

RETURN-FROM-DEATH NARRATIVES IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINA

Introduction

Many aspects of the rich and complex history of views on the afterlife in China remain obscure.¹ As a small contribution toward our better understanding of that history, I want here to examine certain representations in narrative form, dating from the late Han to the end of the Liang dynasty (roughly 150-550 C.E.), of what life beyond death was thought to be like and of the nature of the passage from here to there - and back again.

The narratives discussed here are found in that body of early medieval Chinese texts known generically as *zhiguai*² or "accounts of the strange", collections of stories about all

¹ Some of the literature on which I have drawn that is particularly relevant to classical and early medieval notions concerning the post-mortem world and the soul follows: on the soul, Shen Chien-shih, "An Essay on the Primitive Meaning of the Character *kui*³", *Monumenta Serica* 2 (1936-37): 1-20; Qian Mu, "Zhongguo sixiang shizhong zhi guishen guan", *Dongya xuebao* 1 (1955): 1-43; Nagasawa Yōji, "Haku kō", *Kangaku kenkyū* n.s. 2 (1964): 41-54; Ikeda Matsuri, "Kodai Chūgoku ni okeru reiki kannen no tenkai", *Chūō kenkyūsho shūkan* 29 (1970): 121-63; idem, "Kiji kō", *Hiroshima Daigaku bungakubu kiyō* 10 (Aug. 1956): 206-48; and J.J.M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 6 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1892-1910; rept. Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1982), esp. vol. 4. On the historical development of soul and afterlife concepts; Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijieguan di yanbian", *Lianhe yuekan* 26 (Sept. 1983): 81-89; Yü Ying-shih, "Life and Immortality in the Mind of Han China", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25 (1964-65): 80-122; idem, "New Evidence on the Early Chinese Conception of Afterlife - A Review Article", *Journal of Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (Nov. 1981): 81-85; Anna Seidel, "Tokens of Immortality in Han Graves", *Numen* 29 (1982): 79-122; idem, "Geleitbrief an die Unterwelt: Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Graburkunden der späteren Han Zeit", in *Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien: Festschrift für Hans Steininger* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann Verlag, 1985), 161-83; Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979); idem, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982); and Takeda Akira, *Chūgoku no yūrei - Kaji o kataru denshō* (Tokyo, 1980), 9-136. On Chinese Buddhist concepts, Michihata Ryōshi, *Chūgoku bukkyō shisō no kenkyū* (Kyoto, 1979), esp. 86-137; Walter Liebenthal, "The Immortality of the Soul in Chinese Thought", *Monumenta Nipponica* 8 (1952): 327-97; and Whalen Lai, "Emperor Wu of Liang on the Immortal Soul, *Shen Pu Mie*", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101 (1981): 167-75. On the concept of "hell", Sawada Mizuho, *Jigoku hen: Chūgoku no meikai setsu* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1968); and Stephen F. Teiser, "Having Once Died and Returned to Life": Representations of Hell in Medieval China, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48 (1988): 433-64. On specifically Taoist concepts and procedures, Isabelle Robinet, "Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse in Taoism", *History of Religions* 19 (1979): 57-70; Anna Seidel, "Post-Mortem Immortality, or: The Taoist Resurrection of the Body", in *Gülug: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987): 223-37; and Stephen R. Bokenkamp, "Death and Ascent in *Ling-pao* Taoism", *Taoist Resources* 1.2 (Winter 1989): 1-20. Other works will be cited below.

² 志怪、鬼

manner of things fantastic, exotic, folkloric, ghostly, and demonic. I have argued at length elsewhere that the birth of the *zhiguai* genre as a whole, represents an attempt by a certain group of early medieval literate Chinese to come to terms - systematically and for the first time - with areas of human life and experience that were new and unfamiliar in the sense that they had never before been deliberately explored in writing.² Among these areas, none was of more consequence for the development of Chinese religions - and, perhaps, for Chinese people's evaluation of the human condition - than the post-mortem world. So far as we know, nothing approaching the quantity of *zhiguai* materials explicitly concerned with the afterlife had ever been written before in China; and certainly no one had dealt in such searching detail with the realm of the dead, or clothed the afterlife in such compelling narrative form.³

The *zhiguai* narratives, emanating from a stratum of officials most of whom neither belonged to the aristocratic families who dominated the southern dynasties nor held high office at court, are an extremely useful type of source for studying the history of Chinese religions, for several reasons. First, there is good reason to think that many of the narratives are based - though doubtless with some embellishment by their writers, as in the case of any "folkloric" recording - on oral stories told by non-literate people.⁴ Secondly, many of their authors were not closely allied with either the Buddhist sangha or lay associations, on the one hand, or Taoist lineages on the other; this means that the religious perspectives and images found in some *zhiguai* texts are helpful supplements to those found in the Taoist

² I have treated this genre of texts in "Chinese Accounts of the Strange: A Study in the History of Religions", Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1988 (hereafter abbreviated as CAS). See esp. chaps. 2 and 3 for this argument concerning the nature and purpose of the *zhiguai* genre. For other general discussions of the genre see, *inter alia*, Kenneth J. DeWoskin, "The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction" in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Andrew H. Plaks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 21-52; idem, "Chih-kuai", in *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 280-84; and Karl S.Y. Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic: Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-51. These now surpass what was long the standard treatment in Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* (Beijing: Beixin shuju, 1926), trans. by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang as *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976).

³ For a recent review of some of the documentary evidence, see Laurence G. Thompson, "On the Prehistory of Hell in China", *Journal of Chinese Religions* 17 (Fall 1989): 27-41.

⁴ This sort of observation has been used for centuries to differentiate *zhiguai* - particularly *zhiguai* of the Six Dynasties era - from later, superficially similar, but more self-consciously "fictive" genres such as *Tang chuanqi*. For one classic formulation, see Hu Yinglin (d. 1602), *Shaoshi shanfang bicong* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 374 and 486; for a recent reaffirmation, see Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 21-22; and for a fuller treatment of this issue, see CAS, chap. 3, esp. 186-88 and 197-207, and chap. 5, esp. 436-39.

revelation texts of Buddhist monastically produced works now preserved in the canons of those traditions. They often provide clues to how Buddhist and Taoist specialists, rituals, or cosmologies looked to those on the outside looking in. Thirdly, the *zhiguai* narratives are useful precisely because they cannot correctly be read as simply *describing* popular notions about such phenomena as the world of the dead: they also helped to *shape* those notions. They can be taken neither simply as neutral, passive reflections of the afterlife beliefs current in their time, nor simply as sheer literary fancies detached from the tangible press of the realm of the dead on that of the living. They present us, in other words, with both models *of* and models *for* the shape of the afterlife.⁵ The *zhiguai* narrative was particularly well suited to these constructive and persuasive tasks because it was an ideologically rather free genre, not bound by the same constraints to which older, more historiographic genres were subject, in which new models "of" and "for" the afterlife could be safely explored. In future essays I hope to chart some similarities and differences between what the *zhiguai* have to say about such matters as death, rebirth, the afterlife, immortals and Buddhas, and local shrine deities, and what the canonical Buddhist sutras and Taoist scriptures have to say; and to compare both of these, in turn, with what can be learned from archaeological excavations of tombs, from extant stelae or records of their contents, and from other plastic and graphic images that survive from the early medieval period. It is only by combining these various types of evidence that we can begin to construct anything approaching a comprehensive history of the afterlife (or of religion generally) in China, although of course there will always remain much that we cannot know.

I will deal here with one particular type of story: that in which a person "dies" and journeys to the world of the dead, but then physically revives to tell of what he or she glimpsed on the way. Such "return from death" stories are to be distinguished from two related types of *zhiguai* tales that also tell us much about early medieval afterlife concepts, each of which I will treat in subsequent essays: the ghost story, in which a dead person returns to the realm of the living in more or less incorporeal form, without the reanimation of his or her corpse; and the Buddhist rebirth story, which narrates a dead person's karmically determined progress through the wheel of rebirth and into a new existence as a hell being, a hungry ghost, an animal, another human being, an *asura*, or a god.⁶ Return-

⁵ A now classic discussion of the role of religious patterns as models both "of" and "for" reality is Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System", in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), esp. 93-94.

⁶ For an initial overview of some of the Chinese material on "return from death", see de Groot, *Religious System of China*, 4:123ff. ("Re-animation After Death".) An excellent overview of ghost narratives is provided in Anthony C. Yu, "Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit! Ghosts in Traditional Chinese Fiction", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, n. 2 (Dec. 1987): 397-434. For some examples of Buddhist rebirth stories, see (continued...)

from-Death stories are also distinguished here from stories in which a person dies, is encoffined or buried, and a mourner or passerby hears sounds issuing from the coffin or grave, whereupon it is opened and the person is found alive inside - but the narrative ends there, without imparting any revelations concerning the fate of the dead.⁷ Already in the *Hou Han shu* there are two such cases, reported quite laconically in the *Wixing zhi*⁸ (*Treatise*

⁶(...continued)

esp. Donald E. Gjerston, "Rebirth as an Animal in Medieval Chinese Buddhism", *Society for the Study of Chinese Religions Bulletin* 8 (1980): 56-69; and for an excellent survey of Buddhist "miracle tales" from this period, see Donald E. Gjerston, "The Early Chinese Buddhist Miracle Tale", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101 (1981): 287-301.

⁷ On the possible relationship between this sort of story and recent archaeological finds such as that of the intact corpse of Lady Dai in Mawangdui Tomb No. 1, see the intriguing article by Timoteus Pokora, "Living Corpses' in Early Medieval China - Sources and Opinions", in *Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien: Festschrift für Hans Steininger*, ed. Gert Naundorf, et. al. (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann Verlag, 1985), 343-57. Two of the better *zhiguai* examples of such tales are *Lieyi zhuan*^b, item 32 (LX 143), in which a man on his deathbed instructs his mother to watch for the appearance above the ground of a staff buried with him, and to exhume him as soon as it appears; and the story of a Han courtier who emerged alive from his grave and impressed the late Han Empress Guo, found in Ren Fang's *Shuyi ji*^c; see the *Han Wei congshu* (hereafter "HWCS") 1791 edition of this text, fasc. 57, juan 2, p. 14b, and also TPGJ 375 (30.22a). The *Lieyi zhuan* is one of the earlier *zhiguai* collections; it is doubtfully attributed to Cao Pi (187-226), who later (in 220) became Emperor Wen of the Wei. For a discussion of its date, see Lin Chen, "Lu Xun xiansheng 'Gu xiaoshuo gouchen' di jilu niandai suoshou geshu zuozhe", *Wenxue yichan xuanji* 3 (1960): 393-94. "LX" is used as an abbreviation for Lu Xun's anthology of early medieval stories culled by him from later (mostly Tang and Song) Chinese encyclopaediae, most notably the *Taiping yulan*, the *Taiping guangji*, and the Tang Buddhist *Fayuan zhulin*: Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 2 vols. continuously paginated (n.p.: Lu Xun quanji chubanshe, 1946). This citation, for example, therefore indicates that this story is 32nd (by my own count) in the series of items making up Lu Xun's grouping of passages thought to derive from some early version of the *Lieyi zhuan*, and that it may be found on p. 143 of the cited edition of Lu Xun's anthology. "TPGJ" is used here and below as an abbreviation for the great 978 C.E. encyclopedia, *Taiping guangji*, of which I have used the edition published in Shanghai in 1930 by the Saoye Shanfang Publishing Co.; I give the juan number followed in parentheses by the fascicle and page numbers (separated by a decimal) in this edition. Juan 375-386 of the TPGJ - taking up some 50 folio pages in the 1930 Shanghai edition, and containing 127 narratives the longest of which runs to three folio pages - are devoted to items of the category *zaisheng lei*^d, or "Rebirth" (understood, in this case at least, in the sense of "return to life from the realm of the dead"). Of these tales, I would estimate that around 40 date from before the seventh century.

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on the Five Phases), and the *zhigui* corpus contains others.⁸ It was indeed two "returns from death" occurring within his own family that spurred Gan Bao, author of probably the most famous *zhigui* work, the *Soushen ji*, to collect his stories, if we may believe his biography in the *Jin shu*.⁹ I will first translate and discuss a few select return-from-death tales as an entry into describing the way in which their creators, writers, and readers apparently understood the event of death. I will then point out the variety of destinations of the dead in the *zhigui* corpus, discuss the several ways in which people are pictured as managing to return to life, and conclude with some general reflections on the place of these stories in the history of the afterlife in China and on their relationship to other sorts of evidence.

1.

Death as a Bureaucratic Event

I begin with an example drawn from a *zhigui* collection entitled *Youming lu*^b or *Records of the Dark and the Bright*, attributed to Liu Yiqing (403-444), author of the well-known *Shishuo xinyu*.¹⁰

⁸ In the *Hou Han Shu*, see the section entitled "Si fu sheng" ("Re-animation After Death"), pp. 3348ff, in the modern *Zhonghua shuju* edition. In the first case a divination is performed, yielding the statement, "Extreme yin becomes yang; the person below becomes the person above". The second account, concerning the Wuling girl Li Eh, is amplified by Gan Bao in his *Soushen ji* (in juan 15 of the 20-juan edition); I have used the edition of the 20-juan version published in Taipei by the Shijie shuju (1982), where this story appears on pp. 110-111. He ascribes her return from death to a mistaken summons by the Director of Destiny (Siming), on whom more below. (One wonders whether this is a case of Gan Bao embellishing "historical" material, or whether he is giving the "original", "complete", or "folkloric" version of a pre-existent story that the chroniclers had reduced to a colorless item in a list of portents.) The same story reappears in TPGJ 375 (30.221-b), cited from a lost text.

⁹ See the biographical passage in *Jin shu juan* 82 (p. 2150 in the modern *Zhonghua shuju* ed.) and the translation in Kenneth J. DeWoskin, "The *Sou-shen-chi* and the *Chih-kuai* Tradition: A Bibliographic and Generic Study" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1974), chap. 2; this passage is translated on p. 20.

¹⁰ *Youming lu* item 124 (LX 274-75); TPGJ 383 (31.10a-b). Questions of the authorship and date of particular *zhigui* tales and matters of textual history are extremely vexed and will not be dealt with here in any detail. For a sense of the problems and examples of attempts to reconstruct filiations for *zhigui* collections, see Fu Xihua, "Liuchao zhigui xiaoshuo zhi cunyi", *Han-hue* 1 (1944):169-210; Lin Chen, "Lu Xun xiansheng 'Gu xiaoshuo gouchen' di jilu niandai suoshou geshu zuozhe", 385-407; Yan Maoyuan, "Wei Jin nanbeichao zhigui xiaoshuo lufu", *Wenxue nianbao* 6 [1940]:45-72; Wang Guoliang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao zhigui xiaoshuo yanjiu* (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1984), 65-74; and DeWoskin, "The *Sou-shen-chi* and the *Chih-kuai* tradition", chap. 3.

a 搜神記 b 幽明錄 c 世說新語

Suo Luzhen, of Beifu, was a functionary¹¹ in the service of Xun Xianzhi. He died of illness in the sixth month of the fifth year of the Jin *taiyuan* reign period [380 C.E.]. After a night had passed, however, he revived. He said he had seen Xianzhi's [deceased] son Cui, who, surprised but delighted to see him, said: "Your allotted time is not yet up, but we need three officers in this bureau, so we were unable to pass you over. If you know someone as capable as you yourself are, that person will be employed in your stead". Luzhen selected Xi Ying. When Cui asked, "Is he really adequate for the job?" Luzhen responded, "He will not fail you". Cui then invited Luzhen to erase his name [from the register], but the books of fate are not for ghosts to use (*yuanshu fei gui yong*^a), so Cui took the brush and marked through Suo's name himself.¹² Luzhen was thus able to leave.

[On his way out] he suddenly saw a former neighbor, who had been dead seven or eight years and was now serving as a gatekeeper at Taishan. He called out to Luzhen, "So, is Inspector Suo the only one allowed to go back?" Then the gatekeeper instructed him: "When you arrive back at our native village, please convey my apology to my wife. Before my death I buried 15,000 pieces of cash beneath the bed in our house. I had intended to use it to buy a bracelet for our daughter. But unfortunately I died suddenly and was unable to tell my wife and daughter about it". Luzhen agreed to transmit the message.

After he had revived, he sent word to the neighbour's wife, only to find that she had already sold the house and moved to Wujin. So he went there to speak with her; then he explained things to the present owner of the house, who permitted him to dig under the house, where the cash was indeed found just as the gatekeeper had said. Luzhen then sent the money to the neighbour's wife so that she could use it to

¹¹ I follow the explanation of the term *k'ü* given in Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 302.

¹² The phrase *yuanshu fei gui yong* probably means that the dead are not able to alter what the "books of fate" contain concerning themselves. It is not clear from the context whether Luzhen himself, or the narrator of the story, makes this remark.

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buy a bracelet for her daughter. As for Xi Ying, an inquiry showed that he had in fact [just] died. Everyone could only marvel at the whole affair.

Several things are striking about this story, and, as we will see, each of them is a motif found in other *zhiguai* stories concerning the afterlife. For one thing, we note that to die is not only primarily to encounter a bureaucratic system, but also to fill a bureaucratic office and thus become a part of that system. This sort of bureaucratic image of the afterlife is quite familiar to students of Chinese religion and literature, but what is perhaps surprising here is the early date at which the implications of the image were so thoroughly explored in narrative form. Further, the name of the deceased appears in a register or "book of fate". To die normally involves having one's name *inscribed* in a record book by an official, and hence in most cases, rendered irrevocably among the ranks of the dead; this is precisely why cases of return from death are of such exceptional interest to the tellers, writers, readers, and hearers of these tales. To die is also to journey, in this case to Taishan - the eastern of the five ancient sacred peaks, located in Shandong province - or perhaps to the bureau located there. Taishan, well known to have been one of the favourite destinations of the Chinese dead for almost two millennia, plays a much larger role in other *zhiguai* stories, as we will see.

We note also how central is the connection between the realms of the living and the dead. Personal ties made during life continue in the afterlife, and a pre-existent social connection (here, one between two neighbours) becomes an important hinge on which the story's action turns. Furthermore, the story ends with indubitable confirmation, located in this familiar world, that what happened to the dead man in the other, unfamiliar world was quite real. The finding of the buried cash and the reported death of Xi Ying, in other words, constitute tangible proof that Suo Luzhen's experiences while a seeming corpse really occurred. The story is concerned to show that otherworld experiences have real, this-world effects.

As another illustration of how *zhiguai* tales cast the afterlife in elaborate bureaucratic terms and explore the implications of its bureaucratic structure, consider the following story.¹³

In the 25th year of the *yuanjia* period [of the Jin, 448 C.E.], Cao Zongzhi, a native of Gaoping, went to sleep one night in Pengcheng and did not wake up; he died the next

¹³ *Shuyi ji* item 49 (LX 180); TPGJ 377 (30.29b). This is the *Shuyi ji* (*Narratives of the Marvellous*) attributed to the polymath Zu Chongzhi (429-500; see his biography in *Nan Qi shu* 52 [pp. 903-6 in the modern *Zhonghua shuju* ed.]), anthologized by Song and later encyclopaedists and by Lu Xun; it is not to be confused with the two-*juan* text of the same title attributed to Ren Fang (460-508), cited above.

morning. But late that afternoon he began breathing again. He told of what he had seen as follows. There was a man lightly clad, wearing a *ze*¹⁴ and carrying a tablet (*shouban*^b),¹⁵ who announced himself as a commissioner¹⁶ from the King of Beihai sent to summon him to the king's palace. So Zongzhi followed him back to the palace. In the central court were wispy clouds several dozen feet above the floor, flowing about in all directions. From behind a screen came floating purple smoke, blown towards him by a breeze, of an unusual fragrance. The commissioner said, "Please wait here for his majesty; I will go inside and announce that you have arrived." After a few moments the following pronouncement was read: "My apologies to you, Mr.Cao. I have been lax in handling your case. I would like to install you as an official here. How old are you now, sir, and have you ever held the office of Keeper of Salt Records?" Zongzhi replied, "My poor talents are unworthy of your gracious favour. I am now 31 years old, and I have never served as Keeper of Salt Records." Another pronouncement was then read: "Although you are young, you have already achieved a great deal. You should, however, obtain more experience and [then] serve as a Keeper of Salt

¹⁴ This head garment, for which I have yet to find an adequate English equivalent that covers all the various styles (perhaps "hood" comes closest), varied in shape and size but was basically a close-fitting kerchief laid over or wrapped around the head, sometimes with a surplus of material left trailing in the back and sometimes with small ornaments pinned on. It could be worn with, or in lieu of, a *guan*^c or cap. The brief discussion of it in the *Hou Han shu Yufu zhi* (*Treatise on Carriages and Clothing*, found in the modern edition published by Zhonghua shuju on pp. 3670-71), makes it clear that the *ze* was adopted as court dress under the Qin and Han by officials of all ranks; the text also mentions, significantly for our purposes, that the style in effect under the Han was similar to that used in the Jin period as a *sangze*^d or mourning headdress (which, in turn, is perhaps the ancestor of the coarse woven fibres worn on the head today by the bereaved in Taiwan). It seems to be this same head covering that is depicted on the walls of some tombs and shrines, such as the Wuliang mural scene discussed further below. I am continuing to pursue research on this ubiquitous garment of the otherworldly commissioners.

¹⁵ This seems to be either a wooden writing-tablet or a sign of administrative authority; in either case, the inclusion of this detail reinforces the overall impression of a bureaucratic system.

¹⁶ The Chinese term is *shizhe*^e, literally someone sent as representative, hence "commissioner", in this case (and in most others in this article) of a rather lowly rank; see Hucker, *Dictionary of Official Titles*, 421.

• 幘 b 手板 c 冠 d 喪幘 e 使者

Records. You may now take your leave and return home; later I will summon you again." The commissioner escorted him out the palace gate, whereupon he revived. When he was 47, Zongzhi held office in Guangzhou; the next year he was relieved from official duty, so he returned to his ancestral home, where he grew sick and died.

Here the reason why the protagonist is divinely "summoned" to die, as well as why he is allowed to return to life, are both bureaucratic in nature: he is talented, hence summoned; yet he is also inexperienced, hence sent back to life by the mysterious "King of Beihai", whom we will discuss further below. Note too that the divine summons is delivered by a "commissioner" whom the text is careful to describe in some detail. In short, then, to die is to be summoned to fill a vacant office in the vast bureaucratic network of the dead, a network that seems in its structure to mirror the familiar bureaucratic system of this world.¹⁷

Like the Chinese bureaucracy familiar to the authors and readers of these stories, the otherworldly bureaucracy was subject to manipulation for private gain, as is seen in the following example from the same collection.

In Yingzhou [modern Anhui] there lived a man surnamed Yu (given name unknown) who, during the *xiaojian* reign period of the Song, died of an illness. But a place below his heart remained warm, and, having passed a night without yet being buried, he suddenly began speaking. He said that when he first died there were two men in black clothing who came to tie him up; they then sent a commissioner on ahead [and set off]. Then he saw a great city with imposing gate towers and several layers of defences. Yu was taken into a hall along with a great multitude of others. At the head of the hall was a

¹⁷ Another story illustrating this aspect of the afterlife runs as follows: A man from Changsha named Wang Sigui gets advance notice from a "functionary" (*li*) - a term graphically related to *shi* ("commissioner") and denoting the same type of figure - that he will be "summoned to serve as a Keeper of Records" in the other world. This functionary also says to him: "If you don't believe me, watch the sky overhead on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, and you'll see something." On the appointed day - which is, or course, the day of the *yulanpen*^b festival for the souls of the dead - he did indeed see what appeared to be a funeral procession moving by in the heavens and the sound of mourning. See *Zhenyi zhuan*^c item 13 (LX 159), attributed to Dai Zuo of the early Song period (420-479), on whom see Lin Chen, "Lu Xun xiansheng 'Gu xiaoshuo gouchen' di jilu niandai suoshou geshu zuozhe", 394; cf. TPGJ 322 (26.13b).

^a 吏 ^b 幽蘭盆 ^c 甄異傳

nobleman (*guiren*) seated facing south, flanked by several hundred subordinates who addressed him as "Commandery Governor" (*fujun*^a).¹⁸ The Commandery Governor was holding a writing brush and making notes on bamboo slips as he questioned each new arrival. When Yu's turn came, the Governor said, "This person's allotted days (*suan*^b) are not yet up", and Yu was told to step aside. A person then came up the steps to escort Yu out. When they came to the city gate, his escort spoke with a functionary about dispatching someone to take him back. But the gatekeeper (*menli*^c) told him, "To get out, you'll need a 'return permit' (*fubai*^d)."

Now outside the gate was an extremely beautiful girl of fifteen or sixteen who said: "You are very lucky, Mr. Yu, to be able to go back. The reason you are being detained is that this gatekeeper is seeking a bribe." Yu replied, "I was brought directly here and didn't carry anything with me." At that, the girl took an expensive bracelet off her left arm and gave it to Yu, saying, "Give this to him." Yu asked the girl her name, and she replied, "My surname is Zhang, and my home is in Maozhu. I died yesterday in the midst of unrest." To this Yu said, "Before I died I had saved up five thousand in cash and some marketable items. If I come back to life, I will send you this money to repay you." But the girl responded with the words, "I can't bear to see you in trouble all alone. This is my own private belonging; you needn't bother to repay my family for it." So it happened that Yu was able to get escorted back home without presenting a return permit. When he took his leave of the girl, she heaved a long sigh and wept.

Then Yu suddenly revived. He went to Maozhu, where his inquiries confirmed that there was a Zhang family that had recently been bereaved of a young girl.¹⁹

As in other stories, but unlike those discussed so far, the summons delivered by dark-clad commissioners here takes on the air of a summons to court more than that of an invitation

¹⁸ As noted by Sawada (see *Jigoku hen*, 46-50), this term at some early point came to be used to refer elliptically to the divine "Governor" of the otherworldly "Commandery" of the dead located at Taishan.

¹⁹ *Shuyi ji* item 56 (LX 184); TPGJ 383 (31.12a).

^a府君 ^b算 ^c門吏 ^d覆白

to hold office. Here, too, the writing down of information about the deceased plays an important and visible role. Again, the correlation between events in the other world and in this world serves to confirm the protagonist's otherworldly experience as genuine. His encounter "over there" with the Zhang girl is verified by evidence discovered "over here"; trustworthy facts gathered from this familiar world are used in the narrative to support otherwise suspect claims about the other world.²⁰

In the following story, as in the one just discussed, the protagonist is bound immediately after death; but in this case, he is taken to a place frankly described as a "prison", and it is clearly judgement, not an appointment to office that awaits him.

During the Jin dynasty there lived a man named Gan Qing. Although he was not ill, he died. Now at that time the skilled master (*shushi*^a) Wu Meng told Qing's son: "Your father's allotted time was not yet up. I will make an appeal based on his allotted lifespan (*ming*^b). Meanwhile, do not bury him yet." The corpse was laid down in a *vihāra* (*jingshe*^c); only a place beneath the heart remained warm. The corpse lay there for seven days. At the time it was very hot, and Qing's corpse began to decay. At that point Wu Meng burst in and directed the attendants to bathe the corpse with water and rinse out its mouth, then left again. After another day or so, Qing revived. At first he opened his eyes and mouth but could not make any sound. His whole family were both happy and sad. Wu Meng again ordered him to gargle with water, whereupon he sat up and spit out a good quantity of putrid blood and was thereafter able to talk. After three days he was his old self again.

He said that when he died, he first saw a dozen or so men coming toward him with rope and shackles; they hauled him off to prison along with about a dozen other people. They were ordered to line up, but before his own turn arrived he suddenly saw Wu Meng at the northern end [of the court] setting forth his argument on Qing's behalf. The king finally ordered Qing's release and permitted him to return. [On the

²⁰ This narrative device mirrors in literary form certain ritual techniques used since antiquity in China to authenticate the contents of dreams and other visions. On these techniques see Rudolf G. Wagner, "Imperial Dreams in China", in *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture*, ed. Carolyn T. Brown (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1988), 11-24.

^a 尸士 ^b 命 ^c 静舍

way back,] they were welcomed in every office (*guanfu*^a) they passed; all the officials invited Wu Meng to stay as a guest, and Wu Meng for his part was very courteous to them all. Qing didn't even know which gods they were.²¹

Here the abode of the dead is imagined as a "prison" with a series of offices staffed by various officials and headed by a "king" - obvious echoes here of the Buddhist "earth prison" (*diyu*^b), but notably without mention of that term or of any of the standard Buddhist "earth prison" personages.²² Most striking is the role played by the "skilled master" Wu Meng, familiar to students of Taoism as one of the two main ancestors of a later Taoist sect, the Jingming dao^c (Way of Purity and Brightness).²³ He appears as a bureaucratic insider, one who, knowing how to pull strings and call in old debts, can negotiate his client's perilous way back from the otherworld. This story gives a vivid glimpse of how the Taoist master was imagined as operating in the afterlife realm by authors and readers situated outside, or at least on the periphery of, Six Dynasties Taoist liturgical and scriptural communities.

2

The Varied Destinations of the Dead

In the return-from-death stories in the *zhiguai* corpus, the dead are typically pictured as travelling to and returning from one of four places in the otherworldly landscape. Some journey to courts and palaces in the heavens, where they may have an audience with the Celestial Emperor (*Tiandi*^d) or else be taken to the celestial bureaus of unnamed lower officials. Some travel to Taishan, the marchmount of the east, or to the tribunal of the dead located under that mountain, or else to a place called Beihai (actually an area near Taishan).

²¹ *Youming lu* item 74 (LX 259-60); TPGJ 378 (30.341-b); I follow Lu Xun's version, which incorporates phrases from the *Taiping yulan* recension (juan 887), but the reader should note that exactly what Wu Meng did with the corpse in the first paragraph is somewhat unclear from the several versions of this text.

²² The term *jingshe* is, of course, another trace of Buddhist influence, although by this time, it was in use in Taoist texts as well. Another story in which the dead are described as in "prison" (but not "earth prison") is *Zhenyi zhuan* item 14 (LX 159-60), in which a ghost appears to its family and tells of how it has been imprisoned for its immoral acts while living.

²³ For more on Wu Meng, see CAS, 371-72 (which translates another story about him found in *Soushen ji* 1.26 [8]); Miyakawa Hisayuki, "Local Cults Around Mount Lu at the Time of Sun En's Rebellion", in *Facets of Taoism*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 93-94; and Akizuki Kan'ei, *Chūgoku kinsei dōkyō no keisei* (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1978), 93-103 and passim.

^a 官府 ^b 地獄 ^c 淨明道 ^d 天帝

A few sojourn to the northern sector of the sky for an appointment with the god of the Northern Dipper. And a great many go to a place, often termed "earth prison", clearly recognizable but not always explicitly identified as the multipartite "hell" associated with Buddhism.²⁴ This multiplicity of destinations reflects the profound changes that were taking place in notions of the afterlife during the period in which these stories were written. The *zhiguai* narratives provide one kind of evidence of how these changes looked to people not closely involved in the production of Buddhist or Taoist canonical texts or in the leadership of death rituals grounded in those religious traditions.

In contrast to the stories above, whose authors seem to have been primarily concerned with exploring the workings of the otherworldly bureaucracy and which therefore emphasize the means by which the dead manage to return to life, the *main* point of the following stories - although their imagery is often also bureaucratic - seems to be to *reveal the location* of the abode of the dead and the divine personages who exercise authority there.

A. The Heavens

The first example to be considered here of stories in which the dead ascend to a celestial palace runs as follows:

During the *xiankang* period of the Jin dynasty [335-342 C.E.], there was a gentleman named Zhou Wei who died and came back to life. He told of being summoned to an audience by the Celestial Emperor (*Tiandi*). After he had been led up to the palace, he glanced up at the Emperor's face and saw it was about a foot square. He asked those around him, "Is this the Celestial Emperor Zhang of old?" They answered, "The one who was Celestial Emperor in ancient times has long been retired (*shengqu*^a); this is the recent Emperor Ming [of the] Cao [family]."²⁵

²⁴ I will not translate or discuss at length here examples of the latter sort; they will be the subject of a separate article.

²⁵ *Xiaoshuo*^b item 16 (LX 94), attributed to Yin Yun (471-529), whose biography appears in juan 41 of the *Liang shu* (modern Zhonghua shuju ed. p. 596); see also Lin Chen, "Lu Xun xiansheng 'Gu xiaoshuo gouchen' di jilu niandai suoshou geshu zuozhe", 391-92. The last line means, I think, that the one on the celestial throne is Emperor Ming of the Wei dynasty (reigned 227-239 C.E.).

^a 聖去 ^b 小說

We see at work here the notions that the office of Celestial Emperor was filled successively by dead terrestrial emperors and that it was occasionally possible for the dead to glimpse the countenance of this august personage and even perhaps learn his former, earthly identity. A late eighth century story similarly pictures the dead protagonist as flying upwards to the celestial court, and comments on the rarity and difficulty of securing a personal audience with the Celestial Emperor.²⁶

The bureaucratic aspect of the heavens, as well as their population by the souls of the dead - some of whom are recognizable as one's own ancestors - are shown more clearly in the following story.

Once a certain Qiu You of Wucheng died of illness, then was alive again after a day had passed. He said he was taken away to ascend to heaven. Upon entering a large official building (*xieshe*),²⁷ he saw a seated man wearing a purple *ze*. Someone told You that this was his ancestor Qiu Xiaobo, who was serving as master of records, and that You should not have died. An envoy was dispatched to take him back, so he was able to return [to life]. Leaving though the gate, [Qiu You] caught sight of his grandfather and grandmother beside a tree outside the gate, with one foot bound. A month later, he died.²⁸

²⁶ A story cited from the now lost *Guangji ji*^b (*Comprehensive Record of Marvels*) attributed to Dai Fu (whom we know to have passed a government exam in 757) in TPGJ 381 (31.3b); on this text see the note in Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 389. The notion that the souls of kings and officials ascend to heaven and *bin yu di*^c - become "guests at [the abode of] the [Celestial] Emperor" - appears already in oracle bone texts. See Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo gudai sibou shijieguan di yebian", 83. The rarity of securing a personal audience with the Emperor, as reflected in these texts, is mirrored by his striking absence in funerary banners and tomb walls dating from a slightly earlier period; on this see H. Delehay, "Recherches récentes sur le thème de l'ascension céleste", *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 72 (1983): 299-308, esp. 302-3, where Delehay offers speculation on why the Celestial Emperor was so seldom depicted.

²⁷ I am not sure whether this expression, unusual in *zhiguai* narratives, carries any suggestion of a Buddhist monastic dwelling or *vihara*, as does the term *jingshe* which appears in another story (see above).

²⁸ A version of this text can be found in *Luyi zhuan*^d item 16 (LX 414). There are major discrepancies, however, between it and the version in the TPGJ 383 (31.11b-12a), and the latter makes far more sense, so I have translated from it. This text is of unknown authorship and uncertain date, though very probably Six Dynasties.

^a 廟舍 ^b 廣異記 ^c 賓于帝 ^d 錄異傳

The following story, which also locates the abode of the dead in the heavens, is highly unusual in its image of the dead being subjected to a sort of ability test.

At Shanyin in Kuaiji there lived one Jia Yu, whose *zi* was Chanju. He grew ill and lost consciousness; only a place beneath his heart remained warm. He remained that way for three days, then revived. He told of seeing a messenger arrive to take him up into the heavens for an audience at a government office (*guanfu*). The Commandery Governor (*fujun*) looked very stern in his court. He ordered Yu placed in a secret chamber (*qufang*²⁹) with several levels. At the top level of the chamber were a seal and a sword; Yu was directed to take one of these. Now Yu was short and could not reach the highest level. He got the sword, however, and came back out. He was asked, "What did you get?" Yu replied, "I got the sword." He was told, "What a pity you did not get the seal. It would have given you power over a hundred spirits. The sword you have got only allows you to give orders to earth gods (*shengong*³⁰)." He recovered from his illness. After that, every time he went out he would see earth gods kneeling down beside the road as he passed. Yu was bitterly disappointed.³⁰

As seen above and below, this story is not unique in describing the dead person as getting some precious object in the other world and - apparently, at least, in this case - bringing it back when he or she revives. This motif of the "precious object gained" will recur, among other places, in the tale of Zhang Shen translated below.³¹ That tale, like the ones just discussed, locates the destination of the dead in the heavens, specifically in a "celestial palace" (*tiancao*³²) - a phrase which also appears in an *Yiyuan*^d tale (attributed to Liu Jingshu [390?-470?]) as well as in the text of the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu*^e found at Dunhuang, thought to

²⁹ This term, which I have not encountered elsewhere in the *zhiguai* corpus, is defined by the *Zhongwen da cidian* as "secret chamber" (*mishi*³²); but I suspect what may be intended here is a maze.

³⁰ The translation is based on a comparison of the versions in *Luyi zhuan* item 15 (LX 413-14), *Soushen ji* 15.6 (112), and TPGJ 383 (31.11b), among which there are only slight variations, the most noteworthy of which is that the *Soushen ji* version ends thus: "After he recovered from his illness, spirits (*gu*³³) did indeed come to him, calling themselves earth gods".

³¹ *Zhenyi zhuan* item 9 (LX 158).

³² 曲房 ³³ 社公 ³⁴ 天曹 ³⁵ 異苑 ³⁶ 老子想爾注 ³⁷ 密室 ³⁸ 鬼

have emanated from the Taoist Celestial Master tradition.³²

Heaven as the destination of the dead, and the role of the Celestial Emperor and other celestial officials in determining the fate of the dead, are also evident in a sixth-century *zhiguai* collection devoted entirely to cases of "vengeful souls" returning to seek redress for wrongs committed against them by the living. One title of this collection is *Yuanhun zhi*³ of *Tales of Vengeful Souls*, attributed to Yan Zhitui (531-?); fortunately it has been fully and skilfully translated into English.³³ This text repeatedly portrays the Celestial Emperor as the ultimate authority to whom wronged ghosts could appeal and from whom they secured permission to punish their living malefactors. The imagery is strikingly legal and bureaucratic: a formal complaint (*su*^b) is lodged, often in writing, and an order of redress (*shen*^c) is secured.³⁴

B. Taishan and Beihai

Zhiguai return-from-death stories often portray the dead as travelling not to a celestial "court" or "palace" but to a "commandery" or "bureau" in the otherworldly hierarchy, a bureau specially charged with overseeing their allotted lifespans and, in only some stories, their judgement, but almost never their punishment. Many of these stories explicitly locate this bureau on, or sometimes perhaps under, Taishan, which from ancient times had been the sacred eastern marchmount and hence the site of royal and imperial rituals. Fortunately, several of them have already been translated into English, and in the story of Suo Luzhen

³² The *Yiyuan* tale mentioned is that of Zhang Fan, quoted in TPGJ 386 (31.22b-23a); the dead protagonist goes to see the "Lord of the Celestial Palace" (*tiancao zhuzhe*^d). Yan Maoyuan ("Wei Jin nanbeichao zhiguai xiaoshuo lufu", 53) thinks much of this text dates from the Song period (420-479). For an example of the *Xiang'er zhu* usage of the phrase *tiancao*, see Rao Zongyi, *Laozi xiang'er zhu jiaojian* (Hong Kong: Tong Nam Publishers, 1956), 33: "Your sins will be stored up in the celestial palace" (*zui chengjie zai tiancao*^e). See also Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijieguan di yenbian", 87 and note 21.

³³ See Alvin P. Cohen, *Tales of Vengeful Souls: A Sixth Century Collection of Chinese Avenging Ghost Stories*, Variétés Sinologiques n.s. 68 (Taipei: Institut Ricci, 1982). For an excellent discussion of this text, see also Albert E. Dien, "The *Yuan-hun Chih* (Accounts of Ghosts with Grievances): A Sixth-Century Collection of Stories", in *Wen-lin: Studies in the Chinese Humanities*, ed. Chow Tse-tsung, 211-28 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).

³⁴ As Cohen's helpful textual notes make clear, it is actually the version of the text found in manuscript at Dunhuang (Bibliothèque Nationale ms. no. 3126) that specifies the Celestial Emperor (*Tiandi*) as the one who rights wrongs. Other (mostly later) versions usually speak more vaguely of "Heaven" (*Tian*) as the hearer of ghosts' appeals.

^a冤魂志 ^b訴 ^c申 ^d天曹主者 ^e罪成結在天曹

translated above we have already seen another example.³⁵ I will here mention only a few additional examples.

The earliest mention of Taishan in the *zhiguai* corpus appears in Zhang Hua's (232-300) *Bowu zhi*^a (*Accounts of Mirabilia*):

Taishan is also known as the Grandson of Heaven, which means that it is the grandson of the Celestial Emperor. It is in charge of summoning the *hun*- and *po*-souls of people; it is the East, principle of existence of all beings, and thus knows the length or brevity of people's lives.³⁶

Taishan's status as "grandson" of Heaven and of the Celestial Emperor has been variously explained: Yu Yingshi reasons that the god of the mountain, the supreme ruler of the underworld, must by cosmological logic underrank the ruler of the world or Son of Heaven, hence came to be called *tiansun*^b; while Sawada Mizuho suggests that this position is due to the advent of the Buddhist underworld figure King Yama or Yanluo Wang, who, assigned a position in the *yin*-world hierarchy analogous to that of the Son of Heaven in the *yang*-

³⁵ *Lieyi zhuan* item 23 (LX 139-40, concerning Jiang Ji and his son) is translated in Lawrence Chapin Foster, "The *Shih-i chi* and its Relationship to the Genre known as *Chih-kuai hsiao-shuo*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1974), 60-61, and in Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 56-58. *Lieyi zhuan* item 41 (LX 145, concerning Cai Zhi and his wife), which also appears in TPGJ 375 (30.23a), is translated in Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 58-59, and in Gjertson, "The Early Chinese Buddhist Miracle Tale", 289-90; this text is particularly interesting because it combines three key afterlife figures - the God of Taishan (*Taishan shen*), the Celestial Emperor (*Tiandi*, who in a possible echo of early Taoist imagery, is said to reside in a Palace of Grant Tenuity (*taizei gong*)), and the Director of Destinies (*Siming*). *Youming lu* item 83 (LX 262, concerning the shaman Shu Li, which also appears in the Tang Buddhist encyclopædia *Fayuan zhulin* [Taishō ed. no. 2122, hereafter abbreviated as FYZL] juan 62, p. 756a-b, in TPGJ juan 283, and in the Song encyclopædia *Taiping yulan* juan 375) is translated in Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 147-49. A story apparently involving the dead and set in the area of Taishan is *Youming lu* item 47 (LX 250), trans. in Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 139-40. On Taishan as the abode of the dead see esp. Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijieguan di yenbian", passim, and Edouard Chavannes, *Le T'ai Chan: Essai de monographie d'un culte chinois*, in *Annales du Musée Guimet* 21 (Paris: Bibliothèque d'Études, 1910). A superb story that locates the abode of the dead at Taishan is *Soushen ji* 4.4 (27-29), which I translate and discuss as length in the unpublished article on *zhiguai* ghost stories mentioned above.

³⁶ *Bowu zhi* juan 1, p. 4a in the HWCS, the same passage partially repeated on 1.6a; cf. Chavannes, *Le T'ai Chan*, 401; cf. also Thompson, "On the Prehistory of Hell", 34, where *tiansun* and *tiandi sun* are mistranslated as "younger brother" of Heaven and of the Celestial Emperor. For a discussion of similar passages from non-*zhiguai* texts, including the *Xiao jing*, see Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijie guan", 87. On Zhang Hua, see his biography in *Jin shu* 36 (pp. 1068-78 in the modern *Zhonghua shuju* ed.).

^a 博物志 ^b 天孫 ^c 太微宮 ^d 司命

world hierarchy, thus bumped Taishan down one rung on the ladder.³⁷ In any case, *zhiguai* narratives imparted (or perhaps reflected) a new vividness and complexity to the current beliefs concerning Taishan's lordship over the dead. Here are two examples.

Zhang Boyuan, a native of Peiguo, died of an illness when he was about ten years old. He saw a dozen small boys at the foot of a great mountain, pushing a large cart which was several dozen feet tall. Boyuan joined them in pushing it. Then a violent gust of wind suddenly stirred up dust all around them, so Boyuan clung to a mulberry branch, all the while hearing voices nearby. He thereupon returned to life and revived. Sand and dust were caught in his hair.

Many years later, after he had grown up, he was passing by Taishan and recognized the mulberry tree to which he had clung. It was just like the one he had seen while he was dead.³⁸

During the *jian'an* reign period of Han emperor Xian [196-219 C.E.], Jia Ou of Nanyang, whose courtesy name was Wenhe, contracted an illness and died. There came a messenger, who took him to an audience with the Director of Destinies at Taishan (*Taishan Siming*). [The Director of Destinies] told the messenger, "You were supposed to summon [a person named] Wenhe of such-and-such a commandery. Why did you summon this man? Return him at once." Now by that time it was sunset, so when they got beyond the city wall they rested beneath a tree. There [Jia Ou] saw a young girl walking alone. He asked her, "With the sorts of clothes you are wearing, why are you on foot? What is your name?" The girl said, "I am from Three Rivers, and my father is the prefect of Yiyang. Yesterday I was summoned here. Today I am able to return, but it is sunset, and I fear the insults of people along the way. Then I saw your countenance, sir, and knew you must be an upright man, so I waited here so that we could accompany each other." Wenhe replied, "I am pleased to hear of your

³⁷ See Yu, "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijie guan", 87, and Sawada, *Jigoku hen*, 46-50.

³⁸ *Zhenyi zhuan* item 11 (LX 159).

intentions, and I'd like to spend the night with you." But the girl answered, "I have heard it said that a woman's virtue lies in chastity and devotion, her reputation in spotless purity." Wenhe exchanged more words with her but could not bend her resolve. At daybreak they parted.

Now Wenhe had been dead for two nights; his funeral was already in progress, and grave articles were being prepared. Someone looked at his face and saw that it had colour; when they felt below his heart it was still warm. In a moment he revived.

Later, Wenhe wanted to confirm the reality (*yan qi shi*³⁹) of these events, so he travelled to Yiyang and paid a call on the prefect there, asking: "Sir, did your daughter recently die and then revive?" He then gave a detailed description of the girl's appearance, clothes, and speech, telling the whole story from beginning to end. The prefect went inside and asked his daughter about it; what she said corresponded exactly. He was greatly shocked. In the end he made the girl Wenhe's concubine because of this.³⁹

Both of these stories use the familiar narrative device of invoking evidence in this world to confirm the returner's impressions of the other world. In the first story, what is confirmed is that Taishan is indeed the abode of the dead; in the second, what is confirmed is the reality of the meeting "over there" of two wrongly summoned persons. The second tale is notable for locating the old otherworld figure of the Director of Destinies (*Siming*) at Taishan.⁴⁰

In the story of Cao Zongzhi translated above, we have already seen an example of *zhiguai* stories in which the dead are pictured as journeying northward to the cloudy court of the "King of Beihai". There is at least one other story in the *zhiguai* corpus - but not a return-from-death account - mentioning Beihai as a destination of the dead. In this story a

³⁹ *Soushen ji* 15.3 (109-10); TPGJ 386 (31.22b).

⁴⁰ This is of course but one example of the various ways in which the several distinct, but functionally equivalent otherworld figures - including classical, indigenous figures, Taoist deities, and Buddhist personages - are combined in these tales, a subject worthy of a separate study. A late example can be seen in TPGJ 377 (30.31a-32a), in which the dead protagonist is summoned by Shangdi to serve as *Siming zhuzhe*^b, and in which King Yama is also mentioned. The old figure of *Siming* appears at several other points in the *zhiguai* corpus, not always in connection with return-from-death incidents.

a 驗其實 b 司命主者

dead man appears as a ghost to his astonished family; he is seen riding in a carriage in the guise of an official, with a small entourage, and "he referred to himself as the governor of Beihai commandery (*Beihai taishou*)".⁴¹ Now in Han times there was a Beihai commandery, and under the Later Han there was a Beihai kingdom; both were located at the base of the Shandong peninsula, that is, to the north and east of Taishan. In the later Han there was a "Little Taishan" (*Xiao Taishan*) within the borders of Beihai kingdom, identified by some commentators as the "Eastern Taishan" (*Dong Taishan*) at which the Yellow Emperor had anciently performed the *feng* sacrifice.⁴² According to the *Shanhai jing*, furthermore, Beihai was the site of Youdu zhi shan; and we know from other early sources, particularly the *Zhao hun* and its early commentary by Wang Yi, that Youdu, a northern peak, was thought to be a destination of souls of the dead and that its divine lord, Tu Bo^b, "Aged One of the Earth", had dominion over the dead.⁴³ I am therefore inclined to see these stories mentioning Beihai as part of the same early tradition that placed the dead at Taishan (although some texts in that tradition should perhaps be read literally as speaking of a place "in the Northern Sea"): both imagine souls as sojourning to the north or northeast.⁴⁴ Early Taoist revelation texts incorporated, yet profoundly altered, this tradition, as is evident from the Shangqing imagery surrounding the Six Heavens at Mount

⁴¹ *Zhenyi zhuan* item 15 (LX 160).

⁴² See *Hou Han shu zhi*, sec. 22, pp. 3473-74 in the modern *Zhonghua shuju* edition.

⁴³ See Yuan Ke, ed., *Shanhai jing jiaozhu* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1980), 462-63, for the *Shanhai jing* passage and citations from the *Zhao hun* and Wang Yi's commentary. One can already see the bureaucratization of the afterlife at work by contrasting this figure with one of his equivalents in the *Taiping jing*, the *nifu*^c or "Bureau of the Earth" which, upon death, receives a written report on one's evil deeds and will therefore refuse to release one's corpse to be reunited with one's souls. For example, see the passage in Wang Ming, ed., *Taiping jing hejiao* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 615.

⁴⁴ Other return-from-death stories, while they do not mention Taishan or Beihai, have the revived person tell of initially journeying toward the north immediately after death - even when the story clearly shows evidence of Buddhist motifs such as a multilayered hell and a wheel of rebirth. See, for example, the following accounts in the "Return-to-Life" section of the TPGJ: juan 375 (30.21b), a story set in the Tang period in which the protagonist has an interview with "the controller of Beifong" and is able to return to life because of his stock of merit; juan 379 (30.35b-36a), a story set in the Jin period and culled from the *Tasi ji*^d (*Record of Pagodas and Temples*), in which a Hu barbarian upon death travels north and enters an eighteen-level hell, only to be released by the bodhisattva Guanshiyin because his allotted time is not yet expired; juan 382 (31.7a-b), a story culled from the *Mingbao ji*^e in which the protagonist after death travels north with a representative of "the commandery governor" (*fujun*), sees sinners being punished in hell, but secures release because he is a "Buddhist disciple"; and juan 384 (31.17b-18b), a story culled from the *Hedong ji*^f (regarding which see Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 385), in which the protagonist again heads north upon dying.

a 北海太守 b 土伯 c 土府 d 塔寺記 e 吳報記 f 河東記

Luofeng - located, according to Tao Hongjing, "in the midst of the Northern Sea" - to which the souls of the righteous dead repair to accumulate merit and eventually become immortals.⁴⁵ The Lingbao tradition further clarified the fate of the dead by specifying that their bodies are to be ritually transmitted from the tomb to the Palace of Supreme Yin in the far north, where they undergo an alchemical refinement, while their *hun*-souls journey to the south for the same, after which body and soul are reunited in what Seidel has aptly called a "Taoist resurrection of the body".⁴⁶

C. The Northern Dipper

At least two other *zhiguai* stories that locate the realm of the dead in the north are rather unusual in referring, not to Taishan or Beihai, but to the Northern Dipper. The first, exceptional in its mention of a female psychopomp or commissioner, runs as follows:

In the Wu period [222-280 C.E.], there was an old woman Wang who had died of illness at the age of nine. Having been dead from morning till the evening of the same day, she revived. She said she saw an old woman (*laoyu*)⁴⁷ who took her by the arm to fly to an audience with the Lord of the Northern Dipper. [At his court] there was a dog the size of a lion with deep eyes, crouching beside the balustrade of the Well. She was told that this was the dog of the Duke of Heaven (*Tiangong*).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ I refer to Tao Hongjing's *Zhen gao*^b 15:1a ff. (*Daozang* fasc. 639, no. 1010 in the *Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Series no. 25 [Peking: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1925 - hereafter referred to as "HY"]); for a discussion and partial translation of this text, see Thompson, "On the Prehistory of Hell", 38-41. For other recent, important discussions of Celestial Master and Shangqing notions concerning the fate of the dead, see Seidel, "Post-Mortem Immortality", esp. 231 ff., and, for the clearest account, Bokenkamp, "Death and Ascent in Ling-pao Taoism", 3-7.

⁴⁶ See esp. Bokenkamp, "Death and Ascent in Ling-pao Taoism", 7-20, and the most important scripture there discussed, HY 369 (*Daozang* fasc. 181), the *Taishang dongzuan lingbao miedu wulian shengshi miaojing*^c (Translated by Bokenkamp as [... *Marvellous Scripture for*] *Transit Through Extinction by the Refinement of the Five for the Revivification of the Corpse*).

⁴⁷ *Youming lu* item 58 (LX 254). The "Well" mentioned here probably refers to the Chinese asterism
 a 老極 b 真告 c 太上洞玄靈寶滅度五鍊生尸妙經

(continued...)

The second story mentioning the Northern Dipper provides only a bit more bureaucratic detail:

In the Wu period [222-280 C.E.], there was a native of Gongyang village in Linhai named Liu Rong. He served in the military expedition of the Wu general Zhang Di into Yangzhou, where he contracted an illness and died aboard ship. Two days later the troops had already embarked onto the shore and had not buried him yet. Suddenly he cried out in a loud voice, "Someone's tying up the commander! Someone's tying up the commander!" The sound was quite arresting. He then revived. People questioned him, and Rong replied: "I ascended to a sub-bureau of the Northern Dipper Gate in the heavens (*shang tian beidoumen xiazu*),⁴⁸ where I witnessed people tying up Zhang Di. In my thoughts I was greatly alarmed and so I yelled loudly without being aware of it, 'Why are you tying up the commander?'" At this, the [commander's] retainers grew angry at Rong, cursed him, and ordered him away. Rong was terrified, his voice faltering.

That same day, [Zhang] Di died in battle. As for Rong, he was still alive in the time of Jin emperor Yuan [from 316 C.E.].⁴⁹

⁴⁷(...continued)

jing^b, 22nd of the twenty-eight lunar lodgings (*xiu*^c), whose constitutive stars were the culmination (the highest point above the observer's horizon) of two stars of the Northern Dipper asterism, specifically *tianshu*^d (Heaven's Pivot) and *tianxuan*^e (Heaven's Jade-cog), alpha and beta (respectively) of Ursa Major. See Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: Tang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 44-51 and 80-83 (I have adopted Schafer's translations of the two northern Dipper stars), and Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 3, *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 237-38.

⁴⁸ It is likely that Liu Rong would have ascended to a *bureau*, and so I have translated *xiazu* here as "sub-bureau", a very lowly rung on the otherworldly bureaucratic ladder. But the term *zu* of course commonly refers to rank-and-file soldiers, so this sentence may mean that he "ascended accompanied by lackeys under the retention of the northern Dipper [God]", *menxia* modifying *zu*.

⁴⁹ *Soushen ji* 15.8 (112). According to Wang Guoliang's list of *Soushen ji* stories found in Dunhuang manuscripts, this item is not among them; see Wang Guoliang, "Dunhuangben *Soushen ji* kaobian", *Hanxue yanjiu* 4, no. 2 (Dec. 1986): 379-87.

a 上天北斗門下卒

b 井 c 宿 d 天樞 e 天璣

Once more, events in this world confirm what the newly revived protagonist has seen in the other world: the story, with its probatory conclusion, lends credence to Liu Rong's vision at the Northern Dipper bureaus.

Now, as is the case with all *zhiguai* materials, the origin or earliest version of neither of these tales is datable with any certainty. But if the *Soushen ji* account does in fact date from the mid-fourth century (when the author of the work by that name, Gan Bao, lived), and if the *Youming lu* story does in fact date from the early fifth century (Liu Yiqing, to whom the work is attributed, lived from 403 to 444), then we have here what are (to my knowledge at least), along with the Shangqing revelations concerning the Six Heavens, the earliest textual references to the deity of the Northern Dipper as lord and judge of the dead. Well before any of these texts were written, we have unquestionably clear evidence of this deity's lordship over the dead in a scene depicted on a wall of the famous Wuliang shrine, which was carved in the middle of the second century C.E. In this scene, as analyzed by Hayashi Minao, we see seven circles representing the stars of the Dipper; in the Dipper's bowl sits a large figure in royal garb, gnashing his teeth in anger, apparently in the act of decreeing punishment for the soul of a murderer which appears on its knees in supplication before him. Behind the Lord of the Dipper stand his subordinate officials, while before him other souls wait their turn for an audience and in the background a carriage, accompanied by commissioners, arrives with yet another soul. Winged immortals also grace the Lord's court; one of them holds an eighth star which from early times was thought to complement the sixth.⁵⁰ In the Shangqing scriptures, the Lord of the Northern Dipper is similarly made "Spirit-Officer of the Palace of the Fourth Heaven", in charge of "matters of curse and blessing, auspicious or inauspicious [fate], the continuation of lifespan, and crimes and injuries", and the scriptures further reveal that it is King Wu of Zhou who now occupies that post.⁵¹ It is therefore no surprise that from very early on this deity was specially invoked in Taoist texts and rites for protection from various calamities and, in particular, for the prolongation of the lifespan of the faithful,⁵² a practice that may also have been the inspiration for several Vajrayana methods of prolonging one's lifespan involving visualization

⁵⁰ See the superb discussion in Hayashi Minao, "Kandai kishin no seki", *Tōhō gakuho* 46 (1974): 256-58. I have unfortunately not yet seen Wu Hung's very recent book on the Wuliang shrine, published by Stanford University Press, and so do not know whether he agrees with Hayashi's analysis of this scene.

⁵¹ *Zhen gao* 15, 31-3b and 5a, reading *bei* ("northern") for *di* ("earth") on line 1 of 3b, as does Hayashi (p. 257).

⁵² As in the text *Taishang xuanling beidou benming yansheng zhenjing*^a (HY 622, *Daozang* fasc. 341), the date of which I cannot ascertain, although its many Buddhist terms suggest it may be connected with the Lingbao tradition.

a. 太上玄靈北斗本命延生真經

of the deities of the Northern Dipper stars, described in Tang texts.⁵³

3.

Ways of Returning from Death to Life

The authors of *zhiguai* narratives recorded an array of possible ways of returning to life once one had died - loopholes in what was normally thought, for ordinary people at least, to be a strict and formidable procedural system. We have already seen examples of three types of loopholes of a *bureaucratic* nature: there are cases in which the deceased is mistakenly summoned instead of someone else with the same surname or physical description (an example being the story of Jia Ou of Nanyang translated above); there is another type of "mistaken summons" in which the deceased is prematurely summoned before the expiration of his or her properly allotted lifespan (this common motif appears in the story of Suo Luzhen of Beifu translated above);⁵⁴ and there are somewhat more unusual (and darkly humorous) cases in which the deceased, having been summoned to perform a bureaucratic task, is allowed to return to life because of his or her inexperience in such matters (story of Cao Zongzhi translated above) or because he or she succeeds in "nominating" a better candidate for the job (story of Suo Luzhen).⁵⁵

⁵³ Such as the texts numbered 1305-1307 and 1310 in the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, on which I am pursuing further research to compare them with Taoist texts. Important discussions of these sources include Morita Ryūsen, *Mikkyō senseihō* (Kōyasan: Kōyasan daigaku shuppanbu, 1941), 1:80-97 and passim, and Raoul Birnbaum, "Introduction to the Study of T'ang Buddhist Astrology", *Society for the Study of Chinese Religions Bulletin* 8 (Fall 1980): 5-19.

⁵⁴ A variation on this motif is the type of story in which the deceased has been murdered by a human or a ghost and files a complaint. The bulk of the *Yuanhuan zhi* (discussed above) is made up of such stories. Another, rather unusual example can be seen in the story of Yu Xuanfang's daughter (TPGJ 375 [30.22b-23a]), in which a girl who was "unjustly murdered by a ghost" appears in a dream to the governor of Guangzhou and secures his permission to live out her allotted eighty-odd years according to the "register of life" (*shengtu*). On her birthday he makes offerings according to her instructions, then opens her grave to find her body "completely as it was before" and a place beneath her heart still warm. She then marries the governor and bears him two politically successful sons. This story is excerpted from the FYZL, but I have not yet found it in that work.

⁵⁵ Another example of the latter motif is *Yiyuan* juan 5, item 23 (p. 3b in the *Shouku* edition of the text (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1963), in which the protagonist, a skilled carpenter named Shi Xiuzhi, is summoned by the divine "Taishan commandery governor" (Taishan fujun) to make a table. Shi succeeds in getting a man named Liu Zheng summoned in place of himself; Liu does indeed die shortly thereafter, while Shi remains alive.

We have also seen examples of the fact that, in most of these stories, a particular sort of *physiological* explanation is given of how it is possible for the dead to return to life: we typically read that "a place beneath the heart remained warm". I cannot address the technicalities of medical theory underlying this narrative motif, although it is significant that a thirteenth-century forensic text, given instructions for reviving persons who have been hung, says that "if there is warmth below the heart, they may still be saved even though a day or more passed".⁵⁶ What is important for our purposes is that, for the *zhiguai* authors, the physiological fact that "a place beneath the heart remained warm" is a necessary but *not a sufficient* condition for the protagonist's return from death. This physiological detail, in other words, serves as a narrative means for making the return to life seem possible; but it is the nature of the afterlife, the quirks of its bureaucratic system, the location of its dark offices, and the mechanisms by which it operates that the *zhiguai* writers are interested in exploring. The narratives therefore always provide other sorts of *sufficient reasons* for the protagonist's return from death; and these reasons constitute some of the most important and fascinating evidence concerning the development of afterlife images during this period.⁵⁷

But the reasons why a lucky few could succeed in returning from death to life were more complex than the three standard, bureaucratic reasons just mentioned. The *zhiguai* tales reflect the ways in which the process of dying was becoming morally and religiously more complex during the early medieval period. The newly revealed otherworldly bureaucracy was taking on an increasingly human and intelligible - if unpredictable - face.

In the following story, for instance, unusual in its description of an exchange of body parts as a technique for revivification (a bizarre twist on the motif on this-worldly confirmation of otherworld visions), we learn just how far the dark bureaucracy would go to ensure its own smooth operation.

During the reign of emperor Yuan of the Jin dynasty,
there was a certain soldier from an official-rank family who died
of a severe illness. He saw people come to take him up to

⁵⁶ See Brian E. McKnight, trans., *The Washing Away of Wrongs: Forensic Medicine in Thirteenth-Century China*, Science, Medicine, & Technology in East Asia no. 1 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1981), 155. On the centrality of the heart to the circulation of *qi* throughout the body and to the direction of all life processes, see Ilza Veith, dr., *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 105-6, and Manfred Porkert, *The Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 127-28.

⁵⁷ An example of a story emphasizing much more than most the physiological aspects of return from death is *Soushen ji* 15.10 (113).

heaven to have an audience with the Director of Destinies (*Siming*). But the Director of Destinies dismissed his case, because his allotted years were not yet exhausted and thus he should not have died his untimely death. He ordered his subordinates to dispatch an escort to take him back.

But the soldier developed a foot ailment and was unable to travel, despite his reprieve. The subordinates grew concerned, saying to each other, "If this soldier dies of his foot wound and is thus unable to return [to life], we all will be guilty of causing an untimely death." So they went as a group to report to the Director of Destinies. He thought about the matter for a long time, then said, "Go and find the newly summoned Hu barbarian named Kang Yi, outside the western gate. This man is due to die immediately. His foot is quite healthy, and if we exchange the two, neither will be any the worse for it."

Having received their orders, the subordinates went out to make the exchange. But the Hu barbarian had an extremely ugly body, and his foot was awfully strange-looking, making the soldier unwilling to go through with it. At this, the subordinates said to him, "If you don't make the exchange, are you willing to remain here forever?" So the soldier realized he had no choice and relented. The subordinates asked the two men to close their eyes, and in a flash their two feet were switched. Then they sent the soldier back, and he came to life once again.

When he told his family the story, they examined his foot, and it was indeed that of a Hu barbarian: it was covered with matted hair, and it had a Hu odour. Now the soldier was of aristocratic background and had devoted himself to developing his arms and legs. Suddenly to have this appendage was more than he could bear. Even though it had permitted him to live again, he regretted it so much that he was as if dead. He sent someone to find out about this Hu man, and thus discovered that the barbarian had died but was not yet buried. As his home was not far from the soldier's, the soldier went personally to look at the Hu's corpse. Sure enough, there was his own foot on the Hu's leg. Just when they were about to bury the corpse, the soldier began crying uncontrollably.

Now this Hu barbarian's son was very perceptive [and therefore noticed the soldier's foot]. Stricken by grief, he would

frequently run and grasp the soldier's foot with a mournful cry every time the soldier came or went. The soldier finally had to order people to guard the gate of his home constantly so as to keep out the Hu's son. He hated his condition the rest of his life and never once allowed himself to be seen, even by accident. Even in the hottest days of summer he would wear heavy clothing and did not expose [his foot] even for a moment.⁵⁸

Even in the realm of the dead one may die out of time, and officials there, as here strive to avoid any such procedural irregularity.

In rare cases it was possible to secure clemency from an otherworldly official by appealing to human emotions and to fundamental values, as is illustrated by the following story.

A native of Langye surnamed Wang (his personal name is lost), who lived in Qiantang, had a wife whose maiden name was Zhu. In the ninth year of the *taiyuan* period [384 C.E.], she died of illness, leaving two boys behind. Wang himself died a violent death in the fourth month of the same year. But for three days the place beneath his heart remained warm, and after seven days he revived. He said that when he first died, over twenty people, all of them clad in black, came to take him away. They took him to a vermilion-coloured gate set in a white wall; the place seemed to be a palace (*gongdian*^a). There were functionaries (*li*) wearing vermilion robes, purple belts, and black *ze*, and some had pearls and jade sewn onto their clothes - it was not the standard garb of this world. Then he caught sight of a large, tall man before him, wearing clothes that looked like cloud vapours. Wang faced him and knocked his head on the ground, saying, "My wife has already died, yet our two orphaned sons are still quite young. How can they manage?" And he wept. The person standing before him was visibly moved by Wang's speech and said, "Your allotted lifespan should be finished. But because of your orphaned children, I will grant you a special dispensation of three years'

⁵⁸ *Youming lu* item 71 (LX 258-59); TPGJ 376 (30.26b-27a).

^a 宮殿

additional time." On hearing this, Wang replied, "Three years is not long enough to raise my sons." One of the onlookers then interjected, "What are you so worried about, you vulgar corpse (*sushi*)? Three years here in this realm equals thirty years in the world." So Wang was escorted out of that place. He did indeed die after another thirty years had passed.⁵⁹

Other stories, such as the following, construe the realm of the dead as a place in which ties of kinship or friendship - and perhaps even a judiciously placed bribe - might afford a bridge back to life.

Zhang Shen of Lean died of illness, but before he was buried he revived. He told of being escorted to a celestial palace (*tiancao*). It so happened that the person in charge of his escort party was his brother-in-law,⁶⁰ so he was able to wrangle his release. At that moment he saw a woman who was also being escorted upwards. She took off two pairs of golden bracelets and gave them to Shen so that he could give them to his brother-in-law; and in this way she was also able to return [to life]. So they travelled back together. The woman said that her home was in Wu, her surname was Yu, her given name Qiuying. Later on Shen made inquiries about her and subsequently found her, whereupon her parents married her to Shen.⁶¹

In still other *zhiguai* tales, the intercession of a religious specialist - a Taoist priest or Buddhist monk - succeeds in altering what would otherwise be an inexorable process of imprisonment or even of punishment. We saw an example above in which the Taoist Wu Meng travels to the other world and negotiates a dead man's return to life. There are many Buddhist analogues. In one case, the protagonist, Cheng Daohui, dies and is immediately

⁵⁹ *Youning lu* item 125 (LX 275), TPGJ 383 (31.10b).

⁶⁰ The Chinese term is *waixiong*^b, which I translate thus by analogy with the attested expression *waifu*^c, defined by the *Zhongwen da cidian* as "one's wife's father". The term also occurs in the *Yiyuan* story of Zhang Fan mentioned above (TPGJ 386 [31.22b-23a]), in which the Lord of the Celestial Palace to which Zhang repairs happens to be his *waixiong* and so releases him back to life.

⁶¹ *Zhenyi zhuan* item 9 (LX 158).

^a 俗尸 ^b 外兄 ^c 外父

arrested for his karmic offenses, but because of the merit he had established in former lives, and due also to the intervention on his behalf of a monk who appears by his side in the other world as an advocate, he gains release from punishment and is granted permission to return to life after a guided tour of hell.⁶²

Finally, the reason why some of the protagonists in these tales are able to return to life is that they might bear a message back to the world of the living. In many of the stories the message seems to be no more complicated than the revelation or confirmation that there is, in fact, an afterlife - one with the characteristics glimpsed by the protagonist while there. In other stories, however, and particularly the one (not adequately discussed here) with a decidedly Buddhist slant, the message is more specific, and consists of a warning about the consequences of living in violation of basic Buddhist precepts. An example follows.

Yuan Zhizong, of the Song period [420-479 C.E.], was a native of Hedong. In the sixteenth year of *yuanjia* [439] he was serving at the commandery headquarters of Zhongli under the commandery governor Yuan Yi. Yi dispatched Zhizong on a mission to one of the more distant hamlets, sending with him as commandery commissioners Yi Gou and Bian Ding. When they reached the dwellings of the local people, [Zhizong] was suddenly as if asleep, and he did not wake up again. The local people took him for dead. They took him beyond the gate and were making preparations for burial; [but] after a night had passed he could speak.

He said that at first there were about a hundred people who tied him up and took him away. After travelling several dozen *li* they arrived at a Buddha-image (*fotu*^a) being venerated by a group of monks no differently than in this world. One monk said: "you enjoy hunting, so today you will receive retribution (*shoubao*^b)." With that he grabbed Zhizong, stripped off his skin, and sliced him into thin cuts, exactly in the manner in which animals are prepared for sacrifice. Then he was placed in a tub of water, hooked by the mouth, and pulled out, then sliced up as though being prepared as mincemeat. Then he was thrown into a cauldron over a stove, cooked down, and turned over, until the pain was unbearable; this was done three times. He was then asked: "Do you want to live?" Zhizong

⁶² See *Mingxiang ji* story in LX 480-82, and the translation in Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 172-75.

a 佛圖 b 受報 c 冥祥記

knocked his head on the ground and pleaded for his life. The monk ordered him to crouch down on the ground, then bathed with water, saying that one bath would wash away sins to the number of five hundred. Zhizong begged for more baths, to which the monk replied, "Three will do."

Then he caught sight of several ants. The monk said, "Although these are tiny creatures, you may not kill even them, not to speak of larger creatures. Of meats you may eat only fish. On vegetarian feast days you are to wear completely new clothes; if not new, at least they are to be washed." Zhizong then asked, "There were three of us travelling, but I am the only one who received punishment. Why?" The monk answered: "Those other two men know already of their sins and their blessed acts, and committed no offense; only you, in your stupidity, were ignorant of karmic retribution (*yuanbao*), so you were instructed."

At that point he revived. After four days he was able to get up and move about. From that time forward he stopped fishing and hunting.⁶³

Although in this case the protagonist does not, to our knowledge, join the sangha and spend the rest of his days urging people to avoid taking life, the very narration of his experience to his listeners within the frame of the story - and subsequently the appropriation and circulation of his story by the author of the *zhiguai* collection - constitute a spreading of the message imparted to him in the other world. In many stories this spreading of the message is much more explicitly emphasized.⁶⁴

⁶³ This is one of two surviving stories cited from a text entitled *Xiangyi ji*^b; see TPGJ 131 (10.40a-b) and LX 431-32.

⁶⁴ An excellent example is the story of Zhao Tai from the collection *Mingxiang ji*; see LX 453-55 and TPGJ 377 (30.28a-29a), and Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales*, 166-71. Here the protagonist, after discoursing at length on his otherworldly visions to the sixty or so people attending his funeral, "personally wrote an account in order to make it known to his contemporaries".

^a 緣報 ^b 詳異記

4.

Concluding Reflections

I conclude by offering some thoughts on the place of these stories in the history of afterlife concepts in China and on why they were written.

To begin with, let us look backward a bit in time. Much of the evidence gained from archaeological excavations of tombs dating from the Warring States period to the Western Han points to a westward journey of the dead. Sofukawa Hiroshi, for instance, has argued forcefully that Mount Kunlun in the west, though not necessarily the only destination of the dead during this period, was probably their most frequent destination, serving as a cosmic pillar by which the dead could ascend to the heavens and by which heaven's envoys could descend to earth to summon souls.⁶⁵ Given the earlier prevalence of this Kunlun imagery, its absence from *zhiguai* return-from-death narratives is striking. Although Kunlun and the Queen Mother of the West are mentioned occasionally in the *zhiguai* corpus, they are not, to my knowledge, mentioned in direct connection with the fate of the dead. Between the period in which these tombs were built and that in which the *zhiguai* accounts were written down, therefore, an important shift occurred, and the north and northeast largely replaced the west as the realm of the dead in the Chinese imagination. Taishan is now securely in place as a dominant feature of the otherworldly landscape, and even the Northern Dipper finds its way on the map; yet the landscape remains variegated and only vaguely delineated in these texts, since, as Tao Hongjing put it, "As for the 'earth-prisons', they are not all located in the same place; Taishan, the rivers, the seas, each has one".⁶⁶

Scholars have also made much of the distinction in earlier (mostly Han) writings between the *hun*- and *po*-souls. Recently, for instance, Yu Yingshi has used this distinction to explain why the dead are often depicted, especially in the archaeological materials, as simultaneously ascending to heaven and descending into an underworld.⁶⁷ Seen in this light, it is significant that the *zhiguai* narratives pay very little attention to this distinction. The notions of *hun* and *po* (especially that of *hun*) are certainly part of the religious background informing the narratives, but so far as I know they do not form the basis of the plot or figure as important in any of the return-from-death tales. The fundamental distinction evident here is one between body - that which remains behind at death to become the object of funerary attention by family members - and soul - that which is summoned

⁶⁵ See Sofukawa Hiroshi, "Konron-san to shōsenzu", *Tōhō gakuho* 51 (1979):83-185, and the discussion of this article in Delehayé, "Recherches récentes sur le thème de l'ascension céleste", 299-308.

⁶⁶ *Zhen gao* 15.2a.

⁶⁷ See "New Evidence on the Early Chinese Conception of Afterlife", and "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijie guan".

away at death and led to a court or bureau located in a distant city.

Looking forward in time, the afterlife would come in succeeding centuries to be truly dominated by the Buddhist images of karmic retribution, ten courts of "hell", and so on, with which anyone acquainted with modern Chinese religion is quite familiar. Now there are certain *zhiguai* works of the Six Dynasties period, not treated here (since they will be the subject of a separate article), that are written from a decidedly Buddhist point of view. We know that some of these authors have been unusually pious laymen; and in those works one can already see displayed in narrative form the full panoply of the Buddhist netherworld. But in the majority of *zhiguai* works forming the basis of this study there is surprisingly little of the multi-court hell staffed by recognizably Buddhist figures that we see in later texts. What traces there are of Buddhist imagery are mostly terminological: terms such as "earth-prison" (*diyu*) are mentioned in tales otherwise quite lacking in Buddhist motifs. Similarly, although in these *zhiguai* narratives we begin to see at work a concept of *judgement* of the dead - death often being pictured as an arrest and summons to court - we still (again excepting the overtly Buddhist works, written for evangelical ends) seldom see the dead explicitly *punished* for transgressions as they are in the Buddhist netherworld. These non-Buddhist *zhiguai* works therefore appear to have been written at a watershed moment in the history of the Chinese afterlife: Buddhist images had already been made available through translations, commentaries, and preaching, but were apparently rather slow to be accepted by certain groups within the population. To carry the study of this *zhiguai* motif forward into Tang times would allow one to gauge the gradually increasing extent of their acceptance.

Another area in which these *zhiguai* tales show only faint impact from both Buddhist and Taoist afterlife constructions is the role played by rites for the dead. In a society such as that of just one or two centuries later, in which elaborate Lingbao and Buddhist funeral and post-funeral rites had become a deep and permanent feature of religious life, one would expect such rites to play an important role in any corpus of stories concerning the return of the dead to life.⁶⁸ One would expect, in other words, to see the dead affected in some measure by the rites performed for them by the living, as in the Mulian story much studied recently, and to find this an important concern in the stories. But, with the few exceptions noted above - most of which, once again, are overtly Buddhist in orientation - these Six Dynasties stories seldom picture the return of the dead to life as brought about by the intercession of their families or by priests. In most cases the dead are on their own against the formidable odds of otherworldly bureaucratic procedures; and if they do receive any help, it is usually from other dead people like themselves whom they chance to meet in the

⁶⁸ Aside from works on Taoism and Buddhism cited above, another helpful study of funerary texts and rites during this period is Catherine M. Bell, 'Medieval Taoist Ritual Mastery: A Study in Practice, Text and Rite', Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1983, esp. 121-130 on the *zhai*³ of the Yellow Registers.

dark realm.

By now, bureaucratic imagery and nomenclature had come to dominate the afterlife. In these stories, no matter to which specific place the dead are thought to go, to die is to be summoned by lower-level functionaries in official garb, to enter an administrative city, to encounter an elaborate and multi-levelled bureaucratic machinery, to undergo being written up and having one's deeds consulted in record-books,⁶⁹ and to be led by the functionaries into the presence of a king or high official seated in a court-like chamber. This casting of death in bureaucratic terms was itself not new, for, as Yu Yingshi notes, "Recent archaeology has shown that the belief in an underworld bureaucracy taking care of the departed souls was already widespread in China by the second century B.C."⁷⁰ What is new here is the way in which the implications of viewing the afterlife as a great bureaucracy are explored in narrative. And that brings us to the question of why these stories were written and of what effect their writing may have had.

We have examined stories detailing the visions of people who, seemingly miraculously, returned across the barrier separating life from death and were thus able to reveal death's secret shape. That itself is, I think, the most religiously significant function of these tales, a function inseparable from their value as "entertainment" and their "fictive" elements: they revealed. They bodied forth in the vivid strokes of narrative prose a sense of what the realm of the dead looked like and felt like, an impression of how it worked. They gained vividness of portrayal by being cast as reports of specific individuals who lived (and died) at specific, named places and times. To be sure, no one of them provided a comprehensive or exhaustive map of the terrain of the otherworld; that was not the style of the *zhiguai* authors, who preferred to display their data on all manner of subjects piece by itemized piece, as if setting out tidbits of fact gleaned from hearsay or from combing through old documents. But, taken collectively, the *zhiguai* accounts seem to have afforded glimpses of an other world that, though it remained dark and mysterious, could at least be darkly illuminated by flashes of narrative light.

Whence came this function and this authority? William R. LaFleur has written of how pictures and narratives of hungry ghosts in twelfth-century Japan might be seen as doing for ordinary people what shamans and priests could do with their special, hard-won meditative and visionary capacities: making visible the contours of a world that was no less

⁶⁹ In fact, many of these texts use the expression "to be written up" (*beihu*³) as synonymous with "to be summoned" - the same phrase is used, that is, to express both of these aspects of what happens when one dies. For an example see the *Yiyuan* story of Zhang Fan (mentioned above) in TPGJ 386 (31.22b-23a).

⁷⁰ "New Evidence on the Early Chinese Conception of Afterlife", 82; see also the articles by Seidel cited above.

a. 被錄

real for being invisible.⁷¹ Something very much like this, I believe, was behind the writing of *zhiguai*. It was through the vehicle of narrative that these authors vivified, as it were, and rendered visible, a particular sort of notion of what death and the afterlife were like. To write and circulate such stories was to paint pictures in words of the places and events described - and to paint convincing pictures. These stories, like LaFleur's scrolls, are, after all, arguments. That is why they often end with details that confirm the vision as true, or at least render it hard to dismiss it as false. For their authors apparently were not satisfied with entertaining, nor were they willing to grant the reader freedom to suspend belief and easily treat their carefully collected stories as (what we today mean by) "fiction"; instead they wanted to impress upon the reader the reality and the gravity of what was revealed in the stories - "to make clear", as Gan Bao put it, though somewhat elusively, "that the spirit world is no lie" (*ming shendao zhi bu wu ye*).⁷² The *zhiguai* genre of prose thus became a vehicle through which the hidden world of the dead was revealed to ordinary readers, a world increasingly domesticated by bureaucrats and therefore perhaps most strange to contemporary readers by virtue of its shocking similitude to the everyday world they already knew.⁷³ With the possible exception of some of the more elaborate funerary banners, which were placed in tombs with the dead and depicted their cosmic journey,⁷⁴ no genre of texts or graphic arts - not the *Chu ci* songs describing the flight of the soul nor perhaps even the early Taoist revelations of the contours of the Six Heavens - had ever been used to explore so searchingly, and render so vividly, the new bureaucratic structure of the afterlife.

⁷¹ See his elegant essay, "Hungry Ghosts and Hungry People: Somaticity and Rationality in Medieval Japan", in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone, 1989), 270-303; for this point see esp. 276-77.

⁷² This famous phrase occurs in the preface to the *Soushen ji* preserved in Gan Bao's *Jin shu* biography; for alternative translations and interpretations, see CAS, 201 and chap. 3 passim; DeWoskin, "The *Sou-shen-chi*", 261-62; and idem, "The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai*", 32-33.

⁷³ The surprising familiarity of the other world is often registered in the stories in phrases such as "just as in this world". See, for example, the passage in TPGJ 378 (30.34b-35a), set at Taishan, which describes the scene there as "not a bit different from [this] world" (*yushi wuyi*); and the above-translated passage from the *Xiangyi ji* in which a Buddha-image is being venerated by a monk "no differently than in [this] world" (*buyi yu shi*); see TPGJ 131 (10.40a-b) and LX 431-32.

⁷⁴ In addition to the works cited above, a study of the religious significance of these banners, from which I have learned much, is Hou Ching-lang, "Recherches sur la peinture du portrait en Chine, au début de la dynastie Han", *Arts asiatiques* 36 (1981): 37-58.

a 明神道之不誤也

b 與世無異

c 不異于世

But if the *zhiguai* narratives sought to impress upon readers the reality of the other world, they did not instruct readers in exactly what to do regarding it; for this was the vital religious function that was coming to be performed by Taoist and Buddhist specialists and their new ritual codes. It is important to remember that these stories, as evidenced by their very generic name - "accounts of the strange" - were always offered as rare instances of *exceptions* to and *deviations* from the otherwise normal workings of the process of death. Unlike contemporary Taoist revelation texts that contained ritual instructions for approaching the event of death along with descriptions of the bureaucratic terrain of the dead, or translated Buddhist texts that offered accounts of what death and rebirth entailed and protocols for relating to the dead, the *zhiguai* tales did not provide the comfort of a *procedure* for dealing with death, and certainly not for returning from death. Perhaps they did inspire hope in some who read and heard these tales that somehow, against all odds, like the protagonists in the stories, they too might manage to return from death to steal a few more precious years of life in this world.

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