PART I

Signs from the Unseen Realm
and Buddhist Miracle Tales
in Early Medieval China

Introduction

As far as we know, a minuscule number of monks and laymen of foreign extraction, often with the help of Chinese assistants, began translating Buddhist scriptures from Indic languages into literary Chinese in the middle of the second century of the common era.1 Buddhist-inspired visual imagery was deployed in various places throughout China around this same time.2 But in this earliest period, the audience for the translated texts was vanishingly small, and the Buddhalike images that have been unearthed seem to be examples of the cross-culturally attested use of imported bits of exotic cultures as apotropaic devices—things deemed powerful not necessarily because the sacred knowledge and soteriological practices behind them were well understood but precisely for the opposite reason.3 Not until well into the fourth century was Buddhism in China anything more than a “tiny exotic plant flowering on the ruins of the Han

1. For the most up-to-date study, see Nattier, Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations, Zürcher, “Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts,” long the best available study of the early translations, is still well worth consulting. My blanket characterization should be qualified: some of the earliest translators (such as Zhi Qian and Kang Senghui) were not themselves immigrants from Western lands; they were born in Chinese-held areas. (Kang Senghui’s parents were Sogdian. Sources disagree on Zhi Qian’s ancestors’ immigrant status.) Of the earliest translators, only An Xuan (from Parthia), Zhi Qian, and probably Kang Mengxiang were laymen; An Shigao, the earliest of them all, has been argued to have been a layman (see Forte, The Hostage An Shigao), but the argument has not been widely accepted. See Nattier, Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations, 39–40. The others were monks.


3. Numerous examples are discussed, for instance, in Helms, Ulysses’ Sail.
empire,” in Erik Zürcher’s vivid phrasing. Not until that time, it appears, was Buddhism practiced by significant numbers of Chinese.

It seems to have been late in the fourth century that literate Chinese men who wanted to promote Buddhist values and practices began circulating, recording, and collecting records of miraculous events. These events were thought to demonstrate the power of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, monks, and nuns; to prove the efficacy of Buddhist devotional practices; to illustrate the veracity of Buddhist claims; and to warn of the consequences of violating Buddhist norms. It may be that monks and nuns numbered among the earliest recorders of such tales, but in all cases of which any record survives—and with the important exception of compilations exclusively devoted to biographies of monks and nuns—the compilers were Buddhist laymen of the gentry classes. These texts also clearly assume an audience that is not only nonmonastic but also potentially skeptical of Buddhist teachings or relatively new to Buddhist norms. They are not written in technical language for religious “insiders,” and the things of which they seek to persuade readers are a subset of basic Buddhist teachings, not finer points of doctrine or advanced aspects of practice.

The resulting works deploy an already established Chinese literary genre—that of “accounts of anomalies,” or zhiguai— for the purpose of propagating Buddhist ideas and values. Although Buddhist sutra, avadāna, and jātaka literature is full of narratives of marvelous deeds and miraculous events, it had seen nothing quite like the miracle tales that were fashioned and collected in China. Among the closest analogues in Indian Buddhist literature were some of the ghost stories recounted in the Pītavatthu, or Stories of Hungry Ghosts (perhaps second c. BCE, with a fifth-century CE com-
mentary), but, even there, the tales are set in the distant time of Gautama Buddha (with some mentions of earlier Buddhas), and that text draws most of its rhetorical authority from this prestigious association. In these older, South Asian Buddhist genres, it is the placement of the recounted events in the sacred past time of a Buddha (as well as the Buddha’s knowledge of characters’ karmic conditions from times long prior to that) that legitimates the messages conveyed. As a genre, the Chinese miracle tales work very differently. They situate events in the everyday world of relatively recent times familiar to their audience—but then they introduce extraordinary elements into that world, elements that demonstrate the veracity of Buddhist claims and the power of Buddhist devotion, but without the need for a Buddha who can trace the hidden threads of karma through numerous past lives. In the miracle tales it is the very closeness between the assumed reader and the textually depicted world that works to legitimate the claims made in the texts: this event happened to someone very much like you, in the presence of named witnesses, at a particular place and time in your country. If “every genre has its own orientation in life,” then this can serve as a rough, initial summary of the orientation of the miracle-tale genre.

Those tale collections of which any parts survive from the pre-Sui period may be listed in chronological order as follows. Other, similar works written in this period that are now completely lost (i.e., of which not a single verifiable item remains in any extant collectanea) include Buxu Mingzixing ji (補續冥祥記, or Signs of the Unseen Realm Supplemented and Continued) by Wang Manying 王曼頤, on which more below; Zhengying zhuan (徵應傳) by Zhu Juntai 朱君台 (listed in the preface to Huijiao’s Gaoseng zhuan 14.418b2); and a work titled Xiangyi ji 祥異記 by an unknown author, of which, depending on how one sorts out the conflicting attributions in collectanea, no actual excerpts may in fact survive. On these works see Li Jianguo, Tang qian zhiguai xiaoshuo shi, 419–420, 385–386, and 420, respectively. The numbers of stories or textual items listed indicates the number of extant items, not the (often much larger) number once likely contained in the text in question (see below for further discussion). I use “stories” and “items” interchangeably here: both terms refer to discrete textual units—in the cases of these texts, almost always discrete narratives. (The parallel terms in modern Chinese discussions of similar texts include ze 談 and tiao 條.) For details on these texts, as well as transla-
tions of Avalokiteśvara (Guangshiyan yingyan ji 光世音應驗記, 7 stories plus preface) was first written by Xie Fu 謝敷 in the late fourth century and then, after having been lost, reconstructed from memory by Fu Liang 傅亮 in the early fifth century; like two other texts listed below, it exclusively contained tales of the Bodhisattva Sound Observer’s11 miraculous, compassionate rescues of devotees from extreme distress. It was also a source for the text translated in part 2 of this volume. Records Proclaiming Manifestations (Xuanyan ji 宣驗記, 35 stories), plausibly attributed to Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444 CE),12 contains miracle stories of several types and is the most similar to (and also may have been a source for)13 the text focused on in this study. Sometime in the first half of the fifth century, Zhang Yan 張演 compiled Continued Records of Avalokiteśvara’s Responsive Manifestations (Xu Guangshiyan yingyan ji 續光世音應驗記, 10 stories plus preface), a second collection given over solely to stories of Sound Observer’s miraculous interventions. Records of Miraculous Responses (Ganying zhuàn 感應傳, 2 stories) was compiled by Wang Yanxiu 王延秀 in the mid-fifth century. Xiao Ziliang 鮭子艮 (d. 494) compiled a work seemingly titled Records of Verifications of the Unseen Realm (Mingyan ji 聖驗記), of which only two stories now survive.14 Records of Signs from the Unseen Realm (Mingxiang ji 聖祥記), the subject of this book, was assembled by Wang Yan 王琰 around 490. In 501, Lu Gao 龙杲 (459–532), a personal acquaintance of Wang Yan, compiled More Records of Avalokiteśvara’s Responsive Manifestations (Xi Guangshiyan yingyan ji 繼觀世音應驗記), containing 69 items plus a preface; this is the third and largest of the tale collections exclusively devoted to miracles credited

11. Except when giving the titles of tale collections, when referring to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (rendered as Guangshi in the twenty-third chapter of Dharmarakṣa’s translation of the Lotus Sutra [Zheng fahua jing 10.128c–129c] and as Guangshiyan 観世音 in the twenty-fifth chapter of Kumārajiva’s translation [Miaofa lianhua jing 7.56c–58b], the latter usage reflected throughout most of Mingxiang ji and later often shortened to Guanyin 觀音, which became the standard form) I will render his name thus, so as to avoid possible confusion. It would be preferable to refer to this bodhisattva in a way that more closely captured the sense of his name in Chinese in this period and text, but close English equivalents are too bulky to be used frequently.

12. He is already mentioned as the compiler of a text by this title in Lu Gao’s Xi Guan-shiyan yingyan ji 8 (Makita, Rikuchō kōsetsu Kanzón okenki no kenkyū, 29), dating to 501. On this work see Li Jianguo, Tang qian zhiguai xiaoshuo shi, 368–372.

13. Unless perhaps the two works drew on one or more sources in common. See below for a discussion of the implications of China’s early medieval manuscript culture for gauging direct intertextual borrowing. On the overlaps between Xuanyan ji and Mingxiang ji, see Wang Qing, “Jinyang Wangshi de jiaoshi menfeng,” 151, and Liu Yuanru, Chaoxiang shenghuo shijie, 257–258.

to Sound Observer.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Citations of Marvels} (\textit{jingyi ji} 祥異記, 12 stories) was written by Hou Bo 侯白 late in the sixth century. Finally, \textit{A Record of Signs and Marvels} (\textit{xiangyi ji} 祥異記, perhaps 2 extant tales) was circulated by an unknown compiler sometime in the sixth century.\textsuperscript{16} All told, this material adds up to over 260 tales and four compilers' prefaces—a sizeable remnant of a body of writing that was once perhaps many times larger.\textsuperscript{17}

In this book I provide a translation and study of Wang Yan’s \textit{Records of Signs from the Unseen Realm}.\textsuperscript{18} At 129 extant items plus a substantial preface, it is by far the largest miracle-tale collection to have survived from this era, and in terms of the types of tales it contains, it is also the most representative of the genre. No manuscript copy or integral version of the text survives from premodern times. Rather, like many other texts from the early medieval period—especially compilations of discrete, relatively short narrative or descriptive entries—it has been preserved in the form of quotations in medieval collectanea. By far the most important of these, though hardly the

\textsuperscript{15} On the relationship between Lu Gao’s and Wang Yan’s compilations, see Sano, “Ô En Meishoki to Riku Kô Kei Kanzen o senki.”

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{A Record of Responsive Manifestations by Relics} (\textit{sheli ganying ji} 舍利感應記, listed in \textit{sui shu} at three scrolls) was compiled by Wang Shao 王邵 during the Sui—thus postdating the period treated here. A couple dozen notices are quoted or summarized from this text in \textit{fa-yuan zhulin} 40.602ff. and \textit{guang hongming ji} 17.213b ff. On its context, see Wright, \textit{The Sui Dynasty}, 135–136; Chen Jinhua, \textit{Monks and Monarchs}; and Wang-Toutain, “Le bol du Buddha,” 75–78. It is symptomatic of Sinology’s privileging of narrowly political history that, in the only other entire English-language book on the Sui (Victor Xiong, \textit{Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty}), the great imperial project for the distribution of Buddha relics in the years 601–604 goes unmentioned. Modern Sinologists may think that the story of the Sui polity can be adequately told without reference to its legitimizing sponsorship of the sacralization of its territories via the implantation of Buddha relics, but many of the shapers of Sui polity would have disagreed.

\textsuperscript{17} Bibliographic records in \textit{sui shu} and \textit{tang shu} give only numbers of \textit{scrolls} for each title, not numbers of \textit{discrete stories}, and since there was no uniform calligraphic style or manuscript format it is impossible to gauge accurately from such figures the number of stories once contained in any given text. However, it is sometimes obvious that what survives of a text can represent at most only a small fraction of its earlier content. For example, Wang Yanxiu’s \textit{ganying zhuan}, from which only two tales survive, is listed in the \textit{sui shu} catalogue (\textit{sui shu} 33.980) as containing 8 scrolls. Only 12 stories survive from Hou Bo’s \textit{jingyi ji}, but it is listed in the same catalogue as running to 15 scrolls. Only 35 stories from Liu Yiqing’s \textit{xuanyan ji} survive, yet that work is listed in the same catalogue as containing 13 scrolls—to which we may compare the 129 extant items from Wang Yan’s \textit{mingxiang ji} and a listing in the same catalogue at a length of 10 scrolls. It is also likely that other texts like the ones in this list once existed in this period but were lost before they could be excerpted in collectanea or were simply not chosen for quotation. Several candidate titles—though not as many as one might expect—may be found in the same section of the \textit{sui shu} catalogue. And, finally, it is extremely likely that many other such texts were compiled but never circulated widely enough to be recorded in other texts that did survive. Such texts are thus now lost to us unless some turn out to be recovered in future excavations of Six Dynasties tombs, in cave temple chambers, or in the manuscript holdings of Japanese monasteries.

\textsuperscript{18} In the pages below I will often abbreviate the title in English to \textit{Signs from the Unseen Realm} or simply \textit{Signs}. 
only one I have drawn on, is *A Grove of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma* (*Fa-yuan zhulin* 法苑珠林), completed by the monk Daoshi 道世 around 668 CE. This extraordinary compendium is organized into one hundred topical sections (*pian* 篇) unevenly divided over as many scrolls (*juan* 卷). The topics covered range from the three worlds and cosmic time schemes to mouth-washing techniques.¹⁹ To quote Stephen Teiser’s summation:

Unlike many Chinese encyclopedias, each section of *Fayuan zhulin* begins with a narrative portion (*shuyi bu* 述意部) in which Daoshi provides an elegant and often philosophical introduction to the section. His metaphors and allusions here are largely non-Buddhist. Each section then contains extracts from varied sources, which are usually cited by name. A major part of these sources are Indian texts in Chinese translation, but Chinese canonical and non-canonical texts, historical records, second-hand reports, as well as Daoshi’s own testimony, are also included. Each section ends with tales of the karmic causes of miraculous events (*ganying yuan* 偕應緣). These “verifications” (or “evidence,” *yan* 驗) of karmic laws are culled from a variety of Chinese sources, and usually narrate events which occurred on Chinese soil.²⁰

It is in these latter, “verification” subsections that a great many quotations from Wang Yan’s text, other Buddhist miracle-tale collections, and various other genres are located.²¹

We have, then, no independent access to Wang Yan’s *Mingxiang ji* apart from the ways in which it is quoted in Daoshi’s and other compendia assembled from the early Tang onward. One implication of this is that, barring a future discovery of early manuscript versions,²² our characterizations of this work (and all others similarly preserved) will always be to some extent tentative. It remains possible that Wang Yan’s autograph text—which ran to ten scrolls (the length mentioned in his own preface and also the length given in the *Sui shu* catalogue, completed by 656)²³ but whose number of discrete stories is unknown—contained some items differing in emphasis or surprising in content when compared to the roughly 129 items (plus a few additional fragments) that Daoshi and other compendium

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¹⁹. For a complete listing and translation of the section titles and a summary of the contents of each (as well as its location in the work), see Teiser, “T’ang Buddhist Encyclopedias.” *Mingxiang ji* is not cited in *jinglü yixiang*—not surprisingly, since that text, as indicated by its title, does not draw excerpts from miracle tales but only from sutra and vinaya texts.


²¹. I discuss the key notion of “verification” further below.

²². As was the case, for example, with the three earliest extant tale collections concerning Sound Observer, found in a manuscript dating from the twelfth century in a monastery in Kyoto in 1943. On these texts see Makita, *Rikuchō kōitsu Kassouen okenki no kenkyū*; Campany, *Strange Writing*, 68–69, 77–78, 85–86; Campany, “The Real Presence”; and Campany, “The Earliest Tales of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin.”

makers chose to include. However, an unusual number of intratextual references have been preserved among the extant excerpts, a fact that indicates the work is at least fairly well represented in them. Moreover, we do have Wang Yan’s preface to attest to the general purpose that guided his own work of tale collection, and what it says corresponds quite well to the content of the surviving tales.

**Wang Yan and the Making of Mingxiang ji**

No biography of Wang Yan survives. The longest narrative we have about his life is his own preface to *Records of Signs from the Unseen Realm*. That document, combined with a few laconic mentions of him in other texts, allows us to construct only a rough chronological sketch.

His clan, originally hailing from Taiyuan in the north (in present-day Shanxi province), was probably among the masses of people who migrated southward in the first several decades of the fourth century. His ancestors’ and father’s personal names are not recorded. There was a famous Wang clan based in Taiyuan, “only slightly less prestigious than the Wangs of Langye,” but whether Wang Yan was descended from it is unclear, and in any case such descent claims were less significant in his time than one might think. Judging from remarks he makes in his preface, he must have

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24. A possible example would be the Wang Huan story discussed briefly in Appendix 1, although we must always bear in mind that the misattribution of excerpts to texts was a frequent occurrence. On the possibilities and perils of reconstructing texts from this period based on extracts preserved in printed collectanea, see most recently Dudbridge, *Lost Books of Medieval China*; see also Owen, “The Manuscript Legacy of the Tang.”

25. For example: (1) One of two stories about Yu Falan (item 11) refers to the other (item 15). (2) The end of item 33 mentions the previous sequence of six stories and says that they are based on the earlier compilation of Fu Liang. (That string, incidentally, suggests, though it hardly proves, that Wang may have organized his text thematically—grouping all Sound Observer tales together, for example—and that within each theme he ordered the items chronologically.) (3) The second of two stories about Shi Daojiong refers to the other one as having come ahead of it in the text. (4) The long narrative of things seen in the afterlife in item 44 is tied off with the statement: “The rest of what [the protagonist] saw more or less resembled what was seen by Zhao Tai 趙泰 [item 5] and Xiehe 謝荷 [item 45], so I do not record them in any further detail here. Only these two bits [of description] are different, so I have recorded them here in detail.”


27. See Chittick, *Patronage and Community in Medieval China*, 92–93. At least two Wangs of past eras from Taiyuan number among the protagonists of the stories Wang Yan collected in *Mingxiang ji*, but if he understood them to be his own distant ancestors, he does not indicate this in any extant passage. Wang Qing, “Jinyang Wangshi de jiashi menfeng,” 143–148, offers the “hypothesis” (推測, p. 144), based on the fact that Wang Yan’s family lived briefly in the Wuji area of Jiankang, that he was in fact descended from the Jinyang 綿陽 branch of the Taiyuan Wangs, which, if true, would have a number of very interesting implications, including a long-standing feud between his own clan and that of Fan Zhen (on whom see below) and a line of descent that included Wang Guobao 王國寶. Wang’s suggestion, while fascinating, remains highly speculative.