Visualizing the Afterlife:  
The Song Elite’s Obsession with Death,  
the Underworld, and Salvation  

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Abstract

This study explores the Song elite’s obsession with the afterlife and its impact on their daily lives. Through examining the ways they perceived the relations between the living and the dead, the fate of their own afterlives, and the functional roles of religious specialists, this study demonstrates that the prevailing ideas about death and the afterlife infiltrated the minds of many of the educated, deeply affecting their daily practices. While affected by contemporary belief in the underworld and the power of the dead, the Song elite also played an important role in the formation and proliferation of those ideas through their piety and practices. Still, implicit divergences of perceptions and practices between the elite and the populace remained abiding features underneath their universally shared beliefs. To explore the Song elite’s interactions with popular belief in the underworld, several questions are discussed, such as how and why the folk belief in the afterlife were accepted and incorporated into the elite’s own practices, and how their practices corresponded to, differed from, or reinforced folk beliefs. An examination of the social, cultural,* Hsien-huei Liao is a research associate in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, U.S.A.
and political impact on their conceptualization of the afterlife within the broad historical context of the Song is key to understand their beliefs and practices concerning the underworld.

**Keywords:** Song elite, popular beliefs, posthumous judgment, the underworld, religious rites

1. **Introduction**

The elaboration of the concept of the underworld and its denizens during the tenth century drastically reshaped the beliefs concerning the afterlife, casting long shadows over daily life in the Song. The underworld was configured as an unavoidable purgatorial journey that everyone had to undergo after death; a process whereby the spirit of the deceased was led through a series of ten tribunals, at each of which gruesome and frightening punishments were inflicted upon sinful mortals.¹ Reinforced by pictorial presentations, the forbidding images of the underworld and the unbearable tortures resulting from karmic sin

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profoundly affected human conduct in the living world. Just as commoners were easily haunted with the burden of penitence, few educated Song men were immune from the terrors inspired by these powerful images. The educated elite often displayed grave anxiety over the fate of deceased family members, desperately attempting to secure a safe passage and a better rebirth for them. Perhaps more often they were concerned about the conditions of their own future afterlife.

However, their preoccupation with the netherworld and reliance on ritual specialists in dealing with the interwoven concerns about the dead and the living have been largely neglected or considered idiosyncratic by scholars. Stereotypical images of the Confucian elite as rational and worldly oriented may partly account for such a studied disregard. Convinced that the affairs of the underworld were beneath the dignity of the men indoctrinated with Confucian teachings, some scholars have paid more attention to the elite’s roles in promoting Confucian-prescribed funeral rituals than to their concerns over the fate and the abode of the dead. While the conflict and competition between Confucian rituals and folk practices figured as the foci of their studies, the elite’s own preoccupation with the afterlife has received little scholarly consideration.² Other scholars have examined the mentality of the Song elite by taking funeral rituals and grave goods as the main sources for understanding social practices, religious beliefs, and cultural formation. They attributed the initiation of ritual standardization to the Song Confucian-educated elite, who had not only revised and disseminated orthodox norms, but also vigorously corrected the funeral customs among the people. As they have argued, the

superimposition of a standard ritual form by the state and by the educated, together with the mediation of religious specialists, had made Confucian funeral rituals widely accepted.\(^3\) The modification of Confucian funeral rituals by Song Confucian philosophers through accommodating some popular practices was crucial to the uniformity of death rituals during the late imperial period.\(^4\)

Though the purposes of their studies differ, the aforementioned scholars have perceived the functional role of the Song elite in a rather similar way, arguing that the Confucian-educated ruling class, whether state officials or local elite, exerted a strong top-down influence on commoners’ beliefs and practices. The weaknesses of this approach become obvious when examining the large volume of evidence which reveals that the Song elite embraced folk beliefs regarding the afterlife no less enthusiastically than they tried to inculcate the populace with the Confucian rituals. The first group of scholars failed to explain this contradiction, or they simply dismissed those material facts as minor and insignificant. The second, though noting the Song Confucian philosophers’ recognition of some folk customs, equally rejected the notion that the elite might share the beliefs underlying those practices.\(^5\) Overall, these studies have failed to delve into the Song elite’s beliefs in the afterlife, or their association with the funerary specialists of various religious traditions, both of which had been overtly rejected in Confucian thinking.

To point out the limits of the top-down approach by no means suggests that a bottom-up approach is better suited to studying the elite’s beliefs con-

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cerning the afterlife. In their studies of purgatory, karmic sin, and retribution, many scholars have alluded to the far-reaching influence that the newly developed notions about the afterlife during the Song had exerted on Chinese society. Generated from a mix of various indigenous concerns and Buddhist influences, these ideas attracted a broad audience across the boundaries of gender and social strata. The elite and non-elite alike were subject to the same passage of posthumous judgment in which punishments were meted out according to misdeeds during one’s lifetime. As Teiser has argued, such ideas were so widely held among the Song Chinese that “for the next thousand years [they] constituted the definitive model for imagining and alleviating the fate of the dead.” Though cogently argued, these studies neglect to distinguish the nuances between elite and non-elite forms of piety, which were shaped concomitantly by many social and political factors.

Finally, the prevailing scholarship’s focus on funeral rituals and practices poses questions that this study will also address. It is undeniable that funeral rituals and practices serve as a remarkable window on beliefs about the afterlife, revealing many shared notions between the educated and the populace. But making funerals the center of attention usually resulted in the researchers confining their visions to specific times, spaces, and objects. Temporally limited to mourning observances and periodic memorial services, this approach tends to leave out the elite’s visualization of the underworld generated in daily life. Spatially limited to graves, coffins, ancestor tablets, or ritual texts, this approach fails to take their dream adventures and deathlike conditions into account. Also, research limited to ancestors and deceased kin overlooks the elite’s anxiety over their own deaths, as well as the deaths of strangers.

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To explore the Song elite’s obsession with the afterlife and its impact on their daily lives, it is thus necessary to go beyond conventional approaches and frameworks. Aside from funeral rituals and practices, I shall examine the ways the elite perceived the relations between the living and the dead, the fate of their own afterlives, and the functional roles of religious specialists and rituals based on their own testimonies and daily experiences. Questions about how and why the folk beliefs in the afterlife were accepted and incorporated into the elite’s own practices, and how their practices corresponded to, differed from, or reinforced folk beliefs, will also be addressed. Equally important will be an examination of the sociopolitical impacts on their conceptualization of the afterlife within the broad historical context of the Song. Furthermore, the role that the Song elite had played in the evolution of beliefs about the afterlife and rites of purification will also be reevaluated.

2. The Song Elite’s Contradictory Views and Practices Concerning the Afterlife

In contrast to the many studies in which the educated elite has been roughly categorized either as unbending critics of uncanonical practices or as individuals more tolerant of them, this study suggests a more subtle inquiry is required. An examination of their views and behavior concerning the afterlife shows that it is not unusual to find folk beliefs imprinted in the minds of these so-called uncompromising critics. As the line of demarcation is fuzzy, any attempt to dichotomize or trisect the educated elite based on one-sided accounts tends to blur, not clarify, their religious predispositions. In my inquiry, I shall shift the center of attention away from devising classification schemes to a more meticulous view of elite piety in light of their sociopolitical

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and cultural contexts. In this manner, no ardent Confucians will be arbitrarily precluded from the investigation of their religious tendencies. Instead, a whole array of views and practices expressed and embodied by the Song elite will all come under close scrutiny.

Conflicts between the views and practices of the Song elite were apparent in several ways. The one most often remarked upon is the discrepancies found in funerals. On one hand, strongly motivated by the perceived need to guard the Confucian orthodoxy against folk contamination and to maintain an orderly society, Song scholars devoted themselves to reform of the uncanonical funeral practices pervasive in their time. Because of their efforts, many Buddhist, Daoist, and folk services predicated upon popular beliefs in the underworld purgatory and atonement were subjected to severe criticism and largely outlawed. On the other hand, however, rituals of redemption performed by various kinds of ritual specialists had gradually become an integral part of funerals, widely upheld by the populace and the Confucian educated as well. As Hu Yin 胡寅 (1098-1156) once lamented, few among his contemporaries could free themselves from the intimidation of Buddhist ideas about life, death, and reincarnation.

Song observers tended to explain these conflicts as mainly resulting from the elite’s passive or expedient acceptance of folk practices. Uncanonical funeral customs were so popular and functionally useful that no one could easily resist them. The son of the steadfast Confucian Huang Luo 黃犢 (1151-
1211) exemplified submission of the elite to popular mores when pressed by close relatives. When his father died, he tried in vain to eliminate Buddhist and Daoist services from the funeral, since all members of his clan rallied to oppose him. As a result, the funeral was a marriage of folk customs and classical rites. Che Ruoshui 車若水 and Zheng Xiongfei 鄭雄飛 typified elite’s expedient acceptance of folk practices. Neither of them had faith in Buddhism, yet both performed the Buddhist rituals of salvation, which they believed served to express one’s filial piety and emotional attachment towards ancestors better than Confucian rituals did. The central and local officials also often sponsored salvation ceremonies to help untended ghosts enter reincarnation and thus ensure security for the community at large. For example, in 1012 when numerous dead bodies were found drifting down the Bian River 汴渠, Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 998-1022) immediately ordered Buddhist and Daoist salvation ceremonies to be performed. Similarly, in 1167 Zhao Boxu 趙伯虛, the county magistrate of Wujiang 吳江 (Jiangsu), assembled members of the Daoist clergy to perform salvation rituals to relieve the ghosts of those drowned in Shihtang 石塘 (adjacent to Lake Tai 太湖) from the fate of wandering about the netherworld.

In light of such observations by the Song elite, modern scholars invariably have agreed that pragmatic concerns rather than religious piety spurred their
adoption of folk funeral rites. It is generally accepted that funerals in Chinese society were undertaken through the collective efforts of kin groups. In this process, group decisions generally outweighed individual preferences, especially when an individual was a junior member of a family. Moreover, in comparison to Buddhism and folk religion, Confucian funeral rituals offered little spiritual comfort to those who had suffered loss, and showed limited emotional concern toward the deceased.\textsuperscript{16} It is thus possible that the Song elite’s accommodation of folk funeral practices was driven by psychological needs that the emotionally impoverished Confucian rituals could not offer. Justification for the adoption of folk customs was also often made on the basis of a concern for public welfare. Just as the imperial court and local governments frequently undertook rituals of praying for rain to relieve the people from drought and famine,\textsuperscript{17} the Song elite’s sponsorship of various salvation ceremonies was considered appropriate so long as their purposes went beyond personal interest.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite the fact that in some instances passivity and expediency are useful explanatory vehicles, there were many other cases in which they were not applicable. Consider Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) preparation for his son’s funeral. In a letter to Chen Liang 陳亮 (1143-1194) written in 1191, Zhu mentioned that he had already selected a gravesite. However, because the geomancer instructed him not to excavate until next year, he delayed the burial of his son’s coffin, storing it in a Buddhist monastery.\textsuperscript{19} This action utterly belied his previous opposition to delaying burials, retaining coffins at home, or


\textsuperscript{17} Nakamura Jihei 中村治兵衛, “Sōchō no kiu ni tsuite 宋朝の祈雨について,” in \textit{Chūgoku Shamanism no kenkyū 中國尚 ¥weise 可マニスの研究} (Tokyo: Tosui shobo), 139-156.

\textsuperscript{18} Matsumoto Koichi 松本浩一, “Sorei, sairei ni miru Sōdaishū kyōshi no ichi keiko 育礼, 祭礼にみる宋代宗教史の一傾向,” in \textit{Sōdaishi no shakai to bunka 宋代の社會と文化} (Sōdaishishi kenkyūkai hokoku, 1983), 169-194.

\textsuperscript{19} Zhu Xi, \textit{Huian xiansheng zhuwengong wenji, xuji}, 7: 8a-9a.
depositing them at Buddhist institutions.\textsuperscript{20} His practices diverged so markedly from his words that even modern scholars have found it difficult to give a sound explanation for them. Chan Wing-tsit, for example, attributed this instance of grave geomancy to Zhu’s daughter-in-law, stressing that Zhu gave no credence to it.\textsuperscript{21} But this argument explicitly contradicts Chan’s earlier acknowledgement that Zhu had admitted to following folk customs of divination for the gravesites of his family.\textsuperscript{22} However, Ebrey argued that Zhu’s interest in geomancy grew in the 1190s, the exact same time when his son died, explaining that his approach to geomancy was closely related to its metaphysical assumptions and to his own living environment.\textsuperscript{23}

While Zhu’s resort to geomancy was largely accepted, his management of his son’s funeral remained an issue of controversy. Given his seniority, Zhu Xi likely dominated decisions about his son’s funeral. It was at least with his permission, if not by his own decision, that the burial was delayed and the coffin kept in a Buddhist monastery. The practice of individual preferences yielding to group decision simply did not apply in this case. Neither were there any expedient considerations involved, such as filial piety or public welfare, which might justify his departure from his stated beliefs. We must seek other reasons to explain the disparities found in this case and in that of Zhu’s contemporaries as well. It could be simply a gap between ideas and practices, or a specific differentiation of attitude between those emotionally attached to the deceased and those emotionally distant from them that caused the discrepancies. It could also be a manifestation of a religious piety that was usually concealed by the elite themselves. Whatever the explanation, one should keep in mind that the intel-

\textsuperscript{20} When serving as the prefect of Zhangzhou 漳州 (Fujian) in 1190, Zhu gave specific instructions on ritual rules and laws about mourning and burial to local people. Violators, he claimed, would be subjected to the punishment of one hundred strokes. Hui’an xiansheng zhuwengong wenji, 100: 7a-b.
\textsuperscript{22} Chan Wing-tsit, \textit{Chu Hsi: Life and Thought} (Hong Kong: The Chinese Univ. Press, 1987), 156.
\textsuperscript{23} Ebrey, \textit{Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China}, 102-144.
lectual world was not always systematic and free of inconsistencies, confusions, or tensions.

The contradictions, confusions, and tensions concerning funerals and the afterlife actually reflect the different ways in which they dealt with life and death in various situations. The case of Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-1077) is illuminating. Like many of his contemporaries, Shao Yong fervently guarded Confucian orthodoxy, insisting on eliminating Buddhist services from funerals. He was true to these beliefs, as he performed absolutely no Buddhist rituals or other folk services in mourning his father. So observant was he of the Confucian rites that when he died his son Shao Bowen 邵伯溫 (1056-1134) also strictly followed them in holding his mourning observance. Judging from the high degree of consistency between his ideology and his practice, it seems Shao Yong was a Confucian paragon, leaving no room for heterodox ideas to occupy his mind. However, a close scrutiny of his daily conversations shows that his thinking was imbued with Buddhist ideas concerning spirits, the afterlife, and reincarnation openly opposed by Confucianism. As reported by his son, Shao Yong had privately divulged a numinous incident regarding the death and rebirth of Yong’s stillborn twin sister. Possibly learned from his mother, this story tells that a quack doctor mistakenly poisoned Shao Yong’s twin sister while she was still a fetus. Her ghost came to her mother about a decade later complaining about her being killed, and left only when her mother responded that both her death and the survival of her twin brother were predestined. Later, after another decade passed, the ghost appeared again to inform her mother that she finally was able to attain reincarnation, upon which

24 Chikusa Masaaki 竹沙雅章 also pointed out that the Song elite’s attitude toward funerary ceremonies often changed depending on the context. “Sōdai bukkyō shakaishi ni tsuite 宋代佛教社会史について,” in Satake Yasuhiko 佐竹靖彦, Shiba Yoshinobu 斯波義信 et al. eds., Sō-Gen jidaishi no kihon mondai 宋元時代史の基本問題 (Tokyo: Kifuko shoin, 1996), 453-474.
26 Shao Yong was one of the few who were highly eulogized by the Song Confucians for their purity of commitment to the Way. Ercheng ji, yishu, 4: 70.
the ghost-daughter bid her mother a tearful farewell.

Shao Yong’s acceptance of Buddhist ideas as depicted in this account, so contrary to his public image, was usually dismissed as a fabrication and was largely discounted. Yet given that it was Shao Yong’s own son who recorded this story, its authenticity should not be questioned so lightly. Shao Bowen concluded the story with a brief yet revealing remark that serves not only to corroborate but also to justify his father’s religious disposition, saying “Kangjie [Shao Yong] knew that some Buddhist ideas about reincarnation and spirits were indisputably authentic, but he simply did not want to publicize them.” Father and son both seem to have believed that coexistence of one’s religious convictions with opposing secular convictions was justified so long as the former remained bound to the private domain. This attitude concurred with the views expressed in another account which depicts Shao Yong as well aware of Buddhist and Daoist learning, but refrained from making this public. As this rationale recurred in several different discourses, it is likely that Shao Yong did indeed hold ideas about spirits and the afterlife akin to folk religion just as his son had described.

Such anecdotal accounts about the Song elite’s religious piety abound, yet scholars tend to belittle them either as indiscriminate superstitions or deliberate forgeries. I suggest instead that even though the validity of individual accounts is questionable, they are still of great importance in understanding the elite’s mentality. The ways in which these accounts were constructed are as useful in conveying the Song elite’s religious disposition as their actual contents. The supernatural legends about Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086) may serve as the best example to elucidate the rich information such accounts provide.

27 Shaoshi wenjian lu, notes from the editor and punctuator, 4-5.
28 Ibid., 18: 192.
29 Ibid., 19: 215.
30 On Wang Anshi, see Zhang Xianghao 張祥浩, Wang Anshi pingzhuan: Zhongguo shiyi shiji gaigejia de beihuan he shifei 王安石評傳：中國十一世紀改革家的悲歡和是非 (Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu, 1997); and James T. C. Liu, Reform in Sung China: Wang An-shi (1021-1086)
are a number of stories in extant Song materials detailing Wang Anshi’s response to the treatment that his son Wang Pang 王雱 (1044-1076) received after death. One tells that Wang Anshi was grief-stricken when witnessing his son cangued, dripping with blood, moaning in agony, and standing on his broken feet before the infernal court. Another informs of Wang’s endeavors to atone for his son’s sins by making donations to Buddhist institutions after learning of his torments and interrogations at the hands of the underworld bureaucrats. Still another reveals that both father and son wore iron cangues and suffered punishments in the underworld.\textsuperscript{31} So far, these stories have been treated as forgeries invented by Wang’s political rivals to defame the Wangs for reasons of political and personal animosity.\textsuperscript{32} Reasonable as this assumption might seem, it is nevertheless hard to verify, for there was no direct evidence proving that their accounts were counterfeit. On the contrary, many details about Wang Anshi’s religious piety and emotional reaction contained in these accounts were congruent with those found in other accounts and literature. It was often reported that he not only loved to read and annotate Buddhist sutras, but also maintained intimate friendships with Buddhist monks.\textsuperscript{33} His thought was deeply influenced by Buddhism as revealed in his philosophical writings.\textsuperscript{34} Meanwhile, his love for


31 Sun Sheng 孫升, Sungong tanpu 孫公談圃 (SKQS, v. 1037), zhong 中, 5a-b; Shaoshi wenjian lu, 11: 120-121; Xuanhe yishi 宣和遺事 (Taipei: Shijie, 1958), yuanji 元集, 9-10; Fang Shao 方勺 (1066-?), Pozhai bian 泊宅編 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), zhong, 89.


34 Chiang Yi-pin, Songdai rushi tiaohelun ji paifulun zhi yanjin: Wang Anshi zhi rongtong rushi ji chengzhu xuepai zhi paifo fanwang 宋代儒釋調和論及排佛論之演進：王安石之融通儒釋及程朱學派之排佛反王 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1988), Chapter 2; Chikusa, “Sōdai bukkyō
his son Pang was shown when Pang was critically ill and Anshi piously burned spirit money and prescribed Daoist rites of purification to be held, despite his brother’s strong opposition.\(^\text{35}\) Wang’s faith in Buddhism and affection to his son calls into question the customary dismissal of these accounts as fabrications.

Whatever the case may be, such accounts are helpful for exposing the widespread belief in infernal judgment and reincarnation among the Song elite. If they were fabrications invented out of spite, then the details about Wang Anshi’s anxiety over his son’s torment after death are more likely reflections of the authors’ own mentality than that of the Wangs’. In this case, it is certain that the beliefs were widely respected by the Song elite; otherwise the authors’ intent could not possibly have been achieved. For only if their readers believed in the infernal torments resulting from immoral or malfeasant conduct during one’s lifetime could the authors effectively vilify their political rivals by depicting their torments in the underworld. On the other hand, if the authors believed these stories to be authentic, then either Wang Anshi had revealed his innermost emotions and private experiences, or the authors believed that what they had heard about him was true. In this case, not only did Wang and the authors embrace folk ideas about postmortem judgment and rebirth, but their elite contemporaries must also have been imbued with the same beliefs, since these accounts were read and circulated among them. In either case we learn a good deal about the Song elite’s religious piety from these anecdotal accounts, regardless of their authenticity.

\(^\text{35}\) Zhu Bian 朱弁 (?-1138), *Quwei jiwen 曲洧舊聞* (SKQS, v. 863), 6: 8a; *Sungong tanpu*, 1: 13b.
3. Beyond Revenge and Reciprocity: 
The Song Elite’s Relations with the Dead

The belief that people continued to live in different forms of existence after their deaths had earlier precedent. Since ancient times, it was believed that the will of the deceased was detectable through divination, and that the subsistence of their spirits relied on supplies of grave goods. Along with the gradual shift of emphasis from the coffin to the underworld after the Han period, grave goods underwent a slow decline in number and quality, whereas ways of communication with the dead and the underworld became more complex. Despite the fact that Confucianism subjected the interactions between the living and the dead to the metaphysical mutual response of qi (ether, vital energy, or material force), various kinds of physical contact emerged, vitalizing the ties between them and replacing the traditional forms of divination. As frequently reported, many of the Song elite had contacts with the dead, some directly, others through dreams, spiritual possession, under deathlike conditions, or with the assistance of religious specialists. Although at odds with Confucian thinking, notions about the afterlife pervaded the lives of the Song elite.

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37 Ebrey, Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China, 89.

38 Zhu Xi contended that the living shared the same qi with their ancestors, as it was passed down from father to son, and one generation to another. The descendants can reach and affect their ancestors by offering sacrificial service, since they had the same qi. Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed., Zhuzi yulei 朱子語類 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986), 3: 46-53. See also Kim Yung Sik, The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi (1130-1200) (American Philosophical Society, 2000), 31-41, 91-107; and Daniel K. Gardner, “Ghosts and Spirits in the Sung Neo-Confucian World: Chu Hsi on Kuei-shen,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 115,4 (1995): 598-611.
An examination of the Song elite’s communications with the dead shows that their interactions were not only varied, taking place in different times and contexts, but were also recognized as real and authentic by the persons involved. Revenge and reciprocity were common in their contacts with the dead. As manifest in their testimonies, many educated people in the Song did indeed fall ill, get injured, or suffer misfortunes after encountering souls whom they had treated poorly during their lifetimes. Many others, with the aid of their deceased parents, were able to extricate themselves from worldly predicaments, or to pass the civil service examination. Still, there were many cases in which the impact the dead exerted on the Song elite cannot be neatly classified into reciprocity or vengeance. Instead, among the recurrent motifs in the Song elite’s interactions with the dead we find the dead soliciting help and foretelling fortunes, and the elite inquiring into the afterlife and bearing witness to the underworld.

Incidents about the dead requested assistance from the living usually occurred when they had not received proper burials. The living usually recognized and sympathized with the agonies the dead suffered from improper burial and tended to help the dead when called upon. Nevertheless, the problems that the dead faced were not limited to improper burial. No matter how securely and comfortably they had been interred, various sufferings, worries, and vul-

40 Yijian zhi, jia 甲, 2: 11-2; bing, 6: 412; ding丁, 2: 549; 9: 612-3; 18: 689; sanxin 三辛, 5: 1422.
42 See, for example, Yijian zhi, bing, 15: 495-6.
nerabilities continued to plague their existence in the underworld, among the most common of which were terrifying interrogations, corporal punishments, greedy extortions, and indefinite detention in prison. Assistance from the living thus remained crucial to free them from such torments, which in turn necessitated and diversified the contacts between the living and the dead.

The belief that the sinful would suffer terrifying interrogations and punishments in the underworld often impelled the living to atone for the sins of their deceased relatives through religious measures. As shown in the aforementioned story about Wang Anshi, upon learning of his son’s torments by the underworld interrogations and punishments, Wang donated his property to the Buddhist monastery in hopes of cultivating merit for him. The immediate response of Wang confirms that the terror in face of postmortem judgment was very real and vivid. Similarly, after his wife died in 1124, Zhang Tao 張濤 (1092-1166), the prefect of Changzhou 常州 (Jiangsu), witnessed her being interrogated and tortured by infernal bureaucrats. The ghost guards stabbed his wife with long forks to force a confession. At the hands of infernal officials, she repeatedly suffered decapitation and dismemberment. Upon the request of his wife, Zhang invited a monk to recite Buddhist sutra to atone for her sins. A few years later, he was told in a dream that thanks to the merit gained through the chanting of the sutra she was able to reincarnate as a male born into an elite family.

A case about the death and resurrection of an official’s wife illustrates the fear of greedy extortion by underworld clerks and the significance of the assistance from the living. In 1159 when Jin Shiyi 鞏師益 was serving as the county magistrate of Yuhang 餘杭 (Zhejiang), his wife died of an illness. After encoffining her body for days, Jin was surprised to find that his wife suddenly bent and stretched her legs and her clothes seemed to have been wet with tears. He wailed, asking if she was concerned about her funeral or there were some-
thing else that she wanted to hand over. After slowly regaining her body temperature, his wife sighed that she needed money to use. Upon his wife’s request, Jin ordered several packets of spirit money to be burned. Yet, not until he burned spirit money a second time was his wife entirely revived. As she later explained, the spirit money was not for her own use, but rather to satisfy the demand of the spirits who had escorted her home. Her summons to the netherworld by her deceased mother-in-law was also related to infernal extortion. Before returning to life, her mother-in-law’s ghost asked her to send money and transfer merits to her sister-in-law, who had long been detained in the underworld and could not afford to pay the extortion of the infernal jailers.

Failure to meet the extortion demands of the infernal clerks could jeopardize the dead and lead to their prolonged detention in the underworld. But having sinned during one’s lifetime more frequently resulted in being kept in the infernal prison indefinitely. In any case, the Song elite rarely cast doubt on the authenticity of the sufferings and vulnerabilities of the dead, which were not entirely alien to their own experiences. As many scholars have cogently argued, the image of purgatory and the terrors it entailed vividly reflected, or became wedded to, the terrifying prospect of official investigation, interrogation, and torture. Even the practices of extortion and bribery largely replicated the abominable practices often carried out by the worldly bureaucracy.45 Given that postmortem anguish was reminiscent of that endured in the secular world, it is understandable why Song educated men recognized them and were willing to offer the dead any necessary assistance. Aside from such popular practices as burning spirit money, cultivating merit through donation and sutra recitation, and holding salvation ceremonies, they also helped the dead by utilizing

their political authority.46

Relations with the dead were not merely one-directional, a matter of the living offering aid to the dead. While determinedly performing acts of penance on behalf of the dead suffering in purgatory, the Song elite had no absolute control over their own fate and afterlife and was thus often subject to the intervention of the dead. The often-vulnerable dead were vested with certain powers that enabled them to interfere in the affairs of the living world. According to the personal experiences of many Song elite, encounters with the dead often were premonitory, enabling them to foresee crucial events in their lives, including at times receiving a direct sign or a warning of their imminent deaths. From the ways in which the dead foretold the fortunes of the living we are able to get a glimpse of the underworld as visualized by the Song educated elite. In addition, the types and details of information they obtained from the dead may serve to reveal their aspirations, largely shaped by the social, cultural, and political circumstances of the Song.

The reason that the dead were capable of foretelling the fortunes of the living was because they had access to the highly confidential documents of individual lives. Certainly, the privilege of looking over the logbooks kept in the underworld was not shared by all of the dead, but rather reserved to a small minority. Only those who had assumed certain posts in the underworld bureaucracy were entitled to check their contents, and thus able to sneak information out to the living. The adventure of Sun Jiuding 孫九鼎, a National University student, is a case in point.47 One day in 1113, while on the way to visit a friend, Sun ran into his brother-in-law, who had died a long time ago. Upon learning that his brother-in-law served as the judge of the registration office (zhulu panguan 注錄判官) for the city god, he inquired about his career prospects. Exactly as foretold by his brother-in-law, Sun did not pass the civil examination until decades later and then assumed a relatively high-ranking

46  Yijian zhi, sanji 三己, 5: 1337.
47  Yijian zhi, jia, 1: 1-2. Hong Mai learned this story firsthand from Sun Jiuding.
Frequently, encounters with the dead signaled imminent death. In these cases, the context of the encounters, such as where they had met the dead, who they were, and to what they alluded, enabled the living to become immediately aware of their doom. Take for example the dream adventure of Mr. Huo 霍, an educated man.\(^49\) One day in 1132, he abruptly fell unconscious and did not revive until the next day. While in this coma he had a very strange dream that he considered a portent of his death. In that dream, a yellow-clad clerk dragged him to the underworld, where he met his deceased mother and was notified that he would “return to the earth” (guitu 歸土) on an approaching date. Believing that “returning to the earth” meant death, Huo resolutely refused to accept the notification, and tearfully vented his grievance to the underworld authority, but to no avail. An official in green attire accorded him a respite of only seven days, while enjoining him to sign on the agreement. Awakened, he hurried to make arrangements for his own funeral and did indeed die in seven days.

The bureaucratic organization of the underworld manifested itself in the above cases, making clear that it was not only a commoners’ belief, but also appeared vividly in the elite’s visualization. A more complete picture of the infernal configuration can be found in the underworld adventure of Hong Tao 洪煥.\(^50\) In 1237, when mourning his father in Jiangsu, Hong got involved in a judicial case about a homicide committed by his uncle and nephew. Through his personal connection with the prefect of Suzhou 蘇州 (Jiangsu), Hong effectively helped the culprits receive more lenient sentences. Yet one year later, the ghost of the victim of the homicide came to Hong and took him to the underworld for a re-examination of the case. Observing the dark sky, the terrible soughing of the wind, and finally the muddy river in which monks, priests, and

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\(^{48}\) See Zhang Biaochen 張表臣, *Shanhuoug shihua 珊瑚鉤詩話* (*Baichuan xuehai*), 2: 2b-3b, for a similar case.

\(^{49}\) Yijian zhi, sanren 三壬, 9: 1539-40. Hong Mai learned this account from Chen Zheng 陳正, a jinshi in 1133.

\(^{50}\) Zhou Mi 周密 (1232-1298), *Qidong yeyu 齊東野語* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 7: 126-129.
laymen were all drowned, Hong realized that he was entering the region of the dead and became extremely terrified. He then was escorted on a tour of the underworld, including subjection to a series of thorough interrogations conducted by infernal bureaucrats. In the end, Hong’s punishment was rescinded because the underworld authorities did not consider his effort to settle a dispute for a senior relative a perversion of the law.

As Hong recalled, the underworld he personally experienced was very much like the one portrayed in folklore, except that the legendary infernal guards with bovine heads and hooves were absent. In addition to the foregoing muddy river that he quickly recognized as a landmark of the underworld, there were many other features that served to corroborate the prevailing legends, and pictorial presentations of the underworld. The bureaucratic organization and operation of the underworld, for instance, were manifest in the secular office-like buildings, the hierarchically differentiated bureaucrats clad in different colors, the interrogations with tortures, and the variety of ruthless corporal punishments. Meanwhile, the power of the underworld over the living was apparent in its meticulous documentation and frequent adjustment of human lives and fortunes. Hong was well aware of this infernal power as he not only took the opportunity to consult the official in charge about his fortune, but also asked how to evade misfortune in his life caused by sinful acts. Finally, right before he returned to the mortal world, Hong was informed that many infernal bureaucrats were deceased mortals who had served in the secular bureaucracy while alive.

52 The one clad in golden-purple (jinzi 金紫) usually assumed to be the highest authority in the underworld; the one in bright red (feiyi 紅衣) was the second and in green (lùyì 綠衣) was the next. Infernal guards and jailers usually wore yellow attires (huangyi 黃衣). The correlation between one’s official ranking and the color of his dress in the underworld was parallel to that of the living world. See Zhou Xun 周汛 and Gao Chunming 高春明, Zhongguo fushi wuqian nian 中國服飾五千年 (Taipei: Handan, 1987), 111.
From his encounter with the deceased victim until his return from the underworld sojourn, Hong had experienced various frightening scenes and learned a good deal of the kind of information that everyone wished to know about their own future. Largely authenticating his social experiences, Hong’s adventure fully convinced him that the legendary underworld bureaucracy, torments, and authority actually existed. Given that his underworld experiences mostly conformed to folk ideas about the afterlife, Hong was motivated to record them in great detail in order to make them known to the public. Not only did his family become familiar with the configuration of the underworld, but so did many Song contemporary literati, who constantly circulated his account among themselves. The foregoing version of Hong’s underworld adventure, recounted by Zhou Mi, was typical. Zhou stated that he had learned this story directly from Hong’s son, and later recorded it after checking with him about the details a second time.

The Song elite’s relations to the dead, typified by revenge, reciprocity, premonition, and verification, were basically individual embodiments of the newly developed concept of the underworld. The increasingly diversified relations between the living and the dead were closely tied to the changes in the ideas about death and the afterlife during the specific historical context of the Song. As beliefs in the underworld changed with the transformation of Song social, political, and economic structures, the living’s relationship to the dead also shifted accordingly. Motivated by the conviction that the dead were condemned to purgatory, many Song literati were willing to help absolve them from infernal sufferings. At the same time, they were attracted to the power with which the dead were invested within the well-ordered underworld hierarchy. Through contacts with and guidance by the dead, Song educated men were able to explore not only their examination and career prospects, but also the mysteries of the underworld. While their communications with the dead

were largely determined by their silent adoption of popular notions about the afterlife, the Song literati’s responses invariably helped to corroborate, reshape, and further propagate these same beliefs.

4. Honor or Punishment: Bureaucratic Appointments in the Underworld

Parallel to their concerns over the fate of the dead and their curiosity about the configuration of the underworld was the Song literati’s anxiety about their own afterlives. How did they visualize their fortunes in the underworld? Would their afterlives be the same as that of the general populace? Given that the belief that everyone must undergo a stay in purgatory after death was prevalent in the Song, it seems reasonable that the elite and commoners alike were believed to be subject to the same postmortem judgment of the infernal bureaucrats. Furthermore, the literati’s worries about their underworld fortunes most likely not only echoed their concerns about their deceased relatives, but also must have coincided with commoners’ qualms about the burdens of karmic sin. Following this logic, we can hypothesize that the newly developed concept of the underworld crucially contributed to the eradication of the perceived gap in the fate of those of different social classes. The hierarchical distinctions that had commonly extended beyond this world decreased sharply in the Song, as the inevitability of a stay in purgatory for all became a widely held conviction.54

Nevertheless, in some respects the evidence refutes the foregoing hypothesis. The most significant challenge is posed by the belief in the appointment of secular officials to various infernal posts in their afterlives.55 As many

54 The projection of the social and political hierarchy of the living world to the other world was apparent in the pre-Tang eras. See Poo, In Search of Personal Welfare, 157-177; Hsiao Teng-fu 蕭登福, Xianqin lianghan mingjie ji shenxian sixiang tanyuan 先秦兩漢冥界及神仙思想探原 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1990), 1-72, 127-194.

55 The infernal posts mentioned here were not limited to any specific system of the underworld, but inclusive of different versions of the underworld bureaucracy prevalent in the Song period.
scholars have pointed out, literati serving as underworld officials after death become a prominent theme in Song stories. While some literati became administrators in the subterranean government, others assumed supreme authority as the underworld lord.\textsuperscript{56} The literati’s exalted place in the infernal bureaucracy was often treated as proof that social status remained unchanged in the afterlife. Chaffee, for example, has contended that infernal bureaucrats and functionaries “are frequently deceased friends or relatives of the literati who naturally occupy the official posts in the underworld since that is what they had trained for in life.”\textsuperscript{57} More specifically, some scholars suggested that in the popular imagination officials who had been known as honest and upright in the mundane world frequently turned into the lords of the underworld.\textsuperscript{58}

Did the Song literati undergo the same posthumous judgment as the rest of society, or did they continue to receive the same privileged treatment they enjoyed while alive? A perusal of the Song accounts on the infernal bureaucracy reveals that the elite and commoners alike shared the conviction that the literati commonly assumed positions in the underworld government after death. Yet their attitudes toward such official appointments often differed. From the commoners’ point of view, by assuming an official post in the underworld an individual became exempt from postmortem punishment and gained authority over the souls of the dead, since it was the bureaucrats of purgatory

\textsuperscript{56} For instance, Cai Xiang 蔡襄 (1012-1067), Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989-1052), Kou Zhun 科準 (961-1023), and Hong Gua 洪适 (1117-1184) reportedly became King Yama (yamiao wang 閻羅王) in the underworld. Pozhai bian, zhong, 90; Gong Mingzhi 宋明之 (1091-1182), Zhongwu jiwen 中吳記聞 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1986), 5: 115; Zhang Shizheng 張師正, Guayizhi 括異志 (Sibu congkan xubian), 4: 2b-3b; Yijian zhi, zhijia 支甲, 4: 737-738. Wang Zhongru 王仲孺, the prefect of Dezhou 德州 (Shandong), was said to serve as the Lord of Mt. Tai (Taishan fujun 泰山府君). Yijian zhi, zhi gui, 3: 1241-1242.

\textsuperscript{57} John W. Chaffee, The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 180.

conducted the interrogations and meted out punishments. Infernal positions like these were largely reserved to those who were qualified by virtue of having been upright officials of the secular world. In popular thinking, it was thus an honor as well as a privilege to become an infernal bureaucrat after death, which in turn served to verify the virtue and integrity of the person appointed.

However, the literati who learned of their future appointment to posts in the underworld were mostly averse to the offers. They often deemed it a sign of imminent death, or an inferior position and tried desperately to decline or defer them. Moreover, many of them believed that bureaucratic appointment in the underworld was itself a posthumous punishment inflicted upon the sinful. The dream adventure of Xu Yan 許顕, county magistrate of Shanghang 上杭 (Fujian), is illuminating. Having had a terrifying dream portending his imminent death, Xu Yan urgently called his brother, Xu Yi 許顥, also a local official, to come to take care of his funeral. As he later explained, in the dream he met their deceased father in a magnificent official building and realized that

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59 Yijianzhi, zhigui, 3: 1241-2; He Wei 何薳 華渚記聞 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 5: 77; Ywen zonglu 異聞總錄, in Congshu jicheng chubian 叔書集成初編 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), 2: 20. Very few accounts relate that commoners assumed posts in supernatural bureaucracy after death. In some of these cases, the reason why they became supernatural bureaucrats was not clear. Yijian zhi, jia, 1: 1-2; bing, 7: 425. In others, the general precondition was that they have embodied such good moral characters as being kind-hearted, generous, or charitable. Even though characterized by good personality and deeds, they were appointed posts in a rather lower echelon, mostly local tutelary deities (tudi 土地). Yijian zhi, zhijia, 8: 774; zhigui, 4: 1249-1250; sanxin, 10: 1465.

60 Some complained that in the infernal bureaucracy they had to wait too long before a transfer or promotion was possible, while others criticized the administrative undertakings in the underworld as being too heavy. Still others felt extremely despondent, as they had no way to escape from the gloom and solitude that overwhelmed the region of the dead. Yijian zhi, bing, 7: 424-425, 9: 438-439; zhijia, 6: 758-759; yi 乙, 14: 302-303. Occasionally, commoners also revealed similar fear of imminent death when they were assigned supernatural offices. Yijian zhi, zhigui, 4: 1249-1250.

61 Yijian zhi, zhibu 志補, 6: 1598-1600. The author learned this story from Xu Yi’s son.
he was being summoned to the underworld. Through dialogues with his father, Xu learned both of his father’s position as the infernal lord and his own future infernal post. As his father indicated, Xu was going to administer one of the most horrible infernal departments, which was currently under the jurisdiction of Peng Ruli 彭汝礝 (1041-1094). Peng had been an honest and upright official while alive, yet due to his excessive harshness in carrying out his duties, he was relegated to this post as punishment. Depressed and confused, Xu asked why he was to be subject to the same retribution, as he had not committed any crime during his lifetime. The answer was that neither he nor his father had been guilty of a major crime, yet they were relegated to their infernal posts because of minor misdeeds. Xu’s father had inflicted excessive punishment on a subordinate for an unwitting offense. In Xu’s case, he had mistakenly recruited a morally deficient man as a schoolteacher.

Official appointment in the underworld thus did not necessarily contradict contemporary belief in an inevitable stay in purgatory. Though commoners tended to consider the literati’s monopoly on infernal posts as a projection of social class onto the underworld, many Song literati deemed infernal appointment a posthumous punishment meted out by the supernatural authority in accordance with their karmic sins. This conception reveals that their view of their own fate in the afterlife did not differ from that of the populace in any fundamental way, as they all went to the underworld after death, and were inflicted with punishment according to their sins. In short, the difference between the literati’s fate in the underworld and that of the illiterate masses was less an issue of kind than of degree.

Moreover, the apparent contradiction between depictions of the Song literati’s afterlives as being both similar to and different from those of commoners are not as perplexing as they seem, and were in effect reconcilable in the minds of the literati themselves. They did indeed share the widespread conviction that everyone has to undergo infernal judgment and punishment after
death no matter what their social standing in the mortal world.\textsuperscript{62} However, some of them distinguished their infernal experiences and the punishments meted out to them from those of ordinary people on the basis of their social background. As earthly officials, they tended to imagine their afterlives in terms of holding posts in the infernal administration. Clearly, while imbued with the folk belief in purgatory, the Song literati also actively engaged in shaping their own posthumous fortunes based upon their perception of their own social standing.

Still, folk belief about the afterlife was not the only factor affecting the Song literati’s piety and practices, as it does not explain why the Song literati’s assumption of infernal posts became a widely held conviction, or why attitudes toward such appointments differed among different social strata. It is easily understandable why commoners believed that virtuous officials would occupy infernal posts, as there were earlier precedents for such a notion. According to Shen, similar ideas had recurred in various Daoist and literary texts from the Six Dynasties to the Tang.\textsuperscript{63} Moreover, the observation of Sun Guangxian 孫光憲 (?-968), a scholar-official during the Five Dynasties and early Song, testified that the idea continued to flourish during his lifetime. As he pointed out,

\begin{itemize}
\item There are only scattered cases about the Song literati’s turning into members of the divine circle, such as immortals and mountain gods. Qingpo zazhi, 2: 56, 7: 328-329; Cai Tao 蔡條, Tieweishan congant 鐵圍山叢談 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 5: 85; Pozhai bian, 6: 33; Hui Hong 惠洪 (1071-1128), Lengzhai yehua 冷齋夜話 (SKQS, v. 863), 2: 7b; Zhao Lingzhi 趙令畤 (ca. 1051-1134), Houqing lu 侯鲭錄 (SKQS, v. 1037), 4: 8b-9a; Dongxuan bilu, 6: 66; Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077-1148), Bishu luhua 邯暑錄話 (SKQS, v. 863), xia, 78b-79a.
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
\item Shen, Songdai minjian de youming shijieguan, 22-25. From its inception to the Han period, the infernal bureaucracy manifested itself merely in various official titles roughly parallel to that of the contemporary worldly government of the Han. There was no clear evidence about when the various offices in the underworld became substantial positions occupied by deceased human beings. Ikeda On池田溫, “Chūgoku rekidai boken ryakkō 中國歷代墓聳考,” Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo kiyō 東洋文化研究所紀要 86 (1981): 193-278; Hsiao, Xianqin lianghan mingjie ji shenxian sixiang tanyuan, 158-175; and Poo, In Search of Personal Welfare, 167-170. No matter when it started, the belief that virtuous officials of the secular world assumed infernal posts became widespread during the Song.
\end{itemize}
the conviction that righteous people would become underworld officials after
death had been handed down through generations. Daoist texts also relate that
infernal bureaucratic posts in Fengdu 鄮都, the realm of the dead, were
assumed by virtuous officials from the living world.\(^\text{64}\) Exposed to this long
entrenched idea and the belief in an increasingly bureaucratized underworld,
the Song populace thus considered the literati an integral part of the under-
world, not as criminals on trial, but often as the bureaucrats who sat in judg-
ment of sinners.

The nuance between the literati’s afterlife and that of the popular imagina-
tion was also largely influenced by, and concurrent with, the social reality of
the Song. Theoretically, social mobility increased significantly in the Song,
when the civil service examinations became the primary avenue of entry into
the bureaucracy, replacing aristocracy with meritocracy.\(^\text{65}\) Whether the exami-
nations actually brought forth drastic changes in the well-ordered social hierar-
chy by introducing new men into the government remains problematic, howev-
er. Some historians refute the assumption that the civil service examinations
served as the chief mechanism of political and social mobility,\(^\text{66}\) while others
suggest the examinations enabled elite families to reproduce and perpetuate
their prestige based on their economic and cultural heritage.\(^\text{67}\) Though the
examination system of the Song created new potential for upward social mobil-

\(^{64}\) Beimeng suoyan 北夢頌言 (SKQS, v. 1036), 7: 3b-4b.

\(^{65}\) Edward A. Kracke, Jr., “Family versus Merit in Chinese Civil Service Examinations under the
Empire,” \textit{HJAS} 10 (1947): 103-23; “Region, Family, and Individual in the Chinese
Examination System,” in John K. Fairbank, ed., \textit{Chinese Thought and Institutions} (Chicago:
Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), 251-268; Ho Ping-ti, \textit{The Ladder of Success in Imperial China}

\(^{66}\) Robert Hartwell, “Demographic, Political and Social Transformations of China, 750-1550,”
\textit{HJAS} 42 (1982): 365-442; Robert Hymes, \textit{Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-Chou,

\(^{67}\) Benjamin A. Elman, “Political, Social and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service
Examinations in Late Imperial China,” \textit{Journal of Asian Studies} 50 (1991): 7-28; \textit{A Cultural
History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China} (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press,
2000).
ity, the actual chances it opened up for commoners were still very limited. The idea that a social hierarchy persisted despite the appearance of a highly mobile society was projected onto the underworld. While the widespread belief in the inevitability of punishment in purgatory conveys the impression that everyone was equal in their posthumous fate, in practice the elite and commoners often remained socially stratified in the underworld.

Compared to the general populace, the Song literati’s ideas about infernal assignments were much more complicated. The conventional beliefs that virtuous officials became infernal bureaucrats after death and that there was a social distinction between the elite and the populace induced many literati to differentiate their posthumous fortunes from those of commoners in the form of holding infernal posts. Yet, the reason why they regarded infernal appointments as punishments, while worldly appointments were seen as privileges, is not immediately apparent. At first glance, infernal posts were no less powerful and prestigious than secular ones, since both terrestrial and infernal officials possessed the same kind of authority. As Teiser has pointed out, “the two levels of government exercised the same kind of power, not a secular power on one level and a religious power on the other.” If they were equally powerful and prestigious, why then were the infernal posts absent from the Song literati’s aspirations for their afterlives?

Aside from the fear of imminent death, the most significant reason for the Song literati’s aversion to serving in the infernal government lies in the way in which they perceived office-holding. It was not the office per se to which educated men aspired, but the authority, reputation, and wealth that official status would entail. In addition to satisfying their own vanity, the Song literati’s

68 Chaffee maintained “the promise of upward mobility through the examinations was an important myth that had little social reality, in large part because children of officials had access to less competitive examinations.” “Powerful Relations: Kinship, Status, and the State in Sung China (960-1279) [Review],” *HJAS* 60 (2000): 277-289.

endeavors to acquire these material and spiritual assets were frequently motivated by the intent to glorify and benefit their families, kin group, or even their native places. For it was from receiving such confirmation and commendation that the literati’s sense of honor was derived and their achievements became meaningful. The principle that family, kin group, and people of the same locality shared the same fate also found its analogues in many other realms. The good deeds of an individual, for instance, frequently generated positive karmic reward for the whole family, kin group, or locality, while evil conduct resulted in negative retribution. Similar concepts also were manifest in the penal system, under which a crime committed by an individual might lead to a penalty imposed on the criminal’s whole family, kin, and community.

As this social context, in which the family system and regional ties were essential, was absent from the underworld, the prestige and privileges associated with holding an office did not exist in the underworld. The authority with which infernal officials were vested lay mainly in their control over the deceased. Because the underworld was an intermediate place, which the dead left when accorded the chance of rebirth, its magistrates did not have a fixed group of people over whom they could excise their power, nor did they have relatives to appreciate and share in their prestige and privileges. Though documentation and adjustment of the fortunes and life spans of each individual was part of their duties, their influence on the living was often limited to the scale of individuals, a much smaller scale than that of their worldly counterparts.

70 The system of the imperial grace of protection (yinbu or enyin) is a good example for the substantial benefits the literati might bring to their families after holding a high ranking office. See Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, 23.
72 This was mainly apparent in crimes detrimental to the stability of the state. Niida Noboru 仁井田隆, *Shina mibunbō shi* 支那身分法史 (Tokyo: Zayuho kankōkai, 1943), 225-236; and Guo Dongxu 郭東旭, *Songdai fazhi yanjiu* 宋代法制研究 (Baoding: Hebei daxue, 1997), 224-5.
73 Besides, cases about the living celebrating the high status of their deceased kin in the under-
Without families, kin, and fellow villagers as audiences and beneficiaries, the political power and prestige derived from official status were most likely illusory. By contextualizing these two kinds of bureaucracy and the differences between them, the reasons why the Song literati showed an entirely different attitude toward terrestrial and infernal offices become clear.

Judging from the foregoing analysis, we may conclude that the concurrent developments in the underworld bureaucracy and the mundane government administration indicate that the infernal system was replicated from the mundane one. Yet, the reproduction of the official system does not necessarily mean that its social significance was also transplanted from one sphere to the other. As we can see, many Song literati evaluated the holding of an office in the living world and in the underworld very differently. Their infernal appointments were also frequently inconsistent with what they had assumed in the mundane bureaucracy while alive. Moreover, the contrasting views of infernal posts held by the Song literati and the common people call attention to the nuances in religious piety and mentality beneath their commonly shared conviction of this newly emerging concept of the underworld. Rather than a product of different religious convictions, the differences in their piety and mentality were largely shaped by practical perceptions within the sociopolitical context in which they were situated.

5. The Song Elite’s Patronage of Ritual Specialists and Their Salvation Services

One of the most frequently posed questions about religious specialists is why they continued to flourish despite the constant efforts of the state apparatus and Confucian scholars to curb them. This conflict became extremely intense in the Song, when the attempts to suppress and regulate the activities of world bureaucracy were very rare, indicating that infernal offices were not as prestigious as the secular ones.
these religious specialists significantly increased in tandem with the revival of Confucianism. Nevertheless, concurrent with the increasingly widespread ideas about purgatory, ritual masters and religious observances found a more central place in funerals.\textsuperscript{74} This conflict and confrontation lingered down to the Ming and Qing eras, as political prohibition and philosophical criticism intensified while various ritual masters and their services became an indispensable part of standard death rituals.\textsuperscript{75}

The incessant proliferation of the various religious practitioners and their rituals has been attributed to the failure of the political authorities to suppress and prohibit them. Meanwhile, the ineffectiveness of moral persuasion, to which the Confucian scholars invariably resorted, also partly accounted for the proliferation of various religious intercessors and their ritual services.\textsuperscript{76} Some historians have recently begun to take the religious practices of the state and the Confucian educated elite into account. The imperial court, administrators in different echelons of government, and the local elite all had close connections with and frequently relied upon religious priests and their expertise to achieve various goals. Ebrey, for instance, pointed out that concomitant with their suppression and regulation of religious practitioners and ritual services, the Song imperial court and educated elite employed ritual masters of different traditions to perform funerals.\textsuperscript{77} Similarly, Kanani and Matsumoto have contended that the state and the literati frequently resorted to religious specialists out of practical concerns.\textsuperscript{78} Others have argued that the functional role of religious special-


\textsuperscript{75} Watson and Rawski, Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China.


\textsuperscript{78} Kanai, “NanSō saishi shakai no tenkai,” 591-610; Matsumoto, “Sorei, sairei ni miru Sōdai shūkyōshi no ichi keiko,” 169-194.
ists was inherent in many contemporary practices, which not only were rarely questioned by the state or the literati, but often were sanctioned by them.79

Surely, the state and the literati’s patronage of religious specialists for social and practical considerations greatly contributed to popularity of the latter. Yet, religious conviction was often an even more crucial factor behind their patronage of the specialists, and conducive to establishing their place in society. There were several reasons that religious specialists and their ritual services preoccupied the Song literati. The most fundamental one was that the ritual services performed by the specialists not only made sense to many literati, but also in their eyes were effective. They made sense to the literati primarily because they were an integral part of contemporary ideas about the afterlife, with which the literati had become deeply imbued. Only when the literati had embraced the prevailing concepts about the underworld and purgatory did the religious specialists’ ritual services devoted to the purgation of sin and the absolution from sufferings become appealing. Moreover, the reason these services did indeed seem to be efficacious in the eyes of literati was that they invariably authenticated the literati’s social experiences, and also concurred with their knowledge about the underworld.

As is easily observable in the Song literati’s own testimonies, their recourse to religious specialists was strongly motivated by their own beliefs in posthumous judgment and their concern to release the dead from sufferings in the underworld and ensure them good rebirths. The case of the courtier Wei

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79 Some scholars have demonstrated that it was common for officials to set up Buddhist memorial shrines (gongde fensi 功德墳寺) at their ancestors’ graves, where monks would perform sacrifices for them. Huang Min-chi 黃敏枝, Songdai fojiao shehui jingjishi lunji 宋代佛教社會經濟史論集 (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1989), 241-300; Chikusa, “Sōdai funji kō 宋代墳寺考,” in Chugoku bukkyō shakaishi kenkyū 中國佛教社會史研究 (Kyoto: Dōhōsha, 1982), 111-143. Others have highlighted the crucial roles religious priests played in “charitable graveyards” (yizhong 義塚 or louze yuan 洩澤園) set up by the government. Ebrey, “Cremation in Sung China,” 406-428; and Silvia Frein Ebner von Eschenbach, “Public Graveyards of the Song Dynasty,” in Dieter Kuhn, ed., Burial in Song China (Heidelberg: Ed. Forum, 1994), 215-252.
Liangchen 魏良臣 was typical. In 1151, when his wife died of an illness, he invited a Daoist master to perform the Rite of the Yellow Registers (huanglu jiao 黃錄醮). In attendance was Wei’s younger son, who witnessed through trances the configuration of the underworld and the power of the Daoist services. In addition to the general aspects of the infernal government, interrogations, and various tortures, the boy was introduced to the proper ways of performing both the Buddhist and Daoist salvation ceremonies. He learned in particular about the flaws of the ritual ceremony at hand, including the noisome site where the altar was set, the ritual contamination of the people who prepared for the ceremony, and the desecration of the tablet in which the divine beings inhabited by a child. Because all of these details revealed in his son’s underworld journey coincided with real occurrences, Wei believed that his wife had been freed from suffering through the aid of the ritual master, to which his son also bore witness. Deeply impressed by his son’s testimony and the efficacy of the ritual ceremony, Wei recorded the whole event in great detail.

In some cases, even though no salvation ritual had been held for deceased members of their families at the time of their deaths, the literati would call on ritual masters to perform related services soon after they recognized the needs of the dead. Consider the case of Qian Lingwang 錢令望, a member of the Song elite. When confined to her bed due to an illness, Qian’s wife encountered the ghost of his concubine, whom she had beaten to death. Because the ghost threatened to kill his wife, Qian put on hat and clothes, burned incense to worship the ghost, and promised to invite Buddhist monks to recite sutras to help the ghost achieve reincarnation and redeem his wife’s sin. Similarly, in another case the son of a high official desperately tried to alleviate his parents’

80 Yijian zhi, bing, 10: 448-451. He was a privy councilor (canzheng 參政) from 1155 to 1156. SRZJ, 4246.
81 On the Rite of the Yellow Registers, see Zhang Zehong 張澤洪, Daojiao Zhaijiao keyi yanjiu 道教齋醮科儀研究 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe), 151-173; and Edward L. Davis, Society and the Supernatural in Song China (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 227-236.
82 Yijian zhi, bing, 7: 423.
sufferings in the underworld, which he had witnessed in a dream. He invited at considerable expense a Daoist master to perform the Yellow Registers Rite. Though in both cases the ritual services failed to release the dead from suffering as requested, it is clear that the Song literati were not only aware of the function of the salvation rituals, but also were willing to hold them whenever they were called for.

To fully appreciate the Song literati’s close association with religious specialists and salvation ceremonies, it is also necessary to clarify what kinds of specialists they often entrusted with the responsibilities of dealing with the dead and the underworld. Their preferences shed light on the accessibility of the practitioners in the market, the credibility they had in the Song literati’s minds, and the impact the literati had on their evolution. Judging from the stories cited above and many others, it is obvious that Buddhist and Daoist ritual masters, whether having formal ties to the Buddhist and Daoist establishments or not, occupied a central place in the literati’s dealings with the dead. Yet, it is difficult to tell which one was more popular among the Song literati, for while some literati resorted to Buddhist ceremonies in times of need, others preferred Daoist services. This was a vivid reflection of the fierce competition between the Buddhist and Daoist clergy over the business of absolution and salvation. Because the notion of purgatory was generated from a mix of several different forms of Chinese religion, none of the individual traditions could monopolize the rituals of atonement. Just as the Buddhist Festival of Land and Water (shuilu hui 水陸會) was known as an act of penance on behalf of

83 Yijian zhi, bing, 16: 504-505.
84 Frequently, the literati’s sponsorship of salvation rituals came as a result of requests by the dead, or inspiration by infernal bureaucrats. See, for example, Yijian zhi, zhijia, 6: 760; Chunzhu jiwen, 5: 78; and Wen Ying, Xiangshan yelu 湘山野錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1984), xulu, 69.
85 See also Davis, Society and the Supernatural in Song China, 171-199. The Song literati also invited, though less frequently, the ritual masters of other traditions to perform acts of salvation for the dead. Yijian zhi, zhiding, 4: 994-995.
the recently deceased or for wandering ghosts, the Daoist Yellow Registers Rites served similar functions and became equally popular.\textsuperscript{87}

While the intense competition for salvation services came about as a result of the open market in which every religious tradition was able to take part, the large potential clientele fostered even greater competition. The Song literati explored various options of religious redemption available to them because they themselves also often embodied pragmatism and eclecticism in their religious beliefs and practices.\textsuperscript{88} They tended to invite those religious practitioners who had good reputations for the efficacy of the rites of deliverance they performed without consideration for the religious traditions to which they belonged. In other words, the prevalent Confucian criticism toward Buddhism did not entirely prevent the literati from having recourse to Buddhist services deemed efficacious for freeing the dead from posthumous suffering. Similarly, despite lavish patronage by the Song imperial court, neither did Daoist rituals dominate the literati’s religious lives.\textsuperscript{89} In short, the literati made choices among available ritual services based on their efficacy, rather than any ideological or political consideration.

From extant Song accounts, we can gain some sense of how the literati approached religious specialists and ritual services, and also of the competition between the Buddhist and Daoist clergy. A story about the monk, Renjian 仁

\textsuperscript{87} Shuilu hui or Shuilu fahui 水陸法會 is the ritual acts of atonement on behalf of untended souls lurking about the mortal world. On its evolution, see Makita Tairyo 牧田貞亮, “Suirikkai shokō 水陸會小考,” in Chūgoku kinsei bukkyōshi kenkyū 中國近世佛教史研究 (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1957), 169-193; Yoshioka Yoshitoyo 吉岡義薫, “Segaki shisō no Chūgokuteki jūyō 施餓鬼思想の中世的受容,” in Dōkyō to bukkyō 道教と佛教 (Nihon gakujutsu shinkō kai, 1959), 369-411; and Davis, Society and the Supernatural in Song China, 236-241.

\textsuperscript{88} For more details, see Liao Hsien-huei, “Popular Religion and the Religious Beliefs of the Song Elite, 960-1276” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 2001), Chapters three and five.

exemplifies the Song literati’s deep attraction to religious practitioners famous for salvation services. The monk was so good at the Festival of Land and Water that his reputation far exceeded that of his fellow contemporaries. Despite the fact that he constantly violated Buddhist principles by indulging in drinking, eating meat, and many other immoral acts, his fame and expertise attracted numerous clients from the elite circle. Whenever there was the need for such services, the Song literati would avidly seek out Renjian. The story about Wei Liangchen cited above shows that Buddhist and Daoist rites of salvation were equally popular, and the infernal bureaucrats recognized both. Other stories instead highlighted competition between Buddhist and Daoist by suggesting that the dead gave special credence to the rituals of one tradition while disdaining the other, or depicting the clergy of both traditions competing for the same supplicant. Clearly, the Song literati’s choice of religious specialists was rather flexible, and mainly based upon reputation for efficacy. This inclusive approach in turn made them potential and important customers to contemporary practitioners.

As patrons of salvation services, the Song literati not only demonstrated their belief in the existence of an underworld purgatory, but also contributed to the popularity and proliferation of the various religious specialists and rites of deliverance. In addition to personal engagement and oral transmission, their practice of putting into words their experiences or those of others, and to commemorate adroit ritual masters through their writings, all helped corroborate and then accelerate the popularity of ritual services and those who conducted them. The cases cited above provide ample evidence that many Song literati were indeed accustomed to record what they had witnessed or learned about infernal sufferings and the rituals by which such sufferings were absolved or alleviated. Although they did not necessarily intend to promulgate them, the alleged power of the ritual services in question, and also the efficacy of the

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90 Yi jian zhi, zhigui, 2: 1237.
91 Yi jian zhi, sanren, 6: 1509; bing, 3: 385-386.
practitioners’ performances, often left a deep imprint in the minds of those who had access to their accounts. Moreover, it was common for the Song literati to compose memorial writings dedicated to famous religious specialists, consciously eulogizing and disseminating their outstanding specialty. Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), the founder of the Jiangxi poetry school, for example, not only composed a song for Zhitian 志添, a Buddhist monk known for his rigorous performance of the Festival of Land and Water, but also had it engraved in stone for the edification of posterity. ⁹²

Clearly, the Song literati’s association with religious specialists and the rites of salvation was complex. In addition to suppression and criticism, the Song literati also showed great reliance on and vigorous sponsorship of those specialists whom they believed to be effective in ministering to the dead. Like the populace at large, they contributed to the proliferation of religious practitioners and services through their personal participation, patronage, and oral transmission. Moreover, they also often disseminated the lore about religious experts and the power of their rituals through their writings. The popularity of religious specialists and their ritual services was enhanced by literati patronage. Furthermore, this literati patronage consisted mostly of voluntary acts motivated by their belief in the reality of the underworld, rather than expedient measures taken under the pressure of public opinion, or high-sounding expressions of concern for the public welfare.

**6. Conclusion**

Through detailed examination of the Song literati’s interactions with the world of the dead, this study shows that their lives were deeply colored by concerns over death, the underworld, and salvation. Convinced by the idea of an unavoidable purgatory that everyone must undergo after death, many Song literati showed great anxiety over the fates of both their deceased families and

themselves. How to ensure safe passage through the underworld purgatory and secure a good rebirth for the dead figured as a key issue in their lives. The fact that they offered aid to the dead, learned things about both the living world and the underworld from them, and verified the operations of the underworld, all demonstrates that their relations with the dead extended far beyond the conventional characterizations of revenge and reciprocity. The intimate and diverse contacts they had with the dead attest to the firm hold the newly emerging concept of the underworld had on their minds.

It is undeniable that many Song literati much like their commoner counterparts lived under the shadow of infernal punishment resulting from karmic sin, but the punishments they received were not always identical with that of the common people. While some literati suffered retribution in the underworld similar to ordinary people, others were assigned to infernal posts as punishment for misdeeds during their lifetimes. The tendency to differentiate infernal punishments depending on social status as such was not merely expressed by the literati themselves, but equally shared by the people at large. Yet elite and folk attitudes toward bureaucratic appointment in the underworld were different: the literati often deemed them punishments, while commoners regarded them as privileges. Only through contextualization of their conceptions can we understand the reason why such discrepancies occurred, for the differences were shaped by and reflected the sociopolitical and cultural structures of the Song, within which the literati and commoners occupied different levels.

Though the literati’s afterlives seemed to entail relatively less suffering, they still depended on the aid of religious specialists known for salvation services. As their encounters with the dead multiplied, their need for salvation rites to help alleviate the suffering of the dead also increased. Conventional wisdom tends to stress Confucian criticism and suppression of folk practices, largely overlooking the literati’s own religious piety and practices, and thus fails to explain the steady proliferation of religious practitioners and their services. In contrast, the current study exposes the Song literati’s significant con-
tributions to the dissemination and promotion of the lore of religious specialists through personal engagement, sponsorship, and oral transmission. Furthermore, their practice of keeping records of personal experiences or hearsay about the powers of ritual services to absolve the dead from infernal suffering, and of eulogizing skilled ritual masters through written dedications, were forms of dissemination distinctive to the elite.

This study began with a conscious detachment from the conventional focus on funerals in order to better study the Song elite’s beliefs in and practices concerning the underworld as revealed in their daily lives. The main purpose has been to bring to light long overlooked aspects of the literati’s own absorption of contemporary popular concepts about the afterlife, and the commonalties and subtle differences between their piety and that of the populace. Now, it is helpful to return to the issue of funerals, and compare the images of the afterlife as manifest in the literati’s daily practices with those depicted in their funerals. Apparently, the two shared many basic elements, such as the belief in life after death, the contours of the underworld organization, and the close interactions between the dead and their living families. While the variety of grave goods serves as ample evidence for the Song elite’s belief in posthumous existence, the use of land deeds (diquan 地券) testifies to the bureaucratic and judicial systems in the underworld. Similarly, the periodic worship following funerals demonstrated that social relations remained largely unchanged after death.

93 Xu and He, Zhongguo sangzan lisu, 385-419; Kuhn, “Decoding Tombs of the Song Elite,” in Burial in Song China, 11-159; A Place for the Dead; Xu Pingfang 徐萍芳, “Songdai muzang he jiaozang de fajue 宋代墓葬和窖葬的發掘,” in Xin Zhongguo de kaogu faxian he yanjiu 新中國的考古發現和研究, (Beijing: Wenwu, 1984), 597-601.


95 Francis L. K. Hsu, Under the Ancestors’ Shadow: Kinship, Personality & Social Mobility in
Yet the growing standardization of the items that served as grave goods, the entries of land deeds, and the forms of sacrifices suggest that we may question whether these things properly reveal the Song literati’s beliefs in the underworld. The Song literati’s daily practices provide much valuable supplementary information about their emotional reactions to and complex interactions with the world of the dead, mostly absent from the analysis of funeral rituals. Without inquiry into their anxiety, fear, predicaments, and aspirations when faced with the dead and the underworld, one cannot fully understand how deeply influenced they were by contemporary ideas about the afterlife, or how they took an active part in their formation and evolution. In addition, it is through their obsession with practices concerning the afterlife that the nuances between the piety of the elite and that of commoners, despite many underlying shared beliefs between them, become clearly distinguishable. A failure to probe into these nuances easily leads to hasty generalizations about the homogenization of religious thinking during the Song.

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存想冥界：
宋代士人的死後世界觀

廖 咸 惠*

摘要

本文探究宋代士人對於死後世界的認知與關注，以及這種認知對於士人日常生活的影響。透過士人和死者所進行的儀式溝通，對死後世界的想像與建構，以及和宗教儀式專家的互動，本文試圖析論宋代民間信仰中的冥界圖像與力量，對士人的日常生活產生關鍵性的作用。儘管宋代士人對於死後世界的信仰以及從而產生的崇拜，與民間信仰的已然勃興具有一定的關連，他們的虔誠與作為往往也助長這些信仰的型塑與普及。宋代士人和庶民大眾一樣，都相信死後世界的存在，以及個人在死後必然經歷一段晦罪的過程。但在這種共同的信仰之下，士庶之間仍然存在著許多的微妙歧異。為理解宋代士人和冥界信仰之間的交錯互動，以及這種互動對士人與民間信仰所分別造成的影響，本文針對以下問題進行深入分析和討論：究竟死後世界的信仰與相關的儀式，是如何以及為何被士人所接納？士人對於死後世界的認知與行為，在哪些方面與俗民大眾的信仰相呼應，而它們的分別又在哪裡？本文強調，要了解宋代士人為何會遠離儒家「遠鬼神」的教訓，只有將士人的社會、政治和文化處境列入考量時，才能解釋這種認知和行為上的差距。而也在這種考究中，宋代民間信仰中的死後世界圖像，以及它對世俗世界的穿透與影響，才能得到較為整全的理解。

關鍵詞：宋代士人、民間信仰、死後審判、地獄、宗教儀式

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