

Surveilled, harmonized, purified: the body in Chinese religious culture

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Abstract

The human body has long occupied a central role in religious praxis across the globe. Recent decades have witnessed a change in academic studies aimed at theorizing the body and its relationship with society and the cosmos. This article adds to this discourse by demonstrating the pervasiveness of the body as a root metaphor in medieval Chinese religious culture. The notion of the body as a microcosmic replica of the social, political, and metaphysical realms, and the need to synchronize it with the natural cycles of the universe, played a key role in the emerging doctrinal and liturgical schemes of Buddhism and Daoism, China's two main organized religious traditions. Using the apocryphal medieval Buddhist scripture The Sūtra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika as a case study, and reading it against the backdrop of earlier religious, medical, and philosophical texts, this article argues that visions of the body as an object of surveillance by the celestial authorities, and its purification and harmonization through ethical practices and ritual means, were hailed as the most significant religious activities in Buddhist and Daoist communities alike in medieval China, a feature that continues to occupy a central place in contemporary Chinese religious life.

KEYWORDS: BUDDHISM; DAOISM; CONFUCIANISM; MICROCOSMIC BODY; CELESTIAL BUREAUCRACY; RITUAL

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Introduction

The human body, its cultivation, and its wellbeing have played an integral role in many religious traditions throughout human history. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the body has become a focus of systematic theorizing in the academic fields of anthropology, sociology, and religious studies. One of the key figures in this process was Mary Douglas, who stressed its significance in deciphering social structures, symbolic codes, and systems of meaning. The body, argued Douglas, functions as the basic link between humans, nature, and society, and can thus be best understood as a system of natural symbols that metaphorically reproduce social categories and concerns, a ‘microcosm of society, facing the center of power, contracting and expanding its claims in direct accordance with the increase and relaxation of social pressures’ (Douglas 1996:77). In her work, Douglas identifies two types of bodies: the individual human body and the compound social body that determines how physical bodies are perceived and experienced. Human bodies, she argues, are therefore ‘always treated as an image of society ... [and] there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension’ (Douglas 1996:74).

The notion of a microcosmic body has occupied a central role in Chinese religion, medicine, and philosophy. As early as the third century BCE, cosmos, body, and state were depicted as components of a set of mutually resonant systems that were intrinsically linked in shaping and transforming each other (Sivin 1995). Likewise, the idea of a ‘symbolic body’ that is interconnected with the cosmos and can be transformed through alchemical, meditative, and ritual procedures has been central in religious Daoism (Despeux 1996; Schipper 1993). In this article, I will expand on previous scholarship to claim that, in early medieval China, during the emergence and consolidation of the two organized religious traditions of Buddhism and Daoism, the human body became the focus of religious and philosophical investigation, and its cultivation and proper management became the center of ethical and spiritual practice. I will do so through an examination of a specific case study, a syncretic medieval Buddhist scripture titled *The Sūtra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika* (*Tíwèi Bōlì Jīng*, henceforth referred to as TWBLJ).

Despite its eponymous association with Trapuṣa and Bhallika, two wealthy Central Asian merchants who are known for offering the historical Śākyamuni Buddha a meal after his enlightenment and becoming his first lay disciples, Chinese sources indicate that the text was always regarded with suspicion and was widely believed to be apocryphal, namely, an

original work written in Chinese trying to pass itself off as a translation of an earlier Indian text.¹ The earliest reference for the TWBLJ can be found in the *Collected Records of the Tripitaka* (*Chū Sānzàng Jìjì*), a medieval catalog of the early Buddhist texts, where it is described as a two-part text compiled in the mid-fifth century CE by a monk named Tanjing. Later bibliographers expound this claim and suggest that the TWBLJ was produced in a religious community located on the northern slopes of Mount Wutai, modern-day Shanxi Province, in an attempt to revive the teachings of the Buddha after the anti-Buddhism campaign led by Emperor Taiwu (r. 424–452) of the Northern Wei Dynasty (Cao 2011:63–5).

Given the perennially negative attitude toward this text in Buddhist sources, it is hardly surprising to find that it was not included in the *Taishō Tripitaka*, the definitive canon of East Asian Buddhism. Moreover, since only short fragments of the TWBLJ were preserved in the canonical literature, it did not receive much attention throughout most of Chinese history. This changed in the early twentieth century, when multiple versions bearing a similar title were found in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang in Western China. The version of the text alluded to in this article is based on two handwritten manuscripts located in the Stein collection at the British Library in London and in the Pelliot collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, which have both been reproduced by Makita Tairyō and included in his study of apocryphal Buddhist sources (Makita 1976).

The TWBLJ is a moral treatise aimed at a lay audience. Written as a dialog between the Buddha and his disciple Trapuṣa, it provides a code of ethics for lay practitioners and emphasizes the role of the monastic community in providing religious instruction and healthcare services for the community. The first section of the text (Pelliot 3732) stresses the need to uphold the Five Precepts (Sanskrit – *pañcaśīla*; Chinese – *wǔjiè*) against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and the consumption of alcohol. The second section (Stein 2051) focuses on the Purification Rite (Sanskrit – *pośadha*; Chinese – *zhāi*), a ritual event held in Buddhist monastic centers for the lay population, featuring a combination of fasting, chanting, confession of sins, and moral education. Both the Five Precepts and the Purification Rite were conceptualized and practiced in India long before the arrival of Buddhism to China, and have their roots in the Brahminical Vedic tradition (Haskett 2011). In the TWBLJ, however, these two imported sets of practices are articulated and theorized using pre-Buddhist Chinese ideas and terms. Central to this conceptual framework are the notions of the body as a microcosm, an entity representing the correlation between its inner geography and the bureaucratic structure of the

divine realm, and the intrinsic link between moral rectitude and physical wellbeing.

The early identification of the TWBLJ as an apocryphal text and its heavy use of pre-Buddhist Chinese terminology and conceptual models have led some modern scholars to treat it as an example of ‘plebian’ or ‘folk’ Buddhism, a watered down Chinese version of doctrinal Buddhism that played a vital role in the spread of the religion during the medieval period, but which was ultimately rejected by the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and ‘faded out from center stage’ (Lai 1987:32).² In the following sections, I will argue against this position and demonstrate that the TWBLJ and its usage of pre-Buddhist jargon is in fact an important example of the centrality of the idea of the microcosmic body as a source of symbolic meaning in Chinese religious culture. By offering a close reading of key passages from this text against the backdrop of medical, philosophical, and religious texts that have often been associated with the Confucian and Daoist traditions, I hope to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the human body as a root metaphor that transcends religious traditions and identities. Its depiction as an object of surveillance by the celestial authorities, and its purification and harmonization through ethical practices and ritual means, were hailed as the most significant religious activities in many Buddhist and Daoist communities alike, a feature that continued to occupy a central place in Chinese religious life, well into the contemporary period.

Correlative cosmology and the harmonized microcosmic body

The first section of the TWBLJ (Pelliot 3732) begins with an explanation of the Five Precepts, a set of basic ethical guidelines followed by lay believers in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Unlike the highly detailed disciplinary codes for monks and nuns, the lay precepts were designed to be comprehensible and accessible to a mostly illiterate population, and are therefore often expressed as easy-to-follow injunctions, abstentions from unwanted forms of action. In medieval China, becoming a lay believer was often marked by taking the precepts in a formal ceremony officiated by a member of the monastic community (Harvey 2000:81). One of the earliest descriptions of this ritual can be found in the *Sūtra on Lay Precepts* (Sanskrit – *Upāsakaśīla Sūtra*; Chinese – *Yōupó Sāijiè Jīng*), an Indian scripture translated into Chinese by the monk Dharmakṣema in the early fifth century CE. The text, which was widely circulated in northern China during the writing of the TWBLJ, argues that taking the precepts will allow lay believers to accrue merit, free themselves from physical and mental unwholesomeness, and break the karmic cycle of death and rebirth (*samsāra*) (Shih 1994:149–56).

Much like other early Indian Mahāyāna texts, the text displays an overall negative attitude toward the human body, depicting it as the source of suffering and as an impediment to enlightenment (Williams 1997:208).

The author of the TWBLJ, on the other hand, follows a different strategy in explaining the Five Precepts. Like the *Sūtra on Lay Precepts*, it draws on Indian cosmology and terminology to describe the role of the precepts in transcending bodily functions, sense perception, and mental faculties. When Trapaṣa asks the Buddha to explain the relationship between the precepts and the body, the Buddha frames his response using Indian concepts. The physical body, he states, is made from the combination of the Four Elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Moreover, it is constituted by the Five Aggregates (Sanskrit – *pañca-skandhaka*; Chinese – *Wūyīn*): form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness, the bodily and mental factors that take part in the rise of craving and attachment, as well the Six Corrupters, which are the desire-objects of the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, touch, and mind. Unlike the translated *Sūtra on Lay Precepts*, however, the TWBLJ, which was produced in China, supplements the Indian cosmological framework with a Chinese one. In fact, the majority of the first section of the text outlines an explanatory model that draws a correspondence between each of the Five Precepts and pre-Buddhist cosmological terms, such as the Five Directions, Five Celestial Bodies, Five Sacred Peaks, Five Mythical Emperors, Five Phases, and Five Depots (Tavor 2017:434–6).

The *locus classicus* for these models of correspondence can be found in the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor – Basic Questions* (*Huángdì Nèijīng Sùwèn*), one of the most influential theoretical texts in the history of Chinese medicine. Compiled during the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), this text outlines two interconnected models of the human body. The first treats the body as a microcosm, an entity whose inner geography mirrors that of the natural world around it. The second describes the body as an administrative unit that reflects the structural elements of the bureaucracy of the newly established unified empire. The use of administrative jargon to describe the inner workings of the body is best attested in chapter 8, in which the various organs are compared to the bureaucratic offices of the Han: the heart serves as the ruler, the lungs officiate as the chief advisor, the liver as the commander of the army, the gallbladder as the state comptroller, the spleen and stomach as the officials in charge of grain storage, and so on (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011:156–7).

The function of the spleen and stomach as granaries is significant, as one of the key features of this model is its depiction of the internal viscera as repositories of *qi*, the vital energy that animates all things in the universe. Inside the body, *qi* travels in a network of conduits that connect the various

viscera. These core organs are divided into two sets: the Five Depots (*zàng*) – heart, liver, lungs, kidneys, and spleen; and the Six Palaces (*fū*) – the large intestine, small intestine, stomach, urinary bladder, gall bladder, and the triple burner.³ The different functions of the depots and palaces are best described in chapter 11 of the *Basic Questions*, where the Five Depots are said to be permanent storehouses of *qi* that need to be kept full at all times, whereas the Six Palaces are depicted as temporary processing facilities. When food and drink enter the body, for example, they first fill the stomach, where they are processed, and then gradually exit the body through the small and large intestines (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011:205–7).

As a medical text, the primary function of the *Basic Questions* is to provide a theoretical model of the human body and internal structure, an etiology of the diseases that can harm it, as well as diagnostic tools and therapeutic techniques to be used by the physician. Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the external pathogens that invade the body and damage it – insurgent winds (*zéfēng*) and depleting evils (*xūxié*). The concept of wind can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions (c. 1200 BCE), where, alongside ancestral spirits, they were depicted as capricious daemonic forces that can cause large-scale damage in the form of natural disasters or specific targeted damage in the form of disease. As supernatural forces, they can be placated and even controlled through ritual means – the offering of sacrifice (Kuriyama 1994). By the Western Han, when the *Basic Questions* was compiled, the Shang worldview of an unpredictable cosmos inhabited by spirits and demons was supplemented by what is often referred to as ‘correlative cosmology.’ According to this model, natural processes follow a set pattern and move alongside a predictable fixed pattern. The changing of the seasons, the movement of celestial bodies, and even the working of supernatural forces can be observed and categorized using the conceptual framework of *yin* and *yang*, the Four Seasons (*sìshí*), and the Five Phases (*wǔxíng*) (Lloyd and Sivin 2002).

The notion of the body as microcosm is one of the main features of Han correlative cosmology. While external pathogens such as insurgent winds and depleting evils cannot be completely eradicated, their movement and impact on the body can be predicted, as they, much like everything else in the cosmos, follow natural cycles and patterns of change. Chapter 2 of the *Basic Questions* outlines a preventative medical regimen that is based on a correlative cosmological model. Each of the Five Depots, the main viscera that store *qi* in the body, are susceptible to different external pathogens at different periods of the year. Physical health depends on harmonizing one’s bodily cycles with the natural cycles of the world by following a regimen that fortifies specific bodily systems when they are most vulnerable.

Neglecting to tend to this task, argues the author of the *Basic Questions*, will result in disease (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011:53).

The idea that correspondence between bodily and natural cycles can promote health and longevity had become quite pervasive by the Western Han, especially among affluent educated elites who enjoyed the resources and leisure time needed to tend to such individual regimens. A self-cultivation manual titled *The Stretching Book (Yinshū)*, found in a tomb in Zhangjiashan, modern-day Hubei Province, in 1983, outlines a set of physical exercises, breathing techniques, and dietary rules designed to create a perfect state of harmony and correspondence between the practitioner's body and the daily, monthly, and seasonal cycles of the world (Tavor 2016). The *Basic Questions* develops this idea by outlining the correlation between the body's Five Depots and their corresponding counterparts. Chapter 4 offers a comprehensive table of correspondence that associates the Depots with the Five Phases, cardinal directions, celestial bodies, musical notes on the pentatonic scale, as well as smells, flavors, and location of the disease associated with each Depot. The liver, for example, corresponds with the eastern direction, the wood phase, Jupiter, the *jué* note, the eyes, sour flavor, fetid odor, and its disfunction can manifest itself as tendon pain (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011:91).

The goal of the tables of correspondence in the *Basic Questions* was to provide the physician with a diagnostic tool. In the following centuries, however, these tables, and the correlative cosmology that informed them, became a common trope in literary, religious, and philosophical texts. The *Discussions in the White Tiger Hall (Báihūtōng)*, a Confucian text compiled in the first century CE, features a discussion of the body that draws heavily on the administrative terminology of the Han imperial government. It is accompanied by a detailed table that equates the Five Depots with their corresponding sense organs, cardinal directions, Five Phases, and celestial bodies, but it also adds a moral dimension, associating each Depot with one of the five Confucian virtues: the liver with humaneness (*rén*), the lungs with rightness (*yì*), the heart with ritual propriety (*lǐ*), the kidneys with wisdom (*zhì*), and the spleen with trustworthiness (*xìn*) (Unschuld 2009:32). The ethicization of the Five Depots, which became a prevalent trope in this period, might explain the decision taken by the author of the TWBLJ to choose a table of correspondence to explain the five Buddhist precepts to a lay audience. Thus, while the content of the precepts did not necessarily match their corresponding Confucian virtues, the explanatory pre-Buddhist model of correlative cosmology was already an indispensable part of the philosophical and religious milieu of medieval China, making

it an attractive and persuasive device to elucidate complex Indian terms to the local Chinese lay population.

Body gods and the celestial bureaucracy

The second half of the second century CE was a formative period in the history of Chinese religion. The sociopolitical instability created by the gradual decline of the Han regime produced a series of popular rebellions that challenged the existing world order. One of these uprisings eventually led to the formation of an independent theocratic state in Hanzhong, modern-day Shaanxi Province. Known as the Way of the Celestial Masters (*Tiānshī Dào*), the scriptures and practices of this movement laid the foundation for the emergence of Daoism, which eventually became one of China's main organized religious traditions alongside Buddhism. While Celestial Masters communities presented themselves as alternatives to the Han regime, their theology incorporates some of the key elements we have seen in the previous section: correlative cosmology, the notion of the body as microcosm, and the bureaucratic structure of the universe (Kleeman 2016).

One of the key features of late Han religious culture is the deification and anthropomorphization of historical figures and abstract philosophical notions. The founder of Celestial Masters Daoism, Zhang Daoling, claimed to have received a revelation given to him by the Most Venerable Lord Lao (*Tàishàng Lǎojūn*), a deified version of Laozi, the supposed author of the *Book of the Way and its Power* (*Dàodéjīng*), who lived during the Warring States period (485–221 BCE). Evidence for the worship of Laozi as someone who was born as a human but was able to achieve a deified state of immortality became more prominent during this time. Other contemporaneous textual sources go as far as claiming Laozi to be the human incarnation of the Way (*dào*), a phrase used in pre-imperial and Han texts to describe an abstract metaphysical entity or cosmic principle (Raz 2015).

A similar process of deification and anthropomorphization took place on the microcosmic level. In texts associated with the emerging Daoist religion, the Han model of the internal organs as storehouses of *qi* and as bureaucratic offices gradually gave way to a new vision of the body as the dwelling place of powerful internal spirits or gods. In the *Master of the Riverbank* (*Héshànggōng*), a late second century CE commentary to Laozi's *Book of the Way and its Power*, the Five Depots are described as the dwelling place of five spirits. The liver contains the celestial spirit (*hún*), the lungs the terrestrial spirit (*pò*), the heart the soul (*shén*), the kidneys vital essence (*jīng*), and the spleen contains the will (*zhì*). As a meditational

text, the *Master of the Riverbank* provides a set of practices designed to promote physical wellbeing and longevity. By emptying the Five Depots of excessive emotions and desires, the practitioner makes room for divine spirits to descend from the heavens and reside within their body. At that point, the practitioner is tasked with protecting and preserving their body gods by following a set of moral, dietary, and religious guidelines. Failure to do so will result in illness and, in some cases, death (Chan 1991:139–47).

The self-cultivation regimen described in the *Master of the Riverbank* eventually became one of the hallmarks of the Daoist religion. While Celestial Masters communities began spreading across China, offering communal ritual services to lay followers, the post-Han period also saw the emergence of an elite form of Daoism focused on individual meditational techniques. One of the best examples of this practice can be found in the *Central Scripture of Laozi* (*Lǎozǐ Zhōngjīng*). Widely believed to be written in the third century CE, the text offers a detailed description of a meditation technique that involves the ritual visualization and actualization (*cúnsī*) of internal spirits within the human body. Attributed to the deified Laozi, the text can be read as a practical manual that offered an individual practitioner vivid descriptions of the internal geography of the body, the appearance and attributes of its divine inhabitants, and the correct procedures and schedules needed to evoke them. Drawing on these descriptions, as well as illustrations and diagrams, practitioners were tasked with visualizing, manifesting, and nourishing their body gods to maintain the alignment between their own body and the universe (Pregadio 2006:131–5).

The model of the body depicted in the *Central Scripture* draws heavily on the one found in the *Basic Questions*. With the fall of the Han, many educated literati who once served in government began to focus their attention elsewhere. Well versed in the classics, they utilized the idea of the body as a microcosm and the imperial bureaucratic terminology in their descriptions of the internal landscape of the body. Section 37 of the *Central Scripture*, for instance, describes the lungs as the imperial secretary, the liver as the imperial librarian, the heart as the minister of military affairs, the left kidney as the minister of education, and the right kidney as the minister of public works – all titles of officials in the Han government. Section 20, on the other hand, draws on the model of the body as microcosm, referring to the stomach, titled the Great Granary, as the counterpart of Heaven, the residence of microcosmic replicas of the sun, moon, and other celestial constellations, and to the navel, titled the Great Abyss, as the counterpart of Earth, the dwelling place of the Five Sacred Peaks, Four Seas, and Mount Kunlun (Lagerwey 2004).

An important component of this microcosmic model was the synchronization of bodily and natural cycles. This notion, which was one of the central features of the *Basic Questions*, is articulated in the *Central Scripture* using the new anthropomorphized cosmological framework. While *qi* still plays a central role in this model, this text supplements it with the metaphor of imperial tours of inspections. Much like the officials of the Han bureaucracy, internal gods were believed to move around the body according to a set schedule. During the daytime, for example, they resided in the abdomen, enjoying the light emanating from the sun in the navel. After dark, they migrated to the chest and spent the night cavorting and playing inside the heart. In passage 12, the author outlines a ritualistic schedule that follows the cycle of the Four Seasons and includes a series of state sacrifices that, during the Han, were performed by the emperor. The only difference is that, in the *Central Scripture*, the entire ritual is visualized by the practitioner and takes place inside their own body. The top of the head, in this model, was the location of the Suburban Altar (*jiāo*), where the Han emperor sacrificed to the supreme deity of Heaven (*tiān*), the occipital bone hosted the Ancestral Shrine (*miào*), whereas the Altars of Soil and Grain (*shèjì*), another important site in Han state religion, were located in the spleen and large intestines.

In the religious vision of the *Central Scripture*, visualizing their body gods according to the correct ritual schedule allows the adept to harness their divine power and achieve spiritual boons that once were available only to the emperor. This meditational regimen, however, was only available to a small section of the population. Not only did it require a high level of literacy, but it also involved the purchase of manuscripts, illustrations, and other expensive materials. Living in the volatile sociopolitical environment of the post-Han world, most people were concerned with the more pressing concerns of survival. These were met by the religion of the Celestial Masters, which continued to spread across China, offering material and spiritual relief to lay followers. After the initial surge of enthusiasm that followed the establishment of the first theocracy in Hanzhong, a crisis of faith emerged. In an attempt to fend off its competition, later Daoist communities began to stress a millenarian ideology, promising their followers salvation from an approaching apocalypse. These salvific promises were intrinsically linked with piety to a strict regimen of moral conduct, designed to distinguish the members of the community from the depraved outside world and ensure their ultimate salvation by the grace of the deified Way (Kleeman 2016:134).

In the etiology of the *Basic Questions*, illness was depicted as the result of external pathogens that attack the body and interfere with its normal

operation. While some of the terms used to describe these pathogens, such as ‘depleting evil,’ had a definite moral undertone, the text did not draw a direct link between illness and immoral behavior. The notion that sinful thoughts and desires need to be expelled from the body in order to purify it and allow the spirits to reside within it, however, became one of the key tenets of Celestial Masters Daoism. This is perhaps best attested in the first section of the *Scripture of the Precepts and Codes Taught by the Celestial Master* (*Zhèngyī Fǎwén Tiānshī Jiàojiè Kējīng*), a collection of five texts that can be dated to the middle of the third century CE (Kleeman 2016:128).

The text begins with a description of an ideal past in which Heaven, Earth, and the human realm existed in a state of perfect harmony. When this harmony was broken, it impacted on the natural cycle of *yin* and *yang*, resulting in a series of natural disasters. Written in the decades following the fall of the long-standing Han Dynasty, the text outlines the impact of disharmony on the state, the family, and the individual. The complete breakdown of the sociopolitical order had left believers in a precarious state, susceptible to harm by external forces such as marauding invaders, feuding bloodlines, and malicious demons. The only way for them to survive was to follow the precepts and codes handed down by the deified Way, which are described in detail in the following section. These included a combination of Confucian values, such as filial piety, humaneness, and rightness, Daoist religious guidelines, such as venerating the Way and following the commands of the Celestial Masters, injunctions against murder, illicit sexual behavior, gluttony, and deceit, and a variety of moral imperatives such as charitability and respect toward fellow community members.

These regulations are followed by a more detailed description of the five key precepts that apply to members of the Celestial Masters communities. While these are not as simple, comprehensible, and easy to follow as the five Buddhist precepts described in the TWBLJ, they do cover the basic moral injunctions against harming others, engaging in deceitful behavior, succumbing to greed, and indulging in alcohol and other illicit activities. Moreover, this passage also expands on the relationship between the precepts, the celestial bureaucracy, and the body. In the precept that warns against harboring evil thoughts and intents, we find that doing so will unsettle the spirit that resides within the heart. As the heart is the ruler of the Five Depots, upsetting its spirit will cause a chain reaction, encouraging all the other body gods to leave the body, thereby reducing one’s lifespan. This claim, which reflects the anthropomorphization process we first saw in the *Master of the Riverbank* commentary, is expanded in the following passage.

Second precept: do not let your emotions and temperament succumb to violence and anger, filling your heart and leaking out of your mouth. Do not raise your voice and curse or engage in blood oaths and incantations. This will agitate Heaven and shake Earth, startle the spirits and terrify demons. Committing multiple violations without changing your ways, you will accumulate rancor inside you, harming and depleting your Five Depots. Once the Five Depots are harmed, disease cannot be cured. Those who revere the Way know that inside the body there are celestial bureaus, emissaries, and soldiers. Every time you commit a violation or let anger take over you, your inner spirits will stop protecting you and the emissaries and soldiers will submit a memorial to the celestial bureaus revealing your sins and transgressions. As those accumulate, you will be taken off the registry of the living and put on the registry of the dead. Those with small transgressions will bring sin on their own bodies, while those whose sins are many will also bring calamity on their descendants. (Kohn 2004:13–14, with some alterations)

The idea that emotional excess can harm the Five Depots and inflict physical damage was prevalent in early medical sources. This passage, however, makes it clear that the medical etiology of *qi* was replaced in religious Daoist texts with a different model of the body that, in the words of Christine Mollier, ‘is congenitally inhabited with demons and spirits’ (Mollier 2006:75). According to this framework, the various bureaucratic officials that dwell inside the body are entrusted by the Way to keep a record of one’s moral conduct and submit it to their celestial counterparts. This comprehensive ethical model, which draws on earlier notions of the body as a microcosm, the physical effects of sinful behavior, and the correspondence between earthly and celestial bureaucracy, has become one of the key tenets of medieval Chinese religious culture. In the final section of this article, we will see how the author of the TWBLJ weaves together all of these non-Buddhist elements into a palpably Buddhist religious vision that stresses obedience to the Five Precepts and posits the Buddhist monastic community, through their role in the performance of the Purification ritual, as the key for maintaining the physical and spiritual wellbeing of the lay population.

Ledgers, calendars, and watchful eyes

In his seminal *Discipline and Punish*, first published in 1975, Michel Foucault famously describes the human body as the key site where social and political power relations are played out. ‘In every society,’ he argues, ‘the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations’ (Foucault 1995:136). Foucault defines the various disciplines used to mark, train, shape, and manipulate the body

as 'projects of docility' designed to enhance its social utility and aptitude at the expense of individual autonomy. The main focus of this study is the emergence of new institutions of power in eighteenth-century Europe, such as the factory, the school, the hospital, and the prison, which together enabled the emergence of a new 'political anatomy,' an effective mode of producing subjected and docile bodies. While the effects of each institution differed, argues Foucault, they all used some shared common tools and techniques aimed at establishing control over human activity.

Some of these devices were temporal in nature, such as the timetable. Used in factories and schools, as well as in modern armies, adherence to a strict schedule allowed these institutions to establish rhythms, impose particular activities, and regulate the cycles of repetition (Foucault 1995:149). Other forms of control were spatial, with the panopticon serving as the most well-known example. Docility, claims Foucault, can only be achieved through continuous inspection and surveillance. In the past, compliance with the monarch's law was motivated by a fear of corporal punishment. Public spectacles of bodies punished, tortured, and even killed were seen as symbolic representations of the sovereign's authority. In the modern prison system, he argues, such displays were replaced by a new system that sought to monitor, manage, and transform bodies instead of simply punishing them. Central to this new institution was the panopticon, a ring-shaped building of cells where prisoners were always open to surveillance from a central watchtower, without ever knowing if they are being watched. Being under the constant gaze of an invisible overseer was meant to encourage prisoners to monitor themselves and exert self-control over their own actions without physical coercion (Foucault 1995:200–9).

Foucault uses the term Panopticism as a metaphor for the modern disciplinary society, a mode of political control based on surveillance and meticulous record keeping (Turner 2008:82). Given the central role of the bureaucratic paradigm as one of the key organizing categories of Chinese religious culture, I believe that Foucault's theory can offer us some important insights into the cosmological and ethical vision depicted in the TWBLJ. When the feuding warring states were unified by the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), the new regime launched a series of economic reforms that involved the standardization of weights and measures, the system of currency, and the sprawling infrastructure of the emerging empire to facilitate commerce. This was accompanied by political reforms, which sought to replace the old aristocratic political system with a new bureaucratic model based on the circulation of written administrative and legal documents between the central government and the various commanderies and provinces.

The rapid demise of the Qin regime and its replacement by the Han Dynasty did not change this policy. During the following four centuries, bureaucracy gradually pervaded all aspects of social and individual life. As we have already seen, the idea of the body as a collection of interacting administrative units that mirrored the structural elements of the empire was central to the physiological and moral vision of Han texts such as the *Basic Questions* and the *Discussions in the White Tiger Hall*. The bureaucratic paradigm was also highly influential in the realm of religion, where it was used to explain the interaction between the human and divine realms, and the structure and organizing principles of the afterlife. Anna Seidel's analysis of Han funerary texts reveals that, even before the arrival of Buddhism and the emergence of Daoism as an organized religion, the idea of celestial and netherworld bureaucracies that surveilled human activity and judged their postmortem destiny accordingly was already quite pervasive (Seidel 1987). With the introduction of Buddhism, Indic cosmological notions, such as the karmic cycle of death and rebirth and the Six Realms of rebirth and existence (Sanskrit – *śaḍgati*; Chinese – *liùqù*), and the detailed depictions of hell associated with them, were gradually combined with the pre-existing Chinese models (Teiser 1994:4–5). The TWBLJ serves as a stellar example for the pervasiveness of the bureaucratic framework and the intermingling of Indic and Chinese ideas during the medieval period. Its panoptic model of a moral universe, which revolves around celestial surveillance and adherence to a strict ritual timetable, can thus serve as a valuable case study that demonstrates the centrality of the body in Chinese religious culture.

We have already learned that the first section of the TWBLJ (Pelliot 3732) focuses on the Five Precepts, the basic ethical guidelines for lay believers in Mahāyāna Buddhism. While the text draws on some Indic terminology, it mostly follows the paradigm set in Han texts, equating the precepts with indigenous sets of five (cardinal directions, Confucian moral virtues, sacred mountains, and internal organs, to name just a few) and stressing the correspondence and need for harmonization between bodily and natural cycles. Moreover, much like its contemporaneous medieval Daoist texts, the TWBLJ promotes an anthropomorphized vision of the human body, in which each of the Five Precepts and the Five Depots associated with them are governed by designated deities known as emissaries (*shǐzhě*). The precepts against killing, for instance, are associated with the emissary that resides in the liver and are in charge of the circulation and dissemination of *qi* inside the abdomen (Tavor 2017:435). The five emissaries, however, are only one part of a larger network of body gods whose names and titles are based on the administrative system of the Han, such

as the Commander-in-Chief (*sīmǎ*), the Minister of Education (*sītú*), and the Minister of Public Works (*sīgōng*).⁴ While the specific location of the bureau of each deity is not identical to that found in the aforementioned Daoist *Central Scripture*, the overall list bears a close enough resemblance to assume that we are dealing with a fairly standardized pantheon of body gods based on Han state religion. By the fifth century CE, the system of imperial rites and sacrifices performed by the emperor and his court officials and ritualists was incorporated into the rituals of organized religions such as Daoism and Buddhism, and transposed from the macrocosmic realm of the empire into the microcosm of individual human bodies.

The ritual regimen depicted in the *Central Scripture*, which involved the visualization and actualization of body gods for the purposes of personal gains such as longevity or even immortality, was aimed at highly educated elites. As such, it did not address any ethical concerns. The TWWBL, however, much like the Daoist *Scripture of the Precepts and Codes Taught by the Celestial Master*, was written with a popular lay audience in mind, and thus focused on the promotion of a set of ethical prescriptions. Hence, it is hardly surprising that its detailed description of the various body gods and their location within the human body ends with the following conclusion.

The human body is part of the same system as Heaven and Earth and the myriad things. The gods are recording your actions, so you should avoid violating [the Five Precepts]. You should know that Heaven cannot be deceived, and Earth cannot be betrayed. Thus, you must cultivate yourself, be vigilant in your actions, and refrain from idleness. (Tavor 2017:436)

The lay practitioner, much like the subjects of the Chinese imperial bureaucratic state, lived in a world of constant surveillance (de Crespigny 1981). However, whereas the state apparatus could only monitor social interactions and compliance with the laws of the land, the celestial bureaucracy was able to keep track of the practitioner's personal dispositions and inner mental states. It did so with the help of one's own body gods, which acted as the eyes and ears of the divine authorities, functioning as an internal panopticon designed to prevent immoral behavior and ensure obedience to the precepts of the religious community.

As seen in the previous section, in medieval Chinese religious culture, body gods were conceived as personal guardians that can shield the practitioner from external demonic attacks. Their protection, however, was not guaranteed. Any form of immoral behavior could offend and unsettle these deities, resulting in their departure. The second section of the TWWBLJ (Stein 2051) outlines the potential disastrous results of such insubordination.

Those who neglect to observe one precept will suffer the Five Evils, and five good spirits will leave [their body]. Those who neglect to observe all five of them will suffer twenty-five evils and twenty-five good spirits will leave [their body]. All the gods and good inner spirits will be aggrieved and discontent, the Director of Destiny will reduce their lifespan allotment, and all the demons will lay siege to their bodily orifices, inflicting them with disease ... The worldly and base unenlightened masses who do not understand the Dharma proclaim to serve the Buddha, but their actions will only result in misery and death. They do not understand that their behavior sets them apart from those who practice [the Buddhist Dharma], nor do they cherish the services of an enlightened teacher or uphold the precepts and prohibitions. Attached to their own thoughts and desires, they only bring calamity and misfortune upon themselves. (Tavor 2017:437)

The opening sentences of this passage draw on themes that are by now familiar – the connection between moral behavior and physical wellbeing, the imperative to keep one’s body gods placated, and the bureaucratic surveillance apparatus that keeps meticulous records of the believer’s actions, rewarding or punishing them accordingly. The conclusion of this passage, however, is particularly significant, as it positions the Buddhist monastic community and the educational and religious services they provided to the predominantly illiterate lay population as a key component for one’s personal wellbeing and spiritual salvation. The major venue in the medieval period at which lay believers learned about the Five Precepts and other elements of the Buddhist doctrine was the Purification Rite, a communal ritual event that took place at Buddhist centers on a regular basis (Hureau 2009:1224).

The second section of the TWBLJ offers a detailed outline of this ritual, which originated in India but quickly became the main religious event in the lives of Chinese monastic and lay communities alike, even driving Daoist liturgists to come up with their own version (Lü 2009:1285). Faced with competing versions of the Purification Rite, the author of the TWBLJ sets out to demonstrate the superiority of their ritual, warning against the worship of false deities and fake scriptures, attacking the corrupting influence of Daoist and Confucian liturgists, and stressing the vital role of the Buddhist monastic community in providing the correct moral guidance and ritual services to their lay followers. The latter, in the form of the Purification, is especially important as it functions as a course-correction of sorts, allowing transgressors to regain the trust and favor of their inner deities by cleansing their bodies and re-establishing a state of harmony with the cosmos.

The syncretic nature of the TWBLJ, which combines the imported liturgical procedures of the Indian *poṣadha* ritual with the Chinese pre-Buddhist model of correlative cosmology, is best articulated in the opening paragraphs of the second section.⁵ In response to Trapuṣa's query about the meaning of the Purification Rite, the Buddha explains that the timing of the ritual must correspond with the natural cycles of the year, as it allows the participants to harmonize their *qi* with the cosmos.

Spring is when the myriad things are born; summer is when they grow; autumn is when they are harvested; winter is when they are stored. Things are born and die in accordance with the Way. Heaven and Earth have their great prohibitions. For this reason, disciples of the Buddha take joy in avoiding these prohibitions and upholding the Purification Rite, thereby saving their soul. (Tavor 2017:438)

Without the final sentence, which identifies the text as Buddhist, the Buddha's entire explanation could be mistaken for the work of Han Dynasty literati. Read against the backdrop of the medieval texts surveyed above, it suggests that by the fifth century CE, the model of the body we first saw in such texts as the *Basic Questions* had become an integral feature of Chinese religious culture as a whole, utilized by Daoist and Buddhist authors and liturgists alike.

This passage, however, is only the first part of the Buddha's answer. Dissatisfied with this initial account, Trapuṣa asks for further clarification. In response, the Buddha offers yet another explanation, this time drawing on a bureaucratic cosmological framework. Human moral conduct, he argues, is reported to the celestial authorities on a regular basis by their internal bodily emissaries. Moral deeds are rewarded by such deities as the aforementioned Director of Destiny and the Four Heavenly Kings (Sanskrit – *caturmahārāja*; Chinese – *sitiānwáng*), while evil-doers can be sent to hell and punished by King Yama (Chinese – *yánluówáng*) and his officers. The only way to guarantee a favorable outcome, claims the Buddha, is to participate in the Purification Rite on the same days in which the reports are sent, thereby placating one's body gods and ensuring that a favorable evaluation is sent to the celestial authorities. This passage weaves together all the various themes surveyed in this article by identifying the human body as a site of bureaucratic surveillance, harmonization, and purification. It therefore demonstrates the pervasiveness of the body as a root metaphor in medieval Chinese religious culture.

Conclusion

By the Tang period (618–907 CE), the Purification Rite, which was the most significant religious event in the lives of lay believers in the medieval period, was supplemented and eventually replaced by other rituals, such as the Buddhist Ghost Festival. In religious Daoism, it was ultimately incorporated into the Offering Rite (*jiāo*), an annual ritual of cosmic renewal that is still practiced among followers of Celestial Masters Daoism (Pregadio 2008:1217). The TWBLJ, much like other apocryphal texts, was excluded from the Buddhist canon, limiting its exposure to new generations of readers. Other literary genres aimed at lay followers, such as miracle tales and vernacular Transformation Texts (*biànwén*), soon took their place (Mair 1989). Yet the notion of the microcosmic body, and its correspondence with the social and political realms, remained central in Chinese religious culture. The theoretical framework and practices described in such texts as the *Basic Questions* and the *Central Scripture* provided the foundation for inner alchemy (*nèidān*), a highly complex form of meditation designed to achieve physical immortality. The diagrams and charts that helped to guide practitioners through the process of inner alchemy often featured a side view of the human body and depicted it as a miniature replica of the cosmos (Pregadio 2008:767–770). Seated meditation was popular with Buddhist monastic and lay practitioners, as well as among neo-Confucian literati, and a wide variety of body cultivation techniques, from martial arts to breathing exercises and mantra recitation, were adopted by practitioners of popular sectarian groups and redemptive societies throughout Chinese history.

In the twentieth century, a new form of bodily practices known as *qigong* was promoted by the Communist regime as a science-based secular regimen that can help produce healthy bodies and a healthy nation (Palmer 2006). The doctrine of the Falungong, a movement that infused more religious Buddhist and Daoist terminology into *qigong* practice, draws on elements from correlative cosmology and posits as its ultimate goal the need to create a correspondence between the human body and the cosmos through a process of purification that removes contaminated ‘black matter’ and eventually achieves a ‘milk-white body’ that is not susceptible to physical harm, disease, or aging (Penny 2012:198). For these reasons, while body cultivation and the relationship between purity, sin, and wellbeing are certainly not unique to China, the model of the microcosmic and symbolic body surveyed in this article, which has been so dominant in the Chinese religious culture across its various traditions for many centuries, can thus

provide us with new and exciting ways to imagine, analyze, and understand the religious body.

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Notes

- 1 For more about the 'apocryphal' corpus of native Buddhist literature in China, see Buswell 1990.
- 2 The only other substantial English-language study of the TWBLJ is a PhD dissertation (Tokuno 1994).
- 3 The Triple Burner (*sānjiāo*) does not refer to a specific internal organ. Unschuld describes it as an innate source of warmth responsible for changing temperatures in the human organism and hypothesizes that it might have been a foreign concept introduced to China during the Han period (see Unschuld 2003:140).
- 4 Known as the Three Dukes (*sāngōng*), these were the highest officials in the imperial government during the Eastern Han period (see Loewe 2006:19–20).
- 5 This passage is the only fragment of the TWBLJ that was preserved in the transmitted canon. It can be found in the Buddhist encyclopedia *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma* (*Fǎyuàn Zhūlín*), compiled in the seventh century CE.

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