chapter 5

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Rebirth Reborn

The Chinese looked to Buddhism for questions that they found apposite—they approached Chinese translations of Buddhist texts not as glosses on the Indic originals, but as valuable resources that addressed their own immediate conceptual, social, and existential concerns.

—Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*

One of the most detailed expositions of any Chinese individual’s former lives comes from a Daoist text, part of the Lingbao scriptures composed in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.1 According to the opening of one Lingbao text, originally known as *Trials of the Sages,* the Duke Tran-

scendent Ge Xuan 葛 玄 gathered thirty-two of his disciples on Mount Laosheng 勞盛山on February 11, 240, to answer their queries concern-

ing his practice.2 Ge’s disciples especially wished to know why it was that, though they had practiced for hundreds of years, none of them could match the attainments of the Duke Transcendent, who was able to as- cend to the highest heavens to attend the court of the most exalted gods. Ge Xuan reveals that their fault lies in only seeking transcendence for themselves through such practices as those found in the Shangqing scrip- tures, an enterprise he characterizes as the “lesser vehicle,” while he has worked for the salvation of all. Still they press him, wanting to know what he had done in previous lives to merit his high station. To this, he responds as follows:

I could speak until the end of the day about the transgressions and merits, the transmigrational processes, and the various bodies I have passed

1. The *jàtaka* accounts of Tàkyamuni’s numerous prior existences constitute the most detailed account of “individual” samsaric experience.
2. The location of Mount Laosheng is unknown.

158

Rebirth Reborn 159

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through in my previous existences and still not tell all. Since you wish to know, I can but relate one corner of it:

* 1. Of old I was born as a rich man, but I ignored the poor, supported the strong, and suppressed the weak. Thus I died and entered the earth- prisons.
  2. Then I was born as a commoner, destitute and sickly; orphaned and without support. At this time I thought, “What have I done in past lives to reach such suffering? And what merit have those others accomplished in their past lives to attain such good fortune and riches?” I determined to do good deeds, but did not understand why, so my anxiety was difficult

to express. When I died, I ascended into the halls of the blessed and was reborn into a wealthy family.

* 1. Treasures were not lacking, and there was nothing I could want, but yet I was violent with our slaves and servants and died to enter [again] the earth-prisons. There I suffered servitude and beatings in the Three Offices until my transgressions were at an end.
  2. Then I was born as a lowly functionary, attendant on others’ every breath and laboring at every sort of service. Yet, for each move I was beaten. I labored through the mud and ashes [of societal disorder], experiencing every sort of suffering. Then I thought, “What crimes did I commit in former lives to be made a lowly functionary?” So I used my own goods to aid the poor and to respectfully serve Daoists through offerings of incense and oil. I was willing only that I be born into a wealthy family. Then I died and ascended into the Halls of Blessing, where my clothing and food were naturally provided.
  3. Later I was reborn as an esteemed person, but I again slaughtered the myriad forms of life and practiced fishing and hunting. When I died,

I entered [again] the earth-prisons. There I experienced the mountains of knives, the trees of blades, boiling in a vat, and swallowing fire. All of the five sufferings were visited upon me.

* 1. Once my transgressions were at an end, I was reborn as a pig and then as a sheep to repay ancient grievances [against me].
  2. Then I was born as a very lowly man, extremely detestable, stinking, and despised. I cheated and robbed others of their goods, never repaying them, and died to enter the earth-prisons.
  3. Then I was reborn as an ox, to requite humans with my labor and to feed humans with my flesh.
  4. After that, I received human form as a person of middling worth with treasures nearly enough [to support myself ]. At this time, I thought to perform meritorious deeds. I constantly supported Daoists, revered the scriptures, and kept the precepts. With humility, I placed myself below others and gave alms to the suffering and destitute. In all things, I followed the Way. Whenever I heard of a virtue, I followed it. Then, at eighty years of age, I died and ascended straightaway to the hostels of the blest, where

I enjoyed food, clothing, from the celestial canteen.

* 1. Then I was born into a noble family, where I became practiced at

160 Rebirth Reborn

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martial bravery and undertook killing and campaigning. Yet, still, I was reverent towards Daoists and kept faith with the ultimate law. When I died, I entered the earth-prisons and was about to undergo bitter interrogation when the Most High sent down an instruction, saying, “Although this person has transgressed through murder and warfare and has descended into the earth-prisons, when he was alive he kept faith with the law and revered the Dao. He gave to the distressed. Now I desire that, having been interrogated and punished, he be allowed to ascend to the Halls of Blessing and provided for from the celestial canteen.”

* 1. Then I was born as a noble, and retributions for the grievances [I had caused in my previous lives] were about to be visited upon me. At

this, I vowed to keep my mind fixed on the Way and to respectfully receive the scriptures and teachings. Thus I practiced secret virtues, saving the endangered and distressed, conducting governance in accord with the Way, and maintaining a benevolent heart toward all living beings. I supported Daoists, served my lord with loyalty, and treated my officials according to the rites. With constant mindfulness I eschewed glory and official emolu- ments. In this way, I avoided [the exactments] of those who bore grievances against me [for the transgressions of my former lives]. When I had lived out my full allotment of years, I died and ascended to heaven.

* 1. In my next life, I was again a nobleman. My reverence and faith- fulness were even more intense. When I was but young, I burnt incense and made a promise that I would later be born with high intelligence that I might comprehend the wondrous principles and thus become a Daoist. When I died, I entered the Halls of Blessing.
  2. Later I was born into a family in the middle lands and became a Daoist Master of the Law. I wore robes of the law and kept the precepts. When I practiced the Dao, I preached the scriptures with intelligence. Because of my actions as Master of the Law, I was revered by all. Then

I took an oath, saying, “Since in this life I am unable to obtain the Dao, it would be best to be a woman, and enjoy the advantages of leisured withdrawal from affairs.”

* 1. When my lifespan came to an end, I was born a woman, fair of face and body, with innate intelligence and mystically distinguished. My speech was like poetry. At this time I practiced Retreats and recited scrip- tures. Then I determined to be born a man with vast talent and decisive will, so that I could penetrate to the mysterious and vacant. I wished to fully comprehend the “slight and subtle” and be born as a prince who would associate with Daoists. With this as my goal, I went into reclusion in the mountains and took pleasure in music, frequently having the scrip- tures recited for me. When my life came to an end, I ascended to heaven and was naturally clothed and fed.
  2. After a while, I was born as heir in the family of a prince. I had free recourse to all the palaces and succeeded to the king’s throne. I invited Daoists, worthy Ru, and men of learning to conduct rituals and discourse on the Dao. I held Retreats where I maintained quietude. My most cher- ished concerns were that the kingdom might know peace and the folk

Rebirth Reborn 161

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prosperity; that I might [occupy my throne] reverently and without pursuing [mundane] affairs. At this time I took an oath together with officers of my Three Ministries3 that we would in our next lives be Daoists. I would be a recluse. Shi Daowei and Zhu Falan vowed to become [Bud- dhist] monks. Zheng Siyuan and Zhang Tai vowed to become Daoist Masters. We all desired to rise in transcendence and cross over the genera- tions, so we ceased carrying out the business of kingly governance. At death, we ascended immediately to heaven, where we were clothed and

fed at the celestial canteen.

* 1. In my next life, I was a recluse. Zhu Falan and Shi Daowei were monks, and Zheng and Zhang were Daoists. We all entered the mountains to study the Dao and seek transcendence. Later, I became the master of them all, with my will fixed on the Great Vehicle. I carried out lengthy Retreats, practiced the precepts, recited scriptures, and gave away all my treasures. I paid my respects to a great Master of the Law and received from him the great scriptures of the Three Caverns and the rituals for observance. Vowing to conduct retreats and practice the Dao, I practiced ingesting, inhaling, and exhaling [celestial *qi*].
  2. Since my [karmic] causes and conditions were not yet exhausted, at the end of my lifespan I passed through Grand Darkness and was born into a worthy family. Again, we became Daoists and monks and studied together as master and disciple. Again, I received the great scriptures and practiced the Dao with Retreats and the precepts. For this reason, the higher Sages glimpsed my deeds and sent the Perfected to descend and instruct me.4

Ge Xuan here displays one of what the Buddhists know as the “five [or six] penetrating powers,” specifically the one known in Chinese as “spir-

itual penetration into past lives” 宿命神通.5 How is it that a Daoist sage

came to be depicted this way? Why is it that, in the Lingbao scriptures, we

suddenly find Daoists ready to fully embrace the concept of cyclical re- birth, even to the extent of allowing for rebirth as an animal, when Daoist scriptures composed scant decades before are innocent of the notion?

1. The text here reads “three attendant ministers,” *san shichen* 三侍臣, but both ver- sions mention four persons. I thus take the reference to be to the *sansi* 三司, which would have referred to the high officers of the Ministries of Education, Defense, and Works.
2. HY 1107, 3a–5b; with corrections drawn from P 2454, lines 45–96. The added num- bers in parentheses are my own.
3. These powers are generally known as the *liutong zhihui* 六通智慧 (Six [Types] of

Penetrating Wisdom [Sanskrit: *abhijñà*]). The Buddhist list, as found in the *AvataÉsaka-*

*sÜtra,* includes, simply expressed, (1) supernatural vision, (2) supernatural hearing, (3) the ability to know the minds of others, (4) the ability to know the past lives of oneself and others, (5) the ability to travel anywhere at will, and (6) knowledge of the exhaustion of *kleMa* or “defilement.” The Daoist list, by contrast, coincides only with the first two, the remainder being, again simply expressed, (3) supernatural sense of smell, (4) supernatural taste, (5) supernatural heart/mind, and (6) supernatural sense of touch and ability.

162 Rebirth Reborn

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The changing attitudes toward the dead and familial anxieties we have surveyed in the preceding chapters prepare us to provide plausible an- swers to these questions. Before we attend more closely to what the Ling- bao scriptures have to say of rebirth, however, we must clarify several points. Proclaiming theirs the “religion of life,” Daoist writers held out the possibility of continued life both in the heavens and on earth. Among the startling variety of metaphors employed to describe these possibili- ties, early Daoists sometimes wrote of something that bears a resemblance to Buddhist ideas of rebirth. The differences are worthy of our attention.

# daoist and buddhist rebirth

When we explore the concept of rebirth as it appears in medieval Daoist texts, we need to distinguish two paths, as it were, both of which were employed at various times to work out concepts similar to those current among contemporary Buddhists. The first path, rebirth into paradisia- cal realms or other favored modes of transcendent existence, goes back to the earliest days of the Daoist religion and could be taken only by those who underwent a regimen of physical and spiritual practice, including moral practices. In most cases, this transit into other modes of existence is not described as a rebirth at all. Yet Daoists occasionally employed al- chemical metaphors to describe a postmortem “smelting” or “refinement” of the body that would render it suitable for existence in the heavens or other paradises on and below the earth.6 Such paths, while sometimes

described as a rebirth [*gengsheng* 更生or *fusheng* 復生] seem to owe lit-

tle to Buddhist doctrine.7

The second path, elaborated in Ge Xuan’s account of his previous lives, stipulates that all mortals as a matter of course undergo rebirth into the world as human beings or animals. The goal then becomes not rebirth itself, but the securing of a favorable rebirth. This second path is almost certainly traceable to the various Buddhist ideas of samsara.8 Of course,

1. Isabelle Robinet, “Metamorphosis and Deliverance from the Corpse in Taoism,” *History of Religions* 19, no. 1 (1979): 135–38; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Death and As- cent in Ling-pao Taoism,” *Taoist Resources* 1, no. 2 (1989): 1–20.
2. See, for instance, the description in the *Nüqing guilü,* an early Celestial Master text, of the benefits the Dao bestows on the “people of Heaven.” They are able to avoid disease

and, “having died, be born again 天民死而更生.” But, as the text later clarifies, they are

“reborn” with the sun and moon into a rejuvenated world after the destruction of the end-

times (HY 789, 1.8a10 and 5.2a5–2b2).

1. I say “almost certainly” because there have been suggestions that pre-Buddhist China also had a concept of rebirth according to which the *hun* of departed ancestors could be re-

Rebirth Reborn 163

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properly understood, Buddhist samsara does not involve the rebirth of an individual ego at all, but only a karmic residue of causes and condi- tions that remained in solution, as it were, from one life to the next. But Chinese Buddhists had a difficult enough time accepting the nonperdu- rance of the ego. For Daoists of the fourth and fifth centuries, the clar- ifications forwarded by the famous translator Kumàrajíva (d. 413) were of no moment; thus, we can safely ignore these refinements and follow our sources in understanding samsara as the requisite rebirth of all beings. The two paths might be called specialized and generalized rebirth, re- spectively.9 Descriptions of the path of generalized rebirth appearing in the Lingbao scriptures commonly employ images of circularity. The un- derlying metaphor is that of a wheel that rolls on as inexorably as the revolution of the seasons. The inevitable rebirth of all beings finds full

characterization in the Lingbao scriptures as *lunzhuan* 輪 轉 [“cycling”

through births and deaths], a locution that was certainly drawn from the translations for samsara, *lunzhuan shengsi* 輪 轉 生 死 or *zhanzhuan shengsi* 展轉生死, employed by early Buddhist translators.

We need to distinguish these two paths because, on occasion, a tran- scendent being whose form has been remade through Daoist practices can reappear in the world. The sage Laozi, who according to legend was reborn into the world nine or more times as the “teacher of emperors,” served as a paradigmatic example. In addition, early Celestial Master texts described how the “seed people” who followed its Dao would survive the cataclysms at the end of the world to be “reborn” into a new age of

Great Peace.10 Tales of the transformative rebirths 化生achieved by Laozi

born into the family. The evidence for this belief, though suggestive, is scant. See Michel Strick- mann, *Chinese Magical Medicine,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 43–44.

1. This is, of course, a very rough distinction. What I am characterizing here as “gen- eralized rebirth” supposes an unchanging system in which all individual deeds are directly and causally linked to future states of being. This corresponds to what Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, citing A. K. Ramanujan, presents as the three basic elements of karma theory: “(1) causality (ethical or non-ethical), involving one life or several lives; (2) ethicization (the belief that good and bad acts lead to certain results in one life or several lives); [and]

(3) rebirth” (*Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* [Berkeley and Los Ange- les: University of California Press, 1980], xi). What I characterize as “specialized rebirth” lacks such a system for all beings. Instead, it is a sort of “rebirth” into the heavens or other future state of being that is granted, usually by the deities, as a special reward for select individuals who earn it. The primary distinction I wish to make is that “generalized re- birth” is described for all, while “specialized rebirth” is reserved for the few. (I would like to thank Stephen F. Teiser for suggesting the terms *generalized* and *specialized* instead of the terms *passive* and *active* that I first employed.)

1. See fn. 7 above for one example. Also see Yoshioka Yoshitoyo, “Rikucho dÖkyÖ no shumin shisÖ, in *DÖkyÖ to BukkyÖ* (Tokyo: KokushÖ kankokai, 1976), 3:221–84. While

164 Rebirth Reborn

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and other sages, or accorded to the Celestial Master faithful, formed one matrix for the reception of Buddhist ideas of rebirth, but because such transformational skill was reserved for those who had achieved high lev- els of religious attainment, we should keep this path distinct from that which regarded rebirth as normal for all.

In the writings of Yang Xi, as in the Daoist texts that preceded him, we find only the more traditional path of specialized rebirth. Still, Yang’s texts reveal awareness of Buddhist ideas in interesting ways. For this rea- son, the scattered references to rebirth that we find in them are well worth a brief excursus.

# “specialized rebirth” in shangqing texts

The methods Yang Xi received from the Perfected (or from earlier texts) for the Daoist path of rebirth into the heavens have been thoroughly stud- ied. Here I note only the ways in which these methods respond to the anxieties concerning family and death that we have explored in the pre- vious chapters. These responses also involved ideas adapted from Bud- dhism, though transfigured in various ways.

Isabelle Robinet has explored a number of Shangqing meditations for remaking the person.11 Several of these methods taught techniques for creating the perfected embryo that involved the ingestion of celestial em- anations, the merging of these with bodily forces, and the accomplish- ment of generative tasks in key parts of the body, all accompanied by precise visualizations.12 The *Taijing zhongji,* for example, contains a method for untying the “embryonic knots,” twelve sources of death that take root in the human body as it comes to life in the womb.13 Here is Robinet’s summary of the practice:

Yoshioka wishes to show the Buddhist provenance of ideas relating to the “seed people,” even he admits that such favored beings were held to enjoy extended life, not rebirth (see especially pp. 263–65).

1. Isabelle Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing dans l’histoire du taoïsme,* Publica- tions de l’Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, no. 137, 2 vols. (Paris: École française d’Extrême- Orient, 1984), 1:102 ff.
2. Isabelle Robinet, *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-Shan Tradition of Great Purity,* trans. Julian F. Pas and Norman J. Girardot (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 139–42, *inter alia.*
3. The scripture has the full title *Shangqing jiudan shanghua taijing zhongji jing*. See HY 1371 and Robinet, *Taoist Meditation,* 140–43. It seems that this scripture, or a ver- sion of it, may have preceded the Shangqing revelations of Yang Xi. See Robinet, *La révéla- tion du Shangqing,* 2:171–74.

Rebirth Reborn 165

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[It] consists in making the adept relive his embryonic life in relation to the divine and cosmic model Starting from the anniversary of his concep-

tion, the adept will, therefore, relive his embryonic development by receiving, month by month, the breaths of the nine primordial heavens.

During each of the nine monthly periods, the adept invokes the Original Father 元父 and Mysterious Mother 玄母 while visualizing, simultaneously, the King of the [appropriate] primordial heaven Having received the

King’s breath, the adept now reactualizes it. At the same time, the King descends into the [appropriate] bodily cavity.14

The somatic aspects of such meditations are fascinating and complex, but our focus here remains on their social and familial implications. Through remaking his or her body in this way, the adept allies with cos- mic forces but seemingly repudiates natal ties to any human father and mother. The texts are quite explicit about this. The reason people, whose true being emanates from the pneumas of the Nine Heavens, come to grief is that “they forget that which gave birth to them.”15 The birth par- ents serve as mere matrix for the celestial forces that engender the per- son; they “only know the beginnings of parturition and are unaware of the spirits who come to take residence within.”16 Through return to the original purity of one’s origins, we suppose, one might avoid familial im- plication in underworld lawsuits, or indeed any hereditary guilt, through tracing one’s true ancestry to an Original Father and Mysterious Mother in the Dao. This proves not to be the case.

In asserting that a person’s ultimate source of being derives not from the natal parents, the Shangqing texts approximate Buddhist notions of rebirth as these were presented in early translations.17 Buddhist karma entailed the idea that one’s birth parents are not the true source of one’s being, that there is no such thing as collective guilt within the family, and that one suffers the consequences of one’s own deeds from previ- ous lives. These were difficult pills to swallow, and Yang Xi did not in- gest them all.

While the Shangqing scriptures contain methods for bypassing natal parents to reconnect with one’s original source of being, they are quite explicit concerning collective responsibility within the family. Salvation

1. Robinet, *Taoist Meditation,* 141. 15. HY 1371, 2a.

16. HY 1365, 1.2b; P 2751, ll. 220–21 (Ñfuchi, p. 387).

1. See Erik Zürcher, “Buddhist Influence on Taoist Scripture,” *T’oung-pao* 66 (1980): 138–40; and Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Simple Twists of Fate? The Daoist Body and Its *Ming,*” in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture,* ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 151–68.

166 Rebirth Reborn

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depends ultimately upon the actions of the individual, but the adept was also, as we have seen in the cases of Chi Xin and the Xu family, impli- cated in the merits and transgressions of his or her ancestors. Robinet succinctly maps this alignment of forces working on the individual: “The adept is invited to assume a triple destiny: as a humane and social being, attached to his or her lineage; as a cosmic immortal; and as a lone individual.”18

When Yang Xi comes to write of those who achieve rebirth, the full weight of these conflicting demands still applies. Through externalist statements that position his views clearly and serve to discourage any of his disciples from seeking solace in the Buddhist way, Yang Xi describes a few special individuals as undergoing a sort of generalized rebirth. But these favored few always prove to bear particularly heavy familial re- sponsibilities. Either they are beneficiaries of their ancestors in the sev- enth generation, or they separate themselves from the family to their own detriment. The “triple destiny” Robinet describes remains in force for every individual. Those who discover their original source in the Dao must still guard against entanglements from previous generations. Those who seek to escape such entanglements through rebirth or other meth- ods of leaving the family find themselves still bound.

For example, Yang’s informants on the underworld provided him with a list of the merits by which underworld lords might advance in Fengdu. Among these we find the following category:

Those whose ancestors have achieved merit with the Three Offices suffi- cient to flow down to their descendants might in some cases move across generations by refinement and transformation [of their bodies] or be reborn, changing their family. This is all due to the hidden virtues of their seventh generation ancestor, [whose merit] reaches them as [nourishment reaches from] the roots to the leaves. Once they die, they are compelled to leave a bone of their foot with the Three Offices. The rest of their bones stay with their bodies as they pass over. Males are to leave behind [bones] from the left foot and females from the right.19

As Tao Hongjing emphasizes, it is precisely because these fortunate in- dividuals achieve rebirth through the achievements of their seventh- generation ancestors rather than by their own merit that they must leave a foot bone forfeit with the Three Offices. This personal token ensures

1. Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing,* 1:103; my translation.
2. *Zhen’gao,* HY 1010, 16.12a; Yoshikawa Tadao and Mugitani KuniÖ, *ShinkÖ kenkyÜ: YakuchÜ hen* (Kyoto: KyÖto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyÜjÖ, 2000), 596–97.

Rebirth Reborn 167

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that they do not fully “leave the family.” While this brief reference does not specify which individuals might achieve this state, the passage may well serve to explain why contemporary Buddhists claimed to achieve rebirth. “Leaving the family,” as we saw in the introduction, was also the term used to describe those who entered the Buddhist *sangha,* or re- ligious community.

But, for Yang Xi, rebirth is still not something for everyone. Indeed, in that it depends on the merit of an ancestor, rebirth inevitably involves a measure of debt, symbolized by the ransom of bone that must at some point be redeemed if the individual is to achieve wholeness. In this re- spect, we find Yang Xi describing an intermediate space between active and generalized rebirth, one that is not the common lot of all, yet not the actively sought goal of the individual.

Michel Strickmann has discussed another important passage in Yang Xi’s writings that helps to illuminate his attitude toward rebirth. In the writings Yang passed on to his patron Xu Mi, we find the Perfected con- stantly concerned that, despite their best efforts, Xu Mi would not re- tire from public life, that he persisted in sexual practices, and that his son Hui was actually making better progress than he. On a more mun- dane level, Xu Mi’s continued interest in official advancement likely threatened Yang Xi’s ministry.

Among the stimuli the Perfected applied for the benefit of Xu Mi was the following cautionary tale. There lived during the reign of King Wu

of the Zhou (trad. 1169–16 bce) one Xue Changli 薛長里, who attained the Dao. His younger brother, Xue Lü 薛旅, was not so adept. Though

he had retired to the mountains, Lü failed to pass the seven trials set for prospective Perfected precisely because he was given to carnal desires. Nonetheless, his kindness and his fondness for music saved him. In par- ticular, Lü’s bodily spirits were kept from departing entirely only by his ability to whistle in imitation of the phoenix. Observing Lü’s liminal con- dition, Xue Changli petitioned the Most High that his younger brother

be allowed to profit from the merit accrued by Xu Jing 許敬, Xu Mi’s

seventh-generation ancestor, by being reborn into the Xu family so that

he could work off the more regrettable aspects of his character. And so Xue Lü came to be reborn as Xu Mi.

Xu Mi’s destiny was thus “doubly determined.” He inherited both the inclinations of his former self—Xue Lü—and the merit of the seventh- generation ancestor of his natal family, Xu Jing. Now, the Perfected elu- cidated, this not only explains the recalcitrance of Xu Mi’s character, it

also provides him with ample reason to be enlightened 悟 as to the im-

168 Rebirth Reborn

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portance of repairing these shortcomings. He should in no wise betray his various benefactors!20

Strickmann concludes from this that the Shangqing revelations of Yang Xi merged, at least in this instance, both the traditional Chinese famil- ial etiology by which one’s fate was governed in part by the deeds of one’s ancestors—particularly the seventh-generation ancestor—and aspects of the Buddhist doctrine of karma. He writes,

The sophisticated Daoists of Mao Shan were able to synthesize both sys- tems. Like Xu Mi, they stood at the intersection of two discrete strands of destiny, two separate “genealogies of morals.” Xu Mi embodied not only a morally charged biological destiny but a comparably weighty pseudo-Indian “past life” as well. Their convergence had framed his present existence, and both channels of fate depended on his current course of behavior for their future outcome. This is heavy moral over- determination indeed.21

Indeed it is, but such “moral overdetermination” seems to have been nec- essary only in the particularly difficult case of Xu Mi himself, for we find no other individuals who were said by Yang Xi to have such redoubled karmic pasts.

From the perspective of our own investigations, we can see that this is not yet quite the second path of rebirth so forcefully enunciated in Ge Xuan’s narration of his past lives. Xu Mi’s “rebirth” is granted through the intervention of others and special dispensation; it is not the common lot of humankind. While we are not told whether or not Xu Mi had left a foot bone with the Three Offices, he certainly found that his status as one to whom the Perfected revealed their truths was a precarious one, due not only to the virtues of his seventh-generation ancestor, but also to his elder brother from his former existence.

The interfamilial weight of rebirth finds emphasis in yet another tale given to Yang Xi by the Perfected, the story of Bao Jing 鮑靚(fl. 322–25?). This story relates to Xu Mi’s interests in a different way. Xu Mi was in

the process of composing his own biography of transcendent figures, ap- parently modeled on Ge Hong’s *Traditions of Divine Transcendents,* and came to regard Yang Xi’s celestial sources as invaluable “fact checkers” for materials he had gathered from local sources. Bao Jing, already given

1. *Zhen’gao,* HY 1010, 3.13b–14b; Yoshikawa and Mugitani, *ShinkÖ,* 126.
2. This story of Xue Lü is discussed in Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine,* 44–46. The passage cited here appears on 46.

Rebirth Reborn 169

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an entry in Ge Hong’s earlier work, was a figure of local renown, but the Perfected had little praise for him. Among their allegations was that Bao and his sister were in fact reincarnations of their seventh-generation

“ancestors” Li Zhan 李湛 and Zhang Lü 張慮. These two had report-

edly performed secret acts of merit and, as a result, been allowed to “change their clans and be reborn” 改氏更生into the same “target” fam- ily. The two—Bao Jing and his sister, that is—are now underworld lords.

Nonetheless, the Perfected go on, Bao’s study in the underworld proved shallow, and his progress has been slight.22

Yang Xi’s reasons for this report from beyond the grave are not far to seek. Ge Hong had written that Bao Jing was adept at “escape by means of a simulated corpse,” another technique that often required one to change one’s clan allegiances.23 This aspect of the method was one of which Yang Xi’s informants particularly disapproved. They list re- birth among the grisly outcomes awaiting those who employ methods other than the alchemical drugs and meditations they themselves pre- scribe. Some “die and are reborn, some already dead with their heads broken emerge on the other side, some have their corpses disappear be- fore they are enshrouded, in some cases the body remains, but without bones.” None of them, however they might have escaped death, can ever go home again, “for they are seized by the Three Offices.”24 Therefore, methods of escape from familial responsibility by simulating a corpse and changing one’s name or by rebirth into another family ultimately prove futile. The celestial and subterrestrial record keepers are not to be avoided.

Yang Xi’s descriptions of the reborn, in short, are not attractive. Aware of the Buddhist notion, he yet describes rebirth as other-directed; some- how distinct from specialized rebirth as a desirable goal, yet not quite the passive and inexorable cycle of rebirth found in Buddhist scripture.

1. *Zhen’gao,* 12.2b5–3a2; Yoshikawa and Mugitani, *ShinkÖ,* 437–38. It may be that Yang Xi is here playing upon a preexisting legend of Bao Jing. According to this tale, as a youth Bao reported to his parents that he had originally been a youngster named Li who fell into a well and died. See Fang Xuanling et al., *Jinshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 95.2482. The *Jinshu* is known for collecting earlier legends, but I have not traced this one.
2. It is likely that Yang Xi’s information on the postmortem doings of Bao Jing was meant to supplement, and contest, Ge Hong’s account in the *Shenxian zhuan.* See Robert F. Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong’s “Traditions of Divine Transcendents”* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 295–97; and see 52–60 for a full discussion of “escape by means of a simu- lated corpse.”
3. *Zhen’gao,* HY 1010, 4.17a; Yoshikawa and Mugitani, *ShinkÖ,* 176.

170 Rebirth Reborn

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Yang resorts to the notion of rebirth in order to find some explanation— and cure—for his patron Xu Mi’s continued reluctance to leave the quo- tidian world for full-time devotion to the Daoist path. It is hard to ar- gue, as Strickmann does, that this single gesture represents a fully articulated system. At the same time, Yang’s other references to rebirth show clearly enough that he regarded it as somehow shameful and its recipients (for such he regards them) as thereby debt-ridden.

This aspect of Yang Xi’s thought comes to the fore most starkly when we compare his writings on rebirth with the *Essentials of Upholding the*

*Way* 奉法要, composed by his contemporary Chi Chao 郗超 (336–77).

Chao was a fervent upholder of Buddhism, and his treatise, which is a

sort of “catechism” or introduction to Buddhist doctrine as he under- stood it, nowhere directly mentions—a point Yang Xi emphasizes—that rebirth entails leaving the family. Instead, he focuses on the inevitability of karmic retribution as an individual matter and includes a lengthy sec- tion arguing that karma does not involve families. He cites a Buddhist *sÜtra* to the effect that “when the father has done wrong, the son will not suffer in his place; if the son has done wrong, the father will not suffer either,” concluding, “How perfect are these words! They agree with the heart and accord with reason!”25

Given what we now know of Chi Chao’s family trials, as elucidated by Yang Xi, it is not difficult to see against whom he is arguing. Chi Chao’s father, Chi Yin, as we saw in chapter 3, had been taken into the inner circle of Yang Xi’s initiates and promised a celestial mate. At the same time, he had been made aware of the lawsuits from beyond the grave brought against him because of his father’s actions and told of distant ancestors that could bless or curse his future pursuit of the Dao. It is difficult to imagine that Chi Chao would not have been aware of Yang’s account of these postmortem familial lawsuits as related to his father. They would have threatened him equally. It is no wonder, then, that the message of Buddhist karma should agree with his innermost heart! They must have seemed “perfect words” indeed to one so burdened with post- mortem familial entanglements.

Though we lack such intimate familial detail concerning those who wrote and promulgated the Lingbao scriptures, these texts respond to questions of familial responsibility and ancestral threat in a way that is more like that of Chi Chao than that of Yang Xi.

1. Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China,* 2 vols, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), 168–69.

Rebirth Reborn 171

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# “generalized rebirth” in the lingbao scriptures: the invention of a daoist samsara

Given our close view of Yang Xi’s ministry to the Xu family, it would be extremely convenient if we had comparable evidence concerning the au- thors of the Lingbao scriptures. What ancestral anxieties must they have confronted to create the salvific path we have seen in the case of their self-constructed sage Ge Xuan (and in the introduction to this volume in the ritual of Lu Xiujing), where mere possession of the Lingbao scrip- tures that they themselves had written rendered them impervious to un- derworld lawsuit and all manner of infection from beyond the grave? Unfortunately, history has not been kind to us on this score. We have only the dismissive remark of Tao Hongjing, who wrote, one hundred years after the event, that the Lingbao texts had been “fabricated” by

Ge Chaofu 葛巢甫, a grandnephew of Ge Hong 葛洪(283–343). Beyond

Ge Hong himself, the most notable figure in the Ge family was Ge Xuan,

whose rebirths we have traced, and to whom Ge Hong also traced his spiritual lineage.26

Now, given the importance of family in such matters, it is highly sig- nificant for the claim that Ge Chaofu had something to do with the com- position of Lingbao scriptures that Ge Xuan plays such a central role. Yang Xi’s revelations had earlier called into question Ge Xuan’s local reputation as a transcendent; thus, one impetus for the appearance of the Lingbao texts might well have been the desire to counter this claim. But hypotheses of this sort, compelling enough in themselves, hardly count as sufficient cause for the level of anxiety that would lead to such far- reaching changes in Chinese native religion. We are left to assess the rev- olutionary claims of the Lingbao scriptures themselves.

The appearance of the Lingbao scriptures is indeed a remarkable event in the history of world religions. Suddenly, at the very end of the fourth and into the early decades of the fifth centuries, Daoist scriptures closely modeled on translated Buddhist *sÜtras* began to appear in substantial num- bers. Whereas earlier Daoist texts had displayed only scattered and su- perficial references to Buddhism or its concepts, now recognizable “Bud-

1. For what can be known of the authorship of the Lingbao scriptures and what can- not, see Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Sources of the Ling-pao Scriptures, in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R. A. Stein,* vol. 2, ed. Michel Strickmann, Mélanges Chinois et Boud- dhiques, no. 21 (Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1983), 434–85; and “The Prehistory of Laozi: His Prior Career as a Woman in the Lingbao Scriptures,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie,* 14 (2004): 403–21.

172 Rebirth Reborn

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dhist elements” adorned nearly every page, so that one can, with some certainty, distinguish texts produced before and after this sea change.

The Lingbao scriptures mark this dividing line in the history of Dao- ism. The event appears to be, and scholars often treat it as, a total capitu- lation on the part of the Daoist religion, as if one stage in the “Buddhist conquest of China” was the day Daoists decided to begin practicing a faulty approximation of the Buddhist religion.

Certainly the appropriation of the concept of samsara in the Lingbao scriptures might be taken to fit such a picture. Erik Zürcher, in his “Bud- dhist Influence on Early Taoism,” puts the matter this way:

Like any complicated system of thought, Daoism had its “hard” and “soft” areas: “hard” areas where, even before contact with Buddhism was made, the ideas had already been elaborated and crystallized to such an extent that they were comparatively inaccessible to outside influences, and “soft” spaces that were “vulnerable” to outside influence, because in such areas ideas were either poorly developed or weakened by internal contradiction. It could well be that central areas of Daoist thought such as meditation,

the human body, and stages of saintliness were immune to Buddhist influ- ence precisely because they since the beginning had enjoyed so much attention and therefore had crystallized into well-developed “closed” structures, whereas other areas—vague and conflicting ideas about life beyond the grave; indistinct and shifting representations of the heavens and / or paradises; the conflict between collective inherited guilt and personal responsibility—were open to the impact of Buddhist ideas.27

In the introduction, I stated my reservations concerning such “billiard- ball” (perhaps here the image of dough balls—or a Daoist dough ball and a Buddhist billiard ball?—would be more apt) metaphors of “in- fluence.” For our present purposes, we note that Zürcher places the “com- plex of karma and retribution” among the prominent “soft areas” in the Daoist religion. He finds the Lingbao tradition to be “deeply influenced” by Buddhism in this regard.28 At the same time, Zürcher’s profound knowledge of early Buddhist translation literature has allowed him to identify in the Lingbao scriptures a key passage on samsara that will al- low us to refine our understanding of the nature and extent of the Ling- bao appropriation of the concept of generalized rebirth.

The following lengthy passage is drawn from the *Precepts of the Three Primordials,* an exhaustive listing of the celestial record-keepers who work under the Three Offices (the “Three Primordials” of the scripture’s

1. Zürcher, “Buddhist Influence,” 121. 28. Ibid., 135–41.

Rebirth Reborn 173

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title). This vast celestial bureaucracy, we are informed, gathers before the Celestial Worthy, the highest god of the Lingbao scriptures, on three days of the year to compare the records of the living and the dead. At such times, intercession by humans might be particularly effective. These days, the fifteenth of the first, seventh, and tenth months, by the lunar calen- dar, thus came to gradually replace the thrice-yearly meeting days of the Celestial Masters.

On one such occasion, the Most High Lord of the Dao, the principal interlocutor of the Lingbao scriptures, asked of the Celestial Worthy a question that we ourselves would like answered:

I dare ask the Celestial Worthy: There are rankings of meritorious deeds, ranks for those to be saved, and distinctions of high and low, but which aspect has priority? Does the blame incurred by previous generations stop with one person, or does it flow down to infect children and grandchil- dren? Are the evils one commits visited upon one’s own body, or do they obstruct above those who have already died? . . .

Some scriptures and traditions say that the evil committed in one’s previous life causes disaster to flow down upon the descendants. Or they say that the major transgressions one commits obstruct above the departed ancestors.

Yet others say that each good or evil deed we do finds karmic retribu- tion; good and bad fortune, life and death, are all due to this root of fate. If this is so, then the retribution for all good and evil is visited through [karmic] causation on a single body. There should thus be no further talk of [evil deeds] “flowing down” or “obstructing above.”

But again some say, “If one does not establish merit to rescue the banished cloudsouls, they will have no means to gain release. Once merit has been established, [one’s] births and deaths will be unobstructed and peaceful.” Now if each misdeed has its karmic recompense, those who have committed evil will upon death sink away for thousands of kalpas, bound into the darkness. How can they have the means to establish karmic merit to redeem themselves? But if descendants establish this merit for them, then there is no difference between this idea and the idea that [demerit] might “flow down” or “obstruct above.” This is what, in my ignorance, I really cannot understand.

Since the Celestial Worthy has opened forth the all-embracing transfor- mation, life and death have been made clear. Your proclamation causes the worlds of light and dark to be clearly separated so that none will through ignorance be confused regarding these two discourses.29

Here we detect elements of all the struggles with ancestral influence over the living that we have mapped out in the preceding chapters. It will help

29. HY 456, 32a10–33a7.

174 Rebirth Reborn

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if we disentangle them and uncover the nature of the question asked here before we proceed to the answer.

While the “scriptures and traditions [biographies or hagiographies]” are not further specified, it is clear from the conclusion that we are deal-

ing with two contradictory “discourses” 二論. The first two cited pas-

sages deal with the traditional Chinese notion of collective guilt by which

the transgressions of an ancestor might affect the living and, conversely, the transgressions of the living might affect the dead. Transgressions might thus either “flow down” from the ancestors or “obstruct above” previ- ous generations.

As we have seen, there is no reason to consider these resonances be- tween the living and the dead as strictly “Daoist.” Rather, belief in rec- iprocity between living and dead family members was the foundation of pan-Chinese ancestral practice. We recognize in this characterization of “obstructing above” and “flowing down” the motives behind Su Shao’s and Guo Fan’s return from the dead and behind the *hun*-summoners’ ac- tions of 318 as much as we do the etiology of the ancestrally induced ill- nesses diagnosed by Yang Xi. Instead of a sea change in relations with the dead brought about by interactions with Buddhists, these events rep- resent a shift in focus from the assurance of mutually exchanged bless- ings to a fixation with how the unseen might threaten the living.

This dark view of relations with the dead is here contrasted with two further ideas. These comprise the second “discourse”—that of Buddhists— as the terminology employed shows clearly. Buddhist explanation, the Most High Lord of the Dao points out, contains an inherent contradic- tion. It holds that merit and demerit solely reside with the individual, who suffers the consequences of his or her own deeds in a prior lifetime. Thus, “there should be no further talk of ‘flowing down’ or ‘obstructing above.’” And, if that moral solipsism really applies to all, how can Bud- dhists at the same time talk about the transfer of merit to dead ances- tors? Either both good and bad deeds are transferable, as Chinese tra- dition had always held, or they are not. Buddhists, with their talk of individual responsibility, could not without contradiction also claim that merit was transferable.

This is the nature of the question that this passage seeks to resolve. The underlying issue proves not to be a matter of “soft” areas within Daoism itself; rather, it is a fundamental contradiction that the author of the Lingbao scriptures found within Buddhist discussions of relations with the dead, as he understood them. The “conflict between collective inherited guilt and personal responsibility” that Zürcher noticed in this

Rebirth Reborn 175

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passage proves to be something that the author attributed to Buddhist discourse and not some conflict between imported and native ideas.30 Let us see how the author will seek to resolve the contradiction.

Then the Celestial Worthy delightedly answered:

Heaven and earth turn in cycles like the wheel of a chariot. The life of human beings is obliterated as surely as a shadow follows its form—it is difficult to find the end of such things. Pneuma follows pneuma continu- ously, each a seed giving birth to causation. Good and evil, good fortune and bad—all have their root of fate. This is not due to heaven, not to earth, and also not to humanity, but is born from the heart. The heart is what is

spiritual. The human form is not a property of the self 我. The self emerges

from the midst of the empty void and the self-actualized. Due to its karmic

causes, it is entrusted to the womb, transforms, and is born. Thus the self’s birthing father and mother are not the father and mother that originally gave birth to the self.31 The self’s true father and mother are not to be found here. But the birth parents love their offspring and are thus accorded the highest honor. From them one receives the kindnesses of having a place

to entrust one’s karma and of nurturance in this life. Thus one repays them with ritual and calls them “father” and “mother.”

But the form [ = body] the self receives is not the form of the self. The form is just a dwelling place or lodging for the self. The self, in entrusting itself to the form, gives demonstrable presence to what is nonexistent. This is why those who obtain the Dao have no further form. “Were I without form, what trouble would I have? The only reason I have trouble is because I have a body.”32 The myriad troubles arise from the body, while the bodiless enter into that which is so of itself.

When one establishes one’s practice and conforms with the Dao, the body and the bodily spirits are unified. When these are unified, this is the true [perfected] body. One returns to the father and mother who origi- nally gave birth to the self and completes the Dao. Within the Dao there

will be no further troubles, and one will not die. Even if one is obliterated and crosses over [滅度, nirvana] the spirits depart [with one] and the form is not destroyed. The entire body returns to its origin, never departing

from it.

But, when one commits the myriad transgressions and dies, this is called “death.” Death is obliteration *and* destruction 滅 壞 . The self then returns to a father and mother and entrusts itself to the womb. So long as the causes born of these transgressions 罪 緣 are not exhausted, one will never return to the true father and mother. [Instead] one’s spirits will join the ranks of

1. Zürcher, “Buddhist Influence,” 140.
2. Lu Xiujing’s ordination ritual (HY 528, 44a9) includes a formula for the disciples’ remission of guilt (*Da xie* 大 謝 ) that mentions birth parents 有 身 父 母 , using the same terminology.
3. The author cites the *Laozi;* see Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*

(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 94.

176 Rebirth Reborn

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those who labor in the earth [prisons], the body will become dust and ashes. The dust and ashes will fly up to become flickering ghosts 爽 . The cloudsouls and bodily spirits, released, will eventually merge with these

ghosts, transforming to become one again and being reborn as a human being. For such as these, neither the body nor the bodily spirits will depart. In this way, good and evil are both visited upon the body. How can the blame for this fall on ancestors or descendants?

For the modern reader, steeped in Cartesian notions of the body, the most surprising part of this response will be its insistence on accounting for

the multipart body, which at death is “obliterated” 滅 and must be re-

constituted for any sort of postmortem existence, whether for rebirth in

the world or for return to union with the Dao. Where, in such a view of the person, will the true “self” be located, we wonder? Perhaps, in the Celestial Worthy’s response, we might begin to see the changes that Bud- dhist notions of self were beginning to foster. Whereas in early Chinese thought the self was the aggregate of its parts, now the body seems ex- cluded from any role in the formation of the self. At the same time, par- adoxically, the passage still asserts the traditional notion that the body is necessary for rebirth.33 But our interest in such questions should not blind us to the import of the passage.

The Celestial Worthy seeks, through beginning with the cosmic prin- ciples of heaven and earth, to reconcile the Buddhist idea of samsara with traditional Chinese notions of regular cyclical change. Of particular in- terest is the Lingbao deployment of the concept of *miedu,* which was used by early translators to render the idea of nirvana. As I have written else- where, whereas early Buddhist translators seem to have intended the term

1. The idea that the body was not the residence of the self was difficult for even those Chinese thinkers who were positively disposed to Buddhist ideas of rebirth. In his “Essay

on Rebirth,” Luo Han 羅含(ca. 310–380) argued that “the spirit(s) 神and the bodily sub- stance 質 are naturally paired. In this pairing there occur the changes of separation and joining, death and life And again, the spirit(s) and bodily substance are darkly fated

to join again as talismans. People of the world all mourn the necessity of their separation, but no one thinks to sorrow over the fact that what is separated joins again” (Sengyou, comp., *Hongming ji, T* 2102, 52:27b27–27c3). Zürcher, following Liebenthal, notes that Luo was likely not acquainted with Buddhist texts, since “even the concept of karman [= karma] is not mentioned!” (Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest,* 136), but we can find the same

point emphasized by other, better-informed Chinese apologists. Sun Chuo 孫 綽 (ca. 300–380) argues in his treatise “Admonitions on the Dao” 道論 that “Parent and child are one body—it is fate that joins them. Thus, when a mother harms her finger, the child’s

heart is thrown into a panic. This is the resonance between things of the same *qi*” (see Sen- gyou, *Hongming ji,* 52:17a28–29). The complex Chinese discourse on the body was not something easily dislodged by Buddhist thought. Thus, the Lingbao conception expressed here seems noteworthy and deserving of further study.

Rebirth Reborn 177

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to mean “transit into extinction,” the Lingbao author takes the term lit- erally as a compound verb meaning “to be obliterated (die) and cross over [in salvation].”34 This destiny, reserved for those of high spiritual attainment, is here directly contrasted with the destinies of those who really die, who *miehuai,* are “obliterated and destroyed.” But both out- comes involve a sort of rebirth: the one into the heavens for coexistence with the Dao and the other a reassembling of the vital parts of the body for continued existence in the world. While this text does not specify, we know from other Lingbao texts that one who is “obliterated and de- stroyed” will be reborn in a new body—either one marked by disease and poverty, or that of an animal (as was Ge Xuan). Ritual intervention, specifically addressed to “all sentient beings” but prominently aimed at the salvation of ancestors, was considered necessary for favorable re- births, “in the family of a Prince or Marquis.”35

Notice, too, the reduced but still substantial role accorded birth par- ents in this system. Their role is reduced exactly as is the role of the body. While “skin and hair,” to use the *Xiaojing (Scripture of Filiality)* for- mulation, are of one substance with the substance of human parents, the self is here no longer seen as an original property of the body. The “true parent” of the self is the Dao. But Lingbao Daoists, like Yang Xi, did not follow those of their Buddhist neighbors who radically relativized the phenomenal world.36 Like the body, parents are seen (paradoxically per- haps) as vital to the project of salvation. As the Dao is immanent in cre- ation, and human parents contribute positively to this creation through loving and nurturing their offspring and providing a locus for the work-

ing out of karmic burden, they are entitled to ritual recompense 禮 報 —

a term heavily charged in Confucian discourse on ancestral practice. Thus

space is left for bonds of reciprocity between living and dead, the heart of sacrifice to the ancestors.

The Celestial Worthy then goes on to explain how such “erroneous views” as those that prompted the original question arose. He begins his tale in the imaginative space of prior world-systems, known in the Ling- bao texts by exalted reign-titles:

1. Bokenkamp, “Death and Ascent,” 8.
2. The Lingbao *Benxing suyuan jing* (HY 1106, 12b) explains that the vow that one’s ancestors be reborn “in the family of a Prince or Marquis” 王侯之家, a regular part of Lingbao penitential ritual, represents “the way of supreme filiality.”
3. I do not in any way mean this as a critique of Buddhism. For a discussion of some positive social effects of such relativization of the empirical world, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Dou- bleday, 1967), 97–101.

178 Rebirth Reborn

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From prior to the kalpa cycle of Draconic Magnificence to that of Red Clarity, according to the old texts, birth and death [ = samsara] entirely resulted from [the actions of ] a single person. There was no “flowing down” or “obstructing those above.” Good and evil stopped with the individual, and each put his own body as forfeit. But, after the age of Red Clarity and into the age of the Upper Luminary, people’s hearts became evil.37 Men and women were impure. Envy, strife, and mutual

injury arose among them. Since their hearts were not in themselves depend- able 心 不 自 固 , they began to call upon their ancestors above and their descendants below for surety as hostages in making oaths to one another

before the spirits.38 When they did not keep faith and broke their oaths,

[their family members] were bound and taken before the Three Offices, to sink down among the demon officials 身沒鬼官.39 Above, their deceased ancestors were obstructed; while below it [their transgressions] flowed

down upon descendants, bringing calamity on all. Old and young impli- cated one another, so that they were not released until the heavens came to an end, thus causing calamity to descend upon entire lineages.

These evil persons brought great calamity upon themselves. They are eternally unable to accord with the enlightened words of the Ultimate Law. One who does attain [to the Ultimate Law] and assembles [meritorious]

actions must draw on the Self in all things 諸取我身40 and not rely on others.

How can the old canons of the Luminous Perfected be false!41

After all of this patient explanation of individual responsibility, it turns out that the old laws of collective responsibility are still in force! Ac- cording to the Lingbao texts, the world age in which we reside was in- augurated with the “Upper Luminary” reign period. It was thus during our own fallen times that humans came to call upon the names of their ancestors in making oaths, and it was this that quite inevitably led the gods to apply collective punishment. We find reference here to the post- mortem trials suffered by those such as Tao Kedou, so graphically de-

scribed in the visions of Yang Xi. The Ultimate Law 至 法 of individual

responsibility, then, applies only to those who take it upon themselves

in order to accumulate merit. With this stroke, the Lingbao scriptures

1. For the world-ages of Lingbao Daoism and its theory of decline, see Bokenkamp,

*Early Daoist Scriptures,* 380–84.

1. Lu Xiujing makes a similar point in his *Abridged Codes for the Daoist Commu- nity* 道門科略. See Peter S. Nickerson, “Abridged Codes of Master Lu for the Daoist Com- munity,” in *Religions of China in Practice,* ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Prince-

ton University Press, 1996), 351–52.

1. It is unclear to me whether this means that the ancestors became subject to the officials of the underworld or that they themselves became officials in the underworld. Per- haps both fates are implied.
2. Following S 6659, ll. 117–18. HY 456 omits the “*wo* 我 .”

41. HY 456, 33b5–35a5.

Rebirth Reborn 179

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ally themselves with Buddhist ideas of individual merit-making, associ- ating the practice with the perfect practice of previous world-cycles. This strategy of engagement is seen throughout the Lingbao scriptures, which describe themselves as versions of primordial scriptures that were later carried by Laozi to “convert the barbarians.” Chinese Buddhist scrip- ture, by this account, represents imperfectly understood foreign versions of the original message of Lingbao.42

Merit thus can, and should, be transferred. Transgression, unfortu- nately, still brings recompense to those both above and below, to ances- tors as well as descendants.43 The original question concerned a contra- diction that the author of the Lingbao scriptures attributed to Buddhist doctrine. Buddhists hold that merit and demerit are visited solely on the individual, but also that merit is transferable. The Lingbao response is that, yes, merit and demerit were once solely an individual affair in the perfect former world-systems. Now, however, miscreants have involved their relatives, so that transgressions might flow both up and down.

Another aspect of the original question involved those languishing in the earth-prisons for their crimes. From such a station they assuredly could do nothing to save themselves. It is to their sorry plight and to the question of merit transfer that the Celestial Worthy now turns:

The Celestial Worthy further instructed the Most High Lord of the Dao, saying,

The way of Great Benevolence gives highest priority to saving others. Only the meritorious are rewarded; only the virtuous are promoted; only the faithful are saved; only those who observe the practices become tran- scendent. The establishment of merit is for heaven and earth, for the sun, moon, and stars, for the ruler, for commoners, for the ancestors, for those in one’s family, for all the myriad forms of life, and only finally for one’s

1. See Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “The Prehistory of Laozi”; and “The Silkworm and the Bodhi Tree: The Lingbao Attempt to Replace Buddhism in China and Our Attempt to Place Lingbao Daoism,” in *Religion and Chinese Society: Ancient and Medieval China,* vol. 1, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press and École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2004), 317–39.
2. Maeda Shigeki has argued that this passage was added to the scripture later be- cause, among other things, it is contradicted by a phrase found in the closing paragraph of the scripture mandating that “those who, treating this text lightly, leak its contents in- cur disaster that will destroy their clans” (*Shoki dÖkyÖ kyÖten no keisei* [Tokyo: KyÜko, 2004], 408–10). This seeming contradiction dissolves once we recognize that the laws of corporate responsibility, far from being denied here, are actually shown to be still in force. Demerit is transferred among the families of transgressors, but for those who accept the laws of Lingbao, only merit can be passed on. Had Maeda read on to the final passage cited here, he would have found this distinction spelled out clearly. I should also note here that Erik Zürcher (“Buddhist Influence, 140–41), though he modestly claims that he “can only indicate the general line of the argument,” has construed the passage correctly.

180 Rebirth Reborn

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self. The scriptures say, “Whoever wishes to save himself must first save others. I vow not to be saved until all persons are saved.” This is wide- spread benevolence, unlimited in scope and admired by the people of heaven. How could it not [reach to] the seven generations of one’s own

family! Transgression and blessings need not extend to others, but when it comes to merit 功 德 , if one is favored with good karma and in full sin- cerity takes the blame on one’s self, heaven is moved by this singleness

of purpose, and both the human and the spirit world open up. And how could [such deeds] not reach those who have given birth and nurturance to one? Because of the deep love they held, how could one not greatly establish merit in order to save them and to provide recompense to their orphaned souls?

From the era of Draconic Magnificence to that of Red Clarity, none of those who have achieved the Dao, who now appear in grace, their families exalted and whose karmic inheritance will extend to their next lives, has not reached this state as recompense for assembling meritorious actions that have moved all of the heavens.44 As for those who have achieved release from the extremes of successive retributions in the dark night of the nine infernal regions due to blame for their conduct in previous lives, none has not been redeemed to return among men but by the redemption of merito- rious deeds. Their names are all registered in the Vermilion Palaces of the Southern Mount and the upper records of the Nine Metropolises. The standards of recompense are never in error. Dated and cross-referenced

相推, [the records] are very clearly delineated.45

Since the bulk of the *Precepts of the Three Primordials* is devoted to out- lining the vast otherworldly system that oversees the deeds of mortals, assigns blame and blessing, and assures proper disposition of the dead, it is no wonder that the passage ends with a reaffirmation of bureau- cratic infallibility. The notion of bureaucratic infallibility, as we shall see, proves to be an anodyne to the troubled relations between the living and the dead that we have been examining.

This passage from the *Precepts of the Three Primordials* provides us with a concise statement of Lingbao innovations on the subject of cor- porate responsibility: “Transgression and blessings need not be extended

to others, but when it comes to merit 功 德 , if one is favored with good

karma and in full sincerity takes the blame on one’s self, heaven is moved

by this singleness of purpose, and both the human and the spirit world

1. According to the Tang-period *Haikong zhizang jing,* the term *jiaobao* 交報 (“rec- ompense” in my translation) refers to an alternating series of punishments in the hells (HY 9, 7.4a2–5). I am grateful to Terry Kleeman for pointing me to this passage. But here the

term occurs in a clearly positive sense. I thus take it to mean something like “correspond- ing reward” in the present case.

45. HY 456, 35a–36a.

Rebirth Reborn 181

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open up.” While the evil continue to implicate their families, those who heed the message of “great benevolence” have a choice. The phrase also

leaves open the possibility that ancestral blessings 福 might still be

expected.

This raises the question of the role of ancestral sacrifice in the Ling- bao scriptures. The standard sacrificial rites included offerings of meat that were distributed by rank and shared by the family in a banquet once the ancestors had “consumed” them. Such rituals cemented bonds be- tween the living and dead, to be certain, but also reaffirmed social rela- tions through the give and take of meat dishes. The early Celestial Mas- ters heartily condemned meat sacrifices to the ancestors. According to the *Xiang’er Commentary,* an early third-century Celestial Master com- mentary to the *Laozi,*

The correct law of heaven does not reside in offering foodstuffs and praying at ancestral shrines. Thus the Dao has prohibited these things and provides heavy penalties for them. Sacrifices and food offerings are a means of commerce with deviant forces. Thus, even when there are “excess food” or implements [left over from sacrifices], Daoists will not eat or employ them Those who possess the Dao will not stay where there are offerings

of foodstuffs or praying at ancestral shrines.46

One of the precepts derived from the *Xiang’er Commentary* includes this prohibition: “Do not pray or sacrifice to demons and spirits.” The texts of the early Celestial Masters emphasize that their pure gods neither eat nor drink, subsisting instead on *qi.* Nor do Celestial Master priests re- ceive payment for their services. As Terry Kleeman, has shown, this “pure covenant,” as it was called, distinguished the Celestial Masters from the priests of the common religion and from the ancestral cults, from those of the imperial household down through the elite families of the realm, who fed their gods or sainted ancestors bloody victuals. When Daoist practitioners began to spread their doctrines widely in the higher strata of society, this stark prohibition against meat sacrifice was one of the first to be relaxed.47 As Kleeman also points out, Lu Xiujing was one of the first Daoists to explicitly sanction ancestral blood sacrifice, albeit only on specific days of the year.48

But the restoration of blood sacrifice did not betoken a capitulation

1. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures,* 119–20.
2. Terry F. Kleeman, “Licentious Cults and Bloody Victuals: Sacrifice, Reciprocity, and Violence in Traditional China,” *Asia Major,* 3rd ser., 7, no. 1 (1994): 200–211.

48. Ibid., 209.

182 Rebirth Reborn

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to the sorts of active ancestral threats that we have traced. Lu Xiujing, for instance, warns in the direst terms of the “bloody cults” to dead “gen- erals” and “ladies” who “lead demon troops . . . roving over Heaven and Earth.”49 Rather, in the scripted interactions of the Lingbao scriptures, the ancestors are once more given specific days when they will receive sacrifice and specific roles to act out, as they had been in the ordered an- cestral rites of antiquity.50

The passage from the *Precepts of the Three Primordials* demonstrates clearly that the authors of the Lingbao scriptures did not simply accept Buddhist doctrines of rebirth.51 Instead, they critiqued, modified, and adapted the salient points of the doctrines to their own purposes. Rather than allowing traditional Chinese ideas of postmortem familial re- sponsibility to be eroded by this new doctrine, they asserted that Bud- dhists had misunderstood the nature of the present world age and thus failed to recognize how relations between living and dead were now to be conducted.

But this is only half of the story. The questions posed at the beginning of the passage also address the problem of infection flowing between the world of the living and the dead—postmortem lawsuits implicating liv- ing descendants and ancestors held hostage by the transgressions of the living. The explanation that the Lingbao scriptures provide for all of the postmortem threats, anxieties, and machinations that we have surveyed in these pages proves to be simply the assertion of bureaucratic infalli- bility. The *Precepts of the Three Primordials* itself stands as testimony to

1. Nickerson, “Abridged Codes,” 352.
2. On the “scripted” roles of ancestors in early ancestral practice, see David N. Keight- ley, “The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and Its Legacy,” in Lagerwey, *Re- ligion and Chinese Society,* 1:3–64; Martin Kern, *Die Hymnen der chinesischen Stattsopfer: Literatur und Ritual in der politischen Repräsentation von der Han-zeit bis zu den Sechs Dynastien* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), 17–22; and “*Shi jing* Songs as Per- formance Texts: A Case Study of ‘Chu ci’(Thorny Caltrop),” *Early China* 25 (2000): 60 and 104 ff.
3. Typical scholarly characterizations tend to ignore the creative Lingbao adaptations of Buddhist doctrinal points. Livia Kohn, for instance, writes, “Daoists of the Numinous Treasure (Lingbao) school . . . embraced the Buddhist vision [of rebirth] especially heartily” (“Steal Holy Food and Come Back as a Viper: Conceptions of Karma and Rebirth in Me- dieval Daoism,” *Early Medieval China* 4 (1998): 1–48), while Erik Zürcher (“Buddhist In- fluence”) tends to criticize whatever adaptations Lingbao Daoists made to Buddhist thought as “misunderstandings” (See Bokenkamp, “The Silkworm and the Bodhi Tree,” 320–22). In the latter case, simplistic notions of “influence” lead to a mistaken assessment of the data; in the former, they discourage reviewing the data at all. For recent textual stud- ies on Lingbao adaptations of Buddhist doctrine, see Maeda Shigeki, *Shoki dÖkyÖ kyÖten,* 371–95; Kamitsuka Yoshiko, “ReihÖgyÖ to shoki kÖnan bukkyÖ—InkahÖÖ shiso o chÜshin ni,” *TÖhÖ shÜkyÖ* 91 (1998): 1–21; and Bokenkamp, “The Prehistory of Laozi.”

Rebirth Reborn 183

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this principle. It presents a dazzlingly complex otherworldly bureaucracy based on the Celestial Master concept of the Three Offices of Heaven, Earth, and Water, the “three primordials” of the scripture’s title. Each of the three is divided into three palaces, and these are further subdi- vided into three bureaus, each with specified numbers of administrative personnel. In addition, hierarchies, meeting dates, and paperwork pro- cedures for the entire system are specified. It would take a book of ap- proximately this length to properly explore the sources and articulation of the system.52

Suffice it then to indicate here that the system of otherworldly con- trol over sin and retribution was designed to be all-inclusive—and pre- sumably to fit any eventuality. The names of the various postmortem des- tinations we have encountered are included or alluded to, as well as many that we have not. Some of these originated with Buddhist texts. Signifi- cantly, as if to rob it of its former might, the administrative offices of Fengdu have been distributed to two distinct offices.

To most modern minds, the bureaucratic density of this solution to perceived threats from beyond the grave is anything but reassuring. But recall that, even in the case of the underworld rebellion that Su Shao en- countered, the solution was a bureaucratic reorganization. The Lingbao answer is in line with this. Rather than provide new named personnel, however, our text restructures the entire system.

# one mobilization of lingbao soteriology

The foregoing analysis of the *Precepts of the Three Primordials* enlight- ens us on a few of the motives behind the recourse to “Buddhist elements” in the Lingbao scriptures, but it seems dry and academic compared to the lively stories we encountered in previous chapters. What we need is a flesh-and-blood example of how the “awesome rites of Lingbao” might work in practice to counter anxieties resulting from untimely death and to restore threatened relations with the ancestors.

My example comes from a grave document of the Tang period, com- posed within decades of the *hun*-summoning rites mentioned in chap- ter 2 and occasioned by the same imperial violence. I first encountered

1. One such weighty tome ( 646 pages) on the otherworldly bureaucracy imagined in medieval China has already been written; see Xiao Dengfu, *Han, Wei, Liuchao Fo Dao liangjiao zhi tiantang diyu shuo* (Taibei: Taiwan xuesheng, 1989). Pages 419–22 outline some of the peculiarities of the *Precepts of the Three Primordials* addressed here.

184 Rebirth Reborn

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this inscribed stone in the basement of the *Beilin* [Forest of stelae] Mu- seum of Xi’an. The curators who kindly showed the stone to me related that it had come to the museum from “a private person.” It was thus likely recovered from a looted tomb. The curators failed to mention, however, that the piece had already been published in a collection of *muzhi ming* [biographical inscriptions for the tomb]. Indeed, stone in- scriptions such as the one they showed me are comparable to *muzhi ming,* both in size and placement next to the coffin. These two sorts of tomb document differ greatly, however, in content. The main part of the text etched into the stone I was shown was written in a celestial lan- guage called the “Hidden Language of the Great Brahmà” that figures in the Lingbao scriptures.53 This portion of the text is best regarded as talismanic, since it does not bear information readily decipherable by us mortals.

The legible portion of the inscription that I saw in the Forest of Ste- lae Museum is nearly identical to the Lingbao burial text found in the Ming-period Daoist canon, except that the blanks for the names of the beneficiaries and the place of their interment have been filled in (the ital- icized portions below). It reads as follows:

In accordance with authenticated orders of the [Celestial Worthy] of Primordial Origins, it is announced to all the spiritual officers of the earth bureaus of the limitless subterranean worlds of the white heavens of the west: *The former parents of the Empress Concordant with Heaven, the Prince of Feng and his Consort Cui,* have now entered obliteration and salvation. The five transcendent ones will entrust their bodies to Grand Darkness. Now they reside in their original village, *Honggu Township of Wannian County,* where we have established a hall and rooms, entrusting their corpses to the Guardians of Earth. In enlightened accordance with the Correct Law, you are to comfort and aid them. The White Spirits should feed them with white efflorescences of the seven *qi.* Fill them with essence and light. Refine their forms so that their bones and flesh are fragrant, never to decay for a million kalpas. The Western Mount Hua

is to open the nine Gloomy Halls of Eternal Darkness to raise up their cloudsouls.54 These should be bathed and capped and transferred above to the Southern Palace.55 They will be garbed and fed to eternally reside in brilliance. Demons will not dare to encroach upon them. They are to be guarded and secured by all the spirits in accord with the old canons

1. On the “Hidden Language,” see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures,*” 385–89.
2. HY 369, 13b1, indicates that the names of the deceased should be entered here as well. In the Empress Wei inscription, this has not been done.
3. HY 369, 13b2, has “Celestial Bureau” instead of “Southern Palace.” The HY 369 formulas for the east, south, and center all read “Southern Palace,” while those for the

Rebirth Reborn 185

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of Luminous Perfection and the documents of *nuqing* [mandated by] the [Celestial Worthy] of Primordial Origins.

Before attending to the purposes of this document, we need to know what we can of those who caused it to be created. Who was the “Em- press Concordant with Heaven” who provided this means of salvation for her parents? We do not know her given name. For reasons that will soon become clear, she is known to the histories as “Commoner Wei,” an appellation that indicates that she was stripped of her title.56 As one of the several elite women who sought to succeed Wu Zhao, the only woman ever to rule in her own name in all of Chinese history and who in her turn was thoroughly castigated by the officials who constructed the historical record, the Empress Wei has been characterized by one modern historian as a “lewd and ambitious woman.”57 Since this is the image inscribed by Tang historians for us to find, we are unlikely to see beyond it. Nonetheless, examining this record enables us to learn some- thing of the bloody and contentious struggles for power in which she took part. Family prestige, and the family dead, were as closely involved in these quotidian struggles as they had always been. As we have seen, this was precisely the world for which the soteriology of the Lingbao scriptures was intended to provide an anodyne, and so the case of Em- press Wei can provide a glimpse of one way in which this might work out in actuality.

Empress Wei, a member of the powerful Guanzhong Wei clan, entered the palace as the principal wife of the Crown Prince Li Zhe (posthumously known by his imperial title Zhongzong, 656–710). The historians report that, like her mother-in-law Wu Zhao, the Empress controlled her weak- willed husband. It is for this reason, we are told, that soon after he took the throne in 684, Li Zhe appointed the Empress’s father, Wei Xuanzhen

韋玄貞, to the rank of chief minister. This act led Wu Zhao, who saw it

as a threat to her own control, to depose her son in favor of his younger

west and north read “Celestial Bureau.” Lingbao texts all describe the transmutation of the spiritual components of the person as occurring at the Southern Palace, so this is likely the correct reading. I have no theory as to the reasons for this change in our re- ceived text.

1. Her brief biographical entries appear in Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 51.2171–75; and Ou-yang Xiu, Song Qi, et al., *Xin Tangshu* (Bei- jing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 76.3486–87.
2. Richard W. L. Guisso, “The Reigns of Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-tsung (684–721),” in *The Cambridge History of China,* vol. 3, *Sui and T’ang China, 589–906,* ed. Denis Twitchett (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 322.

186 Rebirth Reborn

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brother.58 Li Zhe and the Empress were banished to Fangzhou (modern Fangxian, Hubei), in the south.

Wei Xuanzhen fared much worse. His wife, four sons, and two daughters were banished to Lingnan, the untamed south (corresponding to the present-day provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi).59 Edward Schafer, who has written engagingly of the perils faced by Tang travel- ers in this “pestilential land,” notes that the specific area to which Wei and his family were banished had been secured only in 622, when the Ning tribes submitted to Tang rule. Schafer describes the journey there as follows:

Along with soldiers, administrators, and colonists, [merchants] journeyed westward from Canton through the richly mineralized but dangerous province of Rong [where Wei’s sons were banished]. Its administrative town was on the Yu ( . . . the name means “jungly”) River, now called simply “West River.” The settlement was much troubled by rampant waters until part of the flow was diverted by Sima Lüren in 710–11. This hazardous road led to the Vietnamese lands (not yet distinguished as such), and above them to the Tibeto-Burmans of Nanzhao, in deadly rivalry with the Tang men for the control of the southwest. Many northern visitors must have found it a frightening experience to pass through the Gate of Ghosts, a gap, thirty paces wide, between two crags in Yulin (“Jungle Forest”) County The lands beyond this portal reeked with deadly

miasmas. An eighth-century folk-saying about them went: “The customs barrier at Ghost Gate—Ten men go out, Nine men return.60

Lingnan and adjacent Annam were not just places of banishment for Wu Zhao—she had many of her enemies murdered there.61 Even if they escaped assassination orders from the central government, disease and even cannibals threatened the lives of citified Tang exiles. The Man people were not always amenable to Tang rule, as the lengthy list of reported rebellions during the course of the dynasty that Schafer has collected testifies.62

Not surprisingly, given their political enemies and the perils of their journey, Wei Xuanzhen and the male members of his family all are re-

58. Ibid., 290–91.

1. Wei Xuanzhen and his wife were banished to Qinzhou, modern Qinxian in the far south of modern Guangdong Province. His sons are reported to have died in Rongzhou, in the northeastern part of modern Beiliu Xian in Guangxi Province, perhaps on the jour- ney into the region. See Ou-yang Xiu, Song Qi, et al., *Xin Tangshu,* 206.5843; and Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu,* 183.4743.
2. Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: T’ang Images of the South* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 31.

61. Ibid., 39.

62. See ibid., 61–69.

Rebirth Reborn 187

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ported as having “died” during their banishment. Perhaps the historians were unable to determine the manner of their deaths. Certainly the fact that the two daughters were able to survive and return to the capital

makes us suspicious. Only in the case of his wife, surnamed Cui 崔 , do

the standard histories specifically mention murder. Madame Cui was killed by Ning Cheng 寧承, a Man 蠻 tribesman, and his brothers.63

In 698, Li Zhe and his Empress Wei were recalled to the capital, and

Li was reinstated as heir-apparent.64 In 705, Li Zhe and his supporters moved to depose Wu Zhao and succeeded by force in restoring the Tang dynasty. They did not, however, succeed in blocking all women from what had by now become a bitter, bloody struggle for power.

The following year, the Empress Wei took steps that she hoped would result in her ascent to the throne in her own name, in imitation of Wu Zhao, the remarkable “Child of Heaven” who had died the previous year. The Empress Wei brought her parents’ bodies back to the capital for bur- ial. She also had her mother’s murderers, including Ning Cheng, exe- cuted and their heads brought back to display before the caskets that bore her parents’ remains.65 She then, we know from the inscribed stone, provided for Daoist rituals that would ensure her parents’ favorable re- birth or entry into the heavens. Not incidentally, the stone engraved with Lingbao celestial script that she had placed in the grave to accomplish this spiritual transfer also announced a new and exalted title for her fa- ther, Prince of Feng, a suitable rank for the father of a future “Child of Heaven.”66

The Empress’s wishes for her parents were satisfied—at least insofar as their names are remembered by us—but her personal desires were not. These were years of swift reprisal within the palace. Empress Wei’s head ended up, not crowned in glory, but on a pike in the Eastern Market of the capital Chang’an. Still, despite the failure of her ambitions, we can see the uses to which she hoped to put Daoist ritual. Through her ritual act, ensuring the salvation of her parents, she provided for them a suitable pedi- gree that would bolster her own aspirations to rule all under heaven.

1. Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu,* 183.4743; Ou-yang Xiu, Song Qi, et al., *Xin Tangshu,*

206.5843.

1. Guisso, “The Reigns,” 317.
2. Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu,* 183.4744; Ou-yang Xiu, Song Qi, et al., *Xin Tangshu,*

206.5843.

1. The title of “Prince” was usually rewarded only to sons of Emperors or to “un- usually distinguished military officers.” See Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 562.

188 Rebirth Reborn

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The ritual accompanying the burial of the Empress’s inscription is de- scribed in the Lingbao scripture entitled *Transit through Extinction by the Refinement of the Five for the Revivification of the Corpse* (HY 369; hereafter, the *Scripture for Revivification*). Here the priest is instructed to write the celestial text known as the Perfected Script in yellow on a white stone and to bury it while pronouncing its powerful words together with the charge translated above.67

This charge is a command 符命 (literally: “orders [authenticated by]

talisman”) emanating from the Lord of Heaven, known by the awesome

title Heavenly Worthy of Prime Origin in our scriptures, through the west- ern celestial powers and directed to the underworld officers within their jurisdiction. The purpose of the charge is in one respect the same as that of the Han-period sepulchral documents studied by Seidel and others: to arrange bureaucratic procedures on behalf of the dead.68 The underworld officials are informed of the precise location of the body in the tomb, where a “hall and rooms” have been set up for them. This characteriza- tion recalls the fact that, throughout the ages, Chinese tombs were in- deed constructed on the model of palace residences.

Further notification is given that the Five Transcendents, lords at once of the five “naked-eye” planets and of the five viscera, will descend to take charge of the cadavers, bearing them to the Palace of Supreme Dark- ness, where the White Spirits will rejuvenate them, refining their flesh and bones in alchemical fashion and preparing them for life.

Meanwhile, we are given to understand that one of the spiritual dimen- sions of their bodies—their cloudsouls, are now under the jurisdiction of the appropriate one of the Five Marchmounts, Mount Hua. Our doc- ument commands the officials of this realm to open their earth-prisons (the nine Gloomy Halls of Eternal Darkness) to release their cloudsouls. These constituents of the self will ascend to the Southern Palace where they will also be nourished and garbed in such a fashion as to prepare it for continued existence.69

1. In fact, while the stone could be described as “white,” I saw no evidence that the incised words had ever been colored in yellow.
2. See Anna K. Seidel, “Tokens of Immortality in Han Graves,” *Numen* 29, no. 1 (1982): 79–114; and “Traces of Han Religion in Funeral Texts Found in Tombs,” in *DÖkyÖ to shÜkyÖ bunka* [volume in honour of Professor Akitsuki Kan’ei] (Tokyo: Hirakawa, 1987), 21–57.
3. On these visions of postmortem refinement of the various constituents of the self, see also Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Death and Ascent,” and “Stages of Transcendence: The *BhÜmi* Concept in Taoist Scripture,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha,* ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 119–47.

Rebirth Reborn 189

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So much the document tells us. It appears at this point as if the un- derstanding that separate destinies await the spiritual and the bodily con- stituents of the person at death holds true here. The Palace of Supreme Darkness is known from Daoist texts predating this one to be the palace where the bodies of the righteous dead were refashioned.70 The cloud- souls, on the other hand, are here sent to the Southern Palace. With one part of the self going north and the other south, so to speak, the sepa- ration could be no more complete.

But the matter does not end there. Along with this imperial command, the Daoist presiding over this burial is instructed to pronounce words of incantation which, while they largely reiterate the directives of the com- mand, further specify that the cloudsouls of the deceased are to be re- united with the body. The whole person is then readied for continued ex- istence in the heavens or for rebirth after a certain number of years, depending on the merits of the deceased.71 In the words of the text, “Those who should cross over [to the celestial realms], will cross over; those who should be reborn will be reborn; those who should cycle [into a new existence] will cycle; and those who should return [to the Dao] will return.”72

This burial ritual was crafted for precisely the sort of situation that Empress Wei confronted. What this ritual intends to celebrate, in short, is a reuniting of that which has been separated. Bodies fragmented and threatened are rejoined. The dangerous dead—and all dead were regarded as potentially dangerous—are stripped of the alienation that constitutes their primary reason for resentment. Taxonomic boundaries between the living and the dead are reestablished, and orderly, ancient means of oc- casional contact through ancestral practice can resume.73

But what the ritual story wants to conceal, it gives back in the telling.

1. See Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures,* 46–48.
2. Other scriptures of the Lingbao corpus confirm this and further lay out a system of advancement in merit by which a Disciple of Unsullied Belief such as the one in our sepulchral text might expect an improvement both in spiritual status and in worldly sta- tus as a result of this rebirth. Through unstinting practice of the Way of Lingbao, he or she can expect nine further “refinements” of body and soul, analogous to the nine-times- recycled elixir of the alchemists, until becoming a “Disciple of Ten Cycles” (*shizhuan dizi*

十轉弟子), ready, both physically and spiritually, to ascend to heaven for the final time to

dwell forever among officials of the stellar bureaucracy. See Bokenkamp, “Stages of Tran-

scendence,” for the ramifications of this system.

1. This formula is enunciated twice in the text, albeit in slightly different forms; see HY 369, 1b2–3, and 2b4–5.
2. Robert F. Campany, in *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, 266–71) discusses the disturbing na- ture of such boundary-crossings in *zhiguai* literature.

190 Rebirth Reborn

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Separation remains the fundamental fact about death, and that division is projected onto the dead themselves. The spiritual constituents of the person—the ground of the ancestors’ memory and concern for their descendants—are “fed.” Decomposing bodies—locus of primal fear for the living—are made whole and “fragrant.” But relating the mechanisms by which this was believed to take place, off of the ritual stage, so to speak, reveals to us the fundamental fears that the separation of death, and especially violent death, still occasioned.

Not unexpectedly, then, the persistent anxieties of the living, their pro- jections into the realms of darkness, suffuse this new ritual program. The opening of the *Scripture for Revivification* portrays the Celestial Worthy instructing 7,240 youths in a celestial garden. As the ceremonies are near- ing completion and the great Way has been promulgated, two of the as- sembly, the Youth of Highest Wisdom and the Heaven-turning Youth, ap- proach with a question. The salvation that the Celestial Worthy has promulgated is for all. Even those in the dark cells of the earth-prisons and wandering ghosts have obtained release. But what is to become of them now? Since they have not yet entered again into the revolutions of samsara, “their corpses and spirits flee so that their rotted frame is no use to them, and they sink back into the nine [stygian] realms where they might cross the Earth Officers. Their flying spirits dart about in hesita- tion, unable to return to earth.”74 But it is not solely compassion for the dead that prompts the request that this situation for the two youths con- tinue with more specific explanations: “Those unable to return to the old residence in their bodies will be unbearably oppressed by the myri- ads of spirits in the [subterranean] nine springs. With no place to lodge their flying cloudsouls, they will return to infect their descendants.”75 These concerns are strikingly similar to the ones that motivated those under Sima Rui who wished to conduct for their ancestors *hun*-sum- moning burials or that prompted Yang Xi’s interventions into the Xu fam- ily illnesses. Only the solution differs. The Lingbao response was arguably more effective. In the case of Empress Wei, the ritual might have worked as follows: Her father and mother had been separated from her first by banishment and then (at least in the case of her mother) by violent death. This rupture, in the society of her time, represented a double loss of sta- tus. Alive, her parents were stripped of prestige; dead they lacked not only the power ascribed to ancestors but became a possible source of un-

74. HY 369, 1a8–9.

75. HY 369, 1b4–5.

Rebirth Reborn 191

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seen threat. The Lingbao ritual she commissioned repaired both of these losses. But first it reiterated them in ritual structure with its account of spiritual faculties separated from bodies. In our terms, it attends to both the spiritual and the physical with its account of special “feedings” for both aspects of the person. In a society so concerned with the physical- ity of the dead, this solution reassures in a way that the burying of sim- ulacra in the case of *hun*-summoning burials cannot. And remember, even Yang Xi’s rescue of Tao Kedou, Xu Mi’s deceased wife, was nearly sab- otaged when the daughter-in-law Hua Zirong failed to keep up with the schedule of ancestral feedings.

In the case of the Empress Wei, we know that her father’s status was restored. He was given the title of Prince of Feng, as reported on the stone that once rested in his tomb. And we know that her parents were once again elevated to the status of powerful ancestors. Wei Xuanzhen and his wife were buried in a tumulus called “Glorifying the Ancestors,” and their tablets were placed in an ancestral temple with the exalted title “Cel- ebrating Virtue.” Their final residences were provided with one hundred persons to guard and cleanse them.76 For the moment, harmony had been restored.

# conclusion

Despite the large numbers of his contemporaries who practiced the faith, when the author of the Lingbao scriptures mentions Buddhism, he in- variably states or implies that it is a “foreign” religion. It is remarkable, then, that in Lingbao accounts of rebirth, we find no trace of anxiety concerning the undeniable fact that the mechanisms of rebirth derive from Chinese Buddhism. We do find defensive gestures with regard to other clear adaptations from Buddhist scripture. When the scriptures mention the “bodhisattvas of the ten directions,” exotic otherworldly locales, and other identifiable bits pilfered from Buddhist texts, they commonly in- voke the supposed antiquity of the Lingbao texts as warrant and state forthrightly some version of the formula “all of this issues from Ling- bao.”77 But we find no such disclaimer with regard to the idea of rebirth. Instead, in the only specific reference to Buddhist ideas of individual re- sponsibility, from the *Precepts of the Three Primordials* analyzed above, the strategy is more forthrightly offensive. Buddhist texts have gotten it

1. Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tangshu,* 183.4744.
2. For the examples given here, see Bokenkamp, “Sources of the Ling-pao Scriptures.”

192 Rebirth Reborn

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wrong. Personal responsibility has been there all along, but familial re- sponsibility and involvements across the boundary between life and death are an inescapable fact of this fallen age.

This is a feature of the Lingbao message that we noticed in Lu Xiu- jing’s account of the *Retreat of Mud and Ash.* His citation of the ancient *Shijing* poem that contains the lines “If one has no father, on whom shall one rely? If one has no mother, on whom shall one depend? Abroad, one harbors grief; at home one has no one to whom to go,” together with his thoroughgoing concern with parents in his conduct of the ritual, rep- resent perhaps the clearest Chinese critique of Buddhist ideas of rebirth. And, indeed, the Lingbao scriptures are almost obsessively concerned with rituals designed to rescue ancestors from the underworlds, restor- ing fathers and mothers to their sacrificial families.