

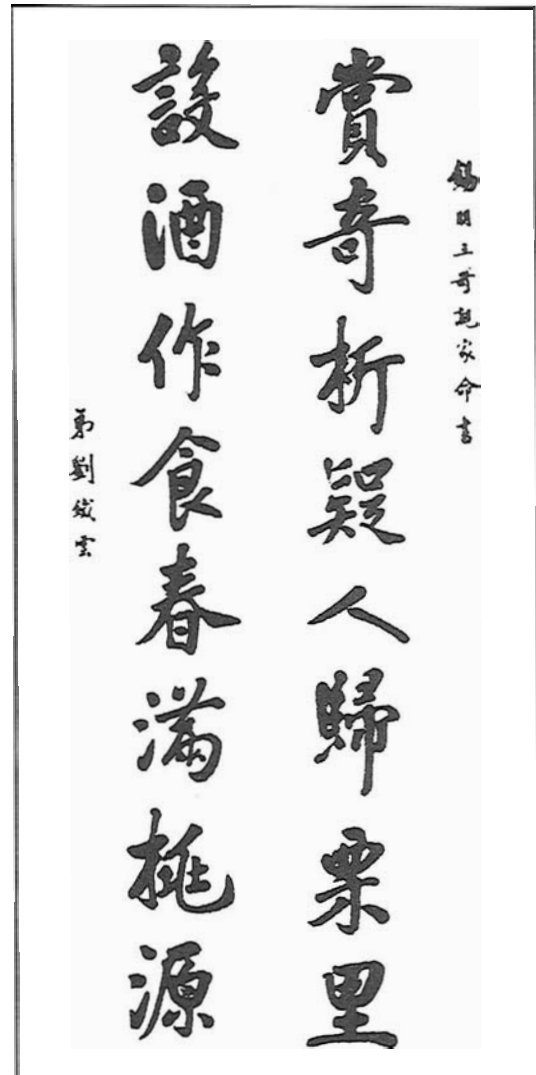
劉鶚：老殘遊記二集

The Sequel to *Lao Can Youji*:

Chapters 7-9

By Liu E

Translated by Timothy C. Wong



Liu E's calligraphy



Liu E

Translator's Introduction

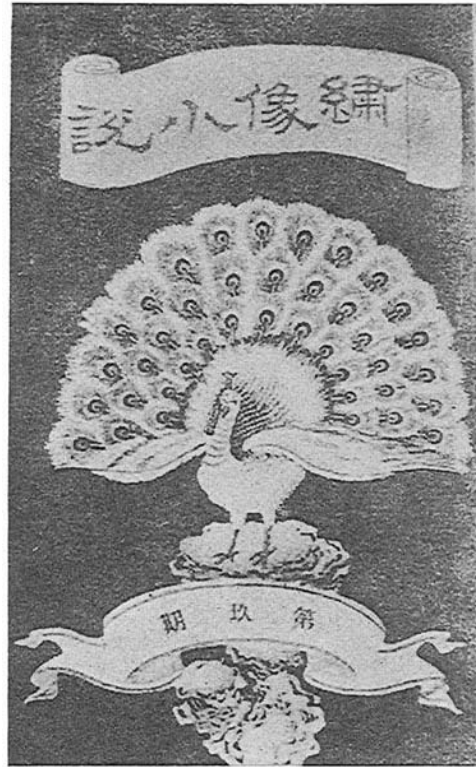
The turn-of-the-century novel *Lao Can youji* 老殘遊記, best known in English as *The Travels of Lao Can*, has been generally regarded as the most popular of the many Chinese novels of the period.¹ Indications are that its author Liu E 劉鶚 (1857-1909) wrote the first fourteen chapters rather rapidly and casually, attaching only the pseudonym of Hongdu Bailian Sheng 洪都百鍊生 (the hundred-times tempered student of Hongdu) to the early serialization in the magazine *Xiuxiang xiaoshuo* 繡像小說 (*Illustrated Fiction*), and hardly bothering to make revisions.² According to the testimony of his son Liu Dashen 劉大紳, he originally "did not wish to broadcast his name" in connection with the novel, and was very much surprised by the enthusiastic reception it received, even though the narrative broke off

The translator acknowledges with gratitude the support of the American Council of Learned Societies for his work on the fiction of Liu E. He also wishes to thank Professor David Y. Ch'en, his colleague at The Ohio State University, for his help in solving some of the problems in this translation.

¹See C.T. Hsia, "The Travels of Lao Ts'an: An Exploration of Its Art and Meaning," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, New Series, VII: 2 (August, 1969), p. 40. The *Lao Can youji* is the first topic covered by *Shimmatsu shōsetsu kenkyū* 清末小說研究, a Japanese journal devoted exclusively to the study of Chinese fiction of the late-Qing period. The extensive bibliography on Liu E and his fiction in the 1977 inaugural issue (pp. 86-106) lists sixty editions of the Text Proper and/or Sequel, including thirty-five published over the last quarter century.

²Liu E later changed the first character of this pseudonym to 鴻. The entire run of the *Xiuxiang xiaoshuo* is now available in facsimile reprint, published by Shanghai shudian 上海書店 in 1980 and distributed by the Commercial Press in Hong Kong. See Timothy C. Wong, "Notes on the Textual History of the *Lao Ts'an yu-chi*," *T'oung Pao* LXIX, 1-3 (1983), for a summary in English of basic textual issues and problems connected with the Lao Can narrative.

Xiuxiang Xiaoshuo
(Illustrated Fiction)



abruptly after the January, 1904 issue. This reception must have motivated Liu E to resume writing again in late 1905, to add six chapters and bring the Text Proper (*chuji* 初集) to a kind of conclusion at Chapter Twenty.³

Liu Dashen also tells us that his father began to write a Sequel (*erji* 二集) to his now famous story in 1907, when the last of his many business failures gave him the leisure to do so. Subsequently published in the Tianjin newspaper *Riri xinwen bao* 日日新聞報 (which had followed the *Xiuxiang xiaoshuo* in serializing all of the Text Proper between 1904 and 1906), the Sequel is said to contain fourteen chapters. When clippings of the Sequel were recovered in the *Riri xinwen bao* office by Liu E's fifth son Liu Dajing 劉大經 in 1929, however, only nine chapters remained. There is now no doubt that all nine are the work of Liu E, even though only the first six were published as a separate volume in Shanghai in 1935. In postscripts to the volume, both Liu Dajun 劉大鈞 and Liu Tiesun 劉鐵孫 deliberately denied the existence of the final three chapters because they feared that the supernaturalistic content would draw political criticism. The existence of a nine-chapter text of the Sequel in the Jimbun Kagaku Kenkyūjo (Research Institute of Arts and Sciences) of Kyōto

³Because of its many Hong Kong reprints, the most accessible modern text of the Lao Can narrative is still the 1957 Renmin wenxue chubanshe edition annotated by Chen Xianghe 陳翔鶴 and Dai Hongsen 戴鴻森, published in Peking.

University is incontrovertible evidence that the final three chapters are genuine, and modern editions containing all nine have been published in Taipei and Hong Kong.⁴

The twenty chapters of the Text Proper have been translated into a number of languages, including Russian, Japanese, and Czech. Three English translations have been produced since 1939, the best-known and most complete being Professor Harold Shadick's, published in 1952.⁵ Lin Yutang 林語堂, who had published Chapters One to Four of the Sequel in his journal *Renjian shi* 人間世 in 1934, produced a very loose English translation of the first six chapters in 1936 and included them in his book *A Nun of Taishan and Other Translations*. Later, the translation reappeared, in Lin's *Widow, Nun and Courtesan*, published in New York in 1951.

The three subsequent chapters translated here have never been rendered into any other language before. Except for a short Fragment (*waibian* 外編) of less than five thousand characters, the present effort completes the task of making available to the English reader all of Liu E's fictional *oeuvre*.

Those who, like the Chinese scholar Wei Shaochang 魏紹昌,⁶ consider these three chapters a lot of reactionary and superstitious nonsense have their point. The direction of the Lao Can narrative, never very clear to most critics,⁷ takes a decidedly traditional and subjective turn in these final chapters. The focus shifts from the social concerns of the Text Proper to something that is clearly more petty and private. It appears that, towards the end of a life marked by many failures, Liu E could not restrain himself from making a certain apologia. Through the persona of his fictional counterpart Lao Can, he shows an undeniably defensive attitude regarding the record of his life on earth.

These chapters, however, can give us better insight into more than Liu E himself. In important ways, they show us that late-Qing fiction, of which the *Lao Can* is representative, is essentially conservative, despite the contemporary call for national change, and despite the label of social criticism given it by so many literary

⁴See Tarumoto Teruō 樽木照雄, "Tenjin Nichinichi Shimbun ban 'Rōzan yūki nishū' ni tsuite" 天津日日新聞版老殘遊記二集について, *Yasō* 野草, 18 (April, 1976), pp. 95-99. The modern edition cited in n.3 above contains only the Text Proper and the first six chapters of the Sequel. The most complete modern edition of the Lao Can narrative is the *Lao Can youji quanbian* 老殘遊記全編 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan 藝文印書館, 1972). The Tiantian xueshe 天天學社 in Hong Kong has also published the complete narrative.

⁵By Cornell University Press. The English title *The Travels of Lao Can* is Shadick's rendering. Two other partial translations exist: (1) *Tramp Doctor's Travelogue*, by Lin Yijin 林疑今 and Ge Deshun 葛德順 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1939) and (2) *Mr Decadent* (Nanjing: Tu-li Publishing Co., 1947) and *Mr Derelict* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), by Yang Hsien-yi and G.M. Taylor (Gladys Yang). Already published twice under different titles, this translation appeared again in 1983 as *The Travels of Lao Can* (Peking: Panda Books).

⁶"Lao Can youji xuji de yiduan neimu" 老殘遊記續集的一段內幕, reprinted in *Zhongguo jindai wenxue lunwenji* 中國近代文學論文集 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社, 1983), pp. 447-448. Wei has gathered together the last three chapters of the Sequel and published them along with other valuable material for the researcher in *Lao Can youji zihiao* 老殘遊記資料 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1962).

⁷A notable exception is Donald Holoch, "The Travels of Lao Can: Allegorical Narrative," in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, ed., *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 129-149.

historians since Lu Xun 魯迅.⁸ There is little doubt that, even within their fantastic setting of a visit to hell, these chapters continue the traditional penchant to focus on fact rather than on fiction, and that characters like Liang Haizhou, Young Zhou or Zhe Lisi are patterned after actual acquaintances of the author. Most importantly, many of the views expressed – such as those on courtesans in the nether world – can be seen as Liu E's attempt to justify his own life. Like Dante, Liu uses his hell to punish those he disapproves of, especially those who slandered his good name.

Aside from their reliance on fact, what marks these chapters as essentially conservative is their exclusive concern with China. Readers who know of Liu E's knowledge of and interest in things foreign should find it curious that the hell depicted is not one for all mankind, but merely for the Chinese, with repeated references made only to *China's* geopolitical realities of the period. As in the Text Proper, the narrative does contain references to foreign places and things which had become familiar to some Chinese of the late-Qing dynasty – Mount Fuji, the Arctic Ocean, the pound sterling; but it is telling that when Lao Can fantasizes about places he would like to visit once he is able to travel as an unencumbered ghost, his chosen destinations all lie within China's borders. The factual orientation and the exclusive concern with China so common in Chinese literature throughout the present century is no less conservative, and can be traced to the work of Liu E and his contemporaries. It is this same orientation and China-centeredness that link the “modern” Chinese fiction of the May Fourth period to its immediate past. And it is this immediate past – the fiction of Liu E and the vast majority of his contemporaries – which gives to all of Chinese fiction a continuity either ignored or denied by so many.

⁸See his much quoted remarks about late-Qing “castigatory” fiction in his *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, tr. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1964), pp. 372-388.

Chapter 7

*Afloat on the Milky Way, he gazes up at Sister Moon;
At the court of severe judgment, he bows before King Yama*

THE STORY continues that De Huisheng went on to Yangzhou with his family while Lao Can set out in his cart and headed directly for Huai'an city to visit his relative. Now who do you suppose the relative was? None other than the husband of Lao Can's older sister, a man known as Gao Wei, who was called Moji.¹ Though he had spent much time on his books, the man never took career or fame seriously. With several hundred parcels of land in his family, he could be considered a fairly wealthy man. He lived on the edge of Ladle Lake inside the city. Though located in the northwestern corner of the city limits, the lake had lovely scenery. There was the Pavilion of Great Mercy in the middle of the lake, with water on every side. To the south was a wooden bridge several hundred feet in length, set off by vermilion balustrades.² The city walls were to the west. Beyond the walls stood a forest of tall masts, endlessly moving to and fro. In the early twilight, the glowing red sun could be seen hanging from the corner of a mast above the battlements – just as it would be in a picture.

Gao Moji also bought a piece of land east of Ladle Lake, some 750 square yards in size. He encircled it with a hibiscus hedge, put up a few thatched huts, and called the place Little Wang River Garden.³ Water from the lake was channelled into the garden, and he planted some lotus there. On the rest of the land, he grew such flowers as plum and cassia, and cultivated roses in numerous little pots. Huai'an roses were famous and boasted many varieties. Among the seventy or eighty species, the one called Indigo-Field Jasper was considered the finest.

When Lao Can arrived at Gao Wei's home that day and greeted his sister, they were naturally very glad to see each other. In short order, he saw all his nieces and nephews, but his brother-in-law was nowhere in sight. So he ventured to ask, "Where has my sister's husband

gone? I suppose he must be at a poetry club somewhere."

"He hasn't gone out," his sister said. "I think he must be in his river garden."

"My brother-in-law is truly a high-minded man," said Lao Can. "He's gone and put together another garden, has he?"

"It's not much of a garden, really," said the sister. "Nothing more than a bunch of rustic shacks. It's out back. Just go northeast about a bowshot, and you'll be there. Let your niece Little Feng take you. Yesterday his Indigo-Field Jasper had an unusual bloom, big as a rice bowl. The delicate fragrance is overwhelming, more delicate even than orchids. You're here at just the right time. He's sure to want you to compose some poetry with him."

"I may not be able to compose poems, but I'm pretty sure I can wrangle a 'flower-appreciation' drink," Lao Can said as he went out the back door with Little Feng.

They went west a short way to a gate with a small bridge immediately beyond. A flower hedge blocked the way on the other side, and they followed the path along it for a few paces before turning west again and reaching the main reception room. On the sizeable plaque above the door were written four large characters: "Chamber Where Blossoms Scatter." On

¹Gao's names link him to the famous Tang dynasty poet Wang Wei 王维 (701-761), whose courtesy name was Moji 摩詰. Wang's names indicate his Buddhist leanings, since Wei Moji is Vimalakirti, a disciple of the Buddha Sakyamuni and a man of spotless reputation.

²The text actually says "several tens of *zhang* 丈 in length". A *zhang* is a lineal measure equivalent to a little over ten feet. All subsequent measures of length, size, or weight will be given in their modern equivalents.

³The original Wang 網 River is in Shaanxi Province.

entering the room, they found that Gao Moji was in the middle of a Buddhist ritual, making offerings to a statue of the Bodhisattva Guanyin in the centre of the room, with that Indigo-Field Jasper placed directly in front. Little Feng, seeing that he had gotten up from prostrating himself, went up and told him "Second Uncle has come."

Gao Wei turned around and was highly delighted to see Lao Can. "When did you get here?"

"I just arrived," Lao Can said.

"You're here at exactly the right time," Gao Wei said. "Take a look at the unusual blooms my flowers produced this year. You see this one? It has over a thousand petals. It appears to be white on the surface, but if you look carefully you'll also make out a tinge of green. Examine it further and the hues seem to go on endlessly. Now ordinary jasper has no odour. This kind is not only fragrant, but fragrant in such an extremely delicate way that even the smell of orchids seems commonplace in comparison." After sniffing it carefully for a while, Lao Can felt that what Gao said was really true.

Gao Wei then ordered a houseboy to prepare tea, and took out a jar of "green-creeper spring"⁴ from the kitchen saying, "In the presence of the great flower, I'd be letting down a good friend if I did not provide some decent tea."

Lao Can smiled. "The flower must have come to you in response to your fine poetry."

"Yesterday, I wanted badly to make up a couple of verses to celebrate the flower. But afterwards I was afraid that the poems might smell it up, and so I thought better of the idea. Now that you're here, let's go ahead and really write a few."

"You're wrong," said Lao Can. "All plant life requires human waste as fertilizer. This flower is too delicate and fecal matter may be too strong for it. So let's make up some poems, as if we're laying a few farts, to provide it with some nutrients. Wouldn't that be grand?" The two roared with laughter.

After that Lao Can stayed there and did little else but drink, discuss poetry, cultivate

flowers, and worship Buddha, none of which needs any detailed accounting.

Now Lao Can was settled temporarily in another garden enclosure to the east of his brother-in-law. Within the side gate, there was a large lotus pond. To the north of the pond was a houseboat named "Seafaring Cup". To the east – with a purple wistaria in front, budding in the late spring and sending its fragrance over half the town – was another houseboat called "Raft Afloat on the Milky Way". A water-pavilion with a row of five rooms stood to the west; it was known as the "Studio of Autumn Dreams". North of the Seafaring Cup was a structure made of large stones from the lake which had a wing with three reception rooms. Family members were put up behind this wing. Usually Lao Can remained in the studio, having little to do but play chess in the Seafaring Cup or fish from the Raft Afloat, thus enjoying a free and unharried existence.

One day he was reading the *Sutra of Buddha-Wisdom* in the Raft Afloat, and he became so absorbed that he read until the moonlight from the west turned the world outside the boat to a crystal sheen. He relished the sight for a long time before turning in, and so it was natural that he nodded off once his head hit the pillow. He dreamt of someone who looked like an official envoy, wearing a large hat with a crimson tassel, and clutching a pile of official documents. To Lao Can's astonishment, when the man came to the outer room of the Studio of Autumn Dreams, he sat down on a chair. "How could an official envoy come straight into the area outside my bedroom here?" he asked himself. "And why is it that no one in the family announced his coming?"

As he was wondering and worrying, the man spoke with a smile: "My master has invited you, sir, to pay him a visit."

"What office did you come from, and who is your good master?"

"My master is Yama, the ruler of hell."

⁴The tea is "biluochun," usually written as 碧螺春, or "Green Snail [Island] spring." In the text, the name is given as 碧籬春; hence, the rendering in the translation.

On hearing this, Lao Can was startled. "Then am I about to die?" he asked, and the envoy answered in the affirmative.

"As long as my time is up, I'll go with you," said Lao Can.

"It's still a bit early," said the envoy. "I am seeing over fifty people today and your name, sir, is at the end of the list." He held up a list.

Lao Can saw that it really did contain over fifty names, and that his own appeared above some thirty others. "When do you think my time will be?" Lao Can asked as he finished scanning.

"I came out of personal regard for you, to get the news to you early and let you get good and ready. If you have any important business, instruct members of your family to take care of it. I'll come back for you after I've gotten to all the others."

"I'm much obliged," said Lao Can. "Only I don't have anything to get ready, and I have no instructions for anyone. So it's best that I just go with you."

"No hurry. No hurry," the envoy kept saying as he stood up and went off.

Lao Can sat by himself in the studio, and considered what to say to his family, but came up with nothing. He went to the window and saw that the moon made everything bright as day. The surroundings were cool and distant and all was quiet – a rather melancholy atmosphere. "I might as well go to sleep," he sighed. "Why bother with it all?" He went to his bed, saw a pair of slippers in front of the drooping mosquito net, and was taken aback. "Oh! Who can be lying in my bed?" Lifting up the net to investigate, he found that it was none other than himself, fast asleep. "How can there be two of me?" he thought. "I'll wake the me in the bed and see what happens." He shook the body with all his strength, but it did not even budge. Then he understood and, nodding to himself, said, "The one standing here at this moment is the real me. So what's asleep in the bed must be my corpse." Without being aware of it, he had shed a few tears. "I'm sorry that you have to be by yourself for half the night," he said to the corpse. "But tomorrow there will be many

who'll come to mourn you. So please excuse me for now."

He turned around and went outside. But how strange! As he came out this time, the moon could not be seen, and the streets were not like the streets he knew. The sky was murky, like it would be during a sandstorm at twilight. He walked a long way, but did not see a single familiar face. Becoming quite unhappy, he thought to himself: "If I knew early on it was going to be like this, I might as well have enjoyed the moonlight a bit longer and waited for the envoy to return. What was I so anxious about?"

Suddenly he was aware of a childlike figure in front of him, hoppity-hopping along toward him. He was thinking about asking him for directions when, drawing near, he discovered that it was Young Zhou. This Young Zhou was the younger son of a working-class family living in the eastern part of the estate. Two months previously, he had hanged himself. Seeing that he was an acquaintance, Lao Can was suddenly glad, and shouted out at him: "Aren't you Young Zhou?"

Young Zhou raised his head for a look, and said, "Aren't you the Second Master Tie?⁵ How did you get here?"

Lao Can then told him what had just happened. "You're really a strange old man," Young Zhou said. "Other people stall around and don't want to die, but you are impatient about it. How odd! What do you plan to do now?"

"I want to see Yama, but lost my way," said Lao Can. "Will you take me there?"

"I can't enter King Yama's court," said Young Zhou. "But I'll take you to the door."

"That'll be fine," said Lao Can, and, effortlessly, they arrived at King Yama's gate.

"Better enter by the gate on the east side," Young Zhou told him.

⁵Readers familiar with the Text Proper of the *Lao Can youji* will remember that Lao Can's surname is Tie 鐵, and his given name Ying 英. The appellation "Lao Can", a sobriquet, comes from his courtesy name Bucan 補殘. In this text, as in the Text Proper, he is variously addressed as both Tie and Bu, according to common practice.

"Thanks for your trouble," said Lao Can. "I haven't brought along any money; so I'm indebted to you."

"Don't want money. Don't want money," Young Zhou said as he hoppity-hopped away.

Lao Can entered by the east gate and went on for about a half-mile. He got to the second gate without seeing a single person. He went in, thinking to himself: "I can't very well go straight on in like this." He walked on for another half-mile and saw that he'd reached a gate to the inner palace. He didn't dare to be brash and thought, "I'll wait until someone comes out to see what I'll do." Noticing someone emerging from the apartment on the east side, Lao Can went up to greet him. The man was the first to bow. "Master Bu, we haven't met for a long time." Lao Can looked at him carefully and saw that he was a man in his fifties. He had a dark handle-bar moustache and wore a sky-blue jacket of some sort of woolen material over a blue padded robe. "How did you get here?" he asked, his face wreathed in smiles.

Lao Can told him about the envoy. "The envoy meant well," said the man. "But you're so impatient, running ahead here. Well, we might as well stroll about outside. At the moment, the Five Powers are holding court, interrogating those who have done evil or committed crimes. Your case has nothing to do with homicide. It's just that the accused has insisted on your presence. The whole case should be settled once you make an appearance. Meanwhile, please go outside and enjoy yourself; I'll summon you when it's time."

Lao Can thanked him for his solicitude and, going outside the second gate, wandered about at his pleasure. He got to the west gate and saw that to the west there was a large tree perhaps ten feet in circumference at the trunk, and under it there seemed to be a human figure. Lao Can thought he would go up and talk with him since he seemed to be unoccupied. On getting up close, Lao Can saw that it was someone he knew well. It was Liang Haizhou, who had died the month before. Lao Can was very glad to see him. "Haizhou, is that you here?" he shouted out as he went up to bow. Liang per-

functorily returned the greeting. "When you passed away last month, I thought it would be decades before I'd see you," said Lao Can. "Who could have foreseen that we'd be meeting again in a month? So it's evident that the two of us were destined to meet. Only, how is it that you are still here? I really don't understand."

Liang Haizhou looked sad and worried, and he was slow in giving his answer. "My case has not yet been settled."

"What kind of case are you involved in? Why has it been delayed for so long?"

"It's actually nothing big," Liang Haizhou said. "I've already repaid the debt of life. So what further guilt do I have? It's just that there has been a tremendous dispute. Fortunately my fifth brother got me some patronage and the whole thing will probably be resolved in today's session. What kind of case brought you here?"

"I don't rightly know," Lao Can replied. "In there just now was an old fellow with a dark moustache who told me it was not a matter for concern, that it was something a single court session could settle. But I don't understand about you: isn't your fifth brother still alive? How can he get you any patronage?"

"What good could he do if he were here?" Liang said. "He got a shaman to intervene on my behalf."

"So occult power is more useful than wealth in the long run," Lao Can said nodding. "To think of it, though you're not really considered wealthy, your estate is worth several hundred thousand dollars. And you were unable to bring so much as a single dollar with you. Ultimately, it's we poor people who are the best off. Alive, we carry but a breath of air on our shoulders; dead, a breath of air bears us away by the shoulders. No way for us to lose our capital. Isn't it terrific? But let me ask you: once your case is settled today, what do you plan to do next?"

"I have no plans," Liang Haizhou said. "What about you?"

"I do, I do, I do," said Lao Can. "I think that for men to live on earth is a most tragic thing. It's really heaven's great emancipation to let us become ghosts. Now I tell you there are five happy advantages enjoyed by ghosts. First,

there is no need to eat; then no need to be clothed; third, no need to be concerned about family; fourth, it's convenient to move about, a thousand miles in a blink, if you like; or you can hunker down in one place for three years, and no one will bother you. Finally, you needn't worry about heat and cold; even the Arctic Ocean would not freeze me, any more than the South Seas below the equator make me hot. With these five advantages, what could I not do? Once today's case is over, I plan to cross the Yangtze River, and first visit Mount Yandang in the Tiantai Range, then go from Fujian Province to Canton to visit the majestic Five Ridges, see the plum blossoms of Dayu Ridge, and then go to Guilin to see the dark-green peaks and rivers. Then I'll climb Mount Emei and head north along the Taihang Mountains to the Western Ranges, where I'll stay for a few days before returning to the Middle Ranges and Mount Song. After I get back from the circular tour, I'll look in on members of my family to see how they are faring after my death, and tell them in a dream not to grieve. After that, I'll stretch my legs and cross the Han Sea, climb Mount Kunlun, and build a hut on its highest peak. There I'll stay for a couple of years before deciding what I'll do next. I do get rather lonely by myself; so how about keeping me company?"

Liang Haizhou only shook his head. "Can't do it, can't do it," he said.

Lao Can had spoken out with such enthusiasm because he had thought the other would gladly go along. Seeing him repeatedly shake his head, Lao Can became greatly annoyed. "You're really something!" he said. "While you were alive, you let a bit of money weigh you down until you could hardly even breathe, worrying and fretting about what to do. I tried many times to turn you around, but you stubbornly refused to listen. Now that you've died, you find out you can't bring along a red cent! After getting through the troubles of your trial, shouldn't you enjoy yourself a little? Don't tell me you're still rattling your abacus!"

Now it was Liang Haizhou's turn to be upset. "It's you that's always been a mess," he said, frowning and glaring at Lao Can. "Since

you know that the dead cannot carry their money along, you should also know that they *do* carry the bad karma of sin. Money is left for others to spend, but the retribution for sins must be borne by oneself. I just said that the debt of life has been settled, but there are still other cases involving me. How do I know when everything will be resolved? How can I be a light-hearted old man like you, who casually farts away all his cares?"

Seeing that Liang was so worked up, Lao Can knew that he had countless vexations in his heart. He looked deathly pale and Lao Can felt sorry for him and found it difficult to continue the conversation. As they lapsed into silence, Lao Can noticed the old man with the dark moustache beckoning to him way to the east. He hurriedly left and went up to the old man, who had meanwhile donned a large hat but was still wearing the same jacket. "So they wear the same official attire in the nether world as people do in our courtrooms," thought Lao Can as he followed that old man into the palace through the same old east gate.

The pathway was also paved with stone, similar to that in the world of the living, but the stones appeared a bit bigger. They reached the end of the pathway, and the palace courtyard was merely a quick turn to the west. There were perhaps ten steps leading up to the courtyard and then they were opposite the palace entrance, another five steps up. They went on in and continued to the west a short distance to another platform. Ascending from the steps on the west, Lao Can saw that there were also three flights of steps leading to the platform. Going up, he saw King Yama seated above the centre bench of judgment, wearing a crown with dangling jewels and clothes of an ancient style. He had a pale countenance and a black beard, mingling a kindly bearing with extreme gravity and dignity. They were within a yard or so of the bench when the old man pointed at a place, and Lao Can understood that he was telling him to make his obeisances there. So he got on his knees and prostrated himself on the ground. He then saw the old man with the many notebooks take his place on the west side of the bench.

Now King Yama opened his mouth to speak. "Are you Tie Ying?"

"Yes," Lao Can replied.

"What kinds of crime did you commit in the world of the living?"

"I don't know."

"How can a person not know what he himself did?"

"If I saw that something was wrongful, I naturally avoided doing it," said Lao Can. "Everything I did I took to be blameless. What's more, the living have laws for the living, and the dead have laws for the dead. The laws of the living are universally promulgated, and anyone with even a modicum of self-respect has read them over once or twice. For this reason, I had never done anything which violates the laws of my country. As for laws of the dead, since there are no special means to make them known in the world, there is also no way for men to avoid violating them. So men can only do as their consciences tell them; as long as they are not hurting anyone else, they consider themselves law-abiding. Therefore, when your majesty asks me what crimes I have committed, I have no idea myself. Please determine my guilt according to legal precedent."

"Even though the laws of the nether world are not promulgated through written documents," said Yama, "they are more or less the same as those on earth. In cases where our laws are stricter than those on earth, they have been set out clearly in the Buddhist sutras."

"If you are to judge me according to Buddhist commandments," said Lao Can, "I'm afraid my transgressions will be countless as the hairs on my head."

"Not necessarily," said King Yama. "Let me ask you: Have you killed?"

"Yes, I have," said Lao Can. "Since I am not a monk, I naturally did not abstain from meat. I may not have slaughtered cattle or sheep, but in my time I've killed innumerable chickens, ducks, fish, and shrimp."

Yama nodded his acknowledgement. "Have you stolen?" he continued to ask.

"I have," was the reply. "Of the sins of my life, stealing was the most venial. Still, I've picked fruit on mountains, and pulled lotus out

of water. Even though these things were not worth much, they were other people's property. So I can't say I haven't stolen."

"And the sin of lust?"

"Yes. In spending long years away from home, I could not help feeling restless. I patronized dance halls and song clubs, and indeed bedded quite a number of courtesans."

Yama also asked Lao Can about transgressions of speech and thought, and Lao Can answered him item by item, and, all the while, the old man kept glancing in the notebooks after each question. After the interrogation, Yama turned around and said a few words to someone behind him, which Lao Can could not make out. Then he saw a person dressed in the same way as the old man emerge from one side of the throne. Approaching Lao Can, he said "Please get up," and Lao Can did as told. "Follow me," the man commanded softly, and they went straight toward the bench before turning west to a place not far from the throne. Off to one side were innumerable little stools lined up three and four rows deep, like cheap seats at a circus. They were all already occupied, except for seven or eight empty ones in the front row. "Please sit here," the man said to Lao Can. Lao Can sat down and saw that the situation to the west side was the same, with all seats occupied. On closer scrutiny, those seated there appeared strange indeed, not only because there were men and women mixed together at random, but because some were in court robes and hats, others in blue padded jackets and pants, and still others naked from the waist up. There were also monks and priests. Moreover, the clothing on some was extremely colourful and neat, while that on others was all tattered and torn – men and women alike. Those in official garb were few, however; no more than one or two. The majority were a ragged lot. Strangest of all was the person seated in the middle of the second row next to someone in court attire. He sat there, feet bare and upper torso naked, wearing only a pair of blue, unlined trousers. Considering there were five rows on the west, he was probably the hundredth person there.

Behind King Yama's throne stood some sixty or seventy people, half of them men, half

women. The men all wore robes and jackets, and boots and large hats mostly decorated with crystal or fancy feathers; there were no more than one or two plain blue hats. The women were in palace costume. Strangest of all, among all these men and women behind the throne, not a single one talked or laughed, and no one at all looked around. It was as if they were made of clay or carved out of wood.

As Lao Can watched, he heard the person seated next to him ask his name. He turned and saw that it was yet another person in padded blue cotton jacket and trousers, but one with a snow-white beard, over seventy years of age, a smile on his face. "My name is Tie," he answered softly.

"Ah, you're a good man," the elderly gentleman said.

"Ah, I'm not," Lao Can joked.

"Those of us who are allowed to sit on little stools are all good," the old man said. "Only, there are degrees of goodness, just as there are degrees of fortune and fate. Just now I saw someone on the west side go off to be a city god. There were two others who were reincarnated into wealthy and prominent families."

"Are there any in the lot who will become immortals or bodhisattvas?" Lao Can asked.

"I don't know," the old fellow said. "You wait. If there are, we'd surely be able to see them."

As he was speaking, the structures and casements of the court disappeared, and even the courtyard in front took on the look of an open area such as that used for martial arts displays. The old gentleman leaned over and whispered in Lao Can's ear: "The Five Powers are about to hold court."

At once five chairs were arranged in front of the hall of judgment, along with five court benches. In front of each bench stood a sergeant-at-arms, much like when county magistrates hold court. Sure enough, in front of each courtroom were an ox-headed lictor and a horse-faced lictor, each with spiked club in hand. Spiked clubs were also carried by five or six runners. What is a spiked club? It is long, somewhat longer than those which reach from the ground up to a man's eyebrows. One end

thickens out like a bud for over a foot, to the circumference of a bowl. All around this thick portion are little blades, each an inch long and less than a half-inch wide, jutting straight out like the teeth of a wolf.

"See how cruel the court sessions of the Five Powers are?" said the old gentleman to Lao Can. "What do you think are the basic reasons people on earth do evil? It's either because they choose to go down the path of wealth or the path of lust. If it's lust, they gain no more than momentary pleasure. And if it's wealth, they trouble themselves for other people's gain since they cannot take one thing with them when they die. In any case, they must then undergo the pain of the spiked club for nothing. What a real waste it all is!"

As he was speaking, five men, with unusually ferocious faces, in ancient-style hats and robes came out from the back. The area in front of the court had been bright and clear. But once the five took their seats, dark and ominous clouds hovered over the gate, covering it completely. The area in front of the seats remained somewhat visible, but nothing could be seen beyond. In the murky darkness, one seemed to hear endless sobbing. If you want to know what will transpire next, please listen to the story as it continues.



Chapter 8

*Amid the scent of blood and gore, bones frizzle in the cauldron of oil;
For dirty and evil speech, souls grind under the mill of stone*

WE HAVE BEEN TOLD that Lao Can was watching the Five Powers conduct trials before the Court of Severe Judgment in hell. Beneath the dark and ominous clouds, he saw an Apang drag a person before the bench to the eastern side. Gentle reader, what do you suppose an Apang is? The name Apang is generally given to all servants who guard over evil spirits in hell. It is a name found in the Buddhist sutras, conferred with the same reasoning as that of people who, having studied abroad, style themselves "Masters of China's millions". But I shouldn't digress. The man the Apang dragged out was a tall and imposing fellow of fleshy and sinister mien. He wore a gown of blue cloth and, looking brave and resolute, was taken before the bench and made to kneel down. The interrogation was inaudible since it was quite far away. All that could be seen in the distance were several Apangs coming up to take the big fellow off. A couple of yards from the bench, a large wooden stake with a sizeable metal ring on it was driven into the ground. The Apangs threaded the man's queue through the ring and pulled it taut, then wound it round and round the stake until it was totally secure. They never even bothered to remove the man's clothing before those on either side, clutching bulbous hammers and spiked clubs, began to rain blows on him. The fellow writhed wildly in pain. With the first blows, he leaped up and thrashed his legs about. But because his queue had been fastened to the stake, his head never left the ground even as he hurled his body all over the place, now leaping upwards, now falling back down. After several times, he was no longer able to get up very high. Each time he went down, the spiked clubs kept hitting him so that within a two-square-yard area blood and gore rained down like hail, while bits of his clothing fluttered about like butterflies. Skin and flesh, with their heavier mass, descended quickly, while the lighter bits of clothing came down

slowly – a ghastly sight to behold. The old gentleman seated next to Lao Can was in tears. "While on earth, I've tried many times to talk to people like him, but they never listened," he whispered to Lao Can. "Now it's come to this. The one who must undergo the suffering aside, it is not easy even for us bystanders to bear."

"You're so right," said Lao Can. "I really cannot watch any longer." But even as these words were coming out of his mouth, in his heart he remained concerned about the sinner, and could not stop sneaking more glances his way. He saw that the man could hardly move any more, his flesh having been totally scattered, leaving only a thoroughly bloodied skeleton whose hands and feet twitched and twitched even as the rest remained largely still. "Look," said Lao Can to the old man, "he's not completely dead. His hands and feet still show jerky movements, and so he must still know pain."

"There's no way to die in the nether world," said the old man as he brushed away his tears. "In a while, he's still got more suffering to go through."

As they looked on, they saw the Apangs loosen the queue from the wooden stake and remove the body to the palace hall. They noticed then that some time ago a cauldron of oil had been set up in front of it. The cauldron had a flat shape, perhaps fifty to sixty feet around but no more than three or four feet deep. Below was a furnace well over ten feet in height with a fire hole four or five feet high. The cauldron rested on three legs, and the flames from the furnace leapt fully two to three feet above its lip. The oil in the cauldron was boiling, rising up and and spilling over the sides like waterfalls; it resembled Mount Fuji in Japan. They then saw several Apangs carry the big fellow's skeleton to the furnace, pick it up with a metal fork, and pass it up to other Apangs standing on a high platform beside the furnace. The skeleton was received with another fork

and pitched into the cauldron. Amazingly, as it went in, it again leaped about, scattering droplets of oil all over. The Apangs standing around covered their faces with pieces of a cloth-like material to protect themselves from the oil. The man's skeleton, bobbing up and down in the oil, whitened in a minute or so. The Apangs peered into the cauldron and saw that it was about ready. They fished the man's bones out with the fork and flung them to the ground.

Now there appeared four or five men and women in front of the benches of the Five Powers, apparently undergoing interrogation.

Screwing up his face, Lao Can told the old man: "I really can't bear to watch any more." The old man was about to reply when King Yama turned to Lao Can. "Tie Ying, you come up here. I want to talk with you," he said.

Lao Can hurriedly got up and went forward. He saw two more flights of steps next to the throne and contiguous to it, and then realized that King Yama was extremely tall. Even though he was seated and Lao Can was standing up next to him, Lao Can's head only came up next to his shoulder, or perhaps a bit below. "When you saw the punishment of the boiling



Bodhisattva Dizang
From Henri Doré, S.J., *Recherches sur les Superstitions en Chine*, 18 vols. (Shanghai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1915)

oil just now," said King Yama, looking down at Lao Can, "did you think it was very cruel? Well, it is the lightest punishment we have; there are many others much more severe."

"I don't understand why the nether world has to employ such drastic penal methods," said Lao Can. "Isn't it in your majesty's power to lessen them? Your servant may be transgressing his bounds, but he feels that, as long as such punishments are used, then at least let the people on earth have a look at them so that they will sin a little less. But since the goings on in the nether world are closed off to them, it appears that they will be punished without prior warning."

King Yama smiled. "Your frank and straightforward nature has not changed. But let me tell you: the nether world has its own reasons for using heavy punishments. Think about it. Our overlord is the Bodhisattva Dizang,⁶ who originally made a solemn vow to release everyone from hell before achieving his own Buddhahood. Many years have now passed and he hasn't made a bit of progress. Wouldn't you think that, deeply merciful as he is, he would want to lessen the punishment? It's just that there is nothing anyone can do. Now I'll tell you about the fundamental reasons for our severe penal practices. First, you should know that human character is divided into dual roots of good and evil, each of which can multiply several fold in a *kalpa*. If the root of good is activated and established in one lifetime, it will multiply several times in the next. After many such lifetimes, a person will become a sage or a Buddha. It's the same with the root of evil, which can also extend itself in each lifetime. So you understand that extending the root of good will eventually benefit the world, while extending the root of evil will harm it.

"Now it's easy to harm the world but difficult to benefit it. A single arsonist, for example, can burn down hundreds of buildings, while one fireman can hardly save a dwelling. Or, when the Yellow River overflows, a single person leaving the dike can result in calamity for tens of thousands, whereas one guarding it can protect no more than a few yards of land, with minimum effect on the overall situation.

This is why punishments in the nether world are all designed to devastate those who do evil. Even so, these heavy punishments still cannot wipe away man's evil nature which, insignificant as it may be at birth, develops day by day once it enters the byways of the world. We can't bear to increase the severity of the punishments any further, but on account of this, human nature declines every day. We in the nether world are just now discussing the matter, and have reluctantly decided on a solution. Rather than just tell you about it, it's better to start by showing you."

Thus speaking, he pointed in front of him, and a large round gate seemed to open up within the noxious clouds of gloom. Lao Can could make out immediately an enormously broad gravestone some three or four miles beyond. On the gravestone were rows of large stone mills, laid out singly or in twos, so that one could not tell exactly how many there were. The mills were each perhaps thirty feet in height, with numerous people piled up below on either side. The people were tightly bound up with ropes, very much like bunches of winter pickles. On each mill stood many Apangs. Below were many other Apangs who picked up the people one by one and threw them upwards, where the Apangs standing on top of the mills caught them in both hands. It was similar to those roof masons in the north who throw up bundles, each with scores of tiles, for their counterparts on the roof to catch, with never a miscue. The Apangs here worked the same way. When an Apang on the mill caught a person, he would push him headfirst into the feeder-hole where he would disappear after two or three turns of the millstone. The Apang below would then toss up another. Blood and gore flowed out from the side of the millstone, mixed with specks of white – the ground-up bones. In the minute or so that Lao Can

⁶Dizang 地藏 is the Chinese equivalent of Kṣitigarbha, a Bodhisattva who is considered the guardian of the earth. Associated with hell as King Yama's overlord, he is nevertheless known as a saviour of lost souls, a deliverer from suffering.

watched, four or five people were thus pulverized, and there were mills like this one in numbers beyond counting. "If four or five can be ground up in one minute," thought Lao Can, "then the number could reach a hundred in a quarter of an hour, couldn't it?"⁷ And with this many mills, if we calculate the number carefully, then even all of the four hundred million people in China wouldn't take up more than a few days."

Even as these thoughts passed through Lao Can's mind, King Yama had already divined them. "You think that each person gets ground up once and that's all?" he declared. "After the grinding, the wind will blow on the remains and restore them to their original shape, ready for a second go-round. There is no set number of times a person must undergo milling. The number depends on how many sins each has accumulated."

"What kinds of sins would deserve such severe punishment?" Lao Can asked.

"Only transgressions of speech," said King Yama.

Lao Can was much taken aback. "Sins of speech are no more serious than an itchy rash," he thought. "Why do they call for such severe punishment?"

By then King Yama had long before stopped pointing, and, with the clouds again shielding what was in front of them, the large mills became invisible. As before, King Yama knew Lao Can's thoughts, and said to him: "So you feel that sins of speech are minor transgressions? It's because everyone thinks so that there are so many such sinners. If someone would only let people know the truth, then maybe those in the world would become more wary, and we in the nether regions could go a little easier on them; that would be a deed of great merit."

"If I could return to the world," thought Lao Can, "I would be willing to spread the word. But I still don't understand why sins of speech are considered so grave."

"Just now I asked you about things like murder, robbery, and lust. Not only have you never sinned gravely in these matters, but you have a bit of merit which can offset what you

did. Even ordinary, reasonable folk would not go as far as to transgress in these areas. But no one has thought about the sin of speech carefully. If one does, then he would know that this sin is greater than practically any other. Next to disregard for family and social order, this sin can be considered the greatest. First, let's take murder. Don't you see that murder is usually committed against one person? And even then, according to the laws in the world of the living, you'd have to pay with your life. Or even if you escape such laws, those of the underworld would incarcerate you for killing just one person. But if it's a transgression of speech, one single utterance can cause the death not only of the person directly concerned, but may even wipe out an entire family. If one person is killed, the proper retribution is one life. But if a family is destroyed, then punishment is meted out according to the number of lives in that family. Now as for robbery, it's a minor matter to rob someone of his wealth, but a major one to rob him of his good name. To *destroy* someone's good name, moreover, is even more serious. Why so? Because all major calamities in the world probably result from it. When there are many who destroy people's reputations, then the world becomes one which cannot distinguish between good and evil. And when this is the case, good people will diminish by the day and bad people increase, until all humankind in the world is destroyed. Thus we in the nether world hate such calumnious people the most; we not only grind them up scores of times over, but also send them on to suffer in all kinds of other hells. Such people, you see, are unwilling to do a single good deed. They think that they can use clever words to turn the good deeds of others into evil ones, and their own evil deeds into good ones. So they free themselves of all scruples and do whatever evil they please. This is also a major example of a transgression of speech. And lust? Lust was originally a rather innocent matter, sinful only inasmuch as it damages a person's reputation for purity. If sexual

⁷Actually, with countless mills all working, the numbers would be far greater. Here, as everywhere in these chapters, the author is very careless with numbers.

intercourse between men and women is considered lust, then what about a husband and wife who have sexual intercourse daily; should it be considered sinful? The ancients were right concerning the matter of lust: if we actually pursue it without restraint, even though it is not sinful, our bodies would weaken. Now our flesh and hair are legacies of our parents, and if we harm them wilfully, then we have sinned against one aspect of filial piety. But if we exercise proper restraint, then nothing about it is sinful at all. If one has sex with someone other than his own wife or concubine, on the other hand, one is then committing the sin of besmirching another's chastity. But adultery is not an easy matter, not like lying, where you only have to open your mouth to utter a falsehood. If one casts doubt on another's chastity with carelessly fabricated gossip, then the sin is tantamount to ruining another's chastity through adultery. If one passes on the malicious gossip of others without thinking, then one's sin is one level less than that of him who started the gossip. You must realize that it is much easier to cast aspersions on someone's chastity than to actually ruin it. So in tallying up such sins over a lifetime, the total guilt becomes rather heavy.

"There are also people who would flirt with women, thus bringing about gossip so that eventually the women become less concerned about their virtuous reputation and lose their chastity as a result. They are also guilty of besmirching the chaste, even though such people may not have committed any illicit acts. This is because these people's unfounded suggestions were the cause of the women's loss of virtue.

"For those who would stir up trouble and cause disharmony to the extent of bringing about death and despondency, their sin is one level more serious than murder. Why so? Because those who die from despondency brought on by others suffer much more than those killed with one swipe of a sword. It is not easy to explain briefly the specifics and particulars of all this, but you can easily understand by deducing from what I have said. Try and imagine what retribution would be appropriate for the total accumulation of guilt on this score for one who has lived in the world for decades."

Lao Can thought it over and felt that what had been said indeed stood to reason. Before he realized it, he broke out all over with goose bumps. "My own transgressions of speech," he thought, "I don't know what they would amount to altogether."

King Yama was again aware of his thoughts. "No one is totally free of transgressions of speech," he said. "But we have to consider whether major sins were committed. If nothing like what was mentioned above took place, then meritorious speech, which is also possible, can balance things out. You should know that while transgressions of speech are seriously damning, virtuous speech is also meritorious beyond imagination. If people can broadcast widely things which are of benefit to others, their merit in heaven is also considerable. In the *Diamond Sutra*, for example, there is the following question: If a good man or a good woman scattered alms of gold, silver, and jewels⁸ in numbers equal to the sands of the Ganges over all your three thousand chilocosms, would he or she earn many blessings? 'Yes, the blessings are many,' answered the disciple Subodhi.

"But the Buddha said to Subodhi that if the good man or good woman were to take to heart at least four sentences from this sutra and then proclaim them to other people, this latter act would be superior to the former one. This is what is written in the sutra, and the Buddha does not lie. Note the powerful implications of the words 'take to heart'; they mean that if a man can take the teaching to heart and then spread it, then the blessings he earns would be greater even than scattering as many precious alms as the countless sands of the Ganges. If we were to measure transgressions of speech in a parallel way, we can see that if someone leads others to do the evil he himself has committed, *his* guilt would be greater than all the sands of the Ganges. From this, you can surmise that merit or debit in heaven or hell is calculated in

⁸The text says "*qibao* 七寶," or the "seven treasures". In Mahayana Buddhism, this is known as the *sapta ratna*, and includes gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, rubies, and cornelian.

the same way. When someone takes to heart Confucian or Daoist doctrines and teaches them to others, his merit would be the same as that described."

Lao Can nodded to indicate his understanding. "Take him to the eastern garden," King Yama turned to say to a member of his retinue. Lao Can followed the man down the platform and went to the rear to exit via the back gate. They turned eastward past two compounds and reached a small courtyard with three rooms on one end. The person took him to the reception room here and lifted the door curtain on the west side. He entered and spoke a few words and a man in his thirties emerged from within. "Please come sit inside," he said, bowing in greeting, as Lao Can's escort took his leave.

"Please tell me your name," said Lao Can as he entered the room.

"My family name is Gu, and I'm called Siyi," answered the man.⁹

Mr Gu then asked Lao Can to occupy the seat of honour at the table, while he himself took the seat of the host by the door. On the table were paper, ink, brushes, an inkstone, and a huge pile of documents. "Master Bu, please sit for a while, and let me first take care of these official matters," said he. Then his brush fairly flew until he was done and had sent off what he had written with a runner.

"I've always admired you very much," he then said to Lao Can.

"I dare not accept such compliments," Lao Can protested repeatedly.

"My master is inviting you to have dinner today," he said. "But he is tied up by his official duties and is unable to play host to you personally, and so he has asked me to do so in his place. Please help yourself to the wine." There were many more pleasantries exchanged between them which we need not go into.

"You have been extremely occupied with your work. How many colleagues do you have here?" Lao Can asked.

"Over five hundred," said Mr Gu.

"That many?"

"We are administrative assistants. Besides myself, there are over ten thousand

clerks who take care of lesser business," said Mr Gu.

"With that many cases," said Lao Can, "can your master handle the trials himself?"

"Cases that my master tries himself number no more than one or two in ten million," said Mr Gu. "Ordinary cases are taken care of by the Five Powers."

"But the Five Powers are just five people," said Lao Can. "Surely that's not sufficient."

"The Five Powers appear as a group of five individuals each court session. But how many groups of five there are, even I don't know exactly. They are divided according to provincial regions, I suppose. For example, I am in charge of cases from provinces in the Yangtze delta. There are many colleagues in charge of affairs in other regions whom I have never met. I don't even recognize some who take care of matters in my own area."

"So that's how it is," said Lao Can.

"There will be four guests for dinner today," said Mr Gu. "Three are scheduled for reincarnation; only you will be returning home. Would you want to leave right after dinner, or would you prefer to look around a bit?"

"If I look around, can I still go back?" Lao Can asked.

"Unless you are tempted by something," said Mr Gu, "you can always go back. As long as you're in control of your mind, you can get back as soon as that desire arises."

"If that's so," said Lao Can, "I would like to see some more of the sights of the nether world. I would be grateful for your continued protection, so that my wandering soul will not be lost."

"You can ease your mind about that; nothing untoward will happen," said Mr Gu. "But I have one thing to tell you. Keep in mind that you should under no circumstances drink the wine at parties. And even if you are wandering about in the streets, don't consume the wine or meat for sale there."

⁹The man's name can be taken to mean "look and ponder the meaning".

"I'll remember your instructions carefully," said Lao Can.

In a short while, someone entered to announce: "The banquet is set. Please instruct us as to what other guests are invited." A few names were mentioned, and, in a flash, everyone appeared.

Mr Gu invited Lao Can outside where he met seven or eight others and exchanged greetings with them. Clutching the wine jug, he led Lao Can to the seat of honour, then the next one down, and then the next, all of which Lao Can refused. Only then did he take him to the fourth seat. "Let me take a lower one," said Lao Can, but Mr Gu was insistent, saying: "The rest are all my colleagues."

After he was seated, Lao Can saw that the table was filled with dishes. There were dark ones, red ones, purple ones, and green ones, and he could not make out what they were. Mr Gu continuously invited the three guests to drink, plying them with inordinately large bowls of liquor. In short order, they were all heavily drunk, and the banquet was concluded. Mr Gu then ordered his servants to help the three to the room on the east side. "You can come along and watch," he turned to tell Lao Can.

Now there were many large beds in this room and each of the three guests was helped onto a bed and covered head to foot with a large sheet as he lay down. Someone slapped the outside of the sheet for two or three seconds and the three guests disappeared. When the sheets were raised, only an empty bed remained. Lao Can was amazed. "What kind of punishment is this?" he quietly inquired.

"It's no punishment," Mr Gu replied. "These three are already being born, wailing *waa waa* up there."

"Of course, the three of them have not been incarnated into one place. How can each reach his destination from having been slapped in this one room?" Lao Can wanted to know.

"Among the unfathomable ways of the world of the living and that of the dead, there is much that you cannot comprehend," said Mr Gu. "I have things to do and must take my

leave. If you want to tour around, how would it be if I sent someone to escort you?"

"I very much appreciate your thoughtfulness," said Lao Can.

Mr Gu gave the order that a servant was needed to escort Lao Can, and one of the servants came up to accept the assignment. Lao Can bowed in farewell, and expressed his thanks for the food and drink. Mr Gu accompanied him to the door of the hall and then said farewell. The servant was just taking Lao Can down the steps of the platform when, all of a sudden, they were in a large marketplace with crowds of people, speeding traffic, and urban bustle. He was about to ask his guide where they were, but the guide had gone off in the meantime and disappeared. "Now I'm really in trouble," thought Lao Can. "I guess I've become some kind of lost ghost." Yet there was nothing he could do but wander on aimlessly. He saw that the marketplace was in no way different from that in the world of the living, with shops hanging out various colourful signs, on which were written characters in gold, white, or black. The buildings were far from uniform; they varied in height and size, and some were new while others were old. The only difference from the world of the living was the colour of the sky, which seemed always to be sombre and dark.

Lao Can went on for a couple of blocks and thought that he would like to explore the smaller side-streets. So he went down two or three of them, quite aimlessly, and found himself in an alley. He saw a lower-class home with a young woman at the gate shopping at a stand displaying miscellaneous goods. Lao Can wasn't paying much attention, but the woman raised her head with a start as she looked at him. "Aren't you Second Brother Tie?" she blurted out. "How did you get here?" She quickly paid for the goods she was purchasing and said, "Second Brother, please come in and sit down." Lao Can saw that she looked very familiar, but could not recall who she was. So he just followed her inside, not knowing what to do next. Who was this person really? This will be made clear to you in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

*Good works store up riches in the world of the dead;
Fortuitous fate activates the fragrance of metamorphosis*

WE HAVE just left Lao Can looking around in a small alley when he chanced upon a young woman who beckoned to him. She looked very familiar, but he could not figure out who she was, and so he just followed her into the house. Now the house consisted of only two rooms; the outer one was the parlour and the one inside the bedroom. Lao Can entered the parlour, made his obeisances, and sat down to take a good look at his hostess. "Aren't you the daughter of the Shi family?" he finally asked.

"I am indeed," the woman said. "Second Brother, you've actually forgotten me. It's now been ten years since we last saw each other, so no wonder you don't remember. I can still recall that year in Yangzhou when you came visiting. From master to servant, there wasn't a single person in the household who wasn't delighted. At the time, the four or five of us sisters had not yet been married off. Who could have imagined that in less than five years, some of us would be married, others would die, and everyone would be scattered hither and yon. When I think of it, I can't help but be saddened!" Her tears flowed as she spoke.

"Ah! When Auntie Shi saw me there that year, she treated me as if I were her real nephew," said Lao Can. "How could anyone foresee that I would hear, after going north for a few years, that you'd married. Then, in another year or so, I heard that you'd died. Recalling it all now, life is so like a dream. Once you awaken, what you experienced while dreaming no longer matters at all. Isn't it lamentable? First there were relatives and old acquaintances who I heard have died off one by one, and I was greatly saddened each time. Now, without being aware of it, I too am dead – a soul lost and woebegone, unsure even of where I am to go. Seeing you here today is like seeing my closest kin. Are you living together with Auntie? Have you seen my mother or my father?"

"I wouldn't have been so fortunate," said Miss Shi. "Good folk that your esteemed parents were, I think they must have gone on to heaven long ago. How would we in the ghostly world be able to see them? I haven't even seen my own parents. I heard that they are in Sichuan, but I couldn't find out how they really are. It's heartbreaking."

"So then you are living here by yourself?" Lao Can conjectured.

Miss Shi blushed. "I'm terribly ashamed to say that I've gotten married again in the world of the dead. My present husband is a little deva; but his temperament is violent and cruel. He yells at me or strikes me at will, and I've had to put up with a lot. There's really nothing for me to live for." As she spoke, her tears rolled down drop after drop.

"What was it that made you want to remarry, then?" Lao Can asked.

"You see," said Miss Shi, "when I died, I was only nineteen years old. Fortunately, I hadn't committed many sins and King Yama let me go free after only one court session. But even though I was free, where was I, a young woman, to go? Neither my own parents nor those of my husband were anywhere to be found; so where would you say I was to go? I heard that those who have given birth to a son or daughter would be taken in by someone from their husband's family. If they had had no children, then they are discounted. Or else if there had been a truly loving relationship with their husbands, and their husbands missed them, then there would be someone from the family to take them in. When the wives who take their places produce sons, they would get the normal share of sacrificial offerings, and not be neglected though they have no male heirs. But you know that my husband in the land of the living was never a decent person himself. I heard that even his parents have become lost souls, that they never received any offerings from him. So

how could I expect him to be concerned at all about any residual feelings or obligations between us as husband and wife? Anyway, if one happens to be woman, the first thing she must do is marry a virtuous man. Then, no matter what happens, she will do well.

"Wait now and I'll show you the large house at the foot of the hill there to the west. It has several hundred rooms, with numerous servants and maids. How happy the owner must be. While he was alive, he was nothing more than a poor student, earning less than a hundred strings of cash a year. Just because he was fond of doing good and was also filial to his parents, in the nether world he's become as rich as all that. In fact though, he was not even tremendously filial. Had he been a really filial person, he would have gone up to heaven long before this, and we would not have any chance of seeing him. If a woman marries someone without virtue, the consequences are frightening. If she were to act as his kin, then she'd be damned to go to hell, with all its unbearable sufferings. Someone like me can be counted as a fortunate one among the unfortunate. If I had known to cultivate myself and make merit within an unvirtuous household, my achievement would have been far greater than that of someone from a virtuous household. Only, I didn't know about such matters while I was alive, and although I now know them in the nether world, the knowledge cannot do me any good anymore. Still, it is my great good-fortune to have met you today. I only hope you'll cultivate yourself when you get back to the world of the living. Then if you achieve salvation, I would also escape this sea of woe."

"That's strange," said Lao Can. "Right now, I, too, am a ghost, just like you. How could I return to the land of the living? Even if I managed that, what do I know about cultivating virtue? Or suppose I did know about that, and were lucky enough to gain salvation, what has that got to do with you?"

"When one man achieves salvation," said Miss Shi, "relatives from nine branches of his clan also go to heaven, and I qualify, don't I? When that happens, I'll even be seeing my own parents."

"I heard that when a man achieves salvation, nine *generations* of his ancestors also go to heaven. Where is anything said about nine branches of the clan?" said Lao Can.

"Nine generations of ancestors going to heaven is the same as nine branches of his clan doing so," said Miss Shi. "If the nine generations before you enjoy great blessings, then the nine branches would also receive some benefit, varying according to the closeness of blood-ties. It's just that those among the nine branches who have already descended to hell would not benefit. As for those like me who are basically innocent, we can certainly benefit from your merit."

"Not only is it extremely difficult to achieve salvation; I'm afraid it's not easy even to return to the world of the living," said Lao Can.

"I can see that you still have the look of the living all over you; I'm sure that you are not a ghost," said Miss Shi. "You'll definitely be returning to the world of the living. I would be beholden to you if you don't forget me in this sea of woe when you get to heaven someday."

"You can count on me," said Lao Can. "But now I have lots of things to ask you about. Where do ghosts live? People say in the grave. But as I see it, the marketplace here is identical to that in the world of the living and certainly not like a grave."

"Come outside please, and I'll tell you," said Miss Shi. The two then went out the front gate. Miss Shi pointed to a place in the sky which had the vague appearance of yellowish clouds. "Have you seen what's up there?" she asked. "That is your ground, just as what is under our feet is ours. Not only do the living and the dead have separate skies; they also have separate earths. Go down another layer and that's the place where ghosts who die become ghouls. Just as ghosts haunt the human world, ghouls can come out and haunt the ghostly world. Ghosts are actually more terrified of ghouls than men are of ghosts."

"Since ghosts and men have different earths, how can ghosts get to the world of men?" Lao Can asked.

"It is often said that ghosts can move

about in the ground like fish can in the water. To a ghost, the earth is as transparent as water is to a fish. Right now, you are standing within the earth, but do you see it at all?" said Miss Shi.

"I am only aware that there is ground under my feet," said Lao Can. "Don't tell me that this atmosphere is all earth."

"Just so," said Miss Shi. "Let me show you some proof." She casually took Lao Can's hand in hers. "I'll go have a look at your earth with you." Her body seemed to spin upwards, and they were soon standing in midair, moving at will in any direction, to Lao Can's great delight. Then they moved upward with all their might. "Look," said Miss Shi, pointing, "up there is your ground. See, there are a few people there burning paper offerings." As they stood on the ground, the people were clearly visible, as if they were on a pane of glass. There were three of them up there burning offerings of paper cash, which dangled down string by string as the incineration was completed. Eight or nine ghosts below them were fighting over the money.

"What's this all about?" asked Lao Can.

"Those three were surely burning paper offerings for a deceased member of their family. The dead person concerned cannot receive them because he has been taken away by the ghostly guards on account of his sins. So what's there is being seized by vagabond ghosts."

"I was just going to ask you," said Lao Can. "The paper cash and paper ingots that are burnt in the world, are they useful here?"

"Of course they are useful," said Miss Shi. "Ghosts are completely dependent on them."

"Then let me ask you: since the practices of each province are different and the kinds of paper money burnt also vary, which province produces the most reliable kind?" said Lao Can.

"They're all equivalent," said Miss Shi. "Ghosts from each province merely use whatever their own province produces."

"What about people like us, who travel all over the place? When we burn paper money to our ancestors during festival days, we sometimes do it the way it's done at home, and some-

times follow local customs. Are there any problems with this?" said Lao Can.

"None at all," said Miss Shi. "If, for instance, a native of Yangzhou does business in Fujian, the money he gets is all in glittering silver dollars. By the time it is remitted to Yangzhou, it becomes pounds sterling, and has lessened only the tiniest bit in value. The five northern provinces use silver while Nanjing and Wuhu use the Spanish dollar. When they are exchanged, don't they become equivalent? It's no different in the world of the dead where you can get money from another province and exchange it for money from this one. One currency is merely substituted for another."

"If a person makes sacrificial offerings to his father or to his ancestors, will the offerings get to them?" Lao Can asked.

"Most certainly," said Miss Shi. "But there is a difference. If during the ceremony the children and grandchildren are really thinking of their fathers and grandfathers, then they would sense it immediately even though they may be thousands of miles away and would be there to receive the offerings right off. But if the children do not take the matter seriously and go through the motions without any feeling, then their ancestors in the nether world would not be conscious of it and the offerings would be grabbed by vagabond ghosts. It's for this reason that the sage Confucius said 'When offering sacrifice, do so as if the person were present.' The sage could comprehend matters of the underworld and hence he established rites and music according to profound doctrines. But after him people did not try to understand these doctrines, and have thus drifted farther and farther away from them."

"In the world there is the practice of burning replicas of whole buildings or warehouses to the dead. Is that effective?" Lao Can asked on.

"Yes," Miss Shi responded. "But houses are not like money, which can be exchanged anyplace. Wherever a building is burnt in sacrifice, it remains on that spot and cannot be moved. There is a way to make a building movable, however. When burning it in sacrifice, line the bottom with reed mats and don't let it touch the ground. When this kind of building

reaches the nether world, it becomes like a boat, transportable over any distance.”

Lao Can nodded. “That really makes sense.”

They returned to the house together and, when they had sat for a while, Miss Shi’s husband returned. He glowered angrily when he realized that a man was there, and asked Miss Shi who the intruder was. Miss Shi cowered, and was unable to articulate an explanation. Impatient, Lao Can announced loudly: “My name is Tie, and I am called Tie Bucan. I’m a cousin of Miss Shi’s, and in passing by your house today, I noticed my cousin was here and so I entered your gate to ask after her. I am unfamiliar with proper etiquette in the nether world, and don’t know whether relatives are allowed social contact. If it is forbidden, then I am remiss for being imprudent. In any case, Miss Shi is blameless.”

On hearing this, the man looked Lao Can over carefully and said, “I’m called Zhe Lisi. I was originally a subject of the Yuan empire, and it’s been over five hundred years since I became a minor official here in the nether world. My first wife served out her time and reincarnated to Shandong, where upon I made your cousin my wife. I was not warned of your coming, and so I have been very rude to you. Even though not many know of you in the world of the living, here you have long been famous. But I had heard that your allotted span of life has not been completed, and even if it were, you should not be wandering about like this. Please enlighten me a little as to what really brought you here.”

“I don’t know the reason either,” said Lao Can. “I heard it had something to do with a case of homicide, and I was escorted here by a guard. I’ve already had an audience with his majesty King Yama, but he didn’t say anything about it to me. I don’t know the least thing about the original case, about the where or who or what, or what it has to do with me. It’s really weighing on me.”

“Cases in the nether regions and those in the world are not alike,” said Zhe Lisi, smiling. “Once you got here, the case was dissolved, and so no interrogation took place. But since we are

blessed with your presence, we ought to be extending to you the hospitality of food and wine. But the victuals of our world can be greatly harmful to a living person, and so I dare not jeopardize your health just to show you the proper respect.”

“This is our first acquaintance, and I am reluctant to trouble you,” said Lao Can. “But since you have been so kind, I would like to ask your advice on a matter. I am at present a lonely soul drifting about with no one to depend on. I don’t know what I should do.”

“Hadn’t you expressed the desire to tour the nether regions?” said Zhe Lisi. “When you get your fill of touring, you will naturally be able to return to your original state. We don’t have to be concerned about that at the moment.” Then he added, “My house is too confining. Let’s go together to a restaurant for some excitement.”

With that, he escorted Lao Can out of the house. “I’ll lead the way,” he said when Lao Can asked where they were to go. They then went on ahead for three or four blocks, made a few turns, and came to a place in front of an expansive river. On the riverbank was a grand restaurant, lit up bright as day with lamps and candles. They went upstairs and saw banquet room after banquet room, like cells in a beehive. Zhe Lisi chose one and entered. A waiter brought a menu and Zhe ordered a few light dishes. Then he asked for the album of available hostesses and, on receiving it, passed it over to Lao Can. “You are most fond of calling on famous courtesans,” he said. “See how those of the nether world compare.”

Lao Can took the album. “How is it that the world of the dead also has such practices?” he exclaimed in surprise. “I haven’t brought along any money and don’t want to burden you.”

“I can still afford to be host in a little matter like this,” said Zhe. “You go ahead and make your picks.”

Lao Can opened the album to look. In it were neither the “Gold Cassia” or “Jade Orchid” common in the North, nor “Precious Darling” or “Little Missy” of the South. Instead, listings in the album were divided

according to provincial origins, and, to his endless amazement, the family name, district, and province of each woman were included. "Aren't these all women from good families?" he cried. "Why have they become courtesans?"

"It's a long story," said Zhe Lisi. "Originally, there were no courtesans in the nether regions. It was Buddha in his mercy who invented the system. Those here were all women of rank in the world of the living, condemned to play the role of licenced prostitutes. Still, they merely act as hostesses in the restaurant and do not sleep with patrons. There are also prostitutes down here who do, but they are always the vagabond ghosts."

"How is it that women of rank in the world are condemned to become licenced prostitutes?" Lao Can asked.

"Because of their cursing," answered Zhe Lisi. "Whatever they curse other people as being, they become in their next existence. She who is fond of making excretory wishes that another have a short life will herself die young in her coming existence, perhaps at age one, perhaps at two or three. Prostitutes in the world of the living were sinners in their previous lives; they have been condemned to reincarnate into their state, to go through the pains of insult and abuse, and even physical chastisement. Having done so, some can then enjoy happiness in the same life, others in the next. Those whose transgressions were very severe, however, would suffer their whole lives through and never be happy. For example, if a woman from a good family whose husband sleeps around with prostitutes is unable to persuade him to change his ways by means of her own virtue, but instead curses both the other women and her husband, the culpability of those she curses is greatly lessened, as are the years of suffering they would have had to undergo. Someone otherwise slated to suffer for a decade, for example, would have the time reduced to eight or nine years if he has been cursed at a lot. But she who did the cursing, once it went to excess, would be condemned to become a prostitute in her coming existence in order to pay for her verbal transgressions by going through various trials. But there are too many who commit this

sin. For though few northerners as yet do so, in the South there are almost none who are not guilty of it. So the merciful Buddha has allowed those whose sins are few to make up for it with verbal merit. Serious sinners are sentenced to be prostitutes in the nether world for a certain number of years, to be released for reincarnation to another area when they have served their time. It's ultimately the number of curses they made that determines the number of years they must be prostitutes."

"Is it sinful for a man in the world of the living to fondle courtesans and imbibe liquor, or even to spend time in houses of prostitution?" Lao Can asked.

"These things are sinful," said Zhe. "But such sins can be made up for. Even to drink and to eat meat are not altogether blameless, but since these are in general sinful acts which are redeemable, they are not big problems."

"If it's sinful to fondle courtesans and to drink in the world of the living, why is it blameless to do the same in the world of the dead?" said Lao Can.

"Not totally blameless," said Zhe. "This is why we pay out two thousand dollars each time we send for a hostess. The money is ransom for our guilt."

"But the living also must pay when they call on prostitutes. Can the money be considered ransom?"

"Yes and no," said Zhe. "Why? Because the culpability of the one who puts out the money is considered public, and thus ransomable. Those who are not paying are committing a private sin, much as if they were flirting with a woman from a good family, and this sin cannot be ransomed. So the answer is both yes and no."

"Then why is it that the money of the living can ransom only public sin while that of the dead ransoms all sins? What reason can you give me?" said Lao Can.

"When living people call on courtesans, it's naturally for lascivious motives. The case is largely different among the dead. Wealthy ghosts are not only fond of seeing courtesans, but are fond of doing so often. This is because each time those licensed ladies are summoned,

it makes up for one of their curses. If they are summoned frequently, then their ledgers would be cleared out early and they would be eligible to be reincarnated. It is to help these women dispel their guilt more quickly that rich men in the nether world like to call on them often; and because of such merciful motives, these men are blameless. In fact, they actually accrue a bit of merit. You can see therefore that guilt or innocence is specifically dependent on the intention at the time of an act. So if someone in the world of the living does the same thing out of compassion, he too would be innocent." Lao Can sighed and nodded.

"Here we've been talking so much you haven't picked anyone," said Zhe. "Who are you going to ask for?"

As Lao Can perfunctorily pointed to a name, Zhe exclaimed, "No, no! At least four names." So Lao Can had to indicate three others, and Zhe also chose four of his own and handed the list to the waiter. In just a couple of seconds, they all arrived. Lao Can looked them over carefully and saw that all had attractive faces, all were carefully made-up and beautifully attired. Despite their attempts to laugh and make merry, however, they had a cold and eerie air about them, which was physically oppressive and gave Lao Can goose bumps.

After a short while, they all left. Zhe paid up and came outside with Lao Can. "Let's go visit a friend," he said, and Lao Can readily agreed. They walked on a bit and came to a thatch-roofed cottage with bamboo fencing, a place quiet and elegant. A houseboy answered Zhe's knock and let the two in. Beyond the front gate was a courtyard with three spacious rooms at the far end. Entering one of them, they saw that the furniture was also neatly arranged, but that there were no paintings or calligraphy hanging on the walls. On three sides was nothing but unadorned whitewash, but on the west wall there were rows of characters, each as big as a tea bowl. Lao Can went up for a look and recognized that it was a poem in seven-syllable regulated verse. It read:

*Prairie fires can hardly exterminate
the ever-renewing grass.*

*Now at this very moment, a lifespan
has meandered past.
The earthworm plays his fading
notes at the bottom of the wall;
From the corner of the dwelling, the
owl hoots his lucky call.
With wine and with flowers, spring
lacks all joy and spark,
And, windless and rainless, the days
are dank and dark.
In autumn fields, at leisure, I roam
with my walking stick,
As chilly clouds stack together,
thousands of miles thick.*

As he was reading the poem on the wall, Lao Can heard Zhe Lisi ask the boy where his master was. "Today is the anniversary of his death," the boy replied. "His great grandson is sacrificing to him, and he has gone to receive the offerings."

"Then we can get back here in good time," said Zhe Lisi. "Let's go out."

So Lao Can again went outside with Zhe as the latter asked him where he would like to go. Lao Can was answering that he didn't know when Zhe pulled back and, without warning, began sniffing repeatedly at Lao Can. "Let's just head back and sit for a while at my house," he said.

They got there very quickly and were just entering the door when Miss Shi came up to greet them. As she stood before Lao Can, she also began sniffing at him. "Congratulations, Second Brother," she said as a smile spread over her face.

"I wanted to go to a couple of other places with Mr Tie when all of a sudden I noticed this scent of sandalwood," said Zhe. "I realized that it must have come from his person and confirmed it when I sniffed at him carefully. That was why I suggested that we return home right away. We're going to share in his good fortune for sure."

"We can look forward to better times now," said Miss Shi.

"See? Right now the fragrance has gotten much stronger," said Zhe Lisi.

Lao Can was speechless with surprise. "I

don't understand what you are talking about," he finally said.

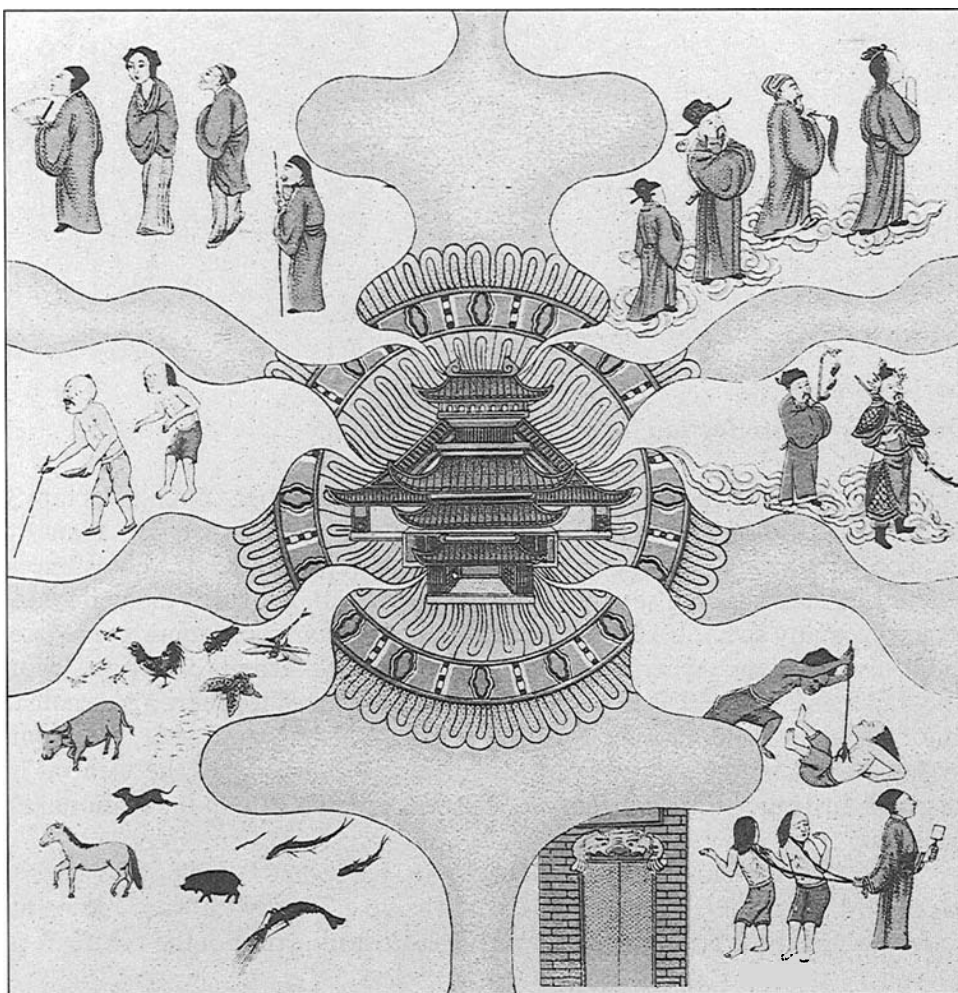
"Second Brother, take a whiff yourself," Miss Shi suggested.

Lao Can then sniffed at the air and detected the scent of sandalwood. "Are you people burning sandalwood incense?" he asked.

"Where are we in the nether world to get sandalwood incense?" said Miss Shi. "If we could have gotten some, we would have left here a long time ago. This is the sandalwood scent from your body. Undoubtedly the good karma you have accumulated in the world of the living has just been activated. Soon, you will

be going to the Great Western Paradise. Now that we here have been visited by you, a Bodhisattva, we will be receiving I don't know how many blessings."

As they were talking, they noticed the fragrance becoming stronger and stronger, and the two little rooms suddenly changed into stately structures of silver and gold. Even the clothing of Zhe Lisi and his wife became dazzling, and their faces took on much greater lustre. Lao Can was astonished and did not know what was happening. He started to ask them questions. What will transpire next? Proceed to the narrative in the following chapter.



The Wheel of the Metempsychosis.
From *Recherches sur les Superstitions en Chine*.