

Article

“Breaking the Blood Pond”: Female Body Narrative and Ritual Practice in Jiangnan Popular Religion

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Abstract

Breaking the Blood Pond (po xuehu 破血湖) was a popular religious practice that took shape from the Song-Jin period onward and became widely prevalent in Jiangnan during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The infernal hell conjured by the Blood Pond requires religious ritual to be broken open and transformed. This article argues that Breaking the Blood Pond can be traced back to Buddhist legend and to its unexpected convergence with Confucian notions of filial piety, while its more substantial discursive logic was established through Daoist apotropaic practices such as “breaking hell”. At the same time, it also had a lateral counterpart in the female inner alchemy of Red Dragon-Slaying (zhan chilong 斬赤龍), which circulated widely in Jiangnan from the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods onward. Menstrual blood and postpartum lochia are judged impure because they are understood as forms of stasis, retention, and obstruction. In Jiangnan local society, the unfolding of Breaking the Blood Pond depends both on the continued development of imaginaries of the netherworld and traditions of netherworld journey, and on concrete forms of local ritual organization. A woman’s state of existence in the afterlife is related not only to her experiences in life, but also to how her posthumous condition is imagined by the living. In this sense, Breaking the Blood Pond concerns not only the bodily experience of individual women, but also a communal ritual experience crossing the boundaries of class, generation, gender, and even good and evil.

Keywords: Breaking the Blood Pond; Blood Pond Hell; female blood; Red Dragon-Slaying; Mulian; Jiangnan popular religion

1. Introduction

Breaking the Blood Pond (po xuehu 破血湖) is a ritual case in Jiangnan popular religion with significant interpretive potential. The ritual transformed bodily substances and reproductive suffering into a religious problem that could be narrated, ritually addressed, and collectively borne. Concerns over blood impurity and postmortem rescue are not unique to China. Jewish purification practices and Hindu funerary rites, for example, show that bodily impurity and the obligations of descendants toward the dead have long required ritual mediation in different religious traditions. Yet the Jiangnan case is distinctive in the way it joins female blood, filial repayment, Buddhist–Daoist netherworld imaginaries, and local performance into a single ritual complex.

Scholarship on Blood Pond Hell (xuehu diyu 血湖地獄) has already shown that the issue of female blood cannot be separated from the larger world of popular Buddhist narrative. Grant and Idema’s study of the Mulian 目連 tradition is especially important in this respect. They demonstrate that Blood Pond Hell was not merely a punitive image of the female body, but a religious scene in which maternal suffering, moral debt, and postmortem



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rescue were made dramatically visible (Grant and Idema 2011). Berezkin's studies of Mulian baojuan 目連寶卷 (precious scrolls of Mulian) further shift the discussion from narrative content to religious performance. His work on late imperial precious scrolls emphasizes the performative and ritual settings in which Mulian materials circulated (Berezkin 2017). His study of the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* (Xuehu baojuan 血湖寶卷) in Changshu shows that Blood Pond narratives were actively used in the Jiangnan "telling scriptures" tradition for the salvation of female souls (Berezkin 2021, p. 5). These studies make it possible to understand Blood Pond materials not only as texts about hell, but also as ritual scripts embedded in local religious life.

Yet the specific ritual logic by which Blood Pond narratives and ritual materials were organized into a communal practice in Jiangnan still requires further examination. The present article therefore shifts attention to Breaking the Blood Pond as a local ritual process. It examines how female blood came to be interpreted as pollution, obstruction, grievance, and suffering, how Buddhist Blood Bowl narratives and Daoist Blood Pond rites converged with filial ethics, and how Jiangnan local society transformed bodily suffering into a practice of ritual deliverance.

Red Dragon-Slaying (zhan chilong 斬赤龍) offers another religious way of understanding female blood. In female inner alchemy, menstrual blood was internalized as an object of bodily regulation and self-cultivation. Breaking the Blood Pond, by contrast, externalized female blood into a ritual scene involving kinship obligation, postmortem deliverance, precious-scroll performance, and communal participation. Read together, the two practices reveal different but related ways in which female blood was interpreted and ritually managed in Jiangnan religious life. The following analysis therefore moves from the formation of the Blood Pond to different religious understandings of female blood, and then from the logic of postmortem deliverance to Jiangnan ritual enactment. Through this progression, female blood was gradually transformed from a bodily substance into a ritual matter that could be named, organized, and collectively borne.

2. The Formation of the Blood Pond Concept

Buddhism and Daoism provided the cultural point of departure for Breaking the Blood Pond. As a symbol in Jiangnan popular religious belief, the term "Blood Pond" first appeared between the tenth and twelfth centuries. In Buddhist discourse, it was called the Blood Bowl (xuepen 血盆), whereas in Daoist discourse, it was called the Blood Pond. In time, Blood Bowl and Blood Pond converged, and the latter prevailed.

In Buddhist texts, the term "Blood Bowl" readily evokes the story of Mulian Rescues His Mother (Mulian jiumu 目連救母), with its strong overtones of netherworld literature. Mulian once journeyed to hell to rescue his mother. Yet as a complete narrative, *Mulian Rescues His Mother*, as recorded in the *Ullambana Sutra*, does not in fact mention the hell of the Blood Bowl. A precise reference to the Blood Bowl appears instead in the *Recorded Sayings of the Layman Ruru on the Three Teachings* (Ruru jushi sanjiao yulu 如如居士三教語錄), written by Yan Bing 顏丙 in 1194, the fifth year of Shaoxi under Emperor Guangzong of the Southern Song. Yan Bing, who was recommended for local office at the end of the Song, abandoned Confucianism for Buddhism and was active mainly in the Jiangnan region. In juan 4 of the *Ji* collection, the "Penitential Memorial for the Blood Bowl" (Chan Xuepen Die 懺血盆牒) states: "A mother's toil is profound, and three years of deep virtue are hard to repay; the Great Vehicle of the Buddha is vast, and five years of pure fasting are invoked in response. Now that good karmic fruits are being brought to completion, one relies on the dharma assembly to express repentance. May the honored mother so-and-so extinguish the calamities of a thousand lives, dissolve the sins of the ten evils, transform the Blood Bowl into a Lotus Bowl, turn the sea of karma into a sea of dharma, transform

disaster stars into stars of blessing in this life, and in another time pass from the human path into the Buddhist path" (Yan n.d., pp. 2–3). Here, Blood Bowl remains relatively abstract in meaning: whether it refers to menstruation or postpartum lochia is not entirely clear, although the latter seems more likely, since its significance lies in its contrast with the "Lotus Bowl" and in the expectation of transformation, return, and elevation. In addition, the *Blood Bowl Sutra Spoken by the Buddha on the Orthodox Teaching of the Mahayana* (*Foshuo dasheng zhengjiao xuepen jing* 佛說大乘正教血盆經), a short text widely considered an apocryphon circulating in the twelfth century and later transmitted to Japan, explicitly connected the Blood Bowl with hell, thus contributing to the formation of the concept of the "Blood Bowl Hell." Its later popularity in Japan was closely connected with the transmission of Jiangnan religious culture, and may even be regarded as an aftercurrent of this Jiangnan apocryphal-scriptural tradition. In later Mulian precious scrolls, Mulian rescues his mother precisely from the Blood Bowl.

It is worth noting that the Buddhist discourse of Blood Bowl Hell remained closely tied to the Confucian ethics of filial piety and thus bore a pronounced stamp of Buddhist localization in China: what mattered was not a general understanding of women, but a case-specific understanding of one's mother. Maternal grace is immeasurable and impossible to fully repay, hence one "relies on the dharma assembly to express repentance," dispel calamity, remove sin and evil, and seek release. Put differently, the basic coloring of the Blood Bowl Hell belief lies in a proposition about maintaining intergenerational relations within the lineage through the roles and social identities of children. The willingness of children to fulfill filial obligations furnishes the primary force of this proposition, while the mother appears more as an object awaiting delayed redemption.

Daoist belief in the Blood Pond and Blood Pond Hell likewise emerged in the twelfth century, especially in the Jiangnan region, somewhat later than Buddhism, but in a richer and fuller form. In the *Supreme Yellow Register Grand Liturgy: Established Rituals* (*Wushang huanglu dazhai licheng yi* 無上黃籙大齋立成儀), juan 53, under the section "Food Three," the Blood Pond Avici Hell of Keshi Xia Mountain is explicitly listed alongside the Avici Hell of the Great Iron Encirclement at Fengdu Mountain and the Total Avici Hell of Fengdu Mountain (Jiang 2004, p. 630), constituting an indispensable part of the overall structure of the Avici Hell. This important Daoist ritual manual, authored by Jiang Shuyu 蔣叔輿¹ of Yongjia in the Southern Song, indicates the institutionalized place of the Blood Pond concept within the religious world of Jiangnan.

As a mature discursive system, the Daoist understanding of the Blood Pond possesses the advantage of completeness. First, in the *Numinous Treasure Jade Mirror* (*Lingbao yujian* 靈寶玉鑑), Blood Pond talismans appear in striking variety rather than in a single fixed form. In juan 6, under "Numinous Banner and Precious Canopy," there are nine Blood Pond lamp-banner talismans, including talismans for rescue from the Hells of Blood Overflow, Blood Pollution, Blood Defilement, Blood Coldness, Xiashi, Avici, the Great Iron Enclosure Mountain, the Small Iron Enclosure Mountain, and the Blood Pond. The Blood Pond Hell thus appears alongside the Hells of Blood Overflow, Blood Pollution, Blood Defilement, and Blood Coldness. Elsewhere, there are also such corresponding titles as the Talisman for Purifying the Blood Pond and Summoning Souls, the Jade Register Golden Writ True Talisman for Breaking the Blood Pond and Granting Great Amnesty, and the Talisman for Souls in the Avici Blood Pond.

Second, the Blood Pond is explicitly defined as a locus of pollution: "The Blood Pond is fetid and filthy, dark and difficult to enter. Even officials who bear the Emperor's command and possess divine powers may enter, yet they still cannot proceed directly to the place of the Blood Pond" (Lingbao yujian 2004, p. 666). This pollution is not only foul but also dark, and its darkness obstructs action.

Third, the core means of breaking the Blood Pond lies in purging. Through “dharmic water,” the Blood Pond is washed away. Here, purging becomes equivalent to breaking, and this logic clearly preserves an aftercurrent of the early Daoist ideal of “purifying the mysterious mirror”. At the same time, the purpose of this purging lies in rescuing women from the sufferings of difficult childbirth. The emphasis on urgency is crucial: the salvation of such suffering permits no delay, and Breaking the Blood Pond is directed toward the immediate distress of childbirth.

Moreover, the Blood Pond talismans acquire historical extension. The source of suffering is not “desire,” but “grievance”. The appearance of the Blood Pond is thus linked to unresolved grievance. The “Jade Register Talisman for Delivering from the Blood Pond and Resolving Grievance” advances beyond the ordinary Blood Pond talisman. Its incantation reads: “Brahmic qi fills and encircles the ten directions; the five sufferings cease their confrontation; the three paths vanish and destroy their knot of grievance; harmony is restored; evil roots are cut off. Previous affinities, karmic debts, and the root of karma are untied” (Lingbao yujian 2004, p. 667). Here, the chain of time is extended, and the point of release falls upon grievance—upon the grievance-entanglement of evil roots. The logic is retrospective: one traces backward, seeking to dissolve “previous affinities,” “karmic debts,” and the “root of karma”.

On this basis, the *Numinous Treasure Jade Mirror* presents a relatively complete picture both of the Blood Pond Hell and of Breaking the Blood Pond. The “Special Treatise on Deliverance from the Blood Pond” states: “The Blood Pond Hell is a manifestation produced by the governors of the netherworld in accordance with the grievances knotted within the dead. ...Without establishing a grand fast, deliverance is impossible. Therefore, within the Great Numinous Treasure Rite, there is a Jade Radiance section devoted especially to deliverance from the Blood Pond. One offers memorials and submits petitions, performs talismans according to the registers, and proceeds step by step according to ritual prescriptions. Heavenly generals first seize the soul; heavenly physicians then treat its illness; divine water cleanses its foul stench; dharmic food relieves its hunger and thirst; only then are its thoughts of attachment released and the path of deliverance opened. The wondrous efficacy and numinous power lie entirely in the practitioners who carry out the rite” (Lingbao yujian 2004, p. 455). The passage links death in childbirth to unresolved grievance and presents deliverance as dependent upon the establishment of a grand fast and ritual procedure. Here, the basic procedure of Breaking the Blood Pond is clearly set forth.

In its original Daoist context, Breaking the Blood Pond reflected the obstetric suffering of the dead mother and the dead or unborn child. As Lévy-Bruhl (1935, pp. 312–13) observed, “menstrual blood and miscarriage sometimes attract the same kind of belief.” In some cultural conceptions, menstrual blood is not simply an excreted substance, but a kind of body that has not yet become a person and has already lost the possibility of ever becoming one. This observation suggests that fears surrounding childbirth are not merely impurity taboos, but are rooted in a deeper anxiety over the loss of life at the very moment of birth. In the agricultural society of premodern China, even in Jiangnan, infant mortality was high and maternal death not uncommon. The terror bound up with childbirth, together with the constant proximity of illness and death, constituted the real background against which Breaking the Blood Pond emerged.

This original state, however, did not remain intact for long. The meaning of the Blood Pond soon expanded: it came to refer not only to postpartum lochia, but also to women’s menstruation, blood shed in punishment and execution, and various forms of pus and blood produced by disease. As sources of contamination, these blood traces were thought capable of polluting waterways. If consumed unknowingly, or if exposed to the sun, moon, and stars—the Three Luminaries—they could spread illness and calamity. For this reason,

the Blood Pond had to be broken open. It should be emphasized, however, that Breaking the Blood Pond was ultimately a collective act. It carried the marks of communal participation, lineage virtue, and social distinction. In this respect, it differed from Red Dragon-Slaying, discussed in the following section, which was centered on the self-conscious practice of an individual cultivator.

3. Red Dragon-Slaying and Another Logic of Female Blood

If Blood Pond narratives emphasize female blood as pollution that must be ritually cleansed after death, Red Dragon-Slaying reveals another religious logic of female blood. In Daoist female inner alchemy, menstrual blood is not externalized as a stain upon the world but internalized as a substance to be regulated, retained, and transformed. The comparison prevents female blood from being reduced to impurity alone.

During the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods, Jiangnan preserved another line that ran parallel to Breaking the Blood Pond, namely, Red Dragon-Slaying. In the historical transmission of Daoism, the main axis of development lay in the elaboration of inner alchemy methods (danfa 丹法). Their importance far exceeded that of other forms of practice, such as thunder rites. By the Song, Jin, and Yuan periods, these methods had come to be differentiated by gender into male and female inner alchemy. Within female inner alchemy, the most important method of practice was Red Dragon-Slaying. If Breaking the Blood Pond may be understood as a passive acceptance of the bodily narrative of womanhood, then Red Dragon-Slaying represents an active response to, and even transcendence of, that bodily narrative: the female life cycle needed to be regulated, just as vital qi could, and indeed should, be nourished and accumulated. As a Daoist practice of self-cultivation tinged with elitism, Red Dragon-Slaying was unlikely to be widely disseminated at the popular level, yet it still served as a lateral counterpart to Breaking the Blood Pond, standing in both contrast and resonance with it.

The *Monograph on Mount Chisong* (Chisong shanzhi 赤松山志) records a certain Master Sheng of Ultimate Joy: “The master’s name was Kuang, his style name Yuanfang, and he was a native of Wulin. ... During the Shaoxing period, because a palace consort transmitted his method of Red Dragon-Slaying, Emperor Gaozong heard of his fame, ordered his portrait to be painted, and summoned him. He then came in rustic attire to the audience; the emperor bestowed a seat and conversed with him on the mysterious, housing him in the Yujin Garden.” His mother dreamt of swallowing five-colored light and thereby conceived him; by the age of ten, he had studied Dao at the Three Caverns in Jinhua; and by fifteen or sixteen, he had moved to the outskirts of Chisong, where he delighted in chanting and composition and left behind a fascicle titled *Blossoms and Pines*. “He silently performed inner refinement at court and mastered everything” (Ni 1987, p. 54). His fame was thus closely tied to Red Dragon-Slaying, testifying to the circulation of this practice at the time.

The Red Dragon itself refers to women’s menstrual blood. This raises the question of how blood was understood in early ritual and cosmological thought. In its oracle-bone form, the graph for blood depicts sacrificial animal blood offered in ritual, hence the notion of “blood sacrifice”. Blood was used in sacrifice because it was understood as precious, and this preciousness derived from its relation to life itself. The trigram Kan 坎 is the blood trigram; the life of living creatures depends on blood just as the earth depends on water. In this sense, blood is the basis of living kinds, including human reproduction, and it bears a special and direct correspondence to women; hence the idea of “blood kinship”. The “Esoteric Directives on Immortal Registers” in the *Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel* (Yunji qiqian 雲笈七籤) states: “As for the root of the human being, once male essence and female blood congeal through the Dao, they naturally generate a drop of water” (Zhang 1996, p. 540). Here, “congeal” means mingling and aggregation. When male essence and female

blood unite, they naturally form the Dao—that is, the Dao of life. Two points deserve emphasis. On the one hand, “blood” belongs specifically to women—men, too, possess blood, yet blood functions as the physiological narrative-symbol of womanhood. On the other hand, “blood” is maternal in implication. “Mother” is a distinct category within the broader category of “woman,” referring both to the birthing woman in the individual sense and to the ancestress in the collective sense. Alongside the pairing of male essence and female blood, one also encounters the formulation “male qi and female blood”: together, blood and qi make possible kinship and filial reverence. Here, male “essence” may be replaced by “qi,” but female “blood” remains constant and is never displaced.

The problem, then, is how a substance associated with life and sacrifice could also become a byword for pollution, contamination, illness, and guilt. A clue lies in the *Explanations of Names* (*Shiming* 釋名), juan 2, “Explaining Forms and Structures”: “Blood means filth: once it issues from flesh and flows out, it becomes filthy indeed” (X. Liu 2021, p. 114). This statement reveals a key thread in the ancient understanding of blood pollution. The value of blood does not lie in some absolute purity of the substance itself, but in the fact that it is originally hidden within the body, belonging to the ordered circulation of life’s interior. Like qi and pulse, blood should move within the body without appearing. Once it leaves the flesh and spills outward, the vital substance that once sustained life suddenly becomes a free-floating, disordered, and unsettling marginal thing. For this reason, menstrual blood and postpartum lochia came to be regarded as impure: they are not “blood” in the abstract, but blood that has already escaped the body’s boundaries and lost the constraints of interior order. As Douglas (1966, p. 121) famously observed, “the orifices of the body symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind”. Blood pollution is thus feared not only because of its sensory offensiveness, but because it exposes the loosening of bodily boundaries. At the same time, the discussion of “rites of passage” suggests that persons or things in the midst of boundary-crossing are considered dangerous precisely because they are “neither this nor that”; only through ritual separation, transition, and incorporation can order be restored (Van Gennep 1960, pp. 41–44). The many taboos imposed upon women’s blood in traditional thought are rooted precisely in this deep anxiety over breached boundaries, unstable states, and threatened order.

Seen in this light, the “slaying” in Red Dragon-Slaying acquires particular significance. In Daoism, “slaying” does not mean killing, slaughtering, extirpating, or severing once and for all. Its counterpart is “capturing”: women slay the Red Dragon, men capture the White Tiger. More precisely, “slaying” here means regulating and managing—preventing the onset of states of confusion and disorder, and transforming what is unknowable and uncontrollable into something knowable, controllable, and properly ordered. If the female practitioner keeps the Red Dragon within the body, it becomes female inner alchemy; uncertainty is transformed into certainty. This is not slaughter, but restoration: the aim of female cultivation is to return oneself to that original condition in which nothing has yet been lost, is not easily lost, and refuses to be lost—a state of fullness and plenitude.

How, then, is the Red Dragon to be slain? The *Direct Instructions on the Secrets of Inner Nature and Vital Existence* (*Xingming fajue mingzhi* 性命法訣明指)², under “Void-Manifesting Form,” says: “If one takes in air as the first step, tightly gathers and rubs the lower abdomen, rubs the two breasts, and inhales the air, this is Red Dragon-Slaying” (Zhao 1988, p. 483). In the *Qiaoyang Scripture on Female Alchemy* (*Qiaoyang jing nügong xiulian* 樵陽經女工修煉), under the Lü Dongbin transmission “The Great Yin Refinement of Form,” one reads: “Close the eyes, preserve the spirit, and rest deeply for a time, so that the mind becomes calm and the breath regulated. Then concentrate the spirit in the qi-cavity, cross both hands and support the breasts, gently rubbing them twenty times; then slightly

draw the qi up from the lower cinnabar field thirty-six times. Again, support the breasts with the hands, turn the light back, and regulate the breath for a long while. Naturally true qi comes and goes, opening and closing. Once abundant, spirit and qi suffice, and the menstrual water naturally ceases, the breasts become like those of a man: this is called Red Dragon-Slaying” (Fu 1994, p. 428). The *Illustrated Explanations on Female Inner Alchemy* (Nü-gong lianji huandan tushuo 女工煉己還丹圖說) similarly states: “When the signal has come but the tide has not yet arrived, one must immediately engage in practice. Sit cross-legged or in Guanyin half-seat; when spirit and qi stir within the body, turn the light back to contemplate the breast points and the sea of blood. Even out the breath through the nose, and use true intention to guide the stirred spirit and qi from the sea of blood into the Caoxi path, straight to the cranial gate, then from above bring it back down until it reaches the breasts and returns to the middle extremity. ... For young women with vigorous blood and qi and a quiet mind, after a month or so one can slay the Red Dragon and return to the body of youth, with the face like peach blossoms” (Bai 1990, pp. 87–88). Taken together, Red Dragon-Slaying broadly consists of meditative sitting, breath regulation, concentrated activation of the spirit, gentle massage of the breasts, and intentional guidance of spirit and qi. Similar methods circulated widely in Daoist female inner alchemy. The contraction of the breasts described here is meant to return the practitioner to youthful womanhood, not to turn her into a man. Red Dragon-Slaying is not gender transformation. Nor is the return to youthful womanhood simply a pursuit of eternal youth. It signifies the restoration of vital wholeness and the arresting of bodily loss within the logic of female inner alchemy. In biological terms, however, it could lead to infertility and separate women from reproductive capacity.

If Red Dragon-Slaying represents an elitist strategy of self-cultivation aimed at survival, it stands in sharp contrast to the postmortem redress offered by Breaking the Blood Pond. Faced with the same bodily predicament, these two paths begin from a shared concern with female blood but diverge in direction, in practice, and ultimately in destiny. Within these divergences are inscribed differences in class, status, worldview, and existential value. Red Dragon-Slaying seeks to prevent bodily loss through inner cultivation, whereas Breaking the Blood Pond responds to suffering after it has already taken shape. The comparison therefore clarifies the distinctive logic of Breaking the Blood Pond. Its focus is not the self-cultivating woman, but a ritual process involving the dead woman, her descendants, scriptures, objects, and local participants. It does not seek to prevent bodily loss before it occurs, but to repair its consequences after death by transforming bodily suffering into a matter of filial action, ritual performance, and communal participation.

4. Breaking the Blood Pond and the Logic of Postmortem Deliverance

The internal logic of Breaking the Blood Pond lies in the very meaning of “breaking,” namely, deliverance. What the Blood Pond is matters, but the central issue is how, under what conditions, and why it must be broken. This raises a crucial question: what is the netherworld (youming 幽冥)? The Blood Pond is only one sign within the world of the netherworld, a symbolic point at which the imagined world after death becomes exposed within the world of the living. The netherworld was originally conceived as a terrifying scene into which one falls after death through the force of karma. Whether called the “Dark Capital” or the “realm of the dead,” hell raises the question of how the dead can still be remembered, sought out, saved, or even abandoned through the continuing force of former life, kinship, and causality.

The term *you* 幽 fundamentally denotes concealment, obscuration, and dimness—something difficult to see, humble, and profound—and for this reason it came to describe the world after death. Yet the character also carries the sense of imprisonment. In Bud-

dhism, karmic rebirth is almost like a mathematical calculation, self-evident in its operation. In indigenous Chinese culture, by contrast, whether a person descends into hell after death is a sociological proposition, one that depends upon judgment. Once guilt is determined, confinement follows; hence the sense of *you* as imprisonment. This, in turn, links the afterlife world to the bureaucratic order and official-centered logic of Chinese culture. On this basis, wherever there is judgment, there can also be a miscarriage of judgment. Wherever there is a verdict, there can be reversal, retrial, wrongful grievance, vindication, and rehabilitation. Even when a judgment is correct, there still remains room for pleading on behalf of the condemned. Within these tensions between human feeling and legal principle, human feeling outweighs legal principle; and because it lies closer to innate nature, it is immediate, recurrent, and timely.

This creates a gray zone that reason alone cannot fully regulate. The same is true of *ming* 冥. In the *Etymological Dictionary of Chinese Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), *ming* is glossed as *you* 幽: like an abyss, without light, vast, empty, and silent. But it can also be read as *ming* 瞑, “to close the eyes,” or as *ming* 溟, “the northern sea.” If the eyes may close, they may also open; and the boundary between sea and land cannot remain absolute. Human beings do not return to life after death, yet death does not sever them completely from what preceded it—there remains a lingering connection, like lotus roots broken yet still linked by their fibers, and thus a mediating zone, an intermediate space, between life and death. The principle that “once the coffin is closed, judgment is fixed” is ineffective in the *Mulian Rescues His Mother* narrative; indeed, whether the coffin is closed or not makes no real difference. Just as no one pauses to question or pursue whether the one Mulian saves is merely his own mother or all mothers under heaven, so too do people set aside Mulian’s deviation from Buddhist doctrine and respond instead to his filial piety with boundless sympathy and praise.

A text popular during the Guangxu period, the *Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescues His Mother from the Netherworld* (*Mulian jiumu youming baochuan* 目蓮救母幽冥寶傳), contains the following prefatory statement: “As for the affairs of the netherworld, I first take hold of them from the standpoint of what is neither hidden nor obscure, and thus preside over them prior to the very emergence of the netherworld. Were this not so, what meaning would there be in my journey through the netherworld? Would this not stand as the clearest proof of what is hidden and obscure?” (*Mulian jiumu youming baochuan* 1900, p. 2). The stress here falls on what precedes the netherworld itself. In the *Mulian Rescues His Mother* narrative, the key issue is not what exists within the netherworld, but why Mulian rescues his mother, whether he can rescue her, and how he does so. In the same way, in *Breaking the Blood Pond*, greater weight falls on the act of “breaking” than on the Blood Pond itself.

Indeed, *Breaking the Blood Pond* becomes possible precisely because its inner logic is already contained within imaginaries of the netherworld and, even more strikingly, within traditions of netherworld journey (*youming* 遊冥): human beings can traverse the boundary between life and death; they can move back and forth between yin and yang 陰陽, entering and leaving, walking and speaking across different realms. This is not the bewildered hardship of hungry ghosts lost in the underworld, nor is it something within the reach of ordinary living people. It is a singular capacity tied to the status of the rescuer, who can remain both outside the situation and, at the same time, act from within it. In one Qing version of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescues His Mother from the Netherworld*, it is written: “Yama had long known that the greatly filial Mulian had, by imperial command, journeyed through the netherworld to save his mother. He therefore descended from the hall to receive him” (*Mulian jiumu youming baochuan* 1900, pp. 36–37). Here, Yama refers to the King of Hell. Mulian’s rescue of his mother is thus explicitly authorized. The key to his action lies precisely here: he does not save his mother of his own accord, but by imperial

command, and he does so through a netherworld journey. Such a journey is the necessary condition for rescuing his mother.

If Breaking the Blood Pond opens a passage out of obstruction, the question remains where this passage leads. The materials discussed here do not point to a single doctrinal destination after deliverance from the Blood Pond. In Buddhist narrative, salvation may take the form of release from hell, rebirth, or ascent to a better realm; in Daoist ritual, it is framed more as the cleansing of pollution, resolution of grievance, and transfer into an ordered postmortem condition. In local Jiangnan practice, what matters most is not a precise eschatological location, but the transformation of the dead woman from an obstructed and polluted soul into one who can be ritually settled, mourned, and reintegrated into the moral world of her descendants.

In hell, Mulian stands on the opposite side of the Blood Pond. One way to approach this is through the Three Luminaries. On the one hand, light comes from the heavenly bodies and was revered by early peoples; it is an indigenous concept of long standing. The *Comprehensive Discussions from the White Tiger Hall* (*Baihu tongde lun* 白虎通德論) already notes that heaven possesses the Three Luminaries of sun, moon, and stars. Wang Yinglin 王應麟³, in the “Record of Rites” section of the *Notes on Difficulties in Learning* (*Kunxue jiwen* 困學記聞), cites Emperor Wen of Han’s edict concerning “bringing shame upon the brightness of the Three Luminaries,” and Yan Shigu’s commentary makes clear that these refer to the light emitted by the sun, moon, and stars (Wang 2008, p. 660). The question, then, is why the Blood Pond should be understood as offending the Three Luminaries. In Buddhist belief, hell is an inverted, dark, and empty world, marked above all by the absence of the sun, moon, and stars. In the “Hells” section of the *Sutra of the Right Mindfulness of Dharma* (*Zhengfa nianchu jing* 正法念處經), it is stated: “In the empty void I see neither sun nor moon nor stars. All is inversion; universal darkness covers all. All five faculties are seen in inversion. Hooks tear at my entire body, splitting it so I suffer great pain. I have nowhere to rely upon—how shall I gain release?” (Gautama 1990, p. 67). This absence of light defines hell as an inverted realm. If this logic is pursued further, then whatever comes from hell—or is about to be cast into hell—may, in relation to the sun, moon, and stars, constitute a form of collision and offense. In the case of the Blood Pond, at least, this assumption clearly holds.

On the other hand, Mulian himself bears the Three Luminaries, precisely because he can journey through the netherworld. The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 says: “One who can bear the great circle walks upon the great square; one who mirrors the great clarity beholds great brightness; one who establishes great peace dwells in the great hall; one who can travel through deepest darkness shines together with the sun and moon” (A. Liu 1985, p. 45). From the standpoint of narrative role, Mulian is no more than a ministerial figure—at most an enlightened minister, a loyal retainer, or a worthy general. Only a minister can be subject to the distinction between acting “by imperial command” and acting without it. Yet at the level of cultural narrative, his true significance as a figure lies in the netherworld journey. He is the representative figure who crosses the boundary between light and dark; because he can enter and leave the deepest darkness, he acquires the qualification of shining together with the sun and moon. Mulian’s “light,” then, is not merely a moral embellishment; it derives from his ability to move through darkness without being swallowed by it. Opposed to him, the Blood Pond gathers within itself the multiple dark valences of bodily filth, ethical guilt, and the breakdown of order. Following Kristeva (2024, p. 66), purification ritual does not simply remove impurity; rather, through prohibition and expulsion, it separates the impure from secular order and thereby reestablishes sacred order on the side of the “self and the clean.” From this perspective, Mulian and the Blood Pond form a mutually opposed yet mutually defining pair of value-poles: one belongs to light

and embodies purification, distinction, and deliverance; the other belongs to darkness and gathers filth, fear, and disorder. Between them, at the juncture of light and dark, the central symbolic structure of the entire narrative takes shape.

When Mulian confronts his mother in the Blood Pond, the rescuer and the one to be rescued, sunk in sin, face one another in hell, pushing the textual rhythm of the female narrative to an intensely dramatic climax. Mulian was once brought into this world by the mother now in the Blood Pond; now, however, he stands at a moral singularity from which he radically negates, deconstructs, and criticizes the Blood Pond. The bond between Mulian and his mother had already been established before she fell into the netherworld. When the Blood Pond first came into being, the infant still in swaddling clothes could only be inside it; at that moment, he could not yet have broken it. Breaking the Blood Pond is thus a technique by which grown children, having matured under the father's protection and the mother's care, display their filial piety. In this sense, the Blood Pond and Breaking the Blood Pond form an inner circulation. The most powerful and emotionally charged righteous subject for Breaking the Blood Pond—goodness—is itself produced out of the Blood Pond, almost like a flower blooming from evil.

This narrative logic of filial rescue acquires concrete force in ritual practice. In Jiangnan local practice, the act of “breaking” moved from a story of netherworld deliverance into a public and repeatable form of communal performance.

5. Jiangnan Ritual Practice and Communal Performance

The Jiangnan specificity of Breaking the Blood Pond becomes clearest when Blood Pond narratives are viewed in their performative settings. The outward form of Breaking the Blood Pond in Jiangnan's popular religious life approximates a communal gathering organized through ritual procedure. It is not simply the projection of personal experience; rather, through a complete set of ritual actions, role assignments, and normative requirements, it incorporates members of local society into a shared religious order. As Smith (1956, pp. 28–30) observed, religion presents itself first and foremost as a series of acts and observances that must or ought to be performed, and every member of the community occupies a place within them by virtue of birth or social position. In this sense, Breaking the Blood Pond is more than a symbolic handling of female bodily impurity; it uses ritual procedure to arrange its members, confirm order, and secure shared participation. This logic becomes visible in local performance, assigned roles, and material objects.

“Ghosts” (gui 鬼) are indispensable to ancient Chinese popular religious culture. The *Etymological Dictionary of Chinese Characters* explains the term as follows: “That to which a person returns is a ghost; the graph follows ‘person’ and depicts a ghost's head” (Xu 1981, p. 434). On the one hand, the ghost is the human shadow. It is not something external to or severed from the human; rather, it is the human in withdrawal, return, and retrospection. It constitutes another mode of human existence, inherently plural: as many people as there are, so many ghosts there are. On the other hand, the ghost-head opens up an inexhaustible imaginative space. Before the introduction of Buddhism into China, ghosts were thought to share the form of human bones and corpses; after its arrival, they became linked to consciousness and karmic awareness. On this basis, the ghost-head could take on further forms—as a mask, as a puppet in Exorcising Opera (nuoxi 傩戲), and as an object of stage performance. This indicates that ghosts occupy a central place in the world of art. That Mulian drama came to be hailed as the ancestor of all theatrical forms is no accident. It stands as a summit of ghost-centered art in ancient China, and it was precisely this textual tradition that created the basis for the coexistence of humans and ghosts, their unobstructed communication, and the polyphony of voices between them. At the level of popular religious practice, Breaking the Blood Pond is therefore not merely the execution

of a liturgical procedure; rather, it establishes in local society a ritual field into which multiple parties may enter. Through it, people traverse the boundary between life and death, moving repeatedly among fear, compassion, sorrow, and hope, so that individual life histories and family memories may be reordered between the yin and yang worlds. As Turner (2011, p. 203) observed, society is less a static entity than a process that moves between structure and communitas; in ordinary life, people are placed within structured orders of identity, but in liminal moments those distinctions temporarily loosen, and participants enter a communal state of shared feeling and symbolic equality. What gives Breaking the Blood Pond in Jiangnan its particular power of attraction is that it opens, beyond ordinary order, a concentrated liminal space in which people of different statuses can participate together and form a shared ritual experience in a setting of compassion and salvation.

Within the Buddhist tradition of transformation texts and popular lectures (bianwen 變文俗講), Mulian, “foremost in supernatural powers,” and Sariputra, “foremost in wisdom,” both rescue their mothers. The Mulian Rescues His Mother tradition is grounded in the Northern transmission Chinese Buddhist *Ullambana Sutra*, whereas the Sariputra Rescues His Mother story takes as its prototype the Southern transmission Minor Collection text, the *Story of Sariputra’s Mother and the Ghost* (*Shelifu mu gui shi* 舍利弗母鬼事). The two illuminate one another and ultimately converge: before filial piety, whether supernatural power or wisdom, both submit to a moral principle. In popular lectures, the keyword is “popular.” To address the popular is not to reform it. Dunhuang manuscripts preserve more than ten Mulian-related texts, including *Origins of Mulian* (*Mulian yuanqi* 目連緣起), the *Transformation Text on Mahamaudgalyayana Rescues His Mother from the Underworld* (*Damuqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen* 大目乾連冥間救母變文), the *Mulian Transformation Text* (*Mulian bianwen* 目連變文), and the *Transformation Text on Mulian Rescues His Mother* (*Mulian jiumu bianwen* 目連救母變文). Together with the proliferation of many apocrypha, such as earlier and later *Mulian Sutra* (*Mulian jing* 目連經), the *Blood Bowl Sutra* (*Xuepen jing* 血盆經), and the *Ksitigarbha Sutra* (*Dizang jing* 地藏經), this not only demonstrates the extent to which the Mulian Rescues His Mother story circulates within transformation texts and popular lectures, but also further confirms how this figure makes possible the vigorous unfolding of vernacular religious discourse.

On this basis, the artistic quality of Jiangnan Breaking the Blood Pond texts constitutes a distinct local hallmark. Jiangnan culture has long been closely bound to the arts, and this in turn has led local popular religious activities to assume a character that is at once highly procedural and aesthetically organized. As one scholar (Bell 1997, p. 171) has noted, every ritual is embedded within “a thick context of social customs, historical practices, and day-to-day routines”; it is precisely the interweaving of inherited custom and present circumstance that forms the texture through which a particular ritual comes into being and is perceived as meaningful. Seen in this way, the artistic character of Breaking the Blood Pond in Jiangnan is not a decorative addition to religious content. It is rather the result of local society weaving everyday ethics, aesthetic habits, and salvific imagination into a single ritual experience.

On the one hand, looking backward, Jiangnan was the land of Wu and Yue. “Wu” 吳 may be glossed as “great speech”: the graph resembles a person opening the mouth in grand utterance—that person is a shaman, the utterance is invocation and prayer. “Wu” is also associated with the eastern direction. “Dong” 東, the east, signifies movement: the “ri” 日 (sun) enclosed in “mu” 木 (wood) has at times been understood as an image of Youchao building a nest in a tree. Yet this “wood” is not only the dwelling place of the common people; it is also the Jianmu 建木 or Fusang 扶桑, the cosmic tree by which the many emperors ascend and descend, the “tree that reaches heaven.” Such a tree must soar into the clouds. If the West has Kunlun 崑崙 and Kunming 崑明, the East has Kunshan 崑山 and

Kunqu 昆曲. “Kun” 昆 joins “ri” 日 (sun) and “bi” 比 (comparison): the sun rises, one after another, without fail. The lands of Jiangsu and Zhejiang have always been places where people sought immortals, searched for the Dao, and pursued Penglai, the mythical isle of the immortals. “Yue” 越 originally means crossing over, passing through. The history of Wu and Yue in the Spring and Autumn period was itself the result of Taibo’s migration. When Taibo cut his hair and tattooed his body, this was not merely a helpless gesture meant to show himself “unfit for use”; it was also an act of respect for, and adaptation to, the flourishing local shamanic ethos of the time. Shamanism is one point of origin for the arts. With “Wu,” there also comes “yu” 娛 (entertainment). The element of “Jostling with Immortals” (zha shenxian 輒神仙) within Breaking the Blood Pond likely emerges, in large measure, from the cultural soil of Wu.

In its later development, Breaking the Blood Pond was also shaped by the City God (Chenghuang 城隍) belief. The City God is fundamentally different from the Earth God, for it is grounded in the city and, as such, takes priority over and even stands above the various lands. The emergence and maturation of urban society thus form the underlying logic by which Jiangnan differs from other regional cultural formations. Wu Zixu, in conforming to heaven and earth, surveying the land, tasting the waters, and constructing Helü City, linked the city to the outside world through eight land gates and eight water gates. The original intention certainly included military calculation, but in lived reality, water-centered exchange and trade furnished this city with a firm urban foundation, allowing it to become one of China’s earliest “vanguards” of urbanization. That Breaking the Blood Pond emerged here thus follows naturally, and may even be regarded as an oblique urban art form.

In fact, the Breaking the Blood Pond rituals that have continued in Jiangnan from the Ming and Qing periods down to the present may be divided into two major models. The first, centered in places such as Jingjiang in Jiangsu, is the life-prolonging ritual (yansheng yishi 延生儀式). Such rites are performed mostly for the living, and the principal participants are middle-aged and elderly women. The ritual implements include an altar table, a paper Blood Pond, a paper horse, a Buddhist ruler, a wooden fish bell, star charts, spirit tablets, a washbasin, chopsticks, a kitchen knife, and brown-sugar “blood water,” among others. In Suzhou, Jiangsu, there is also a “paying off the Blood Pond” (jiao xuehu 繳血湖) ritual, likewise a life-prolonging ritual for the living, again centered on middle-aged and elderly women; its special feature is the inclusion of such paper offerings as a Blood Pond boat, a Blood Pond pagoda, a White Lotus boat, and a treasury. The second model, found especially around Changshu in Jiangsu, is a rite for delivering the dead (duwang yishi 度亡儀式). These rituals are performed mostly for deceased persons, and the main participants are likewise middle-aged and elderly women. The ritual implements include a Blood Pond pool (drawn with rice), bowls, and blood water (a red-colored beverage). The Breaking the Blood Pond ritual in Shexian, Anhui, also belongs to this model of delivering the dead and is directed chiefly toward women who died in childbirth; it employs paper city gates, a paper Blood Pond, and a pool of blood water. The Huizhou version in Anhui is similarly a rite for the dead, but it employs richer ritual objects, including an altar, a paper Blood Pond treasury, paper spirit tablets for Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva and Mulian, tea, rice, copper coins, candles, an incense burner, a Blood Pond pool made from a washbasin, red-bean “blood water,” chopsticks, a kitchen knife, a bamboo khakkhara staff, and blue cloth. Its Buddhist coloration is more pronounced. These implements differ from those in Chongqing, Tainan, Hunan, and Southeast Asia. Chongqing commonly uses a hall drum, bronze gong, and handbell; Tainan uses the Vairocana cap, Five-Buddha crown, vajra bell, and soul-guiding banners; Hunan often uses pine branches, carp, the deceased’s clothing, a Blood Pond lamp, and Blood Pond wine containing chicken blood; Southeast Asia

commonly uses joss paper, basins containing pure water and pomegranate blossoms, and cups of red-rice water, while the local Blood Bowl rite there is performed specifically for deceased women under the age of eighty who had descendants.

The distinctive feature of Breaking the Blood Pond in Jiangnan lies in its more pronounced performative and artistic dimension. At its simplest and most direct, the rite may be divided into three steps: first, “receiving,” in which Buddhas and bodhisattvas are invited and a sacred boundary established; second, “transforming,” in which soul-guiding spells are recited to awaken the dead spirit; and third, “releasing,” in which the Blood Bowl is broken, vessels smashed, and the spirit tablet taken out, thereby liberating the subject from suffering. Similar rites are common in Tainan. Yet the Jiangnan liturgy is far more complex. Taking Jingjiang in Jiangsu as an example: in the “receiving” stage, the ritual leader must sing the *Gatha of Inviting the Buddhas* (*Qingfo ji* 請佛偈); in the “transforming” stage, the ritual leader chants the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond*; in the “releasing” stage—that is, the penitential “breaking” stage—the leader sings the *Scripture of Repentance for the Blood Pond* (*Xuehu chanhui wen* 血湖懺悔文) (such as the “Seventy-Two Repentance” or “Forty-Nine Repentance”). Only after this does the washbasin on the altar get overturned, the kitchen knife and chopsticks taken out, the chopsticks chopped apart to signify repentance for and breaking of the Blood Pond Hell, and the sponsor’s children drink the “blood water” on behalf of their mother. Then come the closing of the scroll, the tea offering, the untying of knots, and the sending off the Buddhas. At the end of the rite, the Blood Pond treasury and spirit tablets from the altar are taken outdoors and burned. In this sense, “singing”—as both narrative chant and liturgical intonation—accompanies almost every stage of the ritual process.

The Jiangnan distinctiveness of Breaking the Blood Pond lies not in the mere presence of Blood Pond belief, but in the way local ritual specialists, precious-scroll performance, and wider communal participation transformed that belief into a public and repeatable ritual event. As Bell (1992, p. 140) argues, ritual activity should be situated within the larger field of social action as a whole; it is precisely a mode of action that distinguishes certain behaviors from ordinary practice and thereby endows them with special efficacy. In Breaking the Blood Pond in Jiangnan, the procedures of altar-setting, chanting, overturning the basin, snapping the chopsticks, and drinking the “blood water” ritually reorganize narratives of the female body, the order of the netherworld, and collective affect into a public experience that can be jointly perceived and jointly borne.

6. Conclusions

Breaking the Blood Pond reveals how female blood in Jiangnan popular religion was transformed from bodily substance into a ritual matter involving pollution, grievance, filial obligation, and postmortem deliverance. Menstrual blood, postpartum lochia, and childbirth-related blood were not treated as impure in a self-evident way. They were narrated, moralized, and ritually reorganized within specific religious and local contexts. The contrast with Red Dragon-Slaying further shows that female blood was not understood through a single religious logic. It could be disciplined inwardly as an object of female self-cultivation, or externalized as a postmortem and communal matter requiring ritual deliverance.

The Jiangnan case therefore contributes to the study of self-organized religious life by showing how Buddhist narratives, Daoist ritual procedures, Confucian filial ethics, and local performance could be gathered around the female body. Breaking the Blood Pond was not merely a remnant of blood impurity belief. It was a local religious mechanism through which bodily suffering was moralized, filial responsibility was enacted, and the boundary between the living and the dead was ritually negotiated.

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Notes

- ¹ Jiang Shuyu (1163–1223), courtesy name Dezhan 德瞻 and sobriquet Cunzai 存齋, was a Song-dynasty native of Yongjia 永嘉, present-day Wenzhou in Zhejiang. His understanding of the Dao was close to that of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 and the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤.
- ² The *Xingming fajue mingzhi* is attributed to Zhao Bichen 趙避塵, also known as the “Old Man of Qianfeng” 千峯老人, the eleventh-generation transmitter of the Daoist Longmen 龍門 lineage. Zhao is said to have travelled by water to Jinshan Temple 金山寺 in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, where he paid homage to the masters Liaoran 了然 and Liaokong 了空; this encounter led to his founding of the Qianfeng xiantian 千峯先天 lineage.
- ³ Wang Yinglin (1223–1296), courtesy name Bohou 伯厚 and sobriquet Shenning jushi 深寧居士, was a native of Yin county, Qingyuan prefecture, in present-day Ningbo, Zhejiang, and belonged to the Jiangnan scholarly world.

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