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Waiting for a Thunderbolt

Abstract

Traditionally, the Chinese assume that those whom lightning strikes dead are being punished by heaven, which smites them with thunderbolts. A large number of Qing dynasty legends record such incidents. These allegedly true stories portray heaven as punishing the failure to live up to an obligation: specifically avarice, the violation of family obligations, or a sexual transgression.

A large proportion of the legends present women as the victims of such transgressions, suggesting such incidents were invoked as a means of social control, to protect women. Indeed, they present heaven as vindicating women's complaints of injustice. Nonetheless, the legends generally uphold the ethical system rather than oppose it, and the unintended implication is that the odds of being treated justly in traditional China are no greater than the probability of being struck by lightning.

Key words: Chinese legends — heaven — thunder complex — Qing dynasty — women

INTRODUCTION

TRADITIONALLY, the Chinese blamed sudden death on heaven's decree. As in many other cultures, thunderbolts, as celestial phenomena, have a sacred nature (ELIADE 1958, 53-54). The Chinese assumption is that those whom lightning strikes dead are being punished by heaven for their transgressions by being smitten by thunderbolts. While early sources depict thunder punishing evil, by the Qing 清 dynasty the transgression punished by a thunderbolt usually involves some kind of dereliction of duty; the Chinese often view the failure to perform a social duty as ingratitude. Sometimes in using the thunderbolt to execute a transgressor, heaven goes beyond mere vindication of a complaint of injustice, simultaneously bringing the victim back to life. Particularly in the Qing dynasty, the narratives frequently depict women as victims whom the thunder vindicates or avenges.¹

In the course of this discussion, I will refer to a number of fascinating but generally neglected collections of *biji* (筆記; jottings). The evidence indicates that, rather than creating *biji* out of whole cloth, their recorders heard them from other sources. *Biji* are, in fact, often what folklorists call legends—stories alleged to be true as part of an unconscious tradition. The narrator and his audience believe such stories are factual; they are usually set in the recent past and involve a verbal tradition of history, but they also include stories of local ghosts and spirits.² Even though they involve marvelous occurrences, the writers and the audience treat the legends seriously. Such incidents obviously do not usually happen but are the product of repeated retellings; as a result, the narratives vary constantly in particular details from one telling to another. Moreover, though those who transmit them may provide their own names, they are not the authors of the stories so much as compilers or editors. The legends themselves are perforce anonymous.

Evidence that the writers and their audience believe the legends to

be factual rather than creative products of the imagination abounds. First of all, comparison of many legends demonstrates that the many similar stories are, in fact, differing versions of legends that have evolved through a process of being retold and rewritten. Second, in editing anthologies, their editors frequently append notes to individual legends; these demonstrate the writers accept the events in the legends as literal truth. Indeed, a single anthology will often mix legendary material with what is palpably historical. Finally, poetic, philosophical, and historical writings from various periods also treat the material as factual. There is an enormous amount of material in Chinese anthologies of legends (TING 1978); here I have selected only a few of those that refer to thunder, mostly from the Qing dynasty, but I also refer to earlier sources.

THE THUNDERBOLT

Human ears interpret sound waves created all along the lightning bolt's length as the sound of thunder (BENSTEAD 1954, 93). Compared to the momentary flash of lightning, the stunning crash of thunder is more arresting, and its echoes more persistent. Accordingly, even though the discharge of lightning causes the damage, sometimes killing its victims, thunder gives its name to the storm. In fact, many peoples have believed that thunder is a physical object, sometimes referred to as a thunderstone (HENINGER 1960, 76). Ancient gods in Egypt as well as Greece and Rome hurl thunderbolts to express their displeasure (SCHONLAND 1964, 3-4).

More recently, lightning has received more attention from Europeans and Africans as a deadly act of God (SCHONLAND 1964, 9; HENINGER 1960, 79-82). An early eighteenth-century British religious characterizes thunder and lightning as the voice of God. Christians stand in awe when they hear it, and tremble and bow when it strikes at them. To them, such manifestations are righteous punishment that its victims deserve (ADAMS 1962, 9-16). An earlier Christian writer cites specific offenders, such as blasphemers, sorcerers, the ambitious, bloodsuckers, drunkards, and adulterers. Evoking Job, he contends that it also strikes for instruction's sake, and may constitute an omen (HARWARD 1971). Yet the Bible depicts God as using thunder primarily to punish those who lack faith, including the enemies of the faithful (II Kings 1: 9-16, Ps 78: 48), and the Koran (4: 153) also alludes to such an episode.

On the other hand, many peoples in Southeast Asia are subject to a set of beliefs known as the "thunder complex," where thunder drives terrified individuals to rites of expiation, their assumption being that they have violated a taboo. The transgressions, which include the ex-

pression of disrespect or ingratitude, are generally offenses against status (BLUST 1981, 290–94). Though the specific nature of these offenses differs from those among the Chinese, in traditional China thunder often plays a similar role.

In earlier ages, the Chinese generally see thunder (*lei* 雷) rather than lightning as causing damage, and they see such damage at the very least as heaven's warning. The *Analects* quotes Confucius on the behavior expected of a sage: "Upon hearing a sudden clap of thunder or a violent gust of wind, he must change countenance" (WALEY 1938, 151). According to the *Book of Changes*, "The trigram representing thunder, being repeated, forms the hexagram *shen* 震. The superior man, in accordance with this, is fearful and apprehensive, and cultivates his virtue and examines his faults" (adapted from LEGGE 1964, 330). Some writers explain thunder's damage as caused by "thunder axes." (These are in fact either neolithic axes or tektites; SCHAFER 1967, 153–54; SCHAFER 1977, 103).

This is not to deny the existence of a more scientific understanding of thunder (NEEDHAM 1970, vol. III, 480–81). There is a more skeptical tradition; in a chapter entitled "Thunder Fallacies" (*lei xu* 雷虛), Wang Chong (王充; A.D. 27–ca. 100) insists that the change of expression Confucius cites is solely due to the fear of nature's random violence (FORKE 1962, vol. I, 285–97). Yet the legends prove most people know nothing of these rational beliefs.

Typically, those who transmit the legends present being struck by thunder as punishment. LIANG Gongchen 梁恭辰 (fl. ca. 1837–1849), who records a fairly large number of such legends, theorizes that when one man is killed and another injured by thunder, the latter must have committed a lesser crime (1981c). Another Qing writer claims that thunder punishes the unfilial and others whose crimes the laws of the land fail to punish (BAIYI 1981, A 4b–5a).

Though the collections of legends to be discussed here are otherwise mostly concerned with men, an unusually large proportion of the narratives that describe punishment by thunder are concerned with women. The legends portray women as more sinned against than sinners. Even when they appear as the malefactors, their victims are also women. While the errors generally involve failure to live up to an obligation, one may divide them into several categories. First of all, some transgressions involve avarice. A second category of offense involves the violation of family obligations. Finally, a third category includes sexual transgressions.

PUNISHMENT OF AVARICE

In earlier writings, thunder most frequently punishes crimes involving money or stealing, which are generally motivated by greed. Often the reason is that people refuse to repay money, as in the case of the Tang 唐 legend of a poor man who borrows money from his friend but, after he attains wealth and their positions are reversed, refuses to repay the debt and is struck by thunder (Anonymous 1963). In another legend from around the same time, thunder repeatedly knocks a rich man's coffin out of the earth, suggesting that he is guilty of a similar crime (XUE Yongruo 1963). Another pair of legends suggests that one of the worst sins in the eyes of the spirits is avarice at their expense. In one from the Six Dynasties period, a man who slaughters the lamb he has been given for a temple is smitten (SHIDAO 1963). A Song 宋 legend tells of another man struck for having adulterated oil with fish paste; the stench defiles the temple, inhibiting the visits of spirits. Afterwards, a spirit explains this to his grieving mother, who knows only that he was filial (XU Xuan 1963a).

In Qing legends of theft or ingratitude, thunder usually kills the wicked when the transgression results in death. One such legend involves an older man, a counterfeiter whose passing of bogus money leads to a suicide (LIANG 1981g). In another, a merchant assists a poor couple in repaying a debt to an official, but they then betray him, burying him alive in a well. Hearing thunder, the official prays, and thunder rescues the merchant from the well. As a result, the pair of miscreants are brought to justice (JING 1965). Another man is struck by thunder after having pretended he would help an old woman and a young boy carry their grain, then stealing it; in pursuing him, the boy slips and drowns. The rogue was struck in response to the old woman's prayer, according to the compiler who claims to have witnessed the occurrence (QING 1981).

When people cannot find an immediate cause for a death by thunder, they examine the person's past behavior. Often there is a lapse of time between the person's transgression and the stroke of thunder. (One man is not killed by thunder until four years after committing a rape; JI 1981, 8.2b.) Another man's honesty proves to have been merely for show.

Thunder Strikes a Certain Family's Son

In the Wancheng 皖城—Huaining 懷寧 area,³ an old woman had a son of around twenty. He seemed sincere and honest; he worked as a certain official's attendant. He pleased his master with his diligence and conscientiousness. On the eighteenth day of the third month of the

seventh year of Tongzhi 同治,⁴ at the second watch,⁵ her son opened the gate while preparing tea for his master, there was a sudden rain and he was struck dead, his corpse left kneeling on the ground.

When his mother heard, she came and, holding her son's body, wept: "My son has always been sincere and honest. Heaven! This is unjust! What crime did he commit that he must suffer such cruelty?"

The thunder crashed again, in warning to the old woman not to anger the spirits with rash speech. The thunder then stopped.

Afterwards, someone said her son had appropriated a certain family's capital for buying porcelain in the amount of five hundred cash. The husband and wife angrily scolded him, but, having nothing to do business with, they hanged themselves. This had happened a year before the thunder smote him, which amounts to mercy. Alas! Is the violence of heaven's anger at the deaths of two people over five hundred cash not fitting?

Li shengzi 里桀子 says, how could this man's mother not have known that he had stolen the money? But his mother's calling to heaven of the injustice and insisting on his innocence is because of his sincere and honest appearance. It not only fooled others, but also his own mother. Nevertheless, because of the two deaths he caused for the sake of money, he met with heaven's punishment. There is a saying that heaven strikes "honest" people. I believe it. (Xu Shuping 1981a)⁶

The mother does not believe that her beloved boy was guilty, even though the fact that his corpse is left kneeling demonstrates his culpability. The revelation of his crime reveals heaven's justice. Indeed, as the compiler Xu Shuping 許叔平 (Qing dynasty), writing under his cognomen, tells the reader, the one-year postponement of the punishment amounted to mercy. He goes on to point out this is in agreement with the ironic saying that thunder kills those who seem honest. The saying also suggests that, however innocent the victims of lightning might have appeared, people assume their guilt. In believing that thunder punishes those whom it has killed, one would presumably generally have been able to discover an offense by examining past behavior over an extended period of time.

Even in descriptions of crimes involving theft, there is evidence of an evolution from a concern with thunder vindicating people in general, to its vindicating women in particular. In a Qing legend, a cheat who is indirectly responsible for the deaths of two women and an infant is also killed by thunder.

Thunder Smashes a Pig Seller

In the Jiaqing 嘉慶 period,⁷ in Yongchun 永春 department,⁸ there was a pig seller who came to an isolated village. A woman there bought

two of his pigs with two pieces of gold, but when she had paid, she heard her child crying and went inside to pick it up, then came back out.

The pig seller had left. The woman pursued him, calling out, "If you've taken away two pieces of gold, why won't you give me the two pigs?"

He put her off by answering, "Two pigs cost four pieces of gold; I won't sell them for two pieces," and fled.

The woman was unable to keep up with him. At the side of the road there was a water mill, where her sister-in-law was watching the grinding. The woman left her child in the millhouse, and returned to the pursuit. At the time, her sister-in-law was sifting rice, and though she heard what she said, the woman had not given him to her to hold. The child crawled under the millstone, and was pounded to paste. In a little while, the sister-in-law turned and saw what had happened. Seeing the scattered remnants of the skeleton, she felt the utmost horror and grief. Weeping, she thought, "How can I face my sister-in-law?" Then stringing up a rope, she hanged herself. Her sister-in-law returned, regretful over having lost both the money and the pigs. The sight of her son dead under the millstone, and her sister-in-law hanging from the rafters was not what she had expected, and she had no idea of the reason. She too hanged herself in the millhouse. Before the pig seller had gone several *li*, though it was a cloudless day, a sudden thunder smashed him, killing him. (LIANG 1981d)

The cheat is ultimately responsible for the deaths of both women as well as the baby; if the mother had not hurried after him, the baby would not have been left unattended. The baby's death then leads to the deaths of the two women. The fact that the women are sisters-in-law (the first woman to commit suicide is the sister of the other's husband) is an oblique reference to the frictions between the younger women in the family. What is of particular interest is the gender of the victims. The fact that both are female suggests that they have little power, and thunder's action helps exonerate them of any guilt they might have. Finally, the sudden arrival of the thunder on a cloudless day demonstrates that this is no ordinary thunderstorm, but heaven's righteous anger.

The same author records a similar, but still more gruesome legend: one woman not only steals a chicken from another's pot, but also substitutes the woman's baby for the chicken. When the mother discovers what has happened, she and her husband commit suicide, and in response to a plea to heaven the villainess is struck by thunder (LIANG 1981a).

DERELICTION OF FAMILY DUTY

While legends of theft punished by thunder are often tangentially concerned with family relations, in others, failure to behave in accordance with them is of central importance. In the Song dynasty, Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202) begins to portray being smitten by thunder as the punishment for failure to live up to one's family duty. One son, so unfilial his father plans to sue him, taunts his father with the money he intends to use to bribe the officials. As a result the son is struck by thunder, and the money is branded into his flesh (HONG 1982c).

Even at this fairly early time, some of these crimes involve women as victims. In one of these, a man replaces his mother's expensive coffin with a cheap substitute. His crime is punished posthumously, with thunder repeatedly disinterring his coffin, until his son covers it with an inexpensive bamboo cover (HONG 1982a). In another, thunder kills an unfilial son who stands idly by as others save his drowning mother (HONG 1982d).

Several such legends describing the punishment of unfilial behavior were compiled in the Qing. In one from the early Qing, a man is punished for murdering his mother.

Thunder Strikes

In Sandy Village, a wife and her mother-in-law got along well, but the son was unfilial. His father had died, and his mother remarried, but the love between the wife and her mother-in-law did not come to an end. Summer and winter they enjoyed entertaining each other. Her husband simply regretted that things were not as they had been. This year, on the thirteenth of the seventh month, the wife wanted to celebrate her mother-in-law's remarriage, and had her husband invite his remarried mother for dinner. When he had escorted his mother half-way there, he pushed her into the water, and covered her with reeds. No one knew about it.

He carried her clothes back, then pretended anger at his wife, saying, "I knew by her expression that she wouldn't come. Why did you invite her?"

His wife suspected nothing.

On the seventeenth, there was a great storm, and very fearful, he told his wife, "Hide me under the basin," but she wouldn't listen.

So he curled up and squatted, and overturned the basin to cover himself. After a long while the rain ended, and his wife went to get him out, but couldn't find him. Together with his wife, the people of the area searched for him. When they reached the reeds, they found him kneeling before his remarried mother, his face at her breast as if suckling, smashed dead.

That he had wanted to overturn the basin, was it not to cover him-

self? Gu Zhangbu 顧章甫 said, "I heard it and I know that it's no illusion. I know that it's no illusion because the monk Xilin 西林 on that day conducted a ceremony at Sandy Village and learned about it." (ZHANG Dafu 1981)

In this legend, the close relationship between the daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law contradicts the stereotypical image of such relationships. The son regrets his mother's remarriage, and, in fact, the repeated references to his "remarried" (*iiào* 醮) mother suggest that she has lost something of the status of being his mother. Yet while Neo-Confucian hostility to the remarriage of women is well known, Confucians never countenance matricide. Nor does heaven: her son realizes this when he hears the approaching thunder and tries to hide, demonstrating his guilty conscience. Finally, heaven has placed his head at his mother's breast, making an object lesson of him. This is what he failed to understand: he was, after all, her son.

Compare this with the Qing legend of a man punished for killing his brother's sole heir, which simultaneously celebrates a childless widow's willingness to die.

Thunder Strikes a Man from Shaobo

Among the people of Shaobo 邵伯⁹ were two brothers who took their meals separately though they lived together. Elder Brother was sincere and honest.

He fell ill, and on the point of death summoned Second Brother and, holding his hand, wept, "My illness probably will not permit me to arise again. Though brothers are inseparable, we must part. With our parents' legacy, you needn't worry about starving to death. But what can we do about the lack of posterity? My good brother, you know how to look after Sister-in-law. Fortunately she is pregnant. If she has a boy, then help Sister-in-law care for him well. When he grows up, you must teach him to read. If it's a girl, look after her well and help choose a good son-in-law. Don't let her be left with no place to live.

"In the future, you will have many sons. Please give one to me to help Sister-in-law maintain her 'cypress boat' chastity.¹⁰ Then I will be able to close my eyes and die happy. If you value your flesh and blood, you'll consider my dying requests. Remember it and do not forget."

Second Brother comforted him, "If you set your mind at ease and recuperate, it won't come to that. In case it did, I would not venture to do other than as you demanded."

Elder Brother nodded, but within a few days he was dead. Second Brother's arrangement of the funeral rites was slapdash. Sister-in-law was not satisfied, but, feeling that frugality was better than extravagance,

she yielded and pardoned him, not thinking he had any ulterior motive.

Shortly thereafter Sister-in-law gave birth, and when she saw the squalling baby had turned out to be a boy, she was happy and comforted. Second Brother was pleased, too, rejoicing that Elder Brother had a descendant. The boy was quite handsome and strong, but always cried, and would not nurse; no matter how they tried to comfort him, he continued crying. They asked doctors to examine his fingerprints, but they all said that he was not sick. Yet his crying had never stopped, even for a quarter of an hour. Sister-in-law was very worried. After just three days he still had not nursed, and he died. Claspng the corpse, Sister-in-law wept bitterly, almost unwilling to live. Her relatives and friends repeatedly exhorted her and comforted her.

Sobbing, she called for Second Brother, and said, "We still remember every word of what our late relative said. The reason I could forgo dying was for this lump of flesh. Now that he's dead, what do I have to hope for? If you value him as a relative, you will bury this orphan in the clothing and the coffin due an adult. Once the corpse is dressed and placed in the coffin, I will follow Elder Brother to the underworld. The property is all yours. But if you insist on disregarding what I have told you, the two of us in the underworld will call for help. What do you say?"

Second Brother could only agree. Thereupon he prepared her son's corpse with beautiful materials and buried it temporarily next to Elder Brother's grave. Sister-in-law invited monks to recite sutras and prayers, sparing no expense. Second Brother was unhappy, but he did not dare say anything. After seven days the ceremony was finished, and Sister-in-law began fasting, permitting neither food nor water to pass her lips. She wailed loudly all day; even her bitter tears dried up. All the neighbors who heard her grieved.

At the time it was winter, and the north wind roared. Black clouds covered the entire sky as the elements brooded. Suddenly there was a thunderbolt, and the sky cleared. People said that both her husband's coffin and her son's had been smashed open by thunder, and two people were kneeling by the side of the grave. No one knew why. When she heard, Sister-in-law wiped away her tears and hurried to see them. She saw that both Elder Brother and her son were alive, and that the people kneeling to the side were Second Brother and an old woman from a neighboring village. She anxiously ordered people to carry Elder Brother while she herself held her son, and they returned home. They fed them food or milk as the case might be, and unexpectedly, they revived.

Earlier, when Elder Brother had died, Second Brother had worried that she would bear a son and he would be unable to annex the property.

Because the woman from the neighboring village generally served as a midwife, he bribed her generously, saying "If it's a girl, let her be, but if it's a boy, then think of a way to stab him."

He wanted to give her fifty pieces of gold as a gift; at first she was unwilling, but when he volunteered to double the amount, coveting the bribe, she agreed. When she assisted Sister-in-law, she stealthily inserted an embroidery needle into the baby's navel, without anyone else's realizing it. Therefore when they were smitten by thunder, Second Brother and the old woman each held an ingot, and the needle had been plucked from the boy's navel and thrust into the old woman's forehead, half into the bone. A thread of blood continued to drip out.

Alas! Who would have thought this old woman could have been so addle-brained? Everyone discussed it, then put Second Brother and the old woman in the coffins of the son and Elder Brother, and buried them in the same grave.

Afterwards, Elder Brother and his wife lived into their eighties and had four sons. Taking pity on Second Brother's lack of sons, they had one of theirs continue his family line. He later became a second-degree graduate.

Li shengzi says that some might say that, although the thunder's smashing Second Brother and the old woman was truly fast, it is a shame it came so late, and that had they been struck during the payment of the bribe, it would have been even more timely. I say that is not so. Elder Brother's reviving was actually in response to Sister-in-law's integrity. If the pair had been struck during the payment of the bribe, it would just have been a lucky escape: the son would not have been harmed, but Sister-in-law's integrity would not have been so clear; how would Elder Brother then have survived? Although her integrity is a quality that Elder Brother would have known about, heaven had to test whether it was really true or not. When her son died and she determined to fast and follow her husband to the grave, wailing until her tears dried up, people could not endure it; how could heaven above endure it? Therefore it was particularly at the time of winter provisioning—breaking the rules for Sister-in-law—that heaven forcefully demonstrated its majesty with a stroke; not only did her contemporaries express their happiness at this, but a thousand years hence, when people hear of it, they too will similarly unanimously express their happiness. If it had been otherwise—if it had not been for the response to her integrity—though her son might have lived, I do not believe that Elder Brother would have lived, too. And is the flawlessness of heaven's rewards and punishments not too frightening? (Xu Shuping 1981b)

The fact that the two brothers take their meals separately suggests that relations between the two of them are not all that could be desired. (In a Tang legend, a pair of brothers who separate their households are struck by thunder; Dou 1963.) Second Brother's niggardly funeral arrangements indicate that his greed outweighs his brotherly feelings; the legend affirms that ritual serves a moral purpose. This is important,

because it is one of the few clues we have to his evil. It is not always easy to tell what the people in the legends are thinking; indeed, the narrator fails to specify that Second Brother's pleasure at his nephew's birth is feigned. Yet the begrudging nature of his payment for the baby's funeral ceremony should arouse suspicions of his misdeed. Sister-in-law's insistence that the deceased child be recognized as an adult is to enable him to enjoy the ancestral sacrifices of the living. When she threatens her brother-in-law, it is due to her being upset more than from any actual suspicion, but it is no idle threat. The dead have enormous power over the living.

Here the winter thunder's untimeliness establishes that it is no ordinary thunder. The disposition of the corpses of Second Brother and the midwife demonstrate their guilt. The circumstantial evidence of the kneeling corpses holding the gold, together with the needle in the midwife's forehead, has enabled someone (the nature of the concatenation of legends makes it difficult to know who) to infer the nature of the crime. Finally, the fact that he provides an heir for his ungrateful brother proves Elder Brother's sterling character.

The compiler Xu Shuping's contention that the rescue was not too late is a dismissal of contemporary skepticism about thunder's often tardy punishment. Significantly, he feels that it is only Sister-in-law's expression of her integrity that was sufficient to move heaven to revive her husband. With both her husband and his heir dead, her contemplated suicide would have been an honorable death. However, the fact that heaven revives blameless people in other legends indicates that heaven is generally more impressed with the injustice rather than such a public demonstration of integrity.

In a similar Qing legend, a man's daughter, jealous of his concubine's son, commits a similar crime.

Thunder Execution at Lime Kiln

Twenty *li* west of Xiangtan 湘潭 district,¹¹ there was a certain old man, whose family was of the bourgeoisie. He had no son, only two girls; the sons-in-law lived with his family. The old man was dealing in grain in western Yue 粤,¹² where he bought a concubine who was already pregnant.

Second Sister and her husband secretly discussed it, saying that if it was a boy, how could they hope for a portion of the estate? While they expressed generosity to her, they concealed their plot to harm her.

When she gave birth, it was a boy, but he dropped out dead. The old man was very sorry, and thought that it had been decreed that he should not have a son, not realizing that Second Sister had bribed the midwife to throttle him to death. The old man's sorrow was unending,

and, removing his clothes, he wrapped his dead son in them and buried him in the rear garden.

Second Sister and the midwife were not entirely satisfied, so they opened the grave for a look at him. With a crash, his daughter dropped dead and his son revived. The midwife was badly charred but had not yet died, and she reported the facts to everyone, so they knew the reason. Then she died, as if her life had been extended as a warning.

The old man then buried his daughter and expelled his son-in-law, giving him money and grain to send him on his way. When the boat had reached the middle reaches of the river, a strange wind arose, and the son-in-law drowned. The whole affair had taken only a few days. (YUAN 1981b)

Here the crime and motive are similar, involving collusion with the midwife to murder an heir to preserve the estate. (The fact that the sons-in-law live with the family suggests that they have little money of their own and have probably married into the family.) Though the most important victim is the concubine's infant, his parents suffer indirectly from his death. This version explains that the plot is revealed through one of the conspirators' confession. This is morally satisfying to the compiler Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798), who believes that this was heaven's intention in temporarily sparing her.

Another Qing variation on the theme occurs in an area where female infanticide is prevalent, despite edicts discouraging it. Here the father-in-law tells his pregnant (and widowed) daughter-in-law that he would prefer a grand-daughter to no child at all. Not knowing of the old man's wishes, when a girl is born, the woman's elder brother discards the child. However, the grieving father-in-law discovers the still living baby girl floating in a pool of water and brings her back to be nursed. When he sees the baby the new mother's brother turns pale, and thunder strikes him dead. The family surmises that he had hoped to leave the old man without issue and thus to control his estate. As word of this incident circulates, female infanticide begins to decline (TANG 1981, 4.1b-2b). Significantly, not only is the defenseless victim that thunder saves a baby girl, but the rescue also influences the treatment of other infant girls.

Similarly, another Qing legend shows thunder working to protect a girl. A glance at an earlier version is instructive. The Song legend tells of a child cowherd who loses his undershirt and blames a neighbor's child, whose angry father throws him into the water. He is saved when thunder strikes the ox that has actually devoured the shirt (XU Xuan 1963b).

By the Qing dynasty this legend has evolved, with the originally

male roles assumed by a mother-in-law and her little foster daughter-in-law (married as children, such girls were known for the notorious abuse they suffered).

Thunder Spares a Person's Life

In the country north of Wuxi 無錫, there was a farm family that was bringing up a little foster daughter-in-law. Her mother-in-law treated her very cruelly. She oversaw her, demanding that she spin ten skeins of cotton and silk a day. One day one skein of silk was missing, but, no matter where the girl looked, she could not find it. Her mother-in-law thought that she had stolen it to sell to a neighbor, so she severely beat her, and she was about to bring the girl to the killing grounds when suddenly dark clouds arose on all sides, and thunder suddenly sounded, smashing an old ox to death. Its stomach had been split open, and there was a skein of silk curled up there, for actually the ox had swallowed the skein. Only then was the injustice done the daughter-in-law revealed. The Way of heaven takes human life as most important. The ox certainly swallowed the silk out of ignorance—a crime that did not deserve death. But when a person was about to be brought to death, heaven could only quickly smite it to save the person. (XUE Fucheng 1981b)

Though the mother-in-law is the villain, she does not suffer punishment. Yet even if the victimizer is also female, the Qing version demonstrates a concern for women. The compiler Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838–1894) recognizes that the ox does not deserve to die, yet it has to be killed to save the poor girl's life.

On the other hand, even when unfilial women are the guilty parties, their victims are usually also female.

A Record of Thunder Smiting Recalcitrant Wives

A man named Guo 郭 lived in the village of Huzhen 湖鎮 on Longqiu 龍丘 mountain,¹³ selling clothes for a living. His family consisted only of his mother and his wife. His wife was quite shrewish, behaving unfilially towards her mother-in-law, even though the latter was old, dim-sighted, and hard of hearing. At all times Guo himself personally looked after everything she did, and what she ate and drank, fearing only his wife's lack of filiality.

One day, because Guo was busy and had to go to the commandery town, he told his wife, "I'll need three days for a round trip. As an old person, she must have meat or she won't feel full. I've already bought it and put it in the kitchen. Though it's summer now, if you salt it down, it will last for three days."

His wife agreed, but as a trick used excrement to make a marinade into which she placed the meat. At each meal, she steamed some for her mother-in-law to eat.

After a few days Guo returned, and his mother was eating, and when he asked "Does the meat taste good?" his mother said, "Wherever that meat came from, it stinks of excrement, but I just force myself to eat it."

Guo took a slice and smelled it, then cursed his wife. She let fly with abuse against him as well as his mother. The neighbors all gathered around, trying to mediate. Suddenly thunder rumbled, the clouds black as ink. His wife seemed to expect something and rushed to the rear garden, where she covered herself with a large jar. Suddenly, with a crash, a hole was knocked in the bottom of the jar, out of which her head now emerged. The way the hole surrounded her neck was as if she was locked in a cangue.

She wailed piteously, and her mother wanted to break the jar to free her, but Guo said, "This is heaven's reprimand for a recalcitrant woman. Going against heaven is unpropitious!"

After a few days, she was dead.

Similarly, there was Mme Li 李 from Lanxi 蘭溪,¹⁴ whose family was quite wealthy. On her fortieth birthday relatives and neighbors assembled, presenting rich gifts.

Her aged, white-haired mother, in tattered rags, holding a cane in her right hand and a basket full of shrimp in her left, said to her daughter, "Unfortunately, your father died long ago leaving your mother alone in poverty, living in a village far from you. I nearly forgot your fortieth birthday. I have no gift, but won't these shrimp from a pond outside our village suffice to add to the banquet?"

Her daughter said, "Disgusting old woman! Father's grave has trees grown up around it now, but you've been spurned by the king of the underworld, and linger on alive as a beggar. Were my face armored, I'd still have lost dozens of layers!"

Snatching away the basket, she threw it out of the hall, and the shrimp jumped around all over the ground. Her mother remained silent, bowing her head and weeping. Some of the guests tried to cajole the woman, others raised their eyes heavenward, sighing, and others slipped away. The woman became increasingly enraged and continued to curse her mother.

At the time it was around noon, and the sky was without a trace of cloud, but it rumbled faintly. Suddenly dark clouds gathered, and a great rain poured down rumbling and crashing, so fast that one could not cover one's ears. Yet the scolding woman's voice was still mixed with the sound of thunder. Suddenly she was forced to kneel at the foot of the hall, and she was killed by a single stroke. Her pearls, her kingfisher headdress, and her gauzy silks were all drenched.

Alas! Who says heaven is uncomprehending! Although quite a few recalcitrant children and shrewish women ought to be executed by thunder, there are many who do not meet with the authority of this

single crash and who spend their whole lives enjoying wealth and honor, ease and pleasure. Why is this? I'll never be able to explain it. This last case was witnessed by my friend He Tielan 何鐵蘭. (Yu Jiao 1981)

While the evildoers in this pair of stories are women, so are their victims. In the first story, heaven retaliates for the daughter-in-law's horrendous abuse of her aged mother-in-law by thrusting her into a cangue-like opening. Like the matricide cited above, the daughter-in-law, realizing too late her guilt, tries to hide under a container. The fact that her mother-in-law's first impulse is to save her establishes the old woman's compassion (in contrast with the typical oppressive mother-in-law). Her son accepts the justice of heaven's sentence, and insists that she starve to death. As a result of scolding her mother-in-law for poor food, another lazy daughter-in-law is also killed by thunder (LIANG 1981e). Here again the mother initially displays more compassion than her son.

Still worse is the wealthy daughter's crime in the second story: abuse of her own mother. Her objection to her mother is apparently due to the poor old woman's appearance. (In a similar Song legend, a woman who has lost her parents as a child mistreats an old man claiming to be her father because he is poor; XU Xuan 1963c.) However, she alludes to the notion that the Chinese woman should follow her husband even in death, an attitude that the legend rejects. Though the sky is clear, thunder comes to punish her, but even as it rumbles she persists in scolding her mother. Note also how her sumptuous clothing is befouled, making a mockery of her fastidiousness. While wondering why so many people escape unscathed, the compiler reveals the expectation that those who are punished by thunder are specifically children and wives who fail to perform their duties.

SEX CRIMES

Just as the role of thunder in punishing or saving the unfilial often turns out to be aimed at women, so is this true in its role involving various sex crimes, whether the women are victims of seduction or rape (if, indeed, there was a difference). The association seems to have begun in Han times, and it survived through the Tang, but most examples of this again date from the Qing.

One of the earliest examples concerns a couple accused of impropriety.

Li Shuqing

During the Han, Li Shuqing 李叔卿, from south of the River, was a worker at the commandery office. He was recommended as filial and

incorrupt.¹⁵ A cohort, jealous of him, made an announcement, saying that because of his relationship with his wife's widowed sister, Shuqing should not have been designated filial and incorrupt.

Shuqing then closed his door, refusing to go out. His sister-in-law hanged herself at the bureau gate. Shuqing also committed suicide, to show that there was no illicit affair. Then their family buried them.

Afterwards there was a crash, and the jealous person was placed at Shuqing's grave. The latter's smitten family buried his body, but his grave was again opened.¹⁶

When the woman commits suicide, the man feels obligated to do the same. The pair of suicides moves heaven to execute the rumor-monger, bringing his body to Shuqing's grave to demonstrate the injustice he has done Shuqing. To further emphasize his guilt, thunder pops his coffin out of the ground. The fact that modern editions of the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 attribute this legend to a volume of biographies of exemplary women, whether correct or not, demonstrates a recognition of the woman's grievance; the *Taiping guangji* was compiled in the Song, when legends had begun to portray women as victims.

In a Song story (HONG 1982b) a pair of foreigners are punished for abducting women. The *Ming History* (written in the Qing but presumably influenced by Ming 明 sources) tells of a widow importuned by a man who wants her to marry him; after she prays to heaven for deliverance, thunder smashes the man's boat (ZHANG Tingyu 1963).

Qing legends similarly tell of men who are killed for carrying off women (LI 1981, 2.23b). Ji Yun (1724–1805) tells of men punished for causing zombies to be prostitutes (1981, 15.15b–16a), as well as the story of a widow who is importuned by a handsome young man who proves to be a ghost; his punishment is having his grave struck by thunder (1981, 14.12b). Women are not necessarily the victims: when a man engrossed in his adulterous affair fails to keep an eye on his father's medicine, and it then becomes contaminated so that his father dies, the unfilial son is killed by thunder (LIANG 1981b).

Generally such stories emphasize the failure to live up to one's duty—the more typical crime—but the depiction of such illicit relations often reaffirms women's status as chattel. In a Qing legend titled “Thunder Executes Wang San,” Wang San 王三 is a hooligan sought by the authorities. Unable to capture him, they arrest his brother during the latter's wedding. Since the bride has never seen the groom, when Wang San impersonates his brother, deflowering her is an easy matter. When his brother is released and the horrified bride discovers her error, she hangs herself, and her distraught parents bury her dowry with her (for her use in the afterlife). Hearing of the buried treasure,

Wang San disinters the coffin, and the beautiful corpse arouses his lust, so he violates her again. However, before he can make off with his booty, thunder strikes him dead and revives his victim (YUAN 1981a).

The injustice done the bride leaves heaven unmoved, until Wang San demonstrates the depth of his depravity by ravaging her corpse as well as her grave. As far as her suicide is concerned, it has demonstrated her virtue, so that after she has been revived, she is restored to her husband. However, as another Qing legend demonstrates, suicides cannot inevitably expect rescue.

Thunder Smites the Dishonorable

There was a man named Zheng 鄭 from Taizhou 泰州.¹⁷ His father had accumulated property from his work as a scribe. Zheng carried on the work. By nature he was perverse and capable of every evil. He illicitly impregnated a servant woman.

When his wife discovered it, she scolded him, then said, "Since it's already happened, you'll have to take her as a concubine."

Zheng refused to acknowledge it and humiliated and beat the servant, then, saying he had no idea where she got pregnant, he expelled her. The servant returned home and was reviled by her parents, who said that in addition to doing such a shameless thing, she had been repudiated. They asked, what kind of behavior was that?

The servant's anger was great, but there was no way out for her, so she hanged herself. Yet Zheng was unmoved.

When she heard of the servant's death, his wife scolded him for lack of conscience and, weeping, accused him, saying, "How can I rely on you after this?"

Weary of her chatter, Zheng kicked her; the blow landed in her stomach. His wife was also pregnant. In great pain, she too committed suicide. Her father was in Yangzhou 揚州, and when Zheng told his in-laws that his wife had died in childbirth, they did not doubt him.

One day Zheng went to a broker in Yangzhou, secretly planning to remarry. He stayed at New Bridge Temple. That day at noon there was a great thunderstorm. Zheng was just mounting his horse, and his face bore a wary expression. Suddenly there was a crash, and Zheng was dead. At the time there were a seller of paintings and a young Daoist also staying at the temple; they were also struck, but awoke. This was on the thirteenth day of the sixth month of the twenty-sixth year of Daoguang 道光.¹⁸ I was following an attendant to Yangzhou, so I know all the details about it. (LIANG 1981f)

The fact that the wife wants her husband to take the servant as a concubine demonstrates a responsible nature quite unlike her husband's. The conflict between the pair of them leads to her death, as well as that of the child she is carrying. On the other hand, the servant finds little

sympathy from her parents, who blame her for first getting pregnant and then for being unable to parlay this into concubinage. The fact that Zheng's two companions are left unharmed by the thunder is to show that he was specifically targeted for the blow.

Other Qing women are wronged as the result of their charity.¹⁹

Thunder Executes an Evil Person

At the end of the year *wuchen* 戊辰 in the Tongzhi period,²⁰ in a township southeast of Hefei 合肥, at a place called Fudaxu 府大圩, there was a poor man who had nothing to support himself. He walked for over 20 *li* to borrow from his relatives. After getting several pecks of rice and two strings of cash, he set out on his return.

On his way back, very hungry and thirsty, he knocked at the gate of a village dwelling to ask for some tea. When Mme Zhang 張, eating with her young son, saw how poor and hungry he looked, she asked all about it and took pity on him. She invited him to stay for lunch, and he left his money and rice in a basket outside the gate.

At the time, the woman Zhang's husband was away on business. Among her neighbors there was a certain Baldy—a ruffian. When he saw the basket of money and rice outside the gate, he thought that, since she was entertaining an outsider while her husband was away, there must be more to it than met the eye. He then carried away the basket, coveting the money and rice, but also to use it as proof to blackmail her. However, she was actually a hard-working, frugal housewife, fond of doing good works, and truly had no other motive.

Having finished eating, the poor man went out; when he failed to see his money and rice, he was extremely agitated and distressed. The woman deeply pitied him and gave him money and rice to replace what he had lost, together with a container to carry them. Weeping, the poor man left.

Several days later, her husband returned, and Baldy made up a story about his wife's having had an affair, with the money and rice as proof of what she had given him. Because his wife had generally been virtuous, her husband did not believe it, but when he asked her where the rice container was, she said she had lent it to the poor man, so her husband thought Baldy had not lied after all. He severely berated her, but there was no way for his wife to explain herself, so she hanged herself. Her husband's grief and anger were mingled. Because New Year's was nearing, he quickly arranged a temporary burial at the side of the family grave.

On the fourth of the first month of the new year, feeling grateful to the woman for her kindness, the poor man brought a small gift to her house as a new year's gift and returned the rice container. Not until then did he discover that the woman had died; he wept bitterly, and strove to expose the slander. As he too realized the truth, her husband's

tears rained down.

The two of them then went to the woman's grave to weep and make offerings, calling out, "A good person has suffered slander. How can the Way of heaven not know of it?"

Suddenly they saw black clouds spreading out, and rapid thunder rumbled. Then with a crash, it snatched Baldy out of the sky, bringing him in front of the grave, where he knelt, confessing the affair in great detail. Then he was struck and killed.

There was another crash that lifted the woman's coffin from the grave. The coffin opened and she revived. When she and her husband saw each other, it was as if she had awoken. Shortly thereafter, people from near and far rushed to look. Marshall Cai Zifang 蔡子方²¹ was from Hefei. He saw this himself, and told it to me, adding that Mme Zhang was still alive, and her son, who was refined and intelligent, could read. (XUE Fucheng 1981a)

The legend explicitly states that the charitable woman is blameless, which together with Baldy's suspicions suggests that the Chinese typically suspected that, left to their own devices, women were prone to adultery. Her husband trusts her until Baldy points to the disappearance of the container. There is nothing she can do but to commit suicide. However, the poor man's return shows that altruism brings protection with it: he proves to the husband that his wife was innocent. The arrival of thunder eliminates any remaining doubt, forcing Baldy to confess before killing him and reviving his victim. Like most other people victimized or vindicated by thunder, they are clearly lower-class, since the fact the son learned to read is worthy of mention.

This is somewhat similar to the Qing legend of a soldier who sees his comrade killed by thunder, and confesses to a rape that caused three deaths. After he had raped a nun, she had been taken in by a woman who had given her a pair of trousers to cover herself. Unfortunately, the trousers were the woman's absent husband's. After the nun had left, when the woman's husband returned, her infant son told him that a monk had been visiting, having mistaken the nun's shaven pate for a man's. The husband's missing trousers seemed to prove the allegation, and, unable to convince her husband of her innocence, the woman had committed suicide. When the nun returned to repay the favor, the husband realized too late his error, and beat his son to death, then committed suicide. The soldier had later discovered the consequences of his evil act, but not until the thunderbolt strikes his comrade does he see the light (YUAN 1981c). Strictly speaking, the soldier fears punishment not for the rape so much as those consequences. But given the relationship between thunder and women, it is significant that the act

that caused the trouble was rape.

CONCLUSION

By the Qing period, the belief that heaven used thunder to punish the evil is widely established. The assumption is that individuals smitten by thunderbolts are guilty of a transgression. Such transgressions usually involve some kind of dereliction of duty, including greed, the violation of filial obligations, or some kind of sexual transgression.

Even the earliest thunder legends frequently demonstrate a link with women, and by the Song dynasty, legends involving dereliction of duty begin to be increasingly concerned with the lower classes in general, and women in particular. The fact that it is beginning in the Song that the legends demonstrate growing sympathy for women might seem to be a reaction against the increasing influence of Neo-Confucianism, which emphasizes the familial relationship, placing ever-greater strictures on women. For the legends so often to portray women as victims who are vindicated by thunder suggests a certain sympathy for their increasingly difficult position. Certainly Yuan Mei felt that women deserved better treatment. Several legends tell of younger women vindicated by having their tormentors struck by thunder. The existence of such legends indicates that such sanctions were invoked as a means of social control, often to protect women.

Even so, the legends generally uphold the ethical system rather than oppose it. First, they condone women's suicide. Traditionally, a widow or a woman merely suspected of licentious behavior commits suicide as an expression of chastity or fidelity. If thunder revives such a woman, it is only when she has been wronged, and not always then. Moreover, when the mother or mother-in-law appears in these legends, even though she is generally a power to be reckoned with in her family, she is generally portrayed as the victim, rather than the victimizer. The absence of legends depicting mothers-in-law punished for abusing their daughters-in-law demonstrates that, among the compilers of the legends, such abuse was not considered a major transgression. This portrayal of the mothers from their own standpoint suggests that the legends could literally be "old wives' tales." Given the nature of legends as stories that are repeatedly transmitted, it is possible that women had some input into the legends.

The legends instruct the audience that heaven will protect those who behave properly, but if they transgress, they can expect punishment. Those who are unjustly treated call on heaven to correct their grievances, and in the idealized cosmology of the legends, heaven answers their pleas, executing those who have wronged them. Ironically,

the unintended implication is that women and the other downtrodden in traditional China could generally expect the odds of being treated justly to be no greater than the probability of being struck by lightning.

NOTES

1. EBERHARD's examination (1967), mostly of Buddhist texts, would classify some of the same sins as violating Buddhist ritual cleanliness, or commandments against killing, or chastity, but other sins he discusses, such as those involving public duty or incest, are outside the province of thunder.
2. Contrast this definition with that of the folktale, which is regarded as fiction.
3. The area extending north of Huaining in Anhwei 安徽.
4. 1868.
5. From nine to eleven p. m.
6. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
7. 1796-1820.
8. In Fujian 福建 province.
9. In Jiangsu 江蘇.
10. A reference to a woman in *The Book of Odes* (*Shih jing* 詩經), no. 45, who refused to remarry after she was widowed.
11. In Hunan 湖南.
12. I.e., Guangxi 廣西.
13. In Longyou 龍游 in the province of Zhejiang 浙江.
14. In Zhejiang.
15. A prestigious recommendation for appointment at the capital.
16. Identified in *TG* 393.3136 as from *Lieh nü chan* [Biographies of Women], comp. Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-6 B.C.), but surviving editions lack this story.
17. In Jiangsu.
18. 1846.
19. There is an untitled variant dated 1642, just before the Qing (Anonymous 1964).
20. 1868.
21. His personal name was Jiaju 家矩 [original note].

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- BYB* Liang Gongchen. 1981. *Beidong yuan bilu* 北東園筆錄 [Northeast garden jottings]. *BX* edn.
- JL* Xu Xuan 徐鉉. 1963. *Jishen lu* 稽神錄 [Record of inquiry into the spirits]. *TG* edn.
- LS* Xu Shuping. 1981. *Li sheng* 里桀 [A village history]. *BX* edn.
- TG* Li Fang 李昉 et al., comps. 1963. *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 [A miscellany of the Great Tranquillity Period]. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- YB* Xue Fucheng. 1981. *Yong'an biji* 庸齋筆記 [Ordinary hut jottings]. *BX* edn.
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