summoning "heavenly soldiers" (*tianbing* 天兵) or "ghostly soldiers" (*guibing* 鬼兵). It was believed that divine beings resided in the same cosmological system as human beings and could be summoned to assist humans in battles. Stories of this kind abound throughout imperial history (see Ter Haar 2002, pp. 27–68; 2022, pp. 259–88; Wyatt 2020, pp. 242–52). They illustrate how Buddhist liturgies were intermingled with vernacular beliefs and practices in society.

Another form of Buddhist-oriented thaumaturgy that is almost always attributed to monks is pre-knowledge of one's own death and reincarnation. In Buddhism, foreknowledge of one's own death (*shenzu tong*宿命通) is one of the six Buddhist wonders.[74] Buddha himself predicted and even planned his own (this-worldly) death and achieved *nirvana*, an eternal state beyond death or life. It is common in hagiographical literature that an eminent monk knows when his time has come and dies without disease or pain. Knowing one's death and afterlife is a mark of Buddhist enlightenment. A group of stories in the *Yijian zhi* depict monks who possess special knowledge of their own afterlife.

One of these stories tells of a Master Jian Shan, who dreams that his deceased teacher comes to him and says the following: "I have been reborn into the family of butcher Du in Xipitang. Why don't you come to visit me?" Master Jian Shan goes there with his disciples the next day. When he hears that the boy has been born from his mother's left side, he knows this is no ordinary baby. He asks to see the boy. The boy smiles at the sight of him and ceases crying. Master Jian Shan says: "If you are my teacher, you deserve to be bowed to. If not, when I bow to you, you will die." Master Jian Shan prepares all the ritual objects, bows to the baby and withdraws. The baby watches this with a smile. When the baby is half a year old, his mother leaves her husband and take the baby to live in the mountain. Now—the story adds—the boy is twenty *sui* and has become a monk. His appearance is exactly like the cloth-sack monk (*budai*).[75]

In this story, an enlightened monk has full knowledge of his own reincarnation, which he tells to his disciple in a dream. His rebirth from his mother's left side is likely to be a reference to Buddha, who according to the legend was born from his mother's right side. It suggests that the monk is on an equal footing with Buddha. The fact that he is born to the wife of a butcher is curious, as butchering is a sinful profession in Buddhist eyes. Perhaps the monk intends to save the butcher and his wife by being reborn in their family. (Indeed, later in the story the mother leaves her butcher husband and takes the baby to live in the mountain, like a hermit.) The monk's new incarnation even looks like the cloth-sack monk (*budai*), a manifestation of Maitreya Buddha. This further suggests his personification as the Buddha.

This is not an isolated story in the *Yijian zhi*. In some stories, a monk informs an expecting mother that he is going to be reincarnated as her child;[76] in others, a monk tells someone about the latter's previous life.[77] In short, from the evidence of the *Yijian zhi*, the status of monks as bearers of Buddhist authority and wonder-working power appears to have remained in tact throughout the Song period.

6. Concluding Remarks

This essay has surveyed various representations of monks in the underworld from the early medieval period to the Song dynasty, utilizing narratives of "local histories" authored

by the literati, termed either *zhiguai*, *xiaoshuo*, or *biji*. These representations reflect the lay perceptions of monastics in society.

In early stories, monks are portrayed as enjoying certain privileges in the underworld, suggesting that they enjoyed a similarly privileged status in real life. The chief sin attributed to monks in these stories is negligence in ascetic practice, including eating meat and drinking alcohol and spending excessive time with the laity. Evidently, the laity held monks to a high moral standard, chiding them for their spiritual failings and actively pressuring them to forsake meat altogether.

The Song narratives point to a notable change in the monastic–lay relationship. Now, if monks are shown being punished in the underworld, it is for failure to fulfil their service obligations to lay patrons. This points to the fact, discussed by Hymes, that clergy–laity relations took an increasingly commercial form in this period, with fees offered in return for particular services.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that monks were now entirely subservient to their lay patrons. Monks, as a class, were still held in awe and respect, as personifications of Buddhist teaching. This enduring perception is evident from the use of monks to symbolize Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the frequent attribution of Buddhist-oriented rituals to monks. The more decisive shift in the perception of the Buddhist clergy came in the Ming, when monks and nuns were routinely caricatured as crooks, lechers, and bawds. But that is a topic for another occasion.

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Notes

1 "Early medieval" here refers to the period from the Six Dynasties (222–589) to the Tang (618–907). I use this term for convenience.

2 Although monks received fees from the laity for religious services in earlier periods, the widespread adoption of this practice occurred only during the Song dynasty. Early patronage often took the form of the *zhai* ritual, where monks were invited to feasts (often by the wealthy laity). These offerings were more in the nature of gifts than fees, and only a small number of clerics had the opportunity to be invited to these events. See (Hao 2010; Gernet 1995).

3 This group of early medieval tales is conveniently named "miracle tales" in Western scholarship. It is also often, in Chinese scholarship, classified as *zhiguai*志怪 literature, following Lu Xun's practice. However, in terms of its purpose and transmission, it is not distinctively different from the later-period literati *biji* genre. Only some of the "miracle tale" collections have a strong Buddhist flavour.

4 The story of Zhao Tai discussed below is an example. Daoshi, *Fayuan zhulin* in Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932), T53.2122, 330; *Taiping guangji*, 377, pp. 2996–98.

5 For a discussion of the textual history of *Taiping guangji*, see (Zhao 2009, pp. 1–14; Ditter et al. 2017).

6 For a discussion of the backgrounds of Hong Mai's informants, see Inglis (2002, pp. 83–125).

7 For the production of *Yijian zhi*, see Inglis (2007, pp. 283–368).

8 Hong Mai indicates himself that when a story came to his attention, he always records it (Inglis 2006, p. 50).

9 These collections are classified under various categories, such as *zhiguai* (recording of anomalies), *leishu* (anthology), or *biji* (notes and jottings).

10 For example, Hong Mai admits himself that he prioritizes recording over checking accuracy when a story came to him.

11 There is much scholarship on the genre of *xiaoshuo*, see, for example, (Dewoskin 1977, pp. 21–52; 1986; Hegel 1994, pp. 394–426; Nien-hauser 1988, pp. 191–219). In addition, Glen Dudbridge provides a good methodological guide on how to read Tang tales (Dudbridge 1995).

12 For the most detailed scholarship on "hell" in Chinese religious history, see Sawada Mizuho, *Jigoku-hen: Chūgoku no meikai setsu*.

13 For a discussion of images of hell, see (Thompson 1989, pp. 27–41; Eberhard 1967; Goodrich 1989; Teiser 1988, pp. 433–64).
14 For example, the *Dīrgha Āgama* sutra mentions eighteen layers of hell.
15 For the bureaucratic influence on Chinese religious life, see (Feuchtwang 2001).
16 This story from *Youming lu* is collected in the Song collection *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記. Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guangji* (Beijing: zhonghua shuju, 1961), 109, pp. 740–41.
17 For example, the Jiang Xiaode 蔣小得 story from the *Mingxiang ji* suggests that there is a separate "heaven". This story will be discussed later.
18 The ideal of "ten kings" came from the early Tang-Chinese-produced "Sripture of Ten Kings". Its popularity started from the late Tang. See (Teiser 1994). Lu Xiuman makes the point that the image of the Song underworld setting is largely influenced by the "Scripture of Ten Kings". However, most underworld stories only depict one of the ten kings/officials (usually the *Yama* King) and his court. Rarely do we see all the ten kings (Lu 2009, pp. 115–37).
19 For the Sinification of the Buddhist underworld, see Teiser, The Scripture of the Ten Kings.
20 *Yüli baochao* is a Qing work purporting to be a Song production. For this text, see (Goossaert 2012, pp. 99–156).
21 Lu Xiuman makes the point that the image of Song underworld setting is largely influenced by the "Scripture of Ten Kings". However, most underworld stories only depict one of the ten kings/officials (usually the Yama King) and his court. Rarely do we see all ten kings (Lu 2009, pp. 155–37).
22 "*Shamen sili* 沙門侍立". This story survives through the seventh-century early Tang Buddhist anthology *Fayuan zhulin* and the early Song compilation *Taiping guangji.* Daoshi, *Fayuan zhulin* in Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932), T53.2122, p. 330; *Taiping guangji*, 377, pp. 2996–98. This story is mentioned by Sawada Mizuho (Sawada 1968, pp. 88–89, 108).
23 *Fayuan zhulin*, T53.2122, p. 772.
24 Another *Mingxiang ji* story also tells of a monk giving the protagonist a tour in the underworld and explaining to him the punishment for various sins committed during a lifetime.
25 This phenomenon is noted (Ng 2007, pp. 169–77).
26 Dunhuang manuscript S.3092. This story was transmitted many times. In the process of transmission, Daoming has become the monk "guide in the dark" (*daoming* 導冥) (Zhen 1998, pp. 121–52). Discussed in (Sawada 1968, pp. 111–13).
27 For the Diamon sutra and medieval lay experience, see (Ho 2019).
28 *Taiping guangji*, 379, pp. 3019–3020 (費子玉). Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 110).
29 *Taiping guangji*, 100, pp. 670–672 (李思元). Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 110).
30 *Taiping guangji*, 100, p. 672 (僧齊之). Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 110).
31 Robert Campany has pointed out that underworld punishment reflects the perception of contemporary legal practice. (Campany 2012b, pp. 40–43).
32 *Fayuan zhulin,* T53.2122, p. 331.
33 Yü Chün-fang, in her study of the Guanyin cult, points out that in many stories written both before and during the Tang period, Guanyin appears in people's dreams as a monk (Yü 2001, p. 195).
34 Such an absence, in my opinion, has to do with the decline of clerical authority.
35 Huijiao 慧皎, *Gaoseng zhuan*高僧傳 in Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932), T50.2059, p. 327; *Fayuan zhulin*, T53.2122, p. 720. This story is narrated in the same way in both collections. It is unclear whether the *Gaoseng zhuan* version was copied from the *Fayuan zhulin* version, or both the *Fayuan zhulin* and *Gaoseng zhuan* versions were copied from the *Youming lu* version.
36 *Taiping guangji*, 100, p. 672. Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 110).
37 (Campany 2012b, pp. 148–54). *Fayuan zhulin*, T53n2122, p. 919. (Sawada 1968, pp. 108–9). For discussion of the Liu Sahe story, see (Hélène Vetch 1984, pp. 61–78; Wu 1996, pp. 32–43). These two works, however, are largely from the perspective of art history.
38 The abbot in the monk Qizhi story commits a sin of killing. But this is a rather exceptional story.
39 This is also a standard theme in the Tibetan narrative of return-to-life stories. In Tibetan version, black and red pebbles are used to indicate merits and sins.
40 *Fayuan zhulin*, T53.2122, p. 900. Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 86). *Baguan zhai* is a set of precepts ascribed to lay practitioners. According to the Vinaya, monastics follow the repentance *zhai*. However, the chapters on repentance *zhai* in the Vinaya were not introduced in their entirety to China till the 5th century. Thus, when the story was produced, the repentance *zhai* was not a popular practice among the monastics. See (Ding 2019, pp. 71–98).
41 *Fayuan zhulin*, T53.2122, p. 953.
42 For a discussion of the *zhai* ritual in Chinese Buddhism, see (Ding 2019, pp. 71–98; 2021, pp. 41–67; Campany 2016, pp. 1–21).
43 *Fayuan zhulin*, T53.2122, p. 978.
44 See above note 43

45 *Fayuan zhulin*, T53.2122, p. 958.

46 By the fifth century, sutras concerning dietary restrictions had been introduced to and were being produced in China. The most influential ones are the *Mahaparinirvana-Sutra* (Dabo niepan jing 大般涅槃經), translated in the early fifth century, and the *Lankavatara-Sutra* (Ru lengqie jing 入楞伽經), translated in the mid-fifth century. The Chinese monastic population would have been familiar with various dietary prohibitions from fairly early on.

47 Both sutras are what might be called "*Fanwang jing*, 2, T24.1484.1005. *Youposai jie jing*, T24.1488.1048. Both are cited and discussed in (Benn 2005, pp. 213–36). Both scriptures are what might be called "apocryphal", meaning they were composed by Chinese Buddhists pretending to translate them from Indic languages.

48 For the lay pressure on the monastics to practice vegetarianism, see (Kieschnick 1997, pp. 26–27; Benn 2005, pp. 213–36).

49 For the detail of the assembly, see *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集, in Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932), T52.2103, p. 294; (Kieschnick 1997, pp. 198–201).

50 The Taiwanese scholar Huang Rujian has counted all the "return-from-death" stories from *Yijian zhi* (Huang 2011, pp. 37–74).

51 The theme of Buddhist (and Taoist) clerics serving in the underworld or some fairy-land does not disappear altogether and still occasionally exists. *Yijian zhi*, pp. 8; 28; 211–225; 557; 737–738.

52 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bring this explanation to my attention. For the "disenchantment", see (Faure 1991, pp. 96–131).

53 *Yijian zhi*, p. 792.

54 *Yijian zhi*, p. 1779. Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, pp. 89–90).

55 *Yijian zhi*, p. 1780. Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 90).

56 There is a single curious story about a girl who journeyed to the underworld and was accused of owing 1500 coins to a member of the Chen family. Upon her unexpected return to life, she recounted the episode to her grandparents, who then sought out the Chen family, intending to repay the alleged debt. However, the Chen family denied any such loan, insisting that the girl had never borrowed money from them. Ultimately, the grandparents chose to donate the sum to a local monastery, giving it to the abbot. In this account, the reality of the "debt" remains ambiguous. *Yijian zhi*, 55–56.

57 *Yijian zhi*, pp. 1013–1014.

58 *Yijian zhi*, pp. 168–169. Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 88).

59 For a discussion of Song commercial life, see (De Pee 2010, pp. 149–84; Liu 2023, pp. 90–114).

60 Examples in *Yijian zhi*: *Yijian zhi*, pp. 89; 332; 382–383; 794; 839; 848–849; 850–851; 860; 1249; 1256–1257; 1318; 1359; 1441; 1527–1528.

61 Su Shi, *Dongpo zhilin*, in *Siku quanzhu* 四庫全書6, pp. 8–9. Discussed by (Sawada 1968, p. 110).

62 *Yijian zhi*, 17: 332. Mentioned in (Sawada 1968, p. 110).

63 *Yijian zhi*, 4: 211–214. For a discussion of Daoming and *daoming heshang*, see (Sawada 1968, pp. 111–13).

64 *Yijian zhi*, p. 860.

65 *Yijian zhi*, p. 89.

66 *Yijian zhi*, p. 281.

67 In *Yijian zhi*, pp. 1424–1425 a nun is identified as having the golden-lock skeleton 金鎖子骨, which is a feature of Guan yin.

68 *Yijian zhi*, pp. 850–851 (Sizhou bodhisattva 四洲菩薩 appears as a monk); 1318 (Guan yin, appearing as a monk, cured someone's disease); 1424–1425 a nun is identified as having the golden-lock skeleton, which is a feature of Guan yin.

69 For scholarship on Buddhism incantation, see (Strickmann 1966; 1990, pp. 75–118; 2002, pp. 103–9).

70 For example, nine stories involve the Great Compassion Spell (*dabei zhou* 大悲咒) and four are attributed to monks; eight stories involve the *Vajra*-being of Impure Traces Spell (*huiji jingang zhou* 穢跡金剛咒) and six are attributed to monks (including the rebellious monk Fa en 法恩); and there are six stories about the Śūramgama Spell (*lengyan zhou* 楞嚴咒) and five are attributed to monks. See (Tōhō shukyō 沢田 瑞穂 1980, pp. 1–30).

71 The Peacock King Sutra is said to have been translated by the fourth-century monk Srimitr (?–343). It is a key Buddhist incantation scripture in China.

72 *Yijian zhi*, p. 888.

73 *Yijian zhi*, pp. 304–305.

74 (Soothill and Hodous 1938, p. 365). For a detailed theological discussion, see (Greene 2012).

75 *Yijian zhi*, p. 1428.

76 *Yijian zhi*, pp. 106–107; 1152; 1201; 1289; 1318.

77 *Yijian zhi*, pp. 132–133; 1454; 1465.

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