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Dizang and the Three Kings: Constructing Buddhist Hell by Imitating the Bureaucratic System in the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: The Buddhist ideas and practices of hell were bureaucratized in medieval China. The cult of Dizang and the Ten Kings of Hell was popular from the late Tang Dynasty onward. However, the concept of the Three Kings of Hell (King Yama 閻羅王, the Magistrate of Mount Tai 泰山府君, and the Great Spirit of the Five Paths 五道大神) appeared before that of the Ten Kings and has long been ignored. This article aimed to make a textual comparison of the descriptions of Dizang and the Three Kings in the literature with the bureaucratic system of the Three Departments (sansheng zhi 三省制), which was the central government system during the Tang Dynasty, where the Three Departments performed their respective functions. There are several structural and functional parallels between the underworldly afterlife and the political bureaucracies of the world. The workings of the system in hell changed in texts from different periods, showing the evolution of the Three Departments system during the Tang Dynasty. This case study demonstrated that the system of Dizang and the Three Kings of Hell were constructed based on the official system used in human society and that the underworld was reinterpreted as a bureaucratic system similar to the temporal one.

Keywords: Three Kings; Dizang; hell; bureaucratic system; Three Departments system; Tang Dynasty



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1. Introduction

Human imaginings of the world after death often reflect changes in human society. Political systems in different periods, especially the official systems, often affect people's understanding and imagining of the netherworld. The system of Dizang (Kṣitigarbha 地藏菩薩) and the Three Kings of Hell (King Yama 閻羅王, the Magistrate of Mount Tai 泰山府君, and the Great Spirit of the Five Paths 五道大神) discussed in this article is a case study on how people constructed the underworld based on the official system of the day. This study conducts a textual comparison of the religious literature and the political and legal literature of the Tang Dynasty. For the first time, several Tang literary representations of the underworld are compared with the records of contemporary legal and political court offices to show how the bureaucratic ranks and functions of the times, known as the Three Departments system, were linked in various ways to the underworld kings and even Dizang Bodhisattva during the Tang period, a matter which has rarely been discussed in previous studies.

When Buddhism was introduced into China, it brought along with it the concepts of "karma" and "samsara". Buddhists believed that all things should enter samsara after death based on their previous karma. On this basis, Buddhists continued to understand and interpret the netherworld according to Chinese traditions. The cult of Dizang Bodhisattva and the Ten Kings (Shiwang 十王) in the netherworld was born in the mid-Tang Dynasty and became more popular than the cult of King Yama (Yamarāja), who ruled the land of death in Indian Buddhism. The Ten Kings were the judges of the souls of the dead, each in charge of one court, while Dizang was the savior in this system. In addition, Dizang was also the supervisor of the Ten Kings.¹ There are several different records of the names of the Ten Kings, with slight differences between them.² However, the Chinese name of the fifth one, the seventh one, and the tenth one are always Yanluo Wang (King Yama), Taishan Wang (King of Mount Tai

泰山王), and Wudao Zhuanlun Wang (King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth in the Five Paths 五道轉輪王). Dang (2002) and Zhang (2013) referred to the existence of the system of these Three Kings without further elaboration in their work regarding the concept of hell. These Three Kings appear in many contemporaneous scriptures and literature, such as one of the most popular bianwen (transformation texts 變文, which is a literary format featuring singing and sayings with Buddhist stories as the main content) from the mid-Tang Dynasty, *Mulian Bianwen* (Mulian 目連 from the Sanskrit name, Maudgalyāyana, a disciple of the Buddha), which tells a Buddhist story of how Mulian saved his mother from hell.³

Among the Three Kings, Yanluo Wang is a translation of the Sanskrit name “Yama-rāja” from Indian Buddhism, while Taishan Wang exercises overwhelmingly autochthonous power. According to the traditional Chinese concept, “Mount Tai was regarded as the abode of the dead. The shades who lived underneath the mountain were governed by the district official, the Magistrate of Mount Tai (Taishan fujun 泰山府君)” (Teiser 1994a, p. 3). Wudao Zhuanlun Wang is in charge of the last court, in which the dead are assigned to their next mode of life. The name Wudao Zhuanlun Wang may be related to the Great Spirit of the Five Paths (Wudao dashen 五道大神) or the General of the Five Paths (Wudao jiangjun 五道將軍) in the Buddhist-related context in early medieval archaeological and textual sources (Chen 2018, p. 117). Individual studies of the Three Kings have been very detailed (Faure 2013; Zhang 2000; Luan 2005, 2019; Liu 1999; Oda 1976; Jia 1994; Zheng 2008, 2011; Chen 2018), but little research has been carried out on the system of the Three Kings, which was shaped during the Southern and Northern dynasties (420–589).

Teiser’s research on the Ten Kings has provided important information that *Shimen Zhengtong* (*The Correct Lineage of the Buddhists* 釋門正統), compiled by Sramana Zongjian 宗鑑 (?–1206), was one of the first systematic attempts to explain the origin of the Ten Kings (Teiser 1994a, p. 63). Zongjian quotes a story about the Three Kings from the *Mingbao Ji* (*The Record of Retribution from the Dark World* 冥報記), which was compiled by Tang Lin 唐臨 (ca. 601–660), a famous official in the early Tang Dynasty. Zongjian wrote the following:

According to the *Mingbao*, it is said, “The Emperor of Heaven exercises universal authority over the six paths ... Yama-rāja is ... just like the Son of Heaven among humans. The Magistrate of Mount Tai is like the Director of the Department of State Affairs (Shangshu ling 尚書令). The Great Spirits, Recorders in the Five Paths are like the Ministers (Shangshu 尚書) of the Six Ministries. The other offices in the path of ghosts are like those in prefectures, districts, and so on.”

Aside from this there are the names of the ten courts, which are divided into various offices ... In the beginning the world was not confused [about their names], but later, as the systems of government offices of succeeding generations differed, [their names] underwent changes in accord with the time.⁴

(CBETA, X75, pp. 303b–4b.)

The entire section of this quotation is in the *Shimen Zhengtong*, while the translation is in Teiser’s *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Teiser 1994a, pp. 64–65). *Mingbao Ji* is a collection of novels related to Buddhism compiled during the Yonghui 永徽 era of the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 during the Tang Dynasty (650–655). In the story quoted by Zongjian, the main governors in the netherworld are the Three Kings. It is obvious that the cult of the Three Kings appeared before that of the Ten Kings, a fact that has long been ignored. This quotation directly connects the Three Kings with the official system of the Tang Dynasty. The Director of the Department of State Affairs and the Six Ministries are the core members of the Three Departments and Six Ministries system

(Sansheng liubu zhi 三省六部制), which was the central official system in the Tang Dynasty. The Three Departments consisted of the Department of State Affairs (Shangshu sheng 尚書省), the Department of the Secretariat (Zhongshu sheng 中書省), and the Department of Supervision (Menxia sheng 門下省), with each one performing different functions. Several scholars compared the trials in hell with the descriptions in the contemporaneous legal documents (Yang 2012; Liu 2016; Chen 2017). However, the workings and functions of the Three Kings in the bureaucratic system have rarely been studied directly. Teiser acknowledged that the citation from the *Mingbao Ji* “explains the workings of the bureaucracy of the subterranean prisons,” and “outlines the general principles of the system by analogy to the government on earth headed by the emperor” (Teiser 1994a, p. 66). Nonetheless, according to Teiser’s translation, he considers (in the square brackets) that what changed with the system of government offices was the names of the kings. However, there is no subject in Zongjian’s original text to emphasize what is changing. In fact, the workings and functions of the Three Departments were not the same in different periods of the Tang Dynasty, and the bureaucracy of the netherworld had similar changes. The descriptions of the Three Kings are not the same in the documents composed in the early and middle stages of the Tang Dynasty, such as the *Mingbao Ji* and the *Mulian Bianwen*, which are analyzed in this paper. Therefore, the main contribution of this study lies in its explanation of the major changes in the Three Kings from the middle to late stages of the Tang Dynasty, by analyzing the religious literature that mentions the Three Kings and the political literature of the Tang Dynasty, which has been neglected for many years.

In addition to the Three Kings, Dizang also played an important role in the bureaucratic system in hell. With the insertion of Dizang into the underworld, the function of supervision was improved and was related to the Department of Supervision in human society. It is necessary to note that the cult of Dizang is a wide-ranging topic, which this paper will only briefly discuss based on a textual comparison between the *Dizang pusa jing* (Scripture on the Bodhisattva Dizang 地藏菩薩經), which is an apocrypha produced during the mid-Tang Dynasty, and the non-religious texts relating to the contemporaneous official system. Another original contribution of this study is the indication that the expanded role of Dizang is parallel to the function of the Department of Supervision in the Three Departments system.

This study identified some preliminary insights into the system of the Three Kings, which is the missing link in the amalgamation of the afterlife cult of Dizang and the Ten Kings. This article aimed to analyze the functions and workings of Dizang and Three Kings in the literature, make a comparison of this bureaucratic system in hell with the central government system in the Tang Dynasty, and elucidate how the bureaucracy of the netherworld with Dizang and Three Kings as the core “changes in accord with the time” (CBETA, X75, p. 303b), as stated by Zongjian.

2. The Three Kings in the *Mingbao Ji*

The system of the Three Kings of Hell with King Yama, the Magistrate of Mount Tai, and the Great Spirit of the Five Paths as the core was shaped during the Southern and Northern dynasties. The decentralization of authority among the three deities gradually took place, which was similar to the changes in the official system in human society. The significant central government system of the Three Departments and Six Ministries was established and developed during the Sui and Tang dynasties (581–907), and the Three Kings system was endowed with a similar operating mode in the literature, reflecting the images of hell. This section discusses the relationship between them by analyzing the description of the netherworld in the *Mingbao Ji* composed in the early Tang period (7th century).

As mentioned above, the description of the Three Kings in the *Shimen Zhengtong* was quoted from the *Mingbao Ji*. In the story of Mu Renqian 睦仁簡, the author Tang

Lin 唐臨 (ca. 601–660) described the bureaucratic system in hell based on what the ghost officer said:

The Emperor of Heaven exercises universal authority over the six paths, which could be called Heaven's Sections. King Yama is . . . just like the Son of Heaven among humans. The Magistrate of Mount Tai is like the Director of the Department of State Affairs. The Great Spirits, Recorders in the Five Paths are like the Ministers of the Six Ministries. The Heaven's Sections will accept requests from the human world and then give the orders to King Yama.⁵

(T51, pp. 792b–793b. Modified translation of Teiser.)

The emperor in the human world, the Director of the Department of State Affairs, and the Ministers are the core members of the Three Departments and Six Ministries system in the early Tang period. According to the records in the *Tang Liudian* (*The Administrative Code of the Tang Dynasty* 唐六典), legislated in 738, the Director of the Department of State Affairs was the leader of all officials, with the Six Ministries under his jurisdiction. All government affairs were decided by them (Li 1992, p. 6).⁶ Therefore, in the laws of the Tang Dynasty, the emperor, the Director of the Department of State Affairs, and the Six Ministers formed a top-down, three-level, hierarchical administrative system. Tang Lin compared the Three Kings of Hell to this system in the *Mingbao Ji*, indicating that King Yama, the Magistrate of Mount Tai, and the Great Spirits, Recorders in the Five Paths, were, in his view, in the same relationship.

In addition to the Department of State Affairs, the Department of the Secretariat and the Department of Supervision were the other two departments in the Three Departments system in the Tang Dynasty. Wang Ao 王鏊 (1450–1524), a famous scholar in the Ming Dynasty, summed up the relationship between the Three Departments as follows: the Department of the Secretariat was in charge of conveying the emperor's orders, the Department of Supervision was responsible for supervision and deliberation, and the Department of State Affairs was in charge of carrying out orders (中書主出命, 門下主封駁, 尚書主奉行; Wang 1985, p. 11). However, during the late Sui and early Tang dynasties, power had not yet been balanced between the Three Departments. The Director of the Department of State Affairs was regarded as the head of all chancellors and took precedence over the other two departments (Luo 1992; Shen 1977; Yan 1969).

Similarly, changes in the netherworld also reflect the initial superiority and later equality of the departments. The *Mingbao Ji* was composed during the Yonghui 永徽 era of the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 of the Tang Dynasty (650–655). The editor, Tang Lin, served successively as the Director of the Ministry of Punishments (Xingbu 刑部), the Ministry of Arms (Bingbu 兵部), the Ministry of Revenue (Duozhi 度支), and the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs (Libu 吏部). It is safe to assume that Tang Lin would have been very familiar with the workings of the Three Departments system during the early Tang period. He compared the Three Kings in the netherworld to the emperor in the human world, the Director of the Department of State Affairs, and the Ministers, without mentioning the other two departments. This is consistent with the situation in the early Tang period. Evidently, the system of the Three Kings of the underworld established by Tang Lin in Mu Renqian's story was influenced by the Three Departments system in the early Tang Dynasty.

In summary, the bureaucratic mechanisms and functions of the Three Kings in the *Mingbao Ji* present a three-tiered, hierarchical administrative system, similar to the central official system with the Department of State Affairs as the core. In this system, all the powers of the Three Kings were executive powers. Even King Yama obeyed the orders of the Emperor of Heaven. This shows that the powers of the Three Kings in the *Mingbao Ji* differ only in the hierarchy of official ranks rather than in the

administrative functions. It should be noted that the decision-making power and supervision power are missing in this system.

3. The Three Kings in the *Mulian Bianwen*

As mentioned above, the balance of power between the Three Departments had not yet been reached during the late Sui and early Tang dynasties. The Department of State Affairs had a higher status than the other two departments, and the Director of the Department of State Affairs was the highest administrative chief in the country. However, from the period of Emperor Gaozong to Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (649–762), the relationship between the Three Departments began to change, transforming into a system of operation in which “the Department of the Secretariat is in charge of conveying emperor’s orders; the Department of Supervision is responsible for supervision and deliberation; and the Department of State Affairs is in charge of carrying out orders” (Wang 1985, p. 11). Accordingly, new changes took place in the workings of the Three Kings in the *Mulian Bianwen*, which was popular in the mid-Tang Dynasty. The authority of the Three Kings began to divide in a similar way to the Three Departments, a change which is analyzed in detail in this section.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Mulian Bianwen* was one of the most popular bianwen since the Tang Dynasty. Currently, fourteen manuscripts of the *Mulian Bianwen*, divided into five systems, have been found (Luo 2015). Among them, the earliest one was the *Damugalyāyana Entered Hell to Save His Mother* 大目乾連冥間救母變文並圖一卷並序), which was composed sometime before 710. This bianwen tells the story of the Buddhist disciple Mulian experiencing all kinds of hardships and peril to rescue his mother Madame Qingti (青提夫人) from hell.

In this story, Mulian meets King Yama in hell and expresses that he is looking for his mother. King Yama orders the Boys of Good and Evil (Shan ‘e tongzi 善惡童子) to ask the Commandant of Mount Tai (Taishan duwei 泰山都尉), who works in the Clerk Office (Lushi si 錄事司), which hell Mulian’s mother is in. All the case files of the dead are kept in the Clerk’s Office. King Yama then lets Mulian go to the General of the Five Paths’ (Wudao jiangjun 五道將軍) office, as all the souls of the deceased are sent to the various levels of hell by the General of the Five Paths (see Appendix A for the Chinese text; T85, pp. 1308c–9b). It can be concluded that, in the *Mulian Bianwen*, the division of the functions and powers of the Three Kings is very clear. King Yama holds the judicial power over the dead (that is, the decision-making power), the General of the Five Paths is responsible for sending the dead into the different parts of hell (that is, specific administrative affairs), and the Commandant of Mount Tai’s responsibility is to record and keep King Yama’s judgments of the dead.

The changes in the netherworld are parallel to the adjustment of power in the Three Departments. During the reigns of Emperor Wu Zetian 武則天 and Emperor Gaozong in the Tang Dynasty (649–705), the Three Departments system was formed into a “tripartite” operation. The decision-making power was vested in the Department of the Secretariat, the power of supervision lay with the Department of Supervision, and specific administrative affairs were entrusted to the Department of State Affairs and the Six Ministers (Ma 1986, p. 455). In addition to the power of supervision, the Department of Supervision also had the task of reviewing, copying, and keeping documents. According to the records of the *Tang Liudian*, the original documents signed by the emperor were kept in the Department of Supervision, and a copy of the documents was sent to the Department of State Affairs for execution (Li 1992, p. 242).⁷ In the meantime, there were four clerks (Lushi 錄事) working for the Department of Supervision in the human world, while the Commandant of Mount Tai was the Chief of the Clerk Office in hell. By comparison, the function of keeping documents by the Commandant of Mount Tai in the *Mulian Bianwen* is particularly similar to that of the Department of Supervision during the Tang Dynasty.

Therefore, in the hierarchical administrative system in the hell constructed in the *Mulian Bianwen*, which was popular during the mid-Tang period, the Three Kings have a more perfect division of authority than that in the *Mingbao Ji*, with King Yama holding the decision-making power that was vested in the Department of the Secretariat, the Commandant of Mount Tai being responsible for saving documents, which was one of the Department of Supervision's functions, and the General of the Five Paths managing specific administrative affairs, which was the function of the Department of State Affairs and the Six Ministers. The limits of the Three Kings' functions and powers roughly corresponded to the functions of the Three Departments in the mid-Tang Dynasty.

Based on the above, from the *Mingbao Ji* compiled in the early Tang period to the *Mulian Bianwen* composed in the mid-Tang period, the workings and functions of the Three Kings described in literary works changed with the evolution of the Three Departments system in human society. This is an example of how the bureaucracy of the netherworld changed in accordance with the historical period. In other words, human beings constructed the bureaucratic system of the Three Kings based on the central official system in human society.

4. Dizang in the *Dizang Pusa Jing*

Although both the *Mingbao Ji* and the *Mulian Bianwen* constructed the bureaucratic system of the Three Kings based on the Three Departments system in different periods of the Tang Dynasty, the powers of supervision and deliberation, the main functions of the Department of Supervision, were missing in this system. The function of the Commandant of Mount Tai in the *Mulian Bianwen* was only to save documents, rather than supervision. After the mid-Tang Dynasty, with the rise of the cult of Dizang, the supervisory function of the bureaucratic system in hell was gradually assigned to Dizang Bodhisattva, which improved the bureaucracy in hell.

At the beginning of the rise of the cult, Dizang did not have supervisory power. In the Buddhist literature composed in the early Tang Dynasty, Dizang could only save the dead from hell rather than intervene in the judgment of King Yama. For instance, there is a story of Dizang in the *Huayanjing Zhuanji* (Chronicles of the Flower Adornment Scripture 華嚴經傳記) written by the famous Huayan 華嚴宗 patriarch Fazang 法藏 (643–712). This text was translated into English by Zhiru Ng (2007, pp. 169–70). The modified translation is as follows:

In the first year of Wenming 文明 (684), a metropolitan person, one Mr. Wang, whose first name is today not known, did not cultivate good acts and moreover was lacking in moral conduct. When he died of illness, two persons came to lead him to the entrance of hell, where they encountered a monk who said, "I am the Bodhisattva Dizang". [The bodhisattva] then taught Mr. Wang to recite a line of verse, which states: "If a person seeks to apprehend all the buddhas of the three realms, he or she should contemplate thus: It is the mind that creates all tathāgatas". After delivering the scriptural line, the bodhisattva addressed him, saying, "Recitation of this gāthā can dissipate [the fate of] hell". Mr. Wang recited most earnestly, and then he was brought to meet King Yama. The king asked, "What merits does this person possess?" Wang replied, "Only the observance of the above gāthā of four phrases". The king subsequently released and pardoned him. At the time when this gāthā was recited, in the places where the recitation could penetrate, all those suffering obtained liberation. After three days, Mr. Wang revived.

(T51, p. 167a. See Appendix B for the Chinese text.)

In this story, Dizang appeared at the entrance of hell to save the dead, but he could neither contact King Yama nor directly intervene in the process of the trial. This sug-

gests that the status of Dizang in hell is inferior to that of King Yama. This situation changed in the apocryphal *Dizang pusa jing*, which was composed in the mid-Tang period by Chinese people. In this apocrypha, Dizang began to participate in the judgment of the dead, which shows that his authority had expanded.

Although the text of the *Dizang pusa jing* is very short, it is typical of the Dunhuang documents, and its popularity is clear given that as many as 23 of its manuscripts have been found so far (Zhang 2003, pp. 107–109). The main storyline of this apocrypha explains the four reasons why Dizang stayed in hell, and it was translated into English by Zhiru Ng (2007, p. 258). The modified translation is as follows:

At that time, Dizang Bodhisattva was residing in the Lapis Lazuli Realm in the south, and he deployed his pure celestial eye to contemplate living beings undergoing tortures in hell . . . Unable to endure these sights, Dizang Bodhisattva came from the south and arrived in hell. He assumed a separate seat in the same place as King Yama. [He came] for four reasons: First, he feared that King Yama's judgment of crimes would be unreliable; second, he feared that the written documents could have been confused; third, he was concerned for those who died in an untimely fashion; and fourth, he [desired that] those who had received their punishments would be able to leave the riverbanks of hell.

(Dunhuang manuscript S.6257, transcribed in T85, p. 1455b–c. See Appendix C for the Chinese text.)

In this text, Dizang “assumed a separate seat in the same place as King Yama,” which shows that their status in the administrative system of hell had become equal. Among the four reasons why Dizang stayed in hell (aside from the fourth one, the salvation function, belonging only to him), the other three are beyond the scope of salvation. The first point shows that Dizang can supervise the judgment of King Yama. In other words, Dizang has the power of supervision. The second point shows that Dizang can assist King Yama in analyzing the written documents. This means that Dizang has jurisdiction. The third point shows that Dizang can correct a wrongful conviction of the dead and help them return to life. Therefore, Dizang has the power of refutation. To sum up, Dizang has the power of supervision and deliberation, which are the main functions of the Department of Supervision in the Tang Dynasty.

Furthermore, there is another piece of evidence that reflects the connection between Dizang and the Department of Supervision. Among the subordinate officials in the Department of Supervision in the Tang Dynasty, the one mainly responsible for refutation had the title Jishizhong (給事中, a type of imperial censor under the leadership of the Director of the Department of Supervision). The distinguished poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), who once served as a minister, summarized the responsibilities of the Jishizhong into four points in his article *Zheng Qin ke Jishizhong Zhi* (Zheng Qin can serve as Jishizhong 鄭覃可給事中制). He wrote the following:

The functions of Jishizhong fall into four categories. If the emperor's orders are inappropriate, Jishizhong can refute them. If the cases are not justified, Jishizhong can correct them. If someone was wrongly accused but has no place to appeal, Jishizhong can accept the case together with Yushi 御史 (censor). If the officials selected by the relevant departments are not suitable, Jishizhong can dismiss them together with the Director of the Department of Supervision.

(Bai 1999, p. 678, See Appendix D for the Chinese text.)

By comparison, the first three points are similar to the first three reasons why Dizang came to hell in the *Dizang pusa jing*. They are very close in terms of their functions. The available evidence seems to suggest that Dizang's function of supervision is the same in nature as the Jishizhong duties in the Department of Supervision.

In addition to the *Dizang pusa jing*, Dizang also appeared together with King Yama in the *Mulian Bianwen*, which proves that Dizang's supervisory power in the bureaucratic system of hell is parallel to the function of the Department of Supervision. When Mulian entered the palace of King Yama, he saw a bodhisattva called "Diyu Bodhisattva" (地獄菩薩), whose name is similar to Dizang. Diyu means "hell" in Chinese. Zhang holds the opinion that Dizang's name is incorrectly written here (Zhang 2003, p. 129). Furthermore, in the *Mulian bianxiang* (目連變相, a painting based on the *Mulian Bianwen*) painted in Cave 19 of Yulin 榆林窟 (Figure 1), a monk sits by King Yama's side, which is exactly how Dizang would be seated. The relationship between King Yama and Dizang described in the *Dizang pusa jing* and the *Mulian bianxiang* is similar to the system in the Political Affairs Hall (Zhengshi tang 政事堂) of the central government in the Tang Dynasty. According to the records in the *Tongdian* (*The General Histories of the Ancient Laws and Institutions* 通典) compiled by Du You 杜佑 (735–812) in 801, and the *Wenxian Tongkao* (*Comprehensive Textual Research of Historical Documents* 文獻通考) compiled by Ma Duanlin 馬端臨 (1254–1323) in 1307, the so-called Political Affairs Hall was the meeting place of the Directors of the Three Departments. However, since the Department of the Secretariat held the decision-making power, while the Department of Supervision was responsible for supervision and deliberation, the two departments were often at odds. As a result, the emperor ordered these two departments to negotiate in the Political Affairs Hall before reporting (Du 1988, p. 542; Ma 1986, p. 455). In the *Dizang pusa jing*, King Yama holds the decision-making power, just as in the Department of the Secretariat, and Dizang holds a power similar to that of the Department of Supervision. Meanwhile, the *Tang Liudian* defines the functions of the Director of the Department of Supervision, thus "he sits together with the Director of the Department of the Secretariat, and discusses all the military and state affairs" (凡軍國之務, 與中書令參而總焉, 坐而論之, 舉而行之 Li 1992, p. 242). It is similar to the description stating that Dizang "assumed a separate seat in the same place as King Yama" in the *Dizang pusa jing*. The comparison between the *Zheng Qin ke Jishizhong Zhi* and the *Dizang pusa jing* could preliminarily support the claim that Dizang's supervision power in the bureaucratic system in hell is parallel to the function of the Department of Supervision in the Three Departments system. The relationship between Dizang and King Yama is analogous to that of the Department of Supervision and the Department of the Secretariat in the mid-Tang Dynasty.

As exemplified in the above analysis, it is evident that the workings of the system of Dizang and the Three Kings is similar to the Three Departments system of the Tang Dynasty. It is important to note that supervision is the main function of the Department of Supervision, while keeping documents is not as important. In the system of the Three Kings discussed in the third section, the Commandant of Mount Tai's only function is to save documents, without the powers of supervision or rejection. The expansion of the authority of Dizang compensates for this vacancy. In other words, Dizang and the Commandant of Mount Tai in the bureaucratic system in hell shared the functions that belonged to the Department of Supervision in human society. Evidently, the rise of the cult of Dizang made the workings of the bureaucracy in hell more robust. The bureaucratic system of checks and balances in hell was established with the insertion of Dizang, which is similar to the temporal one. It is also the result of people constructing a Buddhist hell by imitating the bureaucratic system in the Tang Dynasty.



Figure 1. The Hall of King Yama in the *Mulian bianxiang*. Cave 19 of Yulin, Dunhuang. Five Dynasties (Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan 2003, p. 174).

5. Conclusions

By focusing on the bureaucratization of deities of the underworld, this study examined their evolution from the Three Kings system to the Dizang system and the Three Kings in the Tang Dynasty, a topic that has long been ignored. In this article, the aim was to analyze how the functions and workings of the hierarchical administrative system in hell (with Dizang and the Three Kings at the core) changed in accordance with the central government system during the Tang Dynasty. From the *Mingbao Ji*, which was composed in the early Tang period, to the *Mulian Bianwen*, which has been popular since the mid-Tang period, the Three Kings came to have a clear division of responsibilities, instead of only differing in the hierarchy of their official ranks. Next, by analyzing the *Dizang pusa jing*, it was found that the function of supervision was established in the bureaucratic system with the insertion of Dizang. Eventually, the system of Dizang and the Three Kings was formed, with King Yama holding the decision-making power, the General of the Five Paths in charge of specific administrative affairs, the Commandant of Mount Tai being responsible for recording and keeping documents, and Dizang holding the power of supervision. Meanwhile, decision-making power was vested in the Department of the Secretariat, specific administrative affairs were entrusted to the Department of State Affairs, and the functions of supervision and document keeping were the responsibility of the Department of Supervision in society during the mid-Tang period. In effect, the essence of the Three Departments system was a division of the prime minister's power. All of the directors of the Three Departments in the Tang Dynasty were also appointed as prime ministers. It is a system of checks and balances, with each one performing different functions, as is the case for the system of Dizang and the Three Kings of Hell. This case study showed how people reinterpreted the functions and workings of Dizang and the Three Kings of Hell based on the official system in human society and how they constructed the underworld based on a bureaucratic system that was similar to the temporal one.

The most important limitation lies in the fact that the Chinese Buddhist understanding of hell needs to be considered together with funerary observances, cosmology, morality, and everyday ritual, which is a complex and ever-changing process. Although the findings provide preliminary insight into the system of Dizang and the Three Kings of Hell, more sophisticated textual analysis needs to be conducted to refine these findings. The relationship between the bureaucratic system in hell and that

in human society would be a fruitful area for further work. For instance, the relationship between the Ten Kings of Hell and the Shidao (The System of Ten Censors of Provinces 十道), which was one of the local supervision systems in the Tang Dynasty, would also be worth investigating.

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Appendix A

目連向前問：“識一青提夫人已否？”諸人答言，盡皆不識。目連又問：“閻羅大王住在何處？”即諸人答言：“和尚向北更行數步，遙見三重門樓，有千萬個壯士皆持刀棒，即是閻羅大王門。”

目連聞語，向北更行數步，即見三重門樓，有壯士驅無量罪人入來。目連向前尋問，阿娘不見。路傍大哭，哭了前行，披所由將見於王。

門官引入見大王，問目連事之處。目連言訖，大王便喚上殿。乃見地獄菩薩，便即禮拜。“汝覓阿娘來？”目連啟言：“是覓阿娘來。”“汝母生存在日，廣造諸罪，無量無邊，當墮地獄。汝且向前，吾當即至。”

大王便喚業官、伺命、司錄，應時即至。“和尚阿娘名青提夫人，亡後多少時？”業官啟言大王：“青提夫人已經三載，配罪案總在天曹錄事司太山都尉一本。”王喚善惡二童子，向太山檢青提夫人在何地獄。

大王啟言：“和尚，共童子相隨，問五道將軍，應知去處。”目連聞語便辭大王。

……

即至五道將軍坐所，問阿娘消息處。將軍問左右曰：“見一青提夫人以否？”左邊有一都官啟言：“持三年已前，有一青提夫人，被阿鼻地獄牒上索將，見在阿鼻地獄受苦。”目連聞語啟言。將軍報言：“和尚，一切罪人，皆從王邊斷決，然始下來。”

Appendix B

文明元年京師人，姓王，失其名，既無戒行，曾不修善，因患致死。被二人引，至地獄門前，見有一僧云是地藏菩薩。乃教王氏誦一行偈，其文曰：若人欲求知三世一切佛，應當如是觀，心造諸如來。菩薩既授經文，謂之曰：誦得此偈，能排地獄。王氏盡誦。遂入見閻羅王。王問此人有何功德。答云：唯受持一四句偈。具如上說。王遂放免。當誦此偈時，聲所及處，受苦人皆得解脫。王氏三日始蘇，憶持此偈，向諸沙門說之，參驗偈文。方知是華嚴經第十二卷夜摩天宮無量諸菩薩雲集說法品。王氏自向空觀寺僧定法師說云。然也。

Appendix C

爾時地藏菩薩住在南方琉璃世界，以淨天眼觀地獄之中受苦眾生。鐵碓搗，鐵磨磨，鐵犁耕，鐵鋸解，鑊湯湧沸，猛火旦天。饑則吞熱鐵丸，渴飲銅汁，受諸苦惱無有休息。地藏菩薩不忍見之，即從南方來到地獄中，與閻羅王共同一處，別床而坐。有四種因緣：一者恐閻羅王斷罪不憑；二者恐文案交錯；三者未合死；四者受罪了出地獄池邊。

Appendix D

給事中之職，凡制敕有不便於時者，得封奏之；刑獄有未合於理者，得駁正之；天下冤滯無告者，得與御史糾理之；有司選補不當者，得與侍中裁退之。

Notes

- The study of the Chinese concept of hell has been a popular topic among both Chinese and overseas scholars. Their research has mainly focused on the documents and iconography relating to the concept of hell over a certain time period. The cult of Dizang and the cult of the Ten Kings have both been often studied (Ng 2007; Xiao 1985; Yin 2009; Zhang 2003). The iconography of Dizang and the Ten Kings from the Tang Dynasty to the Song Dynasty has also been extensively studied. The textual research on Dizang and the Ten Kings is mainly focused on the *Shiwang jing* (Scripture on the Ten Kings 十王經) (Du 1989; Teiser 1994a). It is an apocrypha that was written by Sramana Zangchuan 沙門藏川 in the ninth century and played the most important role in the formation of the cult of the Ten Kings. There exists a steady stream of scholarship on Dizang and the Ten Kings,

particularly concentrated on the paintings and frescos in Dunhuang 敦煌, the shrines in Sichuan 四川, and the water-land paintings created during the Song Dynasty (Kwon 2019; Ledderose 1998; Luo 1993; Luo 1998; Zhang and Liao 2007). According to these studies, it can be concluded that the Buddhist ideas and practices in the system of Dizang and the Ten Kings had already been bureaucratized in medieval China. Stephen Teiser holds that “purgatory represents the last stage in the imposition of a bureaucratic metaphor on the experience of death” (Teiser 1994a, p. 14). Lothar Ledderose also regards the hierarchical system in hell as a mirror of bureaucracy in the human world (Ledderose 1998, pp. 163–86).

- ² Stephen Teiser listed their names as King Qingguang 秦廣王, King Chujiang 初江王, King Songdi 宋帝王, King Wuguan 五官王, King Yama 閻羅王, King Biancheng 變成王, King Taishan 泰山王, King Pingdeng 平等王, King Dushi 都市王, and King Wudao Zhuanlun 五道轉輪王 in the *The Scripture of the Ten Kings* (Teiser 1994a, p. 223).
- ³ The basic outline of the Maudgalyāyana legend came to China from India. However, the details of the story for which this Buddhist saint is best known, the rescue of his mother from infernal suffering, seem to have been fully elaborated only in China. It was an exceedingly popular theme, both among monastic Buddhists and the laity alike. For historical and bibliographical information concerning this important text, see Ogawa (1964, pp. 157–89); (Mair 1986; Teiser 1994b; Sun 2001; Li and Lu 2003).
- ⁴ 又有所謂十王者。按《正法念經》，只有琰摩羅王。... 據《冥報記》云，天帝統御六道，是謂天曹；閻羅王者，是謂地府，如人間天子；泰山府君如尚書令；錄五道大神如六部尚書；自餘鬼道如州縣等。此外十殿之名，乃諸司分者。... 初匪罔世，往往猶歷代官制不同，隨時更變也。
- ⁵ 道者，天帝總統六道，是謂天曹。閻羅王者，如人天子。太山府君如尚書令，錄五道神如諸尚書。若我輩國，如大州郡。每人間事，道上章請福，天曹受之。下閻羅王云，某月日得某甲訴云云，宜盡理勿令枉濫，閻羅敬受而奉行之，如人之奉詔也。
- ⁶ 尚書令掌總領百官，儀形端揆。其屬有六尚書，法周之六卿，一曰吏部，二曰戶部，三曰禮部，四曰兵部，五曰刑部，六曰工部，凡庶務皆會而決之。
- ⁷ 覆奏書可訖，留門下省為案，更寫一通，侍中注“制可”，印縫，署送尚書施行。

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