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### Blood Writing in Chinese Buddhism

One of the most common forms of ascetic practice in Chinese Buddhism involves pricking one's tongue or finger to draw blood which is then mixed with ink and used to copy Buddhist scriptures. At first glance, the practice of copying scriptures in human blood seems to be a classic example of what the prominent Chinese scholar HU Shih (1891-1962) once termed the "Indianization" of China. Speaking in the early part of the twentieth century, HU lamented the infiltration of wild, irrational Indian ascetic practices into what he saw as an essentially reasonable and practical Chinese religion.<sup>1</sup> A closer look at the origins of the practice of blood writing shows that, while its roots can be traced in part to Indian Buddhism, blood writing was sustained in China by a mixture of foreign and indigenous beliefs and traditions. Further, once we appreciate these beliefs and traditions, we see that far from the irrational masochistic acts of disturbed minds, blood writing, like other related ascetic practices, was a reasoned, understandable act.

The earliest description of a Chinese figure copying a scripture in blood appears to be a passage in the *History of the Chen Dynasty* which states that the prince Chen Shuling 陳叔陵 copied the *Nirvana Sutra* in his own blood in 579. The *History of the Chen Dynasty* was compiled in the early seventh century and so the story may have been invented at that time.<sup>2</sup> In any event, certainly by the seventh century Chinese monks and laymen were pricking their fingers and tongues, mixing the blood with ink, and copying out Buddhist scriptures in the murky mixture. The seventh-century monk Haishun 海順, for instance, in addition to shedding his own blood in veneration of some relics, also "mixed his blood with ink and wrote out the *Scripture of the Precepts of the Seven Buddhas*".<sup>3</sup> The monk Wen' gang 文綱, also of the seventh century, was

1. "The Indianization of China: A Case Study in Cultural Borrowing," in *Independence, Convergence, and Borrowing in Institutions, Thought, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1937), pp. 219-247.
2. *Chenshu* 陳書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1972) 36, p. 495.
3. *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 30, J. TAKAKUSU 高楠順次郎, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai 1924-1932), here-

said to have copied some six hundred fascicles of Buddhist scriptures in his blood.<sup>4</sup> Dozens of such references in medieval sources testify to the popularity of blood writing at that time. The poet-monk Guanxiu 貫休 (832-912) even composed a poem in praise of a fellow monk who completed a copy of the *Avatamsaka* in his blood, “his ten fingers drained [of blood] to complete seven scrolls.”<sup>5</sup> In the medieval period, the practice seems to have been admired by more than Buddhist devotees, even attracting the attention of an occasional emperor. For instance, two fascicles of unidentified scriptures written in the blood of Zengren 增忍, a ninth-century monk, were submitted to the emperor upon the monk’s death.<sup>6</sup>

Nor does the practice seem to have waned in later periods. Extant prefaces and letters of prominent monks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contain many references to blood writing, carried out by everyone from leading Buddhist thinkers to humble farmers. The practice crossed boundaries dividing monastic and lay, famous and obscure, man and woman. Scholars of Chinese Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century have documented the continuing popularity of blood writing among Chinese monks.<sup>7</sup> This large body of evidence provides ample material for exploring the motivations behind the practice.

### *Scriptural Sources*

One important source for blood writing was scriptural. Several Buddhist scriptures refer to the practice of writing in one’s blood. The reason the *Avatamsaka Sutra* was frequently copied in blood can be traced to a

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after “T”, no. 2060, vol. 50, p. 525a. I have been unable to locate other references to the *Scripture of the Precepts of the Seven Buddhas* (*Qifo jie jing* 七佛戒經).

4. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳14, T 2061, vol. 50, p. 792a.
5. *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1960) 837, p. 9438.
6. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 26, p. 877b. Several texts that refer to Zengren’s blood-written scriptures survived at Dunhuang, indicating the popularity of Zengren and his exploits in the Tang. For references, see Stephen TEISER, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1994), p. 127, n. 19.
7. J. PRIP-MØLLER: *Chinese Buddhist Monasteries. Their Plan and its Function as a Setting for Buddhist Monastic Life* (1937; rpt. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 1982), p. 323; Holmes WELCH: *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1967), p. 323.

passage near the end of the scripture in which the bodhisattva Samantabhadra explains to the pilgrim Sudhana that the Buddhist scriptures are so vast that one can never hope to master them all. Instead, the bodhisattva advises, Sudhana should make ten great vows, including vows to give reverence to the buddhas, to propagate Buddhist teachings, and so forth. Under the vow to “Imitate the Buddhas,” the bodhisattva explains that the buddha Vairocana was “... willing to give even his life. He peeled off his skin for paper, broke off a bone for a pen, and drew his own blood for ink. The scriptures he copied in this manner stacked up as high as Mount Sumeru. All of this he did out of respect for the Law.”<sup>8</sup> Next to the *Avatamsaka* passage, the most influential reference to blood writing for Chinese Buddhists was an injunction in the *Brahma’s Net Scripture*, a text that claims to be a translation of an Indian original, but was probably in fact compiled in China in the fifth century.<sup>9</sup> At one point, the *Brahma’s Net* enjoins the Buddhist devotee to “keep, read and recite the scriptures and monastic regulations of the Great Vehicle with a single mind. Cut away your skin for paper, draw your blood for ink and use your marrow for water. Break off a piece of your own bone for a pen and copy out the Buddhist precepts.”<sup>10</sup> Note that in these texts the procedure includes removing a piece of one’s skin and breaking off a piece of bone in addition to writing with one’s blood. The same is true for several other early scriptural references to the practice.<sup>11</sup>

8. *Da fangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 (Skt. \**Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra*) T 293, vol. 10, p. 845c.

9. See Paul GRONER, “The *Fan-wang ching* and Monastic Discipline in Japanese Tendai,” in Robert E. Buswell ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1990), p. 254.

10. *Fan wang jing* 梵網經, T 1484, vol. 24, p. 1009a.

11. The *Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom* refers to the practice in the story of a *brahmacārin* named Dharmarakta. According to the text, after years of fruitless practice, Dharmarakta encounters a Brahman who tells him “‘I possess a stanza of the sacred Law. If you truly love the Law, I will give it to you.’ Dharmarakta replied, ‘I truly love the Law.’ The Brahman then said, ‘If you truly love the Law, you should make paper of your skin, a pen of your bones, and copy it in your blood.’” (*Da zhi du lun* 大智度論 [Skt. \**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*] 16, T 1509, vol. 25, p. 178c; translated with notes in Étienne LAMOTTE, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* [Louvain: Institut Orientaliste 1944-1980], p. 975). A text purportedly translated in the Eastern Jin (317-420) entitled the *Original Acts of the Bodhisattva* recounts a similar tale of a master who “on account of a single stanza sliced off his own skin for paper, broke off a bone for a pen and mixed his blood with ink.” (*Pusa benxing jing* 菩薩本行經

There is no evidence that devotees in India ever took such passages as literal guides to practice rather than marvelous accounts of distant Buddhist heroes whose incredible actions are to be revered rather than copied.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, short of an extreme ascetic trance, it is next to impossible to carry out the full practice, breaking off a piece of one's own skeleton, dipping it in one's own blood and writing on a piece of skin stripped from one's own body. As far as I can tell, it was only in China (and later in East Asian cultures directly influenced by China) that the practice of mixing blood with ink and copying scriptures with a brush on paper was extracted from scattered textual references, and actually carried out, reflecting the determined zeal of devotees who saw themselves on the margin of the Buddhist world.

These texts provided the scriptural basis for blood writing in both canonical Indian texts and indigenous Chinese scriptures. But we should resist the temptation to stop here. It is not enough to cite a few scriptural sources, however influential, to explain a given practice, especially one as demanding as blood writing. The scriptures leave many basic questions unanswered. They do not, for instance, specifically explain the advantages to be derived from writing a scripture in one's blood. How did Chinese Buddhists expect to benefit from the practice? Further, the huge corpus of Buddhist scriptures describes all manner of beings performing all manner of deeds. What was it about this particular act that inspired Chinese Buddhists to ignore the parts of the practice that are impractical (writing with a piece of one's own bone), and adopt the part of the description that is possible, taking up brush and knife and trying it themselves? Below I explore the cultural and historical factors that made the practice of copying Buddhist scriptures in blood acceptable and even appealing to Chinese Buddhists. Specifically, I

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[Skt. \**Bodhisattvapūrvacarya*] T 155, vol. 3, p. 119b). Similar accounts appear in the *Xianyu jing* 賢愚經 T 202, vol. 4, p. 351b, and in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 5, T 2092, vol. 51, p. 1020b; Yi-t'ung Wang (trans.), *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984), p. 232.

12. James BENN has demonstrated a similar pattern at work in the practice of burning the body. That is, in Indian texts the practice is carried out by supernormal beings, whereas among Chinese Buddhists it is taken literally. See "Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an Apocryphal Practice in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1998), pp. 295-322.

discuss the roots of blood writing in notions of merit, asceticism, and Chinese attitudes towards blood in general.

### *Merit*

One key factor behind the popularity of copying scriptures in blood was the prevalence of the idea that one could derive merit from copying Buddhist scriptures in the more conventional medium of ink. From at least the third century B.C., Indian Buddhists adhered to the notion that one can gain "merit" from either giving or making certain objects, and that this merit can then either be used to one's benefit in this life or the next, or be transferred to one's intimates to improve their lot. For our purposes here, however, the key development in Indian Buddhism came much later, in the first centuries of the Common Era, with the emergence of what has been termed the "cult of the book." The *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Avatamsaka Sutra* all extol not just the propagation of Buddhist teachings, but specifically the propagation of the physical Buddhist books that contain these teachings, and assure their readers of the merit accruing to those who copy Buddhist texts.<sup>13</sup>

By the time Buddhism entered China in the first century of the Common Era, China could already boast a long tradition of book making, book learning, and book collecting.<sup>14</sup> Not only were books respected for their content and the erudition they represented; they were also admired for their calligraphy, for the way they looked. All of these factors came together in the reading and copying of texts. In particular,

13. See, for instance, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* translated by Edward CONZE, in *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bollingen, California: Four Seasons Foundation 1973), pp. 104-106. The passage is discussed in Gregory SCHOPEN, "The Phrase 'sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17.3/4 (November-December 1975), pp. 147-87; see also, Leon HURVITZ, translator, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press 1976), p. 174.
14. For surveys, see TSIEN Tsuen-hsuei, *Paper and Printing*, Part 1 of Volume 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, in Joseph Needham ed., *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985); Jean-Pierre DRÈGE: *Les bibliothèques en Chine au temps des manuscrits* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient 1992).

copying manuscripts was a way to at once read, study, and memorize a text while at the same time practicing the art of calligraphy.<sup>15</sup>

In the medieval period, the felicitous confluence of Buddhist notions of merit with the Chinese passion for books produced an unprecedented outpouring of Buddhist manuscripts. The production of many if not most of these manuscripts was motivated at least in part by a desire to acquire merit. Medieval collections of Chinese miracle tales tell stories of men rewarded for copying Buddhist scriptures with birth in a pure land, or, for instance, of a recently deceased woman saved from a tortured stay in hell by a sister in the world of the living who copies scriptures on her behalf.<sup>16</sup> More concretely, colophons to medieval manuscripts state explicitly that the copier or the donor who commissioned the copy of a Buddhist scripture expected to derive merit from it. In most cases, the colophon indicates that this merit is to be directed towards the benefit of a relative.

What evidence we have for the motivation behind the practice of writing scriptures in blood indicates that the belief in merit was fundamental to this practice as well. Take, for example, the blood-written text of the prominent sixteenth-century monk Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清. In his autobiography, Deqing explained his reasons for taking on the project as follows:

In the Spring of my thirty-second year, I returned from Yanmen. At this time I recalled the benevolence of my [deceased] parents and the care they had given me. I also thought of all of the obstacles that stood between me and the [Buddha] Law. On reading the vow of the great master Huisi of Nanyue, I vowed to make a copy of the *Scripture of the Expanse of Buddhas of the Flower Adornment* (i.e. the *Avatamsaka*) by mixing my own blood with gold. Above, this would tie me to the karma of *prajñā*, and below it would repay my parents for their benevolence.<sup>17</sup>

15. Jean-Pierre DRÈGE, "La lecture et l'écriture en Chine et la xylographie," *Études chinoises* 10, no. 1-2 (1991), p. 92.
16. *Jin'gang banruo jiyān jì* 金剛般若集驗記, in *Xu zang jing* 續藏經 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng 1968-1970), a reprint of NAKANO Tatsue 中野達慧 ed., *Dai Nihon zokuzōkyō* 大日本續藏經 (Kyoto: Zōkyō shoin 1905-1912), vol. 149, p. 49a; *Jin'gang banruo jiyān jì* B, p. 46a.
17. *Hanshan laoren mengyou jì* 憨山老人夢遊集, 53, pp. 37-38 in *Xu zang jing*, vol. 127. See also Sung-peng HSU, *A Buddhist Leader in Ming China: The Life and Thought of Han-shan Te-ch'ing, 1546-1623* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1979), p. 72. The vow of Huisi that Deqing refers to here is a piece by the eminent sixth-century monk in which he states his vow to

Deqing's statement that his action would "repay my parents for their benevolence" refers to the transfer of the merit from copying the scriptures to his parents in the afterlife. In accordance with well-attested Buddhist notions of merit, Deqing's parents could receive a better rebirth with the merit earned for them by their son, including perhaps eons in a pure land, or a shorter stay in a less pleasant destination. Deqing's statement is not surprising, as parents are one of the most common recipients of merit in all such dedicatory inscriptions, whether for Buddhist statues or scriptures – a practice with roots in Indian Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

With this Buddhist background in mind, references to blood writing in the medieval secular dynastic histories begin to make sense. The *Tang History*, for instance, describes an eighth-century official named Yuan Dexiu 元德秀 who on his mother's death "ate neither salt nor kumiss, did not sleep on rushes or mats, and pricked himself, using the blood to paint images and copy Buddhist scriptures."<sup>19</sup> When the father of the ninth-century figure Wei Shou 韋綬 died, he too "pricked himself, using the blood to copy Buddhist scriptures."<sup>20</sup> Although neither of these passages makes reference to merit – not surprising in these secular sources which grant mention of Buddhist matters only with great reluctance – it is almost certain that Yuan and Wei copied scriptures for their parents in the belief that doing so would assist them in the afterlife.

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copy the *Prajñāpāramitā* with gold leaf, a practice that was often repeated at great expense by devotees of later periods as well. For Huisi's vow, see *Nanyue Si Da Chanshi lishi yuanwen* 南嶽思大禪師立誓願文 T 1933, vol.46, p.786c, translated and discussed in Paul MAGNIN, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Huisi* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient 1979), pp. 192-238.

18. See Gregory SCHOPEN, "Filial Piety and the Monk in the Practice of Indian Buddhism: A Question of 'Sinicization' Viewed from the Other Side" in his *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks. Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1996), pp. 56-71.
19. *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1975), 190b, p. 5050. A tenth-century Buddhist banner with an inscription claiming that it was painted in blood survived at Dunhuang: Stein painting 196, reproduced in Roderick WHITFIELD, *The Art of Central Asia: The Stein Collection in the British Museum* (Tokyo: Kodansha 1982-), vol. 2, plate 32, with discussion on pp. 323-324. WHITFIELD notes that the pigment on the banner does not appear to be blood. It may be that the amount of blood mixed with other pigment was so small that the blood is not apparent.
20. *Jiu Tangshu* 162, p. 4244.



At times the merit for blood writing was applied to the living as well as the dead. For instance, when Tang emperor Suzong (r. 756-761) took ill, his empress was said to have copied Buddhist scriptures in her own blood, apparently in the belief that the merit from her actions would assist her husband's recovery.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a Song-era figure named Gu Xin 顧忻 was said to have brought eyesight back to his blind mother by copying out several fascicles of Buddhist scriptures in his blood.<sup>22</sup> The range of references to blood writing shows just how prevalent both this practice and the notion of Buddhist merit were; blood writing was not confined by boundaries of gender, religious or social status: monks, nuns, humble laymen and powerful empresses all found occasion to copy a Buddhist scripture or two in their blood.

The curious colophon of an anonymous devotee preserved at Dunhuang provides us with an example of the more subtle, sophisticated uses to which merit derived from blood writing could be put. The man's dedication to a copy of the *Diamond Sutra* reads as follows:

On the fifteenth day of the fourth month in the third year of Tianyou, *bingyin* in the sequence of years [30 April 906], an old gentleman of eighty-three pricked himself to draw blood, which he mixed with ink. He wrote this scripture with his own hand for propagation to all of the believers in Sha Prefecture. May the state and the land be still and peaceful; may the wheel of the Law turn forever. Should I die in writing it, I ask only that I quickly pass out of this world. I have no other prayers.<sup>23</sup>

Another colophon by the same figure appended to yet another copy of the *Diamond*, written a few months earlier, is equally humble and generous. He writes:

On the third day of the second month in the third year of Tianyou, *bingyin* in the sequence of years [28 February 906], an old man of eighty-three pricked the middle finger of his left hand. He drew blood to make the ink fragrant and wrote this *Dia[mond]* Scripture for transmission to people of believing hearts. He is entirely without prayers. [Since] original nature is truly empty, there is no pleasure for which to pray.<sup>24</sup>

21. *Jiu Tangshu* 261, p. 260.

22. *Songshi* 宋史 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1977) 456, p. 13394.

23. P. 2876, reproduced in HUANG Yongwu 黃永武, *Dunhuang baozang* 敦煌寶藏 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng 1985), vol.124, p.622a. The translation is from TEISER, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, p. 126, which also includes discussion of the passage along with annotation that I have omitted here.

24. Or.8210/S.5669, reproduced in HUANG, *Dunhuang baozang*, vol. 44, p. 300b; translation from TEISER, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, p. 127. Curiously,

The phrase he “drew blood to make the ink fragrant” should not be taken literally, and probably means that he “ornamented” the writing with his physical suffering, a sign of his sincerity and a topic to which we will return below. For now, let us focus on the copiest’s understanding of merit. In the first of these colophons, his merit is directed toward lofty, abstract targets: “the state and the land,” and “the [Buddha] Law.” In the second, he makes a point of noting that his merit was directed nowhere in particular. Evidently, this particular copiest had taken to heart the principles of emptiness expounded in the *Diamond Sutra*: as all is ultimately devoid of permanence (including the self), there is, in the end, no tangible object to receive merit. The “Old Gentleman” was, however, an exception: not surprisingly, most who copied the scripture in their blood did so expecting to receive tangible, direct benefits from it. Indeed, a carefully hidden expectation of merit for the deed lurks behind the words of even this devotee. Why else would he go to the trouble of copying out the scripture in his blood, when, for conveying its teachings, ink would have served the same purpose? As the great poet Bai Juyi put it in the early ninth century in a dedication to a set of scriptures carved in rock, a scripture “drawn in blood mixed with ink on paper made of one’s skin deteriorates and disappears, like painting with a brush on water.”<sup>25</sup> If one’s goal was simply widespread distribution of texts, copying with ink made more sense.

Yet even if we recognize that one of the major motivating factors for copying scriptures was not only to propagate the teachings they contain but also to garner merit, what was to be gained by copying scriptures in blood? The *Diamond Sutra* asks its readers to reproduce the text, but says nothing about blood. The notion of Buddhist merit contributed to the birth and spread of printing in China because of the belief that the production of huge amounts of texts would naturally produce huge amounts of merit.<sup>26</sup> Yet by the sixteenth century, when Deqing lived, the practice of blood writing continued despite the fact that printing was

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initial tests on this manuscript by specialists working for the British Library have failed to reveal any traces of blood. Presumably, and as said before (note 19), the blood used was in such small quantities that it can no longer be detected, though the possibility that the donor lied in his inscription cannot be ruled out. Susan Whitfield, personal communication.

25. “Suzhou Chongyuansi Fahuayuan shibijing beiwen” 蘇州重元寺法華院石壁經碑文 in *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1959) 678, p. 2a.
26. DRÈGE: *Les bibliothèques en Chine*, p. 266.

by then widespread.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, there was more to merit-making than sheer numbers. This brings us to the importance of ascetic ideals in the practice of blood writing; for in calculations of merit, in addition to numbers, sincerity (as expressed through the willingness to endure physical pain) was also factored into the karmic equation.

### *Asceticism*

Behind the choice of blood over ink was an admiration for self-sacrifice and specifically for self-inflicted physical suffering. Though primarily a Buddhist concept, this notion was not entirely foreign to pre-Buddhist China. Texts from the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.) like the *Analects* and the *Mozzi* express a general suspicion of sensuality – Confucius warning that “The gentleman seeks neither a full belly nor a comfortable home,” Mozi inveighing against decorative clothing.<sup>28</sup> And sons were praised for depriving themselves of comfort in service to their parents.<sup>29</sup> But with the entry of Buddhism to China, self-abnegation was taken to greater extremes, and harsher forms of asceticism involving self-mutilation and even ritual suicide became increasingly common.

From the early medieval period on, monks, nuns and laypeople embraced a number of ascetic practices, including the burning of marks on the body and scorching or slicing off fingers. Stories of fierce monks who cut off ears, gouged out eyes and chopped off arms circulated widely in collections of miracle tales and biographies of eminent monks. The motivations for these practices were various. Most Chinese Buddhists believed that such acts were supported by the teachings of the Buddha. Many were inspired to follow the example of the Buddha who in previous incarnations committed great acts of self-sacrifice with no regard for his own comfort. Many believed that acts of self-abnegation,

27. Indeed, Deqing himself participated in several projects devoted to printing Buddhist texts.

28. *Lunyu* 1.14; D.C. LAU (trans.), *The Analects* (1979; rpt. Middlesex: Penguin Books 1986), p. 61. *Mozzi* 20; Burton WATSON (trans.): *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press 1967), p. 62. See also Stephen ESKILDSEN, *Asceticism in Early Taoist Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1998), pp. 1-13.

29. The focus of these deprivations was usually on mourning rites. Keith KNAPP argues that the new emphasis on self-deprivation was part of a larger transformation of attitudes towards “filiality” (*xiao* 孝) in the Warring States period. Keith KNAPP: *Accounts of Filial Sons: Ru Ideology in Early Medieval China* (Ph.D. dissertation for the University of California at Berkeley 1997), p. 61.

including self-mutilation, would improve their chances of rebirth in a pure land. Elsewhere I have made the case that self-mutilation was also inspired by a more nebulous wish to purify the body.<sup>30</sup>

The practice of blood writing was informed by these ascetic practices with which it was closely tied. Dinglan 定蘭, a ninth-century monk, in addition to writing scriptures in his blood, was also said to have branded his arms and even to have plucked out his eyes to feed wild animals.<sup>31</sup> His contemporary Daozhou 道舟, in addition to painting an image of Avalokiteśvara in his blood, also cut off a piece of his left ear when praying for rain.<sup>32</sup> The *Tang History* records that when the parents of a certain Wang Jingru died he both “copied Buddhist books in his blood” and “cut off two fingers from his hand.”<sup>33</sup> Blood writing, then, was one practice among many, arrayed on an ascetic scale running from minor acts of self-mortification to practices involving intense physical pain. The language of these accounts of blood writing further reveals that the practice was respected not so much for any magical properties of the blood itself, but because of the physical pain of cutting oneself.<sup>34</sup> The description of the seventh-century monk Haishun’s austerities ends with the line “acts of his in which he overcame himself and tested his will were all of this sort.”<sup>35</sup> Tenth-century monk Zhenbian’s 貞辯 blood writing is described as a reflection of his ability to “overcome suffering.”<sup>36</sup> And the description of the austerities of Wen’gang, are capped with the phrase “He suffered greatly, with great perseverance, and entered into the sea of selflessness.”<sup>37</sup> In sum, blood writing was

30. John KIESCHNICK: *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1997), pp. 35-66. See also, BENN, “Where Text Meets Flesh.”

31. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 23, p. 856b.

32. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 23, p. 859a. See also BENN, “Where Text Meets Flesh,” pp. 310-12.

33. *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1975) 195, p. 5591.

34. This contrasts with the Tibetan practice of making paintings with blood from the nosebleeds of holy men. See David JACKSON, *A History of Tibetan Painting* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften 1996), p. 251; 257, n. 574.

35. *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 13, p. 525a.

36. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 7, p. 747a.

37. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 14, p. 792a.

perceived to be one of many possible ascetic acts, all based in part on a shared belief in the power of corporal self-sacrifice.

Some references disclose more specific details about the point of inflicting pain on oneself. Ming prefaces to scriptures copied in blood emphasize the transformative potential of blood writing. Deqing, for instance, vows, through copying a scripture in his blood, “to exchange this illusory body for one that is permanent and adamant.”<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, he notes that “by drawing his blood to copy this scripture, the blood of his illusory body will drip into the sea of the Dharma nature.”<sup>39</sup> But above all, Ming prefaces to blood-written scriptures, couched in elegant, flowery language and redolent with Buddhist erudition, repeatedly emphasize the superiority of fierce, selfless practice over the empty talk of exegesis. Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599-1655) speaks derisively of “pretentious Chan monks with their lofty talk of philosophical principles who know nothing of actual practice” compared to the “inconceivable merit” of writing the *Lotus Sutra* in blood.<sup>40</sup> Zibo Zhenke 紫柏真可 (1543-1603) in a postface to a blood-written scripture tells the story of a monk, “dull by nature,” who nonetheless came to comprehend the principles of the *Avatamsaka* not through recourse to teachers or commentary, but by copying the text out in his blood.<sup>41</sup> Even the most sophisticated, literate monks were always ready to disparage intellectual effort when compared to manly physical practice. Indeed, it was the erudition of these monks that afforded them the opportunity to make such claims in a peculiar genre of writing – prefaces to blood-written scriptures – that combined a reverence for both bookish doctrine and ascetic practice.

38. “Cixue he jin *Huayan jing* fayuanwen” 刺血和金華嚴經發願文 in *Hanshan laoren mengyou ji* 40, p. 401b.
39. “Ti Gongquan Chanren xueshu *Fahua jing* hou,” 題公全禪人血書法華經後, *Hanshan laoren mengyou ji* 31, p. 326a.
40. “Xue shu *Fahua jing* ba” 血書法華經跋 in *Lingfeng Ouyi dashi zong lun* 靈峰藕益大師宗論 7.1, p. 9 in *Jiaying Da zang jing* 嘉興大藏經 (Taipei: Xinwen feng 1987), vol.36, p. 372b. On Zhixu’s blood writing, see CHŌ Shōgon 張聖嚴 (Shih Sheng-yen), *Minmatsu Chūgoku bukkyō no kenkyū – tokuni Chigyoku o chūshin toshūte* 明末中國佛教の研究。特に智旭を中心として (Tokyo: Yamakibō Butsushorin 1975), p. 238.
41. “Ba Qi Chanren xueshu *Huayan jing*,” 跋麒麟禪人血書華嚴經 in *Zibo Zunzhe quanji* 紫柏尊者全集 15, p. 446b-447a in *Xu zang jing*, vol.126, p. 892.

A curious motif in the records of blood writing, tangentially related to Buddhist asceticism, is filial devotion. Recall that Deqing's decision to copy out a scripture in blood was inspired by memories of his deceased parents. A number of the examples of blood writing I have already cited were prompted by the death of a parent. The connection between parents and this practice was founded on the belief that copying Buddhist books produced merit, that copying scriptures in one's blood produced particularly potent quantities of merit, and that this merit could then be used to assist the dead. Equally important, however, was a strong tradition of practices and stories associated with filial sons. In early China, stories of the exploits of filial sons developed largely independent of Buddhist influence, at least during their formative period.<sup>42</sup> In these stories, men are lauded for their devotion to their parents and rewarded for their virtues by miracles that occur spontaneously, according to the Chinese principle of "resonance." These elements creep into Buddhist accounts of blood writing as well. One Tang collection of miracle tales writes, for instance, of a layman named Li Qianguan 李虔觀 who, on the death of his father, copies out in his blood the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*. Immediately thereafter, "an unusual fragrance filled the courtyard."<sup>43</sup> The same text tells a similar story of a man named Qiao Qing 喬卿 who, on the death of his mother, made a copy of the *Diamond* in his own blood, whereupon auspicious grasses sprouted up around his mourning hut.<sup>44</sup> Outside of the references to blood writing, these accounts of filial miracles read like classic stories of devoted sons, a tradition from which they drew.<sup>45</sup> Similar accounts in a range of sources, including the dynastic histories, reveal that the practice of blood writing extended beyond didactic stories to the lives of real people who would copy scriptures in their blood as an expression of piety for deceased parents. What was true for lay people was equally true for monks. Whether in sixth-century biographies or private writings in the seventeenth century, monks expressed feelings of remorse on the deaths of their parents and concern that they had not been as filial as they

42. That is, during the Han and Six Dynasties period. See KNAPP, *Accounts of Filial Sons*. Later accounts of filial sons do betray a Buddhist influence, particularly with respect to self-mutilation.

43. *Jin'gang banruo jiyuan ji* B, p. 46b.

44. *Jin'gang banruo jiyuan ji* B, p. 46b-47a.

45. In a note to the story of Qiao Qing, the compiler of the text explains that the story appears also in accounts of filial sons.

should have been. This powerful combination of Buddhist notions of merit, asceticism and filial devotion made the practice of blood writing accessible and compelling when a parent died.

### *Blood*

Modern attitudes towards blood are the product of a long process of development in which we have become increasingly sensitive to bodily fluids in general. In seventeenth-century England, when James I hunted stag, "ladies of quality" would wait anxiously for blood from the hunt to wash themselves with, believing this would whiten their skin.<sup>46</sup> This is all a far cry from the customs and mores of modern England, where one buys one's meat in neat, bloodless packets, and gladly leaves the handling of blood to butchers and surgeons. A similar shift has occurred across Europe and in the United States where, for instance, blood has made a slow retreat from the dinner table.<sup>47</sup> These new attitudes shape our reaction to the practice of blood writing, evoking in modern scholars, myself included, a feeling of uneasiness and morbid fascination. In general, the same pattern of development holds true for China, where people have become increasingly sensitive to the sight of blood.

One can take the point too far: pre-modern Chinese were far from indifferent to blood. The eighth-century monk Jiaoran 皎然, for instance, objected to blood writing, arguing that writing a holy scripture in one's blood is wrong because the body is a vile, unclean thing.<sup>48</sup> Buddhist scriptures at times invoke blood along with puss, phlegm and bile when attempting to provoke in their readers disgust for the body.<sup>49</sup>

46. Keith THOMAS: *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983), p. 29 and pp. 290-291.

47. Stephen MENNELL: *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1996), p. 309.

48. "Tang Huzhou Dayunsi gu Chanshi Yugong bei ming bing xu" 唐湖州大雲寺故禪師瑠公碑銘并序 in *Quan Tangwen* 918, p. 4b. A disgusted ninth-century official made the same point just before banishing a local monk for copying scriptures in blood. *Beimengsuoyan* 北夢瑣言 by Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (d. 968) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1985) 9, pp. 74-75.

49. Consider for instance a passage in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (10.4) that states "Again, bhikkus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: 'In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs,

And Daoists as well as Buddhists at times objected to bloody sacrifices to the gods.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that pre-moderns had more flexibility in using blood in certain prescribed contexts. We know, for instance that blood was smeared on ritual implements in ancient China, and that menstrual blood was used in certain medical remedies and magical potions.<sup>51</sup> More important for our purposes was the use of blood for sealing oaths. The dynastic histories are replete with references to the practice of drinking an animal's blood (*shaxue* 歃血) to seal a covenant, whether between two rulers or between two generals.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, one fifth-century Daoist text describes a covenant "sealed with the blood of a white horse"<sup>53</sup> In these cases, blood had a magical property, ensuring that the oath would be kept.

More relevant still to the practice of blood writing is the practice of using *human* blood to mark a vow. The *Zuo zhuan*, compiled in approximately the third century B.C., recounts the story of the King of Chu who fled his enemies, taking refuge in the kingdom of Sui. In part out of respect for the King's brother, the Sui agreed to protect the King, rather than turn him over to his enemies. The King then "made an incision in the flesh over [his brother's] heart and with the blood

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large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine." Bhikkhu NĀNAMOLI and Bhikkhu BODHI, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications 1995).

50. Terry F. KLEEMAN, "Licentious Cults and Bloody Victuals: Sacrifice, Reciprocity, and Violence in Traditional China," *Asia Major*, Third Series, vol.7, part 1 (1994), pp. 185-211. See also Alan COLE, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998), p. 228.
51. On the smearing of blood on ritual implements, see YAMADA Sumeru 山田統, "Kin" 鬻 in *Yamada Sumeru chosaku shū* 山田統著作集, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Meiji Shōen 1984), pp. 301-338. On menstrual blood in traditional China, see JIANG Shaoyuan 江紹原, "Zhongguo ren de tianguai guan de ji fangmian" 中國人的天癸觀的幾方面 in *Chenbao fukan* 晨報副刊 1926, March 8, 10 and 13.
52. On blood covenants in early China, see Mark Edward LEWIS, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1990), pp. 43-50.
53. *Santian neijie jing* 三天內解經 1, HY 1196, p. 6a; translation in Stephen BOKENKAMP, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1997), p. 216.



concluded an alliance with the men of Sui.”<sup>54</sup> The reason the King used his brother’s blood rather than his own probably relates to the particular role his brother had played in winning over the sympathies of the Sui. Moving forward several centuries, a Tang commentary to this same *Zuo zhuan* passage notes “By drawing blood from over the heart and forging an alliance with it, he expressed his supreme sincerity.”<sup>55</sup> The same notion appears in a number of episodes in the Tang. In 880, in the midst of a rebellion, the loyal minister Zheng Tian 鄭畋 marked a pledge of loyalty from an officer by “sealing a pact with his blood.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the late ninth-century figure Zheng Hanzhang 鄭漢璋 pledged allegiance to a bandit leader by “taking out wine, cutting his shoulder, and making a pact with his blood.”<sup>57</sup> In a more frivolous episode, the heir apparent under emperor Gaozu (r.618-626) agreed to give his brother a talented court musician if his plot to usurp the throne succeeded. He sealed the vow by “cutting his shoulder and making a blood pact.”<sup>58</sup> The *Zuo zhuan* was compiled well before the entry of Buddhism to China, and even in the later episodes there is not so much as a whiff of Buddhist influence. Similar accounts can be gleaned from later dynastic histories in which individuals seal various sorts of pacts or vows with their blood. These passages reflect a separate tradition in which blood, and particularly one’s own blood, was drawn in small quantities as a sign of sincerity when making solemn oaths.

This tradition of drawing blood in oaths of sincerity divorced from Buddhist concerns is evident even in the writings of the monk Ouyi Zhixu, who once composed a letter of devotion to his mother in his own blood.<sup>59</sup> In general, however, while Buddhist ideas of asceticism and merit are absent from the accounts of princes and generals in the *Zuo zhuan* and *Tang History*, the opposite does not hold true. That is, Buddhist practitioners could easily accommodate the idea that drawing one’s own blood was a noble sign of sincerity and determination, in

54. *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, Duke Ding, year five, in *Shi san jing zhu shu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1979) 54, p. 435; Burton WATSON (trans.): *The Tso chuan. Selections from China’s Oldest Narrative History* (New York: Columbia University Press 1989) p. 185.

55. *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 54, p. 435.

56. *Xin Tangshu* 185, p. 5403.

57. *Xin Tangshu* 224b, p. 6399.

58. *Xin Tangshu* 79, p. 3549.

59. *Lingfeng Ouyi dashi zonglun* 5.1, p. 1a.

addition to its ascetic value, utility in acquiring merit, and resonance with filial devotion.

### *Conclusion*

Various factors should have worked against the development of blood writing in China. Before the entry of Buddhism, there was no strong, pervasive ascetic tradition in China. Later, even though influenced by Buddhist teachings, Daoist asceticism emphasized celibacy and fasting, and in general eschewed all forms of self-mutilation.<sup>60</sup> Early notions of filial piety encouraged sons to keep their bodies whole, while Buddhist texts described the body as filthy and vile – hardly a fitting medium for sacred scriptures. In the case of blood writing, however, whatever reservations these factors may have produced in the minds of practicing Buddhists, they were overwhelmed by the doctrine of merit, veneration for physical suffering, and the powerful symbolism of blood as a mark of sincerity. In the end, the decline of the practice of blood writing was brought on not by traditional concerns for the preservation of the body or Buddhist notions of the body as unclean, but rather by the introduction of new sensibilities over the past hundred years.

Modernity has been accompanied by an increasing uneasiness with asceticism, coupled with greater squeamishness about bodily fluids.<sup>61</sup> The Catholic church is now reluctant to grant sainthood to holy men who display stigmata, and accounts of the grisly ascetic practices of Christian saints that once provoked awe and wonder, now elicit shock and disgust.<sup>62</sup> What is true for the West, has been true as well in China, though perhaps the threshold of tolerance for bloody religious practices has lowered more slowly in China than in Europe and the United States. Twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals like HU Shih have generally considered ascetic practice a distasteful example of religious fanaticism, and more recently Buddhist monastic organizations have attempted to

60. See ESKILDSEN, *Asceticism in Early Taoist Religion*.

61. On this point, see in particular Norbert ELIAS' riveting analysis of changing attitudes towards spitting and nose-blowing in his *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization* (1939; Oxford: Blackwell 1994).

62. See Kenneth L. WOODWARD, *Making Saints. Inside the Vatican: Who Become Saints, Who do not, and Why* (London: Chatto & Windus 1991), particularly Chapter 5.

curb some more gruesome forms of asceticism.<sup>63</sup> Chinese leaders no longer make incisions over their hearts when pledging loyalty to allies, and few Chinese mothers would now appreciate a letter in blood from a devoted son.

While blood oaths disappeared from the Chinese political arena by the late nineteenth century, the practice of blood writing continued among Buddhist devotees for some time, and was still quite common in the thirties.<sup>64</sup> Because blood writing was embedded in a network of associations that imbued it with an aura of tradition, it was more resistant to the general trend of increased aversion to blood than pacts between political leaders.<sup>65</sup> At present, however, blood writing is quite rare in China, and seems to have vanished completely from Taiwanese Buddhism. This is a part of a more general trend in which Buddhist ascetic practices, including blood writing, are on the decline as Buddhists absorb the values of a society increasingly ill at ease with self-inflicted pain.

63. HU Shih: "The Indianization of China"; CAI Huiming 蔡惠明, "Feizhi 'shaoxian-ba' de xiguan hao" 廢止燒香疤的習慣好 in *Fayin* 法音 (1984.3), p. 43.
64. PRIP-MØLLER: *Chinese Buddhist Monasteries*, p. 323; WELCH: *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 323.
65. The parallel with fox-hunting in England is suggestive. While the idea of washing themselves in blood from a hunt no longer appeals to English women, English boys are still smeared with the blood of a fox at their first hunt. Evidently because of its status as a revered tradition, fox-hunting has remained resistant to a more general shift in public mores away from contact with blood. See Norbert ELIAS and Eric DUNNING, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (Oxford: Blackwell 1986), pp. 150-174.