CHAPTER 3

Historical Thematic Changes under the Impact of Buddhism in Early Medieval China as Seen in the Youming Lu

The Youming lu is a work that demonstrates Buddhist influence as it began to appear in Chinese narrative on a relatively large scale. Many aspects of Buddhism, such as karmic retribution, Buddhist concepts of hell, and the Buddha as a savior, appear for the first time in this collection, yet because it is a heterogeneous compilation composed in the early stage of Buddhist influence on Chinese literature, some indigenous themes remain in their original states, while others have been modified to reflect Buddhist assumptions. This continuity mingled with metamorphosis provides us with a vivid picture of some of the historical changes that occurred in the development of medieval Chinese literature and culture.

From Demonic Retribution to Karmic Retribution: Changing Concepts of Bao

Indigenous Bao: Three Types of Retribution

Retribution is at the core of Chinese popular Buddhism as well as traditional Chinese culture. In discussions of the tales in the Youming lu and other zhiguai, some scholars tend to place all of the stories with retribution themes under the heading of “Influenced by Buddhism,” as if retribution is of only Buddhist origin. Yet the concept of retribution, bao 报, is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese culture. Literally, bao means “to respond,” “to reciprocate,” “to repay,” and “to take revenge.” As an important concept in ancient Chinese thought, it has various interpretations and applications.

1 See Wang Guoliang, Liuchao zhiguai xiaoshuo kaolun, p. 161; Zhou Ciji, Liuchao zhiguai xiaoshuo yanjiu, p. 91.
bao has been classified into two categories: ethical retribution, a belief in retribution that is dominated by human beings, and divine retribution, a belief in retribution that is dominated by Heaven. However, there is actually another type of retribution, demonic retribution, which can be seen as a combination of heavenly retribution and ethical retribution. Below is a summary of the indigenous Chinese concepts of retribution.

**Ethical (Human) Retribution**

As a moral concept, retribution is found in pre-Qin texts. Laozi holds that one should “recompense resentment with kindness” 貿怨以德. This is contrary to the commonly held idea, as expressed in the set expression yizhi baoyuan 以直報怨 (to recompense resentment with upright behavior), which is said to have been supported by Confucius. The well-known poem in the Shi jing 詩經 [The Classic of Odes], “Mu gua” 木瓜 [A Quince; Mao #64], reads:

She threw me a quince,
I requited her by a precious ju gem;
yet it was not that I requited her,
but that forever it should serve as [a token of] love.

She threw me a peach,
I requited her by a precious yao gem;
yet it was not that I requited her,
but that forever it should serve as [a token of] love.

She threw me a plum,
I requited her by a precious jiu gem;

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3 Karl Kao’s “Bao and Baoying: Narrative Causality and External Motivations” (CLEAR 11(1989): 115–38) differentiates ethical retribution, bao, from divine retribution baoying. Yet I prefer to use the same word, bao, because in classical texts there is not such a distinct difference in word usage. Patrick Hanan has distinguished “human bao” from “heavenly bao” in his discussion of vernacular short stories (See his The Chinese Vernacular Story, pp. 105–06), yet he has omitted another important aspect of retribution, demonic retribution, which will be discussed in this study.


5 Lunyu zhu shu 論語註疏 [Analects with Commentary and Subcommentary], p. 129a, in Ruan Yuan, Chongkan Songben shisanjing zhu shu, v. 8.