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Volume I: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty

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of the office in order to express his thanks to the Emperor, and then coming up to the date, took a seat there. While he was conversing with the Emperor, it was announced that an envoy from the office of the Heavenly Tally had arrived from Chang'an. "What have you come for?" asked Cui Ziyu. "I have come to inform you," said the envoy, "that you are appointed Governor of Pazhou and concurrently Investigating Commissioner of the twenty-four districts of Hebei, with the rank of Senior Censor and the right to wear the purple and gold fish-bag. In addition to this you are to receive twenty thousand strings of cash, to be paid by the treasury at Fuzang, to provide for your household. Issued today by the office of the Heavenly Tally, for the attention of Cui Ziyu." "Well, they didn’t take long hearing about it at the office of the Heavenly Tally," said the Emperor. "I have always heard that appointments made in the Realm of the Dead take effect in the Land of the Living. That seems true, then." The answer that Cui Ziyu framed for the Emperor consisted only of these words: "A great Sage will exterminate a family in order to save a kingdom." When Cui Ziyu had written this out the Emperor was uncommonly pleased. Having shown his answer to the Emperor, Cui Ziyu took it back, and then said, "When you get to Chang-an you must do good works; for example send out envoys galloping to every quarter of the Empire announcing an amnesty, and order the director of the monasteries in the quarter to the west of the high road leading to the Red Sparrow Gate to have the Great Glad News expounded in public. And your Majesty should at your own expense have copies of this note made."

Cui Ziyu then, at the Emperor’s request, fetched paper and wrote out a list of the good works the Emperor was to perform. When it was ready, the Emperor took the list and put it into the folds of his dress. Then he said to Cui Ziyu, "I feel absolutely famished. How could I get something to eat?" "If your Majesty is hungry," said Cui Ziyu, "I will get you some food." Cui Ziyu then gave orders to those about him. …

(Here the manuscript breaks off.)

The Quest of Muanian or The Great Maudgalyayana Rescues His Mother from Hell
Translated by Eugene Eoyang

Among the Denshuang literature ("transformation texts"), an important position is occupied by the various versions (at least eight) of the tale of Maudgalyayana (Mulan

in Chinese), the disciple of the Buddha who searches through all the hells to find his sinful mother and save her from her tortures. This translation is made from the version known as P9319, kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. (It is so numbered because it was among the many manuscripts taken to Paris by Paul Pelliot in 1908.)

During his wanderings through the hells, Muanian, filled to the point of naught, refuses to believe that his mother has committed any sins. His journey takes him through numerous chambers and compartments, before the storyteller presents the final confrontation between the plous son and impious mother. Muanian’s purpose is to redeem his mother, but as he descends into hell he is moved by the sorrowful sight of the condemned, and his quest is thus instrumental in bringing about the eventual salvation of many a sinful soul on the River of Futility. Now on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the heavens open up, the gates of hell swing wide, the karma of the Three Paths of Pain is dissolved, and the Ten Commandments overhew. The assembly of monks, the sages, has set down this date as a holy day of thanksgiving,
and so the eight classes of supernatural beings⁹ all come to observe this occasion. The assembly makes offerings of its worldly goods so that those who have passed away may change their fate and improve their lot. For this reason, on the Avalambha Festival¹⁰ we offer up a hundred tasty sacrifices to the Honorable Triad¹¹ in supplication for divine mercy on the entire congregation, and first to rescue those who hang upside down from their distress.¹²

Long ago, when Buddha lived in this world, he had a disciple, Mullan,¹³ whose secular name, before he joined the order, was Luohu, or Turnip. Mullan was deeply committed to the Three Treasures,¹⁴ and revered the Greater Vehicle, the Mahāyāna.¹⁵ Once he wanted to go to another country for new adventures, so he divided up his worldly possessions. He instructed his mother to initiate offerings, and to supply provisions to wandering Buddhist monks as well as any other mendicants who came by. But after Turnip left, his mother became stingy and selfish, and the wealth which had been entrusted to her was secretly hidden away. Her son, in the course of time, completed his travels and returned home. The mother told the son, “I have, as you instructed, given alms and built up our blessings.” And so, because she had deceived both the

7 They are the eight classes of supernatural beings mentioned in the Lokes Sāvac dao (celestial spirits), nīgī (dragons), jāhā (demons in earth, air, and hell), goodfliers (mammals of the Shakra heavens — one of the eight heavens), none (nir-demons), gādā (animal births), Assura (mammals with men’s bodies and horses’ heads), and māyāpāla (demons shaped like the bee).

8 This is the festival of All Souls (Tien pao in Chinese), when prayer services are said by Buddhist monks and Taoist priests and elaborate offerings are made to the Buddhist dead for the purpose of releasing from the purgatory the souls of those who have died on land and sea.

9 The Buddha, the Law, and the Ecclesia [溃]．

10 Hanging upside down refers to the condition of certain condemned souls, especially those for whom the Festival of Avalambha is held.

11 Maudgalyāyana (or Mādā-Maudgalyāyana, or Mādāgāyānara), noted for his miraculous powers, was one of the ten disciples of Shākyamuni, the principal Buddha. Formerly an ascetic, Maudgalyāyana agreed with Shākyamuni, another major disciple of the Buddha known for his wisdom and learning, that whoever first found the truth would reveal it to the other. In Buddhist iconography, Shākyamuni appears on Buddha’s right, Maudgalyāyana on his left.

12 Same as the Buddhist triad.

13 The Mahāyāna school is one of the main traditions of Buddhism. It is now made up of various gnostic sects found chiefly in Tibet, Nepal, China, and Japan. Emphasis is placed on compassion, universal salvation, enlightenment, and wisdom.

14 The Arhat Hell, the last and deepest of the eight hell-bells (or, the eight cold hells), is the place where the condemned go through endless cycles of suffering, death, and rebirth without intermission.

15 An arhat is one who has acquired transcendent powers over matter, matter, time, and space. Arhatship is to be succeeded either by Buddhahood or by immediate entrance into nirvāṇa (the state of perfect freedom and the absorption of the individual into the supreme spirit).

16 These represent the six directions of reincarnation, i.e., three upper forms (the spirits of heaven, men, and awsome demons), and three lower forms (animals, hungry ghosts, and demons of hell).

17 The text reads “the ten directions,” which include the four cardinal and the four intercardinal directions as well as “up” and “down.”

18 The Deer Park, the site of the Buddha’s famous first sermon, was a retreat of the wise.

19 The arhats who entered nirvāṇa in the ancient world are said to be the Buddha’s principal discipulc. They are, yes, in Chinese is a formula used in the text to indicate either an opportunity for further elaboration or an omission.

secular and the holy community, when she died she dropped straight away down to the Avichi Hell¹⁶ to suffer innumerable tortures.

Turnip, after three years of mourning, offered himself to the service of Buddha, was admitted into the holy order, and devoted himself to religious practices. By obeying the Law, he attained the blessed state of an arhat in the end.¹⁷ Then, with his transcendent eyes, he looked all over for his dear mother, but in all the six realms of life and death,¹⁸ there was no trace of her. Mullan consulted the World-Honored One, the Buddha: Where is my good mother enjoying eternal bliss?”

To this, the World-Honored One answered Mullan, “Your mother has already descended down to the Avichi Hell, where she is suffering innumerable tortures. Although you’ve attained the heights of arhatship, what can you do? Only the efforts of the assembled monks from all directions¹⁹ on the day of the summer sacrifices, with their cumulative strength, can save her. This is why the Buddha, in his compassion, instituted this means, and established the Festival of the Avalamba especially for this purpose.”

Turnip from the time his parents died

Mourned for three years until the obligation was over.

To hear music and not rejoice spoils one’s appearance.

To eat delicacies and not find them tasty is bad for flesh and bone.

It is said that the Tatthāgata, the Buddha, when he was in the Deer Park,¹⁰ took pity at once on all the people of the world.

Today, I search for the Way in order to find the Tatthāgata.

And go to the Twin Grove to ask the Buddha. That, yes, yes...”
On the day when Muliian went to the trees in the Twin Grove, he had already become an arhat. How did this come about? Truly the Lotus Sutra says, "The prodigal son first accepts the value, then is cleansed of impurity." This is it. First one attains arhatship, then one follows the Way. Look at Muliian, sitting deep in the mountains in attitudes of meditation! His father was living in Devapura. 21

Muliian cut off his hair, shaved his beard,
And thereupon went deep into the mountains.
Dark and deep, where it was quiet, with no one around.
There he sat down, facing the void, in meditation, etc., etc., etc.,
From the moment Muliian emerged from meditation,
He quickly achieved supernatural power.
He came as suddenly as a clap of thunder,
And went away like the whirlwind....
With the supernatural status, he achieved spontaneity;
Throwing his magical begging bowl in the sky, he leaped into heaven.
In almost no time, he went
All the way up to the realm of Brahma. 22

Muliian went to Devapura to look for his father. At one gate, he met an old man, to whom he said, "I, a poor monk, was named Turnip when I was young. After my parents passed away, I left home and entered the order of Buddha, cutting off my hair and shaving my beard. I'm now known as Muliian, and I'm well known for my supernatural power."

When the old man was told Muliian's childhood name, he knew that he was his son. "It's been so long since we last saw each other. How have you been?"

Turnip, or Muliian, recognized his good father and, after inquiring as to his welfare, asked, "And my good mother, where is she now receiving the rewards of happiness?"

"Your mother's karma," the old man answered, "while she lived, was different from mine. I observed the Ten Commandments, and obeyed the Five Prohibitions," and so when I died my spirit lived on in heaven. But your mother, all the days of her life, committed numerous sins; so

When she died, she dropped down to hell. Ask around for your mother in the dark alleys of Jambudvipa. 23

After hearing this, Muliian said farewell to his father and descended from heaven. But he was unable to find his mother. Instead, he saw eight or nine men and women who were wandering around with nothing to do. Muliian stepped forward and asked their business and where they came from:

"No, no! Don't bow toward me.
Good souls, who are you?
Why are you all milling around here,
Wandering about with nothing to do?"

They replied, telling the monk:

"It's only because we have the same surnames and given names,
That our names were confused, and we were summoned here.
We wandered around for a few days,
Proven innocent, we were released, and then went home,
But we had been buried prematurely by our families....
To mourn and bewail our fate does no good in the end....
Please go to tell the men and women in our families,
Tell them to perform good works to save the dead
from misfortune." Yun, yun....

Muliian remained silent for a while, and then he said, "Do you know a certain Lady Qingqi?"

"No one among us knows her," they replied.

"Where does Yama, the King of the Dead, live?" Muliian then asked.

"Your Reverence," they answered, "go north several steps further, and you'll see in the distance a triple-layered gate, guarded by thousands of strong men, all wielding swords and staffs. This is the gate of the Yama King."

Muliian, upon hearing this, went north several paces and then saw the triple-layered gate, where the strong men were herding and protecting countless sinners and driving them in. Muliian went forward looking for his mother and, not being able to find her, he stood by the side of the road and cried loudly. Afterward he dried his tears and proceeded forward. After explaining why he was there, he was permitted an

21 Devapura (or Devadaha) is the palace of the devas (the heavenly beings) and the abode of the gods.
22 Brahma is the Supreme Being, the father of all living beings.
23 Jambudvipa is the southern one of the four continents which, according to Indian mythology, comprise the world.
Turning the Scrolls

to cross the river but unable to, pacing back and forth, at sixes and sevens, holding their heads and sobbing. Mulan asked them what had happened:

"The waters of Futility rush toward the west; Shattered rock, jagged cliffs— the way is rough. Clothes taken off and hung on three branches; We have not been transferred, and must stay here. By the riverbank we ask that our names be called; Without our knowing it, our chests are soaked through. Only today we've come to realize what death means. Two by two, under the trees, our tears of grief stream down... Osprey demons, stuffs in hand, on the southern bank; Hell's guardians, wielding tridents, on the northern shore. The eyes of those in the water bridle out; The tears of those on the riverbank gush forth. Had we known how bitter death would be, How would we not have cultivated good deeds in life?"

Mulan then asked those who stood under the trees by the River of Futility:

"So heaven and hell are no fairy tale! For those who sin and do not care, comes the punishment of heaven..."

I had a mother without much merit, Her departed soul, therefore, dropped down here to the Three Paths; After hearing this, I've ventured to come down to hell. Tell me if you have any news of her;"

The sinners all looked at Master Mullan, all weeping and sobbing till their eyes were sore:

"We have been dead only a very short time; Your mother, good monk, we really don't know. In life we all committed many sins; Only in suffering today do we begin to repent. You may have wive and concubines by the droves, But who would be willing to die in your stead? When you have departed from these depths, Please report this to our sons and grandsons: 'Never mind the white jade for our coffins In vain, the yellow gold buried in our tombs."

Kakusangata, one of a group of eight Dhyani or Meditation Bodhisattvas, is the savior of lost souls and the deliverer from hell.

Since the Han period, the worship of the Tai Mountain was combined with the Buddhist concept of hell, and the god of the Tai Mountain was the counterpart of the Yama King on earth; hence it is his line of duty to administer matters concerning life, death, reincarnation, the government of men and spirits.

He is a god in the retinue of the ten kings of the underworld responsible for keeping the book of life. After the Song period, this term is used to designate the individual spirit who were bound in their former existence.

This is the river in purgatory, to be crossed by all souls.
Persistent mourning, signs of sorrow are of no use,  
And taboo music, stringed dirges, we can’t hear.  
If you want to end our torment and suffering,  
Nothing is better than works of charity to save lost souls.”

"Your Reverence, please pass on the message for us, asking them to do more works of charity in order to save the deceased. Aside from the Buddha himself, no one is able to save us. Good monk, may the boat of your perfect wisdom and the boat of perfect freedom constantly appear to deliver all living beings. May the sword of wisdom be constantly sharpened, and the grove of worries be cut down, that majesty may spread to all the hearts of the world. Thus will the ideal of all the Buddhist be fulfilled. If we are to be delivered from the mire and the mud, this is indeed due to your great benevolence."

Mulan, after making inquiries, again went on. In a short while, he arrived at the place of the General of the Five Ways. There he asked for news of his mother:

The General of the Five Ways had a hateful mien;  
His gold armor glimmered and his sword dazzled,  
Intimidating millions of souls around him —  
All took flight on their hands and feet.  
His roar sounded like thundering earthquake;  
His angry eyes flashed like blinding light.  
Some had their chests cut open, their hearts exposed;  
Others had the skins of their faces peeled.

Although Mulian was a sage,  
He was scared to death...

The General clasped his hands and said to the monk:  
"Don’t let tears spoil your appearance;  
Those who come this way are as many as the sands in the Ganges.  
If I ask them about Lady Qingti, who may know the answer?"  
Yen, yen ...

"Have any of you seen Lady Qingti?" the General asked those around him.

From the left, a chief officer answered, "General, three years ago, there was a certain Lady Qingti whose name was inscribed on the tablets of the Avichi Hell. Now she is suffering there."

Mulan, upon hearing this, said to the General, "Would you please tell me, although all sinners receive judgment from the Yama King before they are sent down here, why my mother has never been brought before the King?"

"Good monk," the General replied, "there are two kinds of people in the world who are not allowed an audience with the King. One includes those who have observed the Ten Commandments and the Five Prohibitions — these don’t have to meet the King after their death, for their spirits will live on in heavens. The second category includes those who in their lives did not practice good deeds, but gave themselves to evil karma, so that when they die, they are sent forthwith into hell. They also do not see the King. Only those who are half good and half evil get to see the King to have their fate judged. They will first go through reincarnation, and then they will be rewarded or punished according to what they deserve."

After Mulian had heard this, he started to search through the various hells for his mother.

Mulan’s tears flowed as he thought of the past;  
The fate of all creatures seemed tossed on the wind.  
His good mother came to death’s role of suffering;  
Her spirit had long been wasted away. Yen, yen ...

When Mulian had finished, he moved on, and in a wink, he reached one of the hells. Mulian inspired of the guardian, "Does this prison have a Lady Qingti or not? She is my mother, and I have come looking for her."

"Your Reverence," the guardian replied, "this prison is full of men; there are no women here. A little further ahead, there is the Asipatra Hell of Swords. If you ask there, you will, no doubt, be able to see her."

Mulan went on, and came upon another hell; the left side was called the Mountain of Knives, and the right, the Forest of Swords. In this hell, the tips of swords were locked in confrontation, with blood dripping down from them. There Mulian saw the guardian pushing countless sinners into this hell.  

"What is this hell?" Mulian asked.  
"This is the Asipatra Hell of Swords," a raksha demon replied.  
"What sins have been committed by the sinners here that they should be in this hell?" Mulian then asked.  
"These sinners," the guardian said, "when they were alive, violated the temples, defiled the monasteries, and were fond of picking the fruits of the temples and stealing firewood and kindling from the temples. Now let them attempt to pull the sword trees with their hands; see if their limbs and joints can stay together."

The Mountain of Knives, bleached bones strewn in profusion;  
The Forest of Swords, human heads by the millions.
The Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties

If you want to put an end to the sinners' climbing the Mountain of Knives,
The best way is to cultivate the temple grounds.
Plant fruit trees within the monastery walls,
Liberally sow seedlings to grace the temple.
Of course, you can't give pleasure to these sinners,
Who will forever suffer torments numberless as the sands of Ganges...-
Bronze-tipped arrows whizz straight into the eye —
Mountain of Knives, Forest of Swords, cut them down.
They cannot return to life in a thousand years,
But they still must suffer incessantly in the jungle
of iron knives and swords.

Mulan, when he heard this, broke down in tears and went forward to ask the guardian, "In this hell, is there a Lady Qingti?"
"Good monk, is she related to you?"
"She's my mother."
"Your Reverence," the guardian then replied, "in this hell there's no Lady Qingti, but if you go a little further, there is a hell which is only for women. You should get to see her there."

Mulan, on hearing this, went on ahead until he reached a hell that was a yojno high from top to bottom, with black smoke gushing up from it, and a stench that fooled the sky. He came upon a horse-headed raksha demon with an iron staff in his hand, standing there looking haughtily.

"What's the name of this hell?" Mulan asked.
"This is the Hell of Bronze Pillars and Iron Beds," the raksha replied.
"What sins did these poor souls commit in life that they should have dropped down to this hell?"
"To life," the guardian replied, "girls who seduced boys, boys who seduced girls, as well as parents and children who had incestuous relations, teachers and students who had affairs, and masters and servants who had liaisons — they have all dropped down into this hell, where the east is separated from the west, and men and women each occupy one division."

Turning the Scrolls

The women lie on the iron beds, their bodies nailed down:
The men are wrapped around the bronze pillars to rot...
The knives cut bone and flesh, pierce right through;
The swords cut liver and gall into little pieces...-
Their parents, if still alive, are building up blessings for them,
But only one out of seven may be saved.
Even should the Eastern Sea turn into a mulberry field:
The sinners will have yet to be released. Yes, yes..."

When Mulian finished his inquiries, he went on ahead. In a twinkling of an eye, he was at another hell. There, he asked the guardian, "Does this place have a Lady Qingti in it?"
"Good monk," the guardian said, "is Lady Qingti your mother?"
"Yes, she's my mother."
"Three years ago, there was a Lady Qingti who was among those who dropped down here, but she was put on the roster for the Avichi Hell. So now she is over there."

Mulan fainted for a moment. He resumed his normal breath after a long while, and then slowly went on ahead. Then he ran into a raksha demon, who guarded the way. Mulian questioned him and the raksha replied:
"It appears we have a Lady Qingti here.
Though I can't completely confirm that report...
Bodies of new arrivals are strewn about.
Please take my advice and go back home.
To look for someone here is to look in vain.
You'd better go quickly to see the Tathagata;
What use is there in beating your breast in despair?"

After Mulian learned of all these obstacles in the various hells, he immediately turned back. Then, sailing up with his magic begging bowl, in a wink, he was in the Grove of Brama, where he circled the Buddha three times before sitting down in front of him. He looked up in reverence at the honored visage, his eyes not wavering. He spoke to the World-Honored One:

It has been so long since I received instructions from the Tathagata;98 Throughout heaven and earth, I have constantly searched.
Only my father has been able to live in heaven,

98. Yojno was a rather ambiguous unit of measurement. It has been described as the distance covered by a day's march of an army, and in forty, thirty, or sixteen it, and as eight fresnas (four fresnas being equivalent to nearly thirty li). (Compare chapter 14, note 21.)

99. This term means literally "One who has come to Truth," or "One who has discovered Truth." It refers to the Buddha, etc.
But my mother I have been unable to meet face-to-face.  
When I heard she was suffering torments in the Avichi Hell,  
The mere thought tore at my entrails.  
Raging fires, dragon serpents obstructed my progress.  
In my consternation, I could think of no other way.  
The Tathāgata's holy power moves mountains and oceans.  
All living creatures benefit from his benevolence.  
So I have hurried here to have you explain  
How mother and son can meet once again."

The World-Honored One comforted the Mūlian:

"Now, please, stop your tears of grief.  
The sins of the world are drawn out like string:  
They are not stuck on from the outside.  
Someone hurry to bring him my abbot's staff;  
It can ward off the Eight Obstacles, 37 the Three Calamities. 38  
As often as possible, chant my name;  
All the hells should be accessible to you."

Mūlian assumed the Buddha's power, soared away, and went down as fast as a windborne arrow.  
In a wind, he reached the Avichi Hell.  
Even as he was passing through in the sky, he saw fifty ox-headed, horse-trained rakshas and yakshas, with teeth like jagged stumps, mouths like bowls of blood, voices like thunderclaps, eyes like flashes of lightning, on their way to heaven to report for duty.  
When they encountered Mūlian, they yelled at him from afar: "Good monk! Don't come to these regions. This is not a good place to come to. This is the road to hell.  
In the west, there is black smoke full of hell's poisonous vapors; if you inhale it, your Reversion, here and now you will turn to ashes and dust."

"Good monk, have you not heard about the Avichi Hell?  
Even iron and rock, in passing through it, will not be spared.  
Where is the hell one speaks of?  
Toward the west, black fumes spurt forth over there."

37 This term refers to the eight conditions in which it is difficult for someone to see the Buddha or to hear his Dharmas (Law)—in the hell of hungry ghosts; as animals; in Utarakuru (the northern continent where all is pleasant); in the long-life heaven; as dead. Blind, and dumb: as a philosopher on earth; in the intermediate period between a Buddha and his successor.

38 There are two kinds of calamities. The major three calamities, appearing during a decadent period in the world, are war, pestilence, and famine; the major ones, for the destruction of the world, are fire, water, and wind.
He went to the second cell, then to the third, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth—and each time the answer was no. The lictors went to the seventh cell and saw Lady Qiugi nailed down on a platform with forty-nine spikes, and called out, "Are you Lady Qiugi?"

"Yes," she said.
Then the guardian told her, "There’s a monk outside who claims to be your son."
Qiugi, when she heard this, replied, "Guardian, I have no son who is a monk. He must be mistaken."

When the guardian heard this, he returned to the high tower to report: "Your Reverence, how could you have made such an error, thinking that sinner in the hell to be your mother? What’s the reason for this nonsense?"

Mulan, when he heard this, broke down in tears. He told the guardian, "I was called Turnip when I was small. After my parents passed away, I entered the order of Buddha and became a monk, assuming the name of Mulian. I beg you, do not be angry. Go back once more and make the inquiry."

When the guardian heard this, he went back to the sinner: "The monk outside claims his name was Turnip when he was small."

"If he was called Turnip as a child," Qiugi said, "then he is my son, my precious offspring, this sinner’s own flesh and blood!"

Hearing this, the guardian helped lift Qiugi up, drawing out the forty-nine spikes, tied iron chains around her waist, put shackles on her, and drove her to outside the gate. This was how the mother and the son met.

The shackles around her, bristled with pricks like fish scales. A thousand tears of punishment that cannot be imagined.
From the seven apertures in her head, blood spurted forth;
Fire flared out from the woman’s mouth....
Oxheads held the cangaie on both sides;
Stepping and stumbling, she came forward.
Mulan embraced his mother, bursting into tears,
And crying: "This comes from my not being a devoted son!"

But, you...

His mother was then driven back into the cell. When Mulian saw his mother go back in, his bones snapped, his heart broke, and he choked on his sobs. Then he stood up and beat his breast. It was as if the Five Mountains trembled. And the seven apertures in his head all gushed blood. In the end, he seemed to die, but in time revived, and he pushed himself up from the ground with his arms and put his clothes in order.

Then he leaped into the sky and to the place of the World-Honored One.

Turning the Scrolls

Mulian’s feelings were all in a turmoil.
What others said seemed blurred; he heard out at all.
After a long while, he woke with a revelation;
Throwing his begging bowl and leaping to the sky, he went to ask the Buddha.

Mulian told the Buddha all about his sorrow and suffering,
And spoke of the Mountain of Knives and the Forest of Swords.
"By the grace of Buddha’s overwhelming power,
I have managed to see my mother in the Avichi Hell." ...
"Your mother committed many sins in the life before,
So her soul went straight down to the Avichi Hell.
She cannot absolve herself from sin, after all this time;
And no one but the Buddha, no ordinary mortal can understand all this."

Then he called Ananda18 and the other disciples:
"I must go down to save her myself."

The Tathāgata, leading the eight groups of supernatural beings, surrounded in front and back, shining forth radiance, shaking the ground, went to release the souls from suffering in hell:
The exalted wisdom of the Tathāgata is equitable,
And in his compassion, he saves the multitude in bell.
Innumerable worthies, a congregation from all eight sectors,
Followed in procession and moved as one.
Deep and hidden was the procession,
Heaven above, heaven below — nothing quite so extraordinary!
On the left, it was overwhelming; on the right, devastating:
Like mountain peaks peaking out from above the clouds.
High and lofty,
The vaults of heaven and of hell opened together;
Moving like rain, shaking like thunder,
Just like the moon rising round over the sea.
In the clouds, heaven’s music wafts on the willows:
On the air, a flurry of plum-blossoms floats down.
The Buddha-king seizes forth, the jade tablet in hand;
The Brahma-lord from the rear holds the golden tablet.
What cannot be fathomed cannot be fathomed:
The transcendent power of the Tathāgata liberates hell.
Left and right, the supernatural beings of all classes;

18 Ananda was the most learned disciple of the Buddha.
Here and there, imperial guards of all directions.
In the Buddha’s eyebrows flashed a thousand hues;
Behind his head, a halo-cloud in dazzling colors.
When the radiance permeates hell, it disintegrates —
The Forest of Swords, the Grove of Knives, crushed to dust.
The lectors of the hells, accepting grace, bow down on their knees
And clap their hands in supplication to the Buddha...
The sinners all gain rebirth in heaven;
Only Mulan’s mother still goes hungry.
Hell then is totally transformed;
In the end, the majesty of Shakyamuni prevails.

Mulan, beneficiary of Buddha’s power, once again saw his beloved mother. But her sin was too deeply rooted, and her karma was difficult to cast off; although she was able to avoid the stench of hell, she nevertheless fell into the realm of the “hungry ghosts.”48 Although the misery is greatly reduced, there is no comparison between the conditions of the realms of bitterness and happiness. Her throat felt like the tiny aperture of a needle, so small that water could not drip through it; while her head was like the Tai Mountains, which the waters of three rivers are not enough to cover. She heard not so much as a hint of water and drink, but the months went by, the years passed, and the miseries of starvation had to be endured. From a distance, pure, cool, refreshing waters could be seen, but up close, they turned into a stream of pus. Delicious food, delectable meals, turned into blazing fire.

Lady Qingci told her son, “Your mother is suffering from hunger-pangs, and her life is hanging by a thread. If you don’t take pity on her, how can you be called a devoted son? The paths of life and death are

Turning the Scrolls

separate, and any future meeting is beyond prediction. If you wish to rescue me from these perils, the matter should not be delayed. The life of a monk is to rely on faith and devotion. Please, son, leave me, go to Rajagriha,49 and see that I get something to eat.”

Mulan took leave of his mother, tossed up his begging bowl, and ascended into the heavens. In a wink, he arrived in the city of Rajagriha.

At one house after another, he begged for food, and came to the residence of an elder. Seeing that it was not the hour for begging, the elder stopped him and asked him the reason: “Good monk, breakfast is over and the time for eating has passed. What are you going to do with this food you’re begging for?”

Mulan responded to him, “Worthy elder,
After she passed away, this monk’s mother’s Soul was sent directly down to the Avichi Hell.
Of late the Tathāgata saved her,
Her body all withered bones, her breath a wisp.
This poor monk’s heart broke, bit by bit;
How could a bystander know the pain?
I know I have come at the wrong time to beg;
I only intend to bring my mother some food to eat.

When the elder heard this, he was startled,
His thoughts unsettled, his feelings awry.
The elder’s companions said:

‘Golden saddles cannot touch the pearl-bright heart.
No reason to add makeup to a pretty face.
So, let us sing, let us be happy,
A man’s life is as uncertain as a flickering candle.
No one sees those enjoying bliss in heaven;
We only hear of crowds of sinners in hell.
There’s time to eat and time to clothe oneself.
Don’t learn to hoard things like a fool:
Better build up karma for the time to come.
For who can guarantee life from day to day?
When two people meet, no one thinks of death; Wealth and riches must not be spared for the body.
One day, we pass away and are placed in coffins.

48 This ancient Indian city, a little to the southeast of the present city of Bihar, was important in early Buddhism. It was the site of the council that is said to have been held right after the death of the Buddha for the purpose of verifying the sayings of the Buddha and for establishing the basic disciplinary code.
What use is it to water the graves in vain?
Those who are wise use wealth to do charity,
Whereas fools use money to buy land and property.
All through life, one struggles in search of riches;
But after death, in the end, others will portion them out."

The elder, hearing these words, was startled by doubt:
"The blessed land, the Three Treasures, are difficult to meet."
Hurriedly, he urged his subordinates not to waste any more time;
From the house, they took out food for the monk.
In a twinkling, hell disintegrated and dissolved,
And the ineffable power of Buddha was manifested.
The elder held offerings of food in his hands,
Wore over to the monk, and wished him well:
"This is not just for your Reverence to give to your mother,
But so that all the sinners can eat their fill."

After Mulian had received the delicious food,
He put the food in the begging bowl to tend to his mother.
Then he went to the wilderness to meet his waiting mother,
And with a golden spoon, he fed her herself.

Although Lady Qingti had suffered the ordeals of hell, her stinginess and greed had still not been rooted out. When she saw her son coming with food, she succumbed to her miserliness and avarice: "The monk who comes is my son, and he is bringing for me the food he has collected from the world of humans. Now all of you have to be patient. I will tend to myself. There is little I can do for the rest of you."

Mulian took the food and offered it to her in his begging bowl. But his mother was afraid that someone might snatch it from her; so, glaring at the companions all around her, she used her left hand to cover up the bowl, and scooped up the food with the right hand. Before the food reached her mouth, it turned into raging flame. The devotion of the elder who had donated the food had been profound, but it was not enough to expiate a selfishness that was deeply ingrained.

When Mulian saw his mother like this, his insides were unstrung: "I have but the puny strength of a lowly monk; my ability is limited, and I am but an insignificant man. Only by consulting the World-Honored One can one know the road to salvation." Now, let us see how his mother ate:

When she saw the food, she went forward to take it.
Even before she ate it, out of greed, she was already defending it.
"My son brought food from the world of humans,
With which he intended to cure my hunger pangs.
The food does not seem to be enough for myself;
All of you, be patient and wait."

Qingti's karma of greed and selfishness was deep.
So when the food entered her throat, it caught fire.
And when Mulian saw his mother touched by flames,
He beat his breast and fell to the ground like a mountain collapsing.
From his ears and nose, blood came streaming out,
And he cried out, "Oh, my poor mother!" ... She replied:
"Now, the food cannot be put in my mouth,
And the fire hurts me.
Those who are covetous should remember this;
They will encounter a hundred or more misfortunes.
Good monk, you are my most devoted son;
Get me some cold water to save my empty stomach."

Mulian, when he heard his mother asking for water, her breath scorched, her voice hoarse, remembered in a flash that south of Rājagriha there was a great river, with vast expanses of water without end, named the Ganges, where he could find relief for his fire-engulfed, suffering mother. When people in the southern continent Jambudvīpa saw this water, it was a pure, clear, refreshingly cool river; when the mortals of heaven saw this water, it was a crystal pond; when the fish and the tortoises saw it, it was a bubbling brook; but when Qingti saw this water, it became a stream of blazing pus. She went to the water's edge and, without waiting for her son's blessings, out of greed supported herself on the shore with her left hand, and out of avarice dipped her right hand into the water, because her greed and avarice knew no bounds. The water had not reached her lips when it turned into fire.

When Mulian saw the food his mother ate turn into fire, and the water she drank also turn into fire, he pounded his head and beat his breast in loud lamentation and tears. He came before the Buddha, paid homage three times, and addressed him: "World-Honored One, in your grace and mercy, please rescue my mother from her misery. Now when she can eat, it turns into fire, and when she drinks water, it also turns into fire. How may she be spared this ordeal of fire?"

"Mulian," the World-Honored One replied, "your mother cannot eat anything, and there is no way to overcome this without first celebrating, one year from now, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Festival of the Avalambha. Only then can she begin to eat."

Mulian, seeing his mother starve, said, "World-Honored One, can this be achieved on the thirteen or fourteenth day of each month? Must she
wait for the fifteenth day of the seventh month each year before she can eat?"

"It is not just for your mother that the Festival of Avalambha has been established on this day; it is also for meditative exercises, the day for the arhats to attain the Way, the day of absolution for Devadatta, the day of rejoicing for the Yama King, the day when all the hungry ghosts eat their fill."

When Mullan heard the Buddha's instructions, he went to a temple tower on the outskirts of the city of Rajagriha and recited the sutras of the Mahayana school and established the blessings of the Avalambha, so that his mother might have a meal to eat from that offering.

Once she was fed, mother and son again lost sight of each other.

Mullan looked for his mother everywhere, but could not find her; so mournfully, with tears streaming down both cheeks, he came before the Buddha. Paying homage to him three times, he stood in front of him, his hands clasped together, and, on his knees, said, "World-Honored One, when my mother took food and it turned to fire, when she drank water which also turned into fire, it was possible for me to save her from her ordeal of fire only through the compassion of the World-Honored One. So, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, she was able to eat a meal. But since then, my mother and I have not seen each other. Is it because she has dropped down to hell and is again on the way to becoming a hungry ghost?"

"Your mother has not fallen into hell nor into the realm of hungry ghosts," the World-Honored One replied. "Because you attained merit from reciting the sutras and establishing the blessings of the Avalambha Festival, your mother has been transformed from the form of a hungry ghost into that of a black dog in Rajagriha. If you wish to see her, you must go, without any discrimination, begging at each house, whether rich or poor, until you arrive at the gate of a very wealthy elder, where a black dog will come out and nip at your cassock, mouthing words as if it were human. This, then, is your mother."

Mullan received these instructions and took his begging bowl and plate to look for his mother. Without any regard to the wealth or humbleness of the dwelling, he went through every lane and alley, all around, but could find no trace of her. Then he came upon the residence of an elder and saw a black dog running out of the house, which began nipping at

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39 Devadatta was a cousin of Shakyamuni and his enemy. For his plot against the Buddha, he is said to have been mutilated up alive in hell.

40 India, not China.
Then, she felt herself spirited away by the dragons and escorted by the Heavenly Maidsens, and taken to the Trayastriṃśa Heaven, there to enjoy everlasting bliss.

The first time the first sutra was chanted, there were eighty thousand bodhisattvas, eighty thousand monks, eighty thousand male deacons, and eighty thousand female deacons, performing the ritual around and around, in joy and in the faith that this teaching would prevail.

The Great Maudgalyāyana transformation text, one scroll.

Further Reading


Chapter 30
Among the Flowers
Lyrics of the Tang and Five Dynasties

Zhang Huizhen (1781–1859), in the preface to his Lyric Anthology, gives a most succinct account of the origins of the lyric: "It originated with the poets of the Tang dynasty, who made music out of popular songs, adding their own words, or 'lyrics'."

Chen Zilong (1688–1757) wrote: "The lyric is a fragile form. Pearls and kingfisher feathers are too heavy for it, let alone dragons and phoenixes." That is not to say that the lyric is frail. In a lyric, a very serious idea would still be expressed in a light and ethereal fashion.

Although poetry in general deals with the subtler aspects of human experience, there is a still more elusive and refined level of subleap; a still greater delicacy of music, that cannot find expression in the regular poetic forms, even if these are stretched to their utmost limits. A new form is needed, a form at once lighter and more supple than regular verse. This is where the lyric comes in. Poets came to discover that the lyric was perfectly suited to the expression of those very experiences, those subtle feelings and fugitive melancholy moods, that were beyond the reach of the old regular forms.

Regular verse seems explicit when compared with the even more suggestive and veiled mode of expression found in the lyric; it seems plain spoken and exhaustive, when compared with the more symbolic and restrained style of the lyric. To quote Wang Guowei (1877–1927), writing in his Poetic Remarks in the Human World.

The lyric form is one of exquisite refinement and sophisticated beauty. While this enables it to deal with subjects that are beyond the scope of regular verse, it also limits its range. Regular verse is broader in scope, the lyric deeper in expression.

When describing the sky, the lyric poet will prefer a faint rain, a solitary cloud, scattered stars and a pale moon. His landscape will tend to be one of distant peaks, meandering banks, misty lakes and fishermen's boats. His preferred emotions will be groundless grief, secret meetings, quiet enjoyment, and feelings of seclusion.

The lyric poet's perceptions and impressions arise from the depth of his personal joy and sorrow, and although they may appear far fetched or confused, they have an artistic unity and intrinsic balance of their own — rounded like a pearl, smooth as jade, and with the translucent clarity of a carved miniature. The world of the lyric is like a mountain viewed through the mist, or a flower seen in the moonlight. Its beauty resides in its elusive ambiguity.

— Miao Yue (1904–3), "The Chinese Lyric" (translated by John Minford)