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Near-Death Folklore in Medieval China and Japan: A Comparative Analysis

Abstract

Western researchers have found common elements within modern near-death experiences (NDEs). Equivalent primary features exist in medieval European and Asian folklore accounts. These elements, which seemingly transcend culture, support belief in spiritual guides, immediate judgement by a deity following death, and transitional stages within the netherworld. Commonalities within NDE accounts may have contributed to cross-cultural convergences within religious ideologies.

Key words: NDE (near-death experience) — netherworld — death — judgement after death — ideology (religious)

MEDIEVAL Chinese and Japanese literature provides numerous examples of near-death experiences, episodes in which the narrator claims to have gained personal images of the afterlife.¹ Within this motif, individuals die, come close to death, or reach an equivalent meditative state, and later revive to describe their experiences. Modern near-death experience (NDE) researchers claim that cross-culturally uniform features exist within these reports (RING 1980). Could common elements inherent within NDEs contribute to a degree of cross-cultural agreement regarding the nature of heavens and hells? Although the evidence is not fully conclusive, an investigation of NDE accounts in medieval Europe, China, and Japan suggests that these episodes have the capacity to produce such convergences.

Sociologists of religion generally assume that religious ideologies are shaped by cultural needs. DURKHEIM's (1965/1912) formulations have established a dominant paradigm within religious studies; investigators explain belief systems through demonstrating social functions. When this orientation is applied to anomalous experiences, HUFFORD (1982) refers to it as the "cultural source" theory, since the researcher assumes that all anomalous experiences are products, in totality, of the narrator's culture. HUFFORD (1982, 1983) argues that this supposition is allied with academic "traditions of disbelief" that have distorted theorizing regarding anomalous experience. Because the cultural source hypothesis coincides so closely with the ethic of scientific skepticism regarding the supernatural, scholars frequently depart from normal academic standards, relying on *a priori* reasoning regarding what is "real" and "possible" (McCLENON 1984).

HUFFORD (1982) argues that some forms of anomalous experience contain elements independent of culture, occurring regularly without contact with a supporting tradition. His "experiential source" theory proposes that some episodes may be origins of folklore beliefs, rather than merely products of culture. His data regarding night paralysis suggest that some folklore accounts regarding possession and spirits

harbor experiential roots, evolving from actual episodes. These events may act as a source for religious belief, rather than being totally a product of faith.

Various scholars have noticed the striking similarities between Chinese conceptions of heavens and hells and those evolving within Christian and Moslem cultures (ASÍN 1926, DUYUENDAK 1952). Medieval Christian, Moslem, and Buddhist afterlife narratives contain clearly demarcated boundaries and transition stages, deity figures who judge the deceased, hells where punishments are designed to fit specific crimes, and administrative staff governing hierarchical domains. DUYUENDAK (1952) suggests that a common cultural foundation affected the development of Moslem, Christian, and Buddhist concepts of hell, causing commonalities. Other cultural diffusion hypotheses include the theory that Pure Land Buddhism was a Chinese distortion of Indian Christianity (TAKAKUSU 1947, 166), or borrowed from Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism (REISCHAUER 1917, 69). These theories do not clearly specify the means and timing by which medieval NDEs were influenced by foreign doctrines and some of the assumptions required within these conjectures are farfetched (BECKER 1981, 1984). In some cases, there is little probability that the authors of innovative images of the afterlife had contact with distant influences.

Hufford's experiential source theory *can* explain the conceptual commonalities within Asian and Western netherworlds. The primary features, inherent within NDEs, may contribute to ideological convergences and uniformities of images of the afterlife (BECKER 1984). The goal of the experiential source theory is not to refute the notion that culture affects religious experience, but to replace excessively simple "culture-plus-psychology" explanations, so that a more complete understanding of religious history can be developed (McCLENON 1988, 1990). This orientation corresponds, to a degree, with ideas expressed by LANG (1968), LOWIE (1924), OTTO (1952), and TYLOR (1920).

THE MODERN NDE

Modern evidence suggests that NDEs occur with surprising frequency, hinting that equivalent events occurred in the past. GALLUP (1982), for example, found that 15% of a randomly selected sample of the U.S. population has had a close brush with death and that 34% of this group remembered events that can be termed "experiences."

NDE researchers conclude that basic "elements" exist within these reports which transcend any single culture (GREYSON and FLYNN 1984, LUNDAHL 1982, SABOM 1982). RING (1980) found that the contents of NDEs were unrelated to the respondent's religious orientation or

religiosity. Many atheists and agnostics have reported NDEs. OSIS and HARALDSSON (1977) gathered NDE reports from American and Indian respondents and found many cross-cultural equivalencies. IRWIN (1985) reviewed studies regarding out-of-body experiences, noting that religiosity seems unrelated to the incidence of these episodes.

The issue between "believers" and "skeptics" is not whether common elements exist cross-culturally, but regarding interpretations of the evidence. Some believers feel that the data supports belief in life after death (OSIS and HARALDSSON 1977). Skeptics argue that this claim is unsupported (HOVELMANN 1985) and propose that commonalities within NDEs are produced by physiological factors associated with death trauma. Believers refute physical explanations by citing cases constituting exceptions (NDEs have occurred when the experiencer's life was not threatened and the individual was not under stress). The present study does not address this issue, but seeks to evaluate the effect that primary features within NDE reports may have had on medieval religious history. Hufford's orientation allows a form of "applied folklore" in which hypotheses derived from his theory can be tested using folklore data.

NDE researchers have consistently noted primary features. RING (1980) hypothesizes that five stages exist: a feeling of peace, body separation, entering the darkness, seeing the light, and entering the light. MOODY (1975) includes other phases: ineffability, hearing the news [of one's own death], feelings of peace and quiet, the noise, the dark tunnel, out of the body, meeting others, the being of light, the review, the border, and coming back. He also discusses "telling others" and "corroboration." Most experiencers return to their bodies before reaching the advanced stages, which involves contact with the "being of light." Among SABOM's (1982) sample of nonsurgical cases, 28% encountered "the light."

MOODY's (1975, 21-22) model might be paraphrased as follows: A dying person hears him/herself pronounced dead, feels out of his/her physical body, and views attempts at resuscitation or other events related to the physical plane. The person moves through a dark tunnel or transition area, is met by spirits, relatives, or friends who have already died, and encounters a being of light who questions him/her nonverbally regarding his/her life. At some point a form of barrier brings about a return to the physical body. Sometimes a decision on the part of the experiencer leads to the return to the body. NDEs often produce profound behavioral changes; experiencers frequently evaluate them as "more real" than normal reality.

Although most modern reports are associated with feelings of joy,

love, and peace, a small percentage of respondents report experiencing barren, isolated domains, filled with restless souls; they feel alienated and despondent, a condition evaluated as a form of hell (SABOM, 1982, found that 23% of his respondents described a dark or void region). In RING's (1980, 249) view, hellish states within NDEs are transitional phases which some individuals pass through on their way to more pleasant realms, unless they return to their bodies beforehand.

NDErs sometimes describe physical phenomena, such as the medical personnel's identity, clothing, procedures, and conversation, information which theoretically should be unavailable to unconscious individuals (MOODY, 1975, reviews "corroboration"). Some NDEs have a "life-transforming" quality, in that, following their NDE, experiencers report greater interest in spiritual matters, greater compassion for fellow humans, but sometimes a lack of concern for traditional religious rituals and structures (RING 1984).

Medieval Chinese and Japanese "anomalous event literature" (in Chinese: *chih-kuai* 志怪 [records of anomalies], or *ch'uan-ch'i* 傳奇 [accounts of the extraordinary]) furnishes many examples of NDEs. Medieval European literature harbors equivalent accounts. These narratives furnish a means of testing the experiential source hypothesis. The population of possible features, occurring within dreams, visions, and apparitional hallucinations, is large, making the NDE pattern of primary features unique. If NDE primary features (transition stages, guides, boundaries within the spiritual realms, beings of light, judgement) are present within medieval reports, the experiential source hypothesis would be supported. Narratives with primary features could easily have originated with actual experiential episodes. If these accounts can be shown to have had ideological impact, this would further support the experiential source theory; primary elements may have contributed to ideological convergences.

The existence of primary features within NDEs does not *force* ideological change, since cultural factors remain instrumental in determining the overall shape of religious ideology. Cultural factors determine the role that experiential reports play within a society and govern which reports will be selected for inscription. Undoubtedly, most medieval NDE experiences were not recorded, just as occurs during the modern era. Modern narrators frequently regard their NDEs as ineffable, so overwhelming, awesome, and inexpressible that they hesitate to describe the episode. The experiential source hypothesis does not argue that cultural factors do not shape anomalous reports but that the common features within these accounts have had impact on folk beliefs, producing convergences.

MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN NDEs

Although divergences exist, medieval European visionary experiences reveal the basic elements found within modern NDE reports (ZALESKI 1987). For example, the monk Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of England*, completed in 731 (COLGRAVE and MYNORS 1969, 488), describes Drythelm's vision. Drythelm "died" one evening in A.D. 696 of a severe illness, yet revived in the morning to report meeting a man "of shining countenance and bright apparel" who led him through an enormous valley. One side was filled with flames while the other side had hail and snow. As Drythelm observed tortured souls being thrown from side to side, his guide explained that this is a temporary situation, that these individuals could be released through Masses, prayers, alms, and fasts, performed by the living on their behalf. Later Drythelm saw Hell, a bottomless, stinking pit. When demons threatened him, his guide reappeared as a bright star. Together, they traveled to a realm of clear light, saw a vast wall, and suddenly were on top of it. Beyond was a bright, flowery meadow, filled with happy people. Drythelm thought he was in heaven but was informed that this was a holding area for the slightly imperfect. The actual kingdom of heaven was filled with far greater fragrance and light. After his return to his body, Drythelm distributed his property, retired to a monastery, and began a life of devotion, austerity, fasting, and cold baths. Drythelm's NDE was one of a succession of similar visions continuing through the mid-thirteenth century, most of which contain the primary features of modern NDE reports. As with many medieval and modern NDEs, Drythelm's experience did not conform to the image of the afterworld which was commonly accepted during his era. In the late seventh century, the notion of temporary punishment in Hell was not theologically acceptable, and the word "purgatory" had not come into usage. ZALESKI (1987, 33) notes that later narratives, mainly from the twelfth and thirteenth century, followed the Drythelm pattern:

Among them are the visions of Adamnán, Alberic, the Boy William, Tundal, and the Knight Owen (St. Patrick's Purgatory) . . . the narratives in this group display a remarkable similarity in their choice of which set phrases and images to borrow. Typically the visionary is told, after viewing purgatorial torments and mistaking them for the punishments of the damned, that there are far worse sights to come (Drythelm, Tundal, Owen); he sees souls tossed between fire and ice (Thespesius, Drythelm, Tundal) and rising like sparks from the pit of hell (Drythelm, Alberic, the Boy William, Tundal);

he is temporarily deserted by his guide (Thespesius, Drythelm, the Boy William, Tundal); he finds paradise surrounded by or on top of a wall, which he surmounts without knowing how (Drythelm, Adamnán, Alberic, the Boy William, Tundal, Owen); at the end, after a brief taste of heavenly joys, he is compelled against his will to return to life (Drythelm, Tundal); and after he revives, his newly austere mode of life testifies to the authenticity of his vision (Drythelm, Alberic, and Tundal borrow Gregory's phrasing for this). In addition, the test-bridge [walking across a dangerous structure functions as a form of judgement] . . . recurs with many similarities in the visions of Adamnán, Alberic, Tundal, and Owen.

Various NDE reports were seemingly a factor in creating ideological change. NDEs supplied a rhetorical tool for the legitimization of the idea of purgatory, supporting the performance of special rites for the dead. Wetti (824), Charles the Fat (c. 885), Thurkill (1149), and Edmund of Eynsham (1196) saw specific individuals in purgatory, conceptions particularly suitable for modifying listeners' opinions regarding the nature of the afterlife.

Although ZALESKI notes fundamental similarities between medieval and modern visions, her analysis discloses many differences. While medieval accounts focus on hell and a "bad" death, modern accounts point to a "good" death, associated with relaxation, peace, and love. Medieval guides and deities stand for hierarchical and feudal authorities. Modern otherworldly figures symbolize parental acceptance. Medieval accounts reveal a predominance of judgmental obstacles, tests, and purificatory torments. The modern "life review," in which the individual evaluates his or her own life, is regarded as an educational experience. Medieval NDEs consolidated Catholic teachings on purgatory and retained vestiges of older conceptions of planetary schemes as places of punishment and interrogation. Modern narratives are vague regarding cosmic topographies and are shaped by optimistic democratic, "healthy-minded" principles reflecting contemporary ideologies and moods. In medieval accounts, the returner generally promotes a particular penitential and monastic institution. Modern NDEs tend to advocate service and humanistic ideals coupled with a change of lifestyle toward renunciation of worries and fears (1987, 188-90). Because of these differences, ZALESKI (1987, 7) concludes that

. . . the otherworld journey is a work of the narrative imagination. As such, it is shaped not only by the universal laws of symbolic

experience, but also by the local and transitory statutes of a given culture.

She argues that many NDE stories appear to be “formed in an inner dialogue between the visionary and his culture” which “develops in the telling and retelling, until it finally comes into the hands of an author who shapes it further for dialectic, polemic, or literary use” (ZALESKI 1987, 153).

Although some differences between modern accounts and medieval stories can be attributed to variations in methods of collection and transcription, it also seems likely that cultural factors shaped the form of original memorates. The experiential source hypothesis does not argue that cultural elements do not intrude into anomalous reports. Although Zaleski seeks to refute the claims of those who argue that NDEs reflect a reality beyond the individual’s culture, her data supports the experiential source theory. Her “universal laws of symbolic experience” are equivalent to Hufford’s primary features. Medieval experiencers reported guides, boundaries, beings of light, judgement, and changes in lifestyle, which, although not exactly equivalent to modern accounts, are certainly parallel. The accounts support the experiential source hypothesis since the existence of “primary elements” modified beliefs regarding the afterlife in a direction coinciding with patterns occurring in other locations. Experiencers, and those believing their accounts, accepted the notion of spiritual guides, immediate judgement following death, a connection between the affairs of the living and those of the dead, and demarcations between spiritual realms.

MEDIEVAL CHINESE NDEs

The NDE motif existed in Chinese folklore previous to the entrance of Buddhism. Since ancestral worship was a major component of their religious practice, Chinese people were particularly curious regarding the nature of the afterlife. This interest probably granted NDE narratives special rhetorical power for shaping religious ideologies. DE GROOT (1967, 113–14) describes two Taoist NDEs within one narrative: The ruler Kien-tszě 簡子 of Chao 趙, while ill, lost consciousness for five days in 498 B.C.; his physician analyzed his condition as equivalent to that of the ruler Muh of Ts’in 秦穆公 (658–620 B.C.), who, while in a similar state, experienced being taken to the residence of the Emperor of Heaven. There Muh learned information about future political events which proved valid. Basing his advice on this precedent, the physician counseled patience and, after two and a half days, Kien-tszě awoke and described his NDE. He met the Emperor of Heaven, heard

beautiful music, saw ten thousand dances, and participated in a symbolic dream situation which eventually resulted in producing prophetic information. The existence of pre-Buddhist NDE folklore, containing the common features found within modern NDEs (guides, deity figures, divine structures), supports Hufford's experiential source hypothesis with regard to these events.

Sutras presenting patterns for Buddhist NDEs, peripheral to Indian ideologies, were translated into Chinese as early as the second century. One such text was eventually to become one of the fundamental scriptures of the Pure Land School. Dharmākara bodhisattva (Amitābha) made forty-eight vows, affirming that he would meet believers at the moment of death and transport them to a wonderful "Pure Land" heaven (TAKAKUSU 1947, 181). Another text, the *Bhaiṣajya-guru sūtra*, or *Yao-shih liu-li-kuang ju-lai pen-yüan kung-te ching*, 藥師琉璃光如來本願功德經 (Sutra on the Merits of the Fundamental Vows of the Master of Healing, The Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathāgata) was first translated into Chinese early in the fourth century A.D. It narrates the dying person's experiences even more clearly:

Then, while his body lies in its original position, he is seized by the messengers of Yama who lead his spirit consciousness before that King of the Law. The inborn spirits attached to all sentient beings, who record whether each being's conduct is good or bad, will then hand down these records in their entirety to Yama, King of the Law. Then, the King will interrogate this person, and he will sum up the person's deeds. According to the positive and negative factors, he shall judge him. . . . [If the proper scripture is recited] that person's consciousness may be returned to his body [immediately]. He will clearly remember what he has experienced, as if it were a dream. (BIRNBAUM 1979, 165)

Although some tales describe visits to both heavens and hells, Chinese and Japanese NDE folklore reveals a bipolar aspect. Some narratives focus on Yama's judgement, as outlined in the *Bhaiṣajya-guru sūtra*, and are equivalent to European visions of purgatory. Other reports portray Amitābha's Pure Land and are parallel to modern heavenly NDE memorates. The bipolarity of reports does not refute the experiential source hypothesis. Both heaven and hell accounts reveal primary features, serving as rhetorical tools for ideological change. Although cultural factors may have shaped the incidence and narrative form of memorates, the primary features within these accounts seemingly influenced the ideological framework of Buddhism in Asia in a direction converging with that in Europe, a phenomenon predicted by the ex-

periential source hypothesis.

Chih-kuai from the Six Dynasties (A.D. 317–589) provide near-death visions which fit the *Bhaiṣajya-guru sūtra* pattern (KAO 1985). Such accounts should be viewed as bridges between historical documents and literary fictions (DEWOSKIN 1977). In an important early story, Chao T'ai, a native of Pei-ch'iu in Ch'ing-ho (in modern Hopeh, bordering on Shantung), died at the age of 35 during the Chin Dynasty (265–420). After ten days he revived to tell of being carried to the east by two horsemen, arriving at a large city wall, passing through the city gate, and being presented to the magistrate. He was ordered to describe his sins before a scarlet-clothed individual who then directed that he take the role of inspector of the hells' waterworks. This allowed him to view the harsh punishments in the different hells and note the efficacy of rituals performed by the living for the dead. He followed a group who were released due to these performances and saw a godly person with beautiful countenance (assumed to be the Buddha). After completing his waterworks inspection, Chao T'ai asked an overseer the means by which one might avoid the hellish tortures. The overseer informed him that serving the Dharma wipes out even those sins committed before acceptance of it. After it was discovered that Chao T'ai had been prematurely called to hell due to a bureaucratic error, he was returned to life and directed to inform people of what he learned. Upon his return, he convened a great mass for the sake of his deceased relatives and ordered his sons and grandsons to mend their ways and honor the Dharma. Chao T'ai's story includes the names of an imperial officer and a marquis, who were among ten people who came to his house inquiring about what he had seen. "Every one of them was dreadfully frightened by what he heard, and thereupon decided to honor the Dharma" (KAO 1985, 166–71).

A later tale sheds light on the degree to which Chao T'ai's narrative circulated. Ch'eng Tao-hui, a Taoist native of Wu-ch'ang (in modern Hupeh), reportedly died in A.D. 391, but revived after several days. He described being originally bound but later released by ten or more people, who took him along a road with dense brambles on both sides. Sinners were being driven through the brush as a form of punishment. Ch'eng was taken to an audience hall in a large city and was told he had been treated with kindness since he had been a devout Buddhist in a previous life. A magistrate listened to arguments regarding Ch'eng's past deeds. His past-life virtues were considered sufficient, and he was sent on a tour of the hells so that he might inform the living of the nature of Buddhist Dharma. The narrative indicates that "what Ch'eng Tao-hui saw was more or less the same [as Chao T'ai's description]"

(KAO 1985, 173–74), a phrase that suggests that Chao T'ai's story had circulated widely. As Ch'eng's soul returned to his house, he observed familiar people around his neighborhood. After he revived and described his observations, these people corroborated his account (this "corroborative" element, also present in the previously related Taoist tale, coincides with features in some of MOODY's [1975] NDE narratives). These early Chinese Buddhist NDEs, which contain "primary elements," were undoubtedly useful to Buddhist preachers, contributing to their ability to portray clear images of the netherworld.

Both the Hindu *Bhagavadgītā* and early Buddhists believed that a person's condition in the afterworld was determined by the state of mind at the moment of death. This belief gave NDEs special importance as an indication of the soul's eventual home. Through meditation, chanting, and special practices, one could increase the probability of focusing one's mind on a heavenly destination at the moment of death.

Accepting this doctrine, Tao-an 道安 in A.D. 379 assembled seven of his pupils and led them in collectively vowing to seek rebirth in Maitreya's heaven. Legend tells us that "when he died in A.D. 385, a strange priest appeared and pointed to the Northwest, where the clouds opened and a beautiful heaven became visible to his dying eyes" (DE VISSER 1935, 318).

Tao-an's leading disciple, Hui-yüan 慧遠, attracted more than 100 devotees and scholars to his famous monastery at Lu-shan Mountain. Through austere meditative practice and a vow of devotion to Amitābha (Amida) in 402, Hui-yüan and many of his students had NDE-type visions, regarded as precursors to what one could expect at death. One disciple, Liu Ch'eng-chih 劉程之 (354–410), claimed to see the Buddha and the Pure Land on many occasions. Not long before his death, another disciple, Seng-chi 僧濟, had a form of NDE in which, while afflicted with a grave disease, he "saw himself proceed through the void" and "he beheld the Buddha Amitābha." The following night he suddenly stood, seemed to see something, lay down, and stated with a joyful expression on his face, "I must go," after which he died (ZÜRCHER 1959, 221–22).

Another disciple, Hui-yung 慧永, in 414 appeared to see something from his deathbed. When attending monks asked what he saw, he replied, immediately before dying, "The Buddha is coming!" (ZÜRCHER 1959, 222).

The Pure Land Buddhist patriarch T'an-luan 曇鸞 was recruited to Buddhism, in part, as a result of an NDE. T'an-luan (476–542), a Taoist scholar from northern China, recovered from a serious illness when he suddenly saw a golden gate open before him. The experience

led him to search for everlasting life, and, after gathering many Taoist texts, he met the Buddhist monk Bodhiruci 菩提流支, who revealed to him the Pure Land doctrines (ca 530). T'an-luan discarded his Taoist scriptures, which he had gone to great effort to obtain, and devoted his life to spreading the Pure Land religion (CH'EN 1964, 344). It would seem that his NDE led him to focus his attention on specific Buddhist scriptures that depicted the NDE imagery of a deity coming to meet the believer at death (BECKER 1981). T'an-luan was particularly important in modifying Pure Land doctrines in a direction that allowed lay practice, since he advocated chanting in a manner possible for common people.

Tao-ch'o 道綽 (562–645), a Pure Land Buddhist monk who attracted a large following, was also affected by an NDE episode:

At the age of sixty-five, aged and sick, he felt himself to be on his deathbed, and summoned his disciples and many followers to recite the sutras. Thereupon T'an-luan appeared to him, and in a voice heard by all present, commanded that Tao-ch'o must continue to teach people for many years. It is said that flowers fell from heaven, which were carefully preserved by his followers. From that day on, Tao-ch'o became progressively healthier, even regaining another set of teeth, and continued to teach for almost two decades, living to the rare age of eighty-three. (BECKER 1981, 166)

Shan-tao 善導 (613–681), one of Tao-ch'o's followers, ate only small amounts of rice and vegetables, controlled his mind, repeated tens of thousands of mantras, went without sleep for seven days at a time, and accepted the objective reality of visionary experience. He, and later Pure Land Buddhists, devised a form of "replicable experiment" which produced experiences supporting their faith. Through engaging in severe meditation techniques, they increased the probability of having a heavenly NDE and some even caught glimpses of the Pure Land before death.

Shan-tao invoked his monks to record deathbed visions of Pure Land Buddhists, an activity which generated a body of written "evidence" regarding the afterworld. The *Ching-t'u-lun* 淨土論, a document compiled shortly after Tao-ch'o's era, contains twenty NDE accounts, half from monks and half from lay persons.

In at least one case (that of Dharma-master Chu-Hung 祿宏), not only the dying person but all present were said to have seen the body of the Buddha coming from the Pure Land to

welcome the dying monk. . . . In other cases, devout laywomen and laymen described visions of heavenly hosts on their deathbeds. In yet another, a butcher first had a vision of hell, whereupon he was terrified into chanting the name of Amida; he then had a vision of Amida offering him the lotus seat, and passed peacefully away. (BECKER 1984, 60)

The hells described in the Pāli Canon lack systematization; paintings by Chinese artists who visited hell while near death contributed to an eventual formalization of images (TEISER 1988b). For example, Chang Hsiao-shih 張孝師 (ca. late seventh to early eighth centuries), painted hells “thought to have been inspired by the wanderings of his spirit while his body lay near death” (TEISER 1988b, 440). These paintings were judged to be qualitatively better than versions based solely on hearsay. Such images were widely copied, contributing to a degree of consistency, gained by the tenth century, associated with ten kings (TEISER 1988a).

The development of an image of Ti-tsang 地藏 (Kṣitigarbha) bodhisattva is also related to an NDE tale. In the Tun-huang manuscript, *Huan-hun chi* 還魂記 (The Record of a Returned Soul), probably copied in the ninth century, the monk Tao-ming 道明 is summoned to purgatory by mistake, then instructed by Ti-tsang to paint his image correctly, as well as chant his name. The deity vowed to save those who hear his name, see his statue, or meet him personally in hell. Tao-ming was returned to life and produced what became a standardized image of the bodhisattva. Less than a hundred years later, Tao-ming became, within folk belief, the head of the ten kings. In the twelfth century, Tao-ming was believed to act as a compassionate guide for spirits arriving at the netherworld. In this case, a near-death account was instrumental in standardizing a specific iconographic image and, later, in contributing a new personality to hell’s reception committee.

The seventeenth-century *Yü-li* 玉歷 (Jade Register) presents examples of post-medieval Chinese NDEs (CLARKE 1893–94). In one story, occurring between 1662 and 1723, Mr. Mo, a medical practitioner, died, but he returned to consciousness. He reported that the judge in Hell rebuked him for poor medical practice and sentenced him to become an ass. A recording clerk argued for leniency due to Mo’s benevolent motivations. When Mo awoke he found a piece of ass’s skin on his back (CLARKE 1893–94, 179). In another story, Mr. Yang, a hunter, died in 1774, lay unconscious for several days, and woke. He described his stay in Hell, where birds pecked his back. Later, after being beaten by the Ruler, he was set free in order to exhort people not

to kill birds (CLARKE 1893–94, 336–37).

Parallel to the findings of ZALESKI (1987), the Chinese narratives reveal common features (transition phases, guides, authority figures, life reviews, barriers, corroboration, and change of lifestyle following the episode), coupled with many divergences coinciding with the social, didactic needs of the experiencer's era. Although the documentary data (names, locations, witnesses, dates, times, etc.) hint that these accounts originated with actual incidents, many narratives appear shaped by prescriptive requirements, since they stress specific doctrines. The Taoist stories describe heavenly visits, while early Buddhist accounts present detailed descriptions of hells, useful for proselytizing. Pure Land patriarchs focused attention on specific sutras that coincided with NDE imagery, useful for inducing favorable NDEs. Later NDE accounts, from the *Jade Register*, for example, show less concern for hellish topography (visitors are not allowed to take tours); Chinese hells had been systematized by this era and descriptions of images were apparently unnecessary. Although Chinese medieval otherworldly visits reveal consistent tendencies regarding “primary” NDE features, narratives from each era also reflect cultural needs.

MEDIEVAL JAPANESE NDES

The *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記, compiled in the ninth century by the monk Kyōkai 景戒, provides the first written Japanese accounts of NDEs (NAKAMURA 1973). Although some *Nihon ryōiki* narratives provide specific names, dates down to the day and hour, locations, and other information favoring their historicity, many harbor a fantasy quality, following the Chinese motif. At the time of Kyōkai's compilation, the idea of a Pure Land heaven had not gained popular support. Kyōkai borrowed a number of stories from other texts (for example, the stories from Vol. 2, #10 and #19, reviewed below, were taken from the *Ming-pao-chi* 冥報記 (Record of Invisible Work of Karmic Retribution).

Although six narratives describe “hellish” aspects related to NDEs, the earliest account is of a heavenly visit. Lord Ōtomo no Yasunoko no muraji 大部屋栖野古連 revived after being seemingly dead for three days. He described walking on a roadway of colored clouds to a golden mountain where he met the late Prince Regent Shōtoku and a saintly monk. His vision expressed a fusion of Taoist and Buddhist symbols, a motif valuable for early Buddhist proselytizing (NAKAMURA 1973, 111–15; Vol. 1, #5, a tale from the era of Empress Suiko: A.D. 593–628).

The *Nihon ryōiki* also includes the narrative of Kashiwade no omi Hirokuni 膳臣廣國, who died in 705 but revived after four days. He

described two messengers who took him across a golden bridge to a golden palace. He saw his deceased wife and father being tortured. He was allowed to return to life due to his past good deeds. He made images of the Buddha, copied scripture, and made offerings in order to aid his father (NAKAMURA 1973, 143-46; Vol. I, #30).

A youth who ate bird eggs had a vision of a strange soldier who led him through a field. He perceived the field as aflame and ran about shouting "It's hot, it's hot." Although a villager, who did not perceive his vision, caught the boy and pulled him from the area, the youth was found to be severely burned and died the next day (NAKAMURA 1973, 174-75; Vol. II, #10, a tale attributed to the year A.D. 754). The compiler, Kyōkai, comments, "Now we are sure of the existence of hell in this world" (175), a statement indicating confusion regarding Chinese Buddhist ideology.

In another story, Aya no kimi 綾君 failed to help some old people, although his wife rectified the situation. After he died, his spirit asked through a diviner that his corpse not be cremated for seven days. He returned to life after the time elapsed and described seeing a golden palace where his virtuous wife would be reborn. Because of his sins, he was forced to suffer grievous hunger and thirst. Due to specific virtuous deeds, he was allowed to return to the world of the living (NAKAMURA 1973, 182-83; Vol. II, #16, a tale attributed to the reign of Shōmu 聖武, 724-749).

Tokari no ubai 利莉優婆夷, an extremely virtuous woman from Kawachi province, died while she was asleep but returned to life after three days. King Yama had summoned her merely to listen to her recitation of scriptures. She was told that the three men who guided her would meet her again in three days. The event occurred symbolically when three books of scriptures she had copied, which had been stolen, came back into her possession (NAKAMURA 1973, 186-87; Vol. II, #19, a tale attributed to the reign of Shōmu).

Fujiwara no asomi Hirotari 藤原朝臣廣足, living in a mountain temple in Yamato province, died but revived three days later. He described being led by men over a deep river to a many-storied, shining pavilion where he met a king and learned that his wife, who had died in childbirth, was in purgatory. He agreed to copy, expound, and recite sutras so that her torture might end. As he departed he learned that King Yama and the bodhisattva Jizō (Kṣitigarbha) were the same (NAKAMURA 1973, 233-35; Vol. III, #9, a tale attributed to the year 768).

Tanaka no mahito Hiromushime 田中真人廣虫女, a governor's wife who collected debts by force, had a visionary dream in 776. She died

after telling her family that King Yama had admonished her. After seven days she was restored to life, but her body above the waist had turned into an ox. This half person/half animal lived for five days, creating a great deal of embarrassment for the family and astonishment for those witnessing the event (NAKAMURA 1973, 257–59, Vol. III, #26).

Except for the first story, which fuses Buddhist and Taoist symbols, the *Nihon ryōiki* stresses karmic retribution and Buddhist values. Hellish NDEs consistently include transition phases, guides, authority figures, and judgement.

Genshin's 源信 *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集, completed in 984, presents a summary of Buddhist sutras regarding heaven, hell, and the process for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land of Amida (REISCHAUER 1930). The *Ōjōyōshū* clearly describes Yama's hells and its tortures, as well as Amida's golden palaces, bejeweled halls, and green groves. Amida is expected to arrive at the deathbed of believers to transport them to the Pure Land. Even before Genshin's summary could contribute to the propagation of Japanese Pure Land doctrines, Buddhist artists portrayed images that were used as meditative tools for eliciting visions. The famous tapestry at the Taima-dera, probably imported from China in the eighth century, shows images of Amida arriving at a believer's deathbed and transporting him away (OKAZAKI 1977, 52–53).

Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), credited with being the founder of the Jōdō (Pure Land) School of Buddhism in Japan, chanted the name Amida over 70,000 times a day and carefully recorded his visions between 1198 and 1206. He described heavens, hells, and Amida as the merciful individual whose function it is to guide those who seek him. For example, in 1198,

while he was engaged in a special practice of the *Nembutsu* [chanting], a bright light appeared to him, then a body of clear water and finally some blue emerald ground. In the second month of the same year, he saw the so-called jewel-ground, the jewel-pond and the jewel-palace. From that time forward he was continually having visions of the most wonderful things. (COATES and ISHIZUKA 1930, 207)

Hōnen's visions were regarded as equivalent to NDEs since they included detailed descriptions of heavenly components; his visions of jewelled trees, jewelled ground, voices of many birds of variegated plumage, as well as harp and flute music seem commensurate to Christian heavenly streets of gold where angels play harps. It became the custom for Pure Land Buddhists to attempt to stimulate NDEs by setting a statue of Amida by the bed of a dying believer and placing cords at-

tached to the effigy in the patient's hands.

[During Hōnen's last hours] his disciples brought him an image of Amida three feet high, and, as they put it on the right side of his bed, asked him if he could see it. With his finger pointing to the sky, he said, "There is another Buddha here besides this one. Do you not see him?" Then he went on to say, "As a result of the merit of repeating the sacred name, I have, for over ten years past, continually been gazing upon the glory of the Pure Land, and the very forms of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but I have kept it secret and said nothing about it. Now however, as I draw near the end, I disclose it to you." (COATES and ISHIZUKA 1930, 636)

The *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (URY 1979), compiled in 1120 in Japan, contains two Chinese tales which have NDE forms. A monk, Ting-sheng, strongly desired to go to the Lotus-Matrix heaven but failed to keep the precepts. After death, he was sent to the Red Lotus Hell, which he mistook for the Lotus-Matrix World. Rapt in contemplation, he exclaimed, "Homage to the Lotus-Matrix World," a statement which miraculously caused the hell to be transformed into a heaven and Ting-sheng to be returned to life in order to recount what he had observed (60-61). This story is notable in that it fails to include the common NDE features of guides, authority figures, or judgment, yet like Pure Land visions, stresses grace attained through faith. In a second tale, Sun Hsüan-te, from I-an District, made a vow to copy the Wreath Sutra. While hunting, he fell from his horse and died. After a day he returned to life and tearfully repented his sins. He described three officials of the land of the dead who brought him to a great castle where King Yama chastised him for killing animals. He was allowed to return to life in order that he might fulfill his vow of copying the sutra, an action which allowed him to be reborn in the Tuṣita heaven upon death in his eighty-sixth year (61-63).

The *Uji shūi monogatari* 宇治拾遺物語 (MILLS 1970), compiled in the early thirteenth century, contains various Japanese accounts of NDEs. In one story (204-205; 3/13), a minor priest of a temple in Inaba province took responsibility for, and attempted to complete, a wooden statue of Jizō. Unfortunately, he fell ill and died, but he was restored to life after six days. He described being carried off by two demons, but then was released by order of the bodhisattva Jizō. The priest was allowed to return to life in order that he could complete the statue. The *Uji shūi monogatari* also contains a slightly alternate version of the narrative supporting the equivalency of Yama and the bodhisattva Jizō found in

the *Nihon ryōiki*.

The *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書 (URY 1970), completed in 1322, also recounts NDE narratives, generally in concise form. In 941 monk Nichizō, of Kyoto, had an NDE in which he saw both heaven and hells (279–82). In 916 the monk Chikō had an NDE in which he visited hell and was warned regarding his envy of another monk (304–305). Other stories include that of the nun Nyozō who was returned to life by Jizō (327), and of the daughter of the governor of Kaga Province, who was instructed in the netherworld to read two other sutras in addition to the Lotus Sutra (327–28). Monk Myōtatsu was cautioned by informants in the netherworld about the sinfulness of the monks, nuns, and lay adherents in his society (334). Monk Genson gained the ability to recite the entire Lotus Sutra as a result of his NDE (335). Monks Jōshō and Ajō were separately saved by Jizō in different NDEs (335). The monk Enno died, yet revived, only to find that he could not speak for three years. When he regained his faculties, he described the Pure Land, Maitreya's Palace, Yama's hells, and his rescue by six figures of Jizō (335–36).

APPLIED FOLKLORE: CHINESE AND JAPANESE CASES

In general, medieval Chinese and Japanese near-death visits reveal features equivalent to medieval European and modern NDEs. Bridges, paths, or other transition stages, spiritual guides, various barriers, deity figures or judges, great structures or beautiful terrains, and judgmental past-life reviews are often present. This observation supports Hufford's "experiential source" hypothesis, hinting that some narratives originated with actual experiences.

A number of differences exist between visits to hell and Pure Land narratives. Visions of Yama's court coincide, to a degree, with medieval European accounts of purgatory; Pure Land visions are parallel to modern NDE reports. In addition, the Asian hell visitor generally is "out of body" for a far longer time than the Pure Land visionary, whose travel time tends to be equivalent to that of the modern NDEr. As with modern NDEs, Pure Land accounts tend to provide less change of scene, and less activity on the part of the narrator, than hellish accounts. These differences do not refute the experiential source hypothesis, since both forms contain NDE primary features.

The accounts of Pure Land patriarchs suggest, but do not "prove," that religious doctrines evolved in harmony with, and benefited from the existence of, primary features in NDEs. NDEs were instrumental in recruiting the patriarch T'an-luan and, consequently, in determining the specific sutras which were granted most importance in Pure Land

doctrines. Throughout the history of the Pure Land doctrinal development, NDEs provided rhetorical tools for ideological innovation as well as support for established aspects of Buddhist ideology. NDEs aided in propagating the notion of karma, the superiority of Buddhism over Taoism, the prohibition against killing animals, the value of rituals for the dead, and of chanting, statue making, and sutra copying, as well as the equivalency of Yama and Jizō (bolstering the Pure Land notion of salvation through grace). NDEs aided in systematizing doctrines regarding specific personalities and images of heavenly and hellish domains. Individuals separated by great distances and hundreds of years reported proceeding through a transition stage after death, being greeted at death by a being of light assumed to be Yama, Jizō, or Amida, and seeing similar images of Yama's hells or Amida's Pure Land. Just as these equivalencies have led some modern researchers to believe that NDE evidence supports belief in life after death, Pure Land proponents felt visionary reports validated their faith (BECKER 1984).

ZALESKI (1987, 34) noted that arranging European other-worldly visits in chronological order revealed no natural progression, sequence of literary transmission, or causal mechanism. The Chinese and Japanese narratives provide vague patterns of such transmissions and progressions. Early Taoist NDEs were heavenly visits, as was the earliest narrative in the Japanese *Nihon ryōiki*. Early Chinese and Japanese Buddhist accounts, occurring in locations where hellish topography had not been systematized and before the general acceptance of Pure Land doctrines, established clear images of tortures and the nature of karma. Hellish NDEs bolstered the practice of special rituals for the dead. Pure Land NDEs supported belief in grace and special meditative techniques. Later NDE accounts, from the Chinese *Jade Register* (CLARKE 1893-94) or the Japanese *Genkō shakusho*, for example, seem more equivalent to modern NDE narratives, because of their general brevity and simple style. Detailed portrayals of hellish topography were no longer necessary. Chinese and Japanese accounts show a general progression explained by changing social needs. These observations illustrate the intrusion of cultural factors within NDE accounts, perhaps even at the level of memorates, since some reports, especially from Pure Land Buddhists, were apparently transcribed soon after their incidence.

Social factors probably contributed to selective survival of NDE tales. Medieval Chinese and Japanese accounts that fit the needs of Buddhist preachers undoubtedly outlasted tales that were not useful for didactic purposes. It is possible that a variety of NDE events occurred during all eras and in all societies, and that social selection and shaping determined which gained inscription. A cultural source theorist might

argue that Pure Land patriarchs were selective in the NDEs they recorded, causing only those containing primary features to be inscribed. We have no way of determining the extent that this occurred, since we cannot take a random sample of medieval citizens and interview them regarding anomalous experiences. The argument that NDEs contain primary features is based on modern surveys; although the available folklore evidence supports the assumption that early religious leaders were faced with reports containing similar features, we cannot be certain about the degree of selective inscription. By itself, the medieval folklore data does not "prove" the experiential source hypothesis; we must depend on modern surveys to support the argument that primary features exist within NDE accounts.

A modified, and weakened, version of the cultural source theory, based on the revised Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, would note that all experiences, stored in the respondent's memory, are shaped by the categorization system specific to the culture. It may be that NDE primary features are a universally shared feature of the subconscious mind (Zaleski's "universal laws of symbolic experience"). Even though cultural factors may be instrumental in determining the final form of transcribed NDEs, these "universal laws" seemingly create an impetus toward cross-cultural ideological convergence.

The relationship between primary features and parallel ideological innovation is not always obvious. Early Buddhist scriptures contain passages illustrating NDE primary features, supporting belief in life immediately after death, guides who lead experiencers through transition areas, and a deity figure who administers judgment. NDE primary features may have influenced Buddhist doctrinal development at a very early stage. Later Asian NDEs supported belief in karma, the sanctity of animals, and the value of specific scriptures, doctrines divergent from European creeds. NDEs spawned convergence to the extent that they supplied rhetorical tools, harboring primary features, for some religious groups, but not others. Pure Land doctrines evolved, in part, as a reflection of the hidden structure of the experience itself, since only specific sutras were applicable to the NDE framework. European preachers gained equivalent benefits from using NDEs as a rhetorical device. Although cultural diffusion may have played a role in the development of parallel images of the netherworld, the use of NDEs for ideological change strengthened both Christian and Buddhist sermonizing in a manner supporting equivalent afterlife images.

CONCLUSION

Chinese and Japanese NDE narratives served the didactic needs of the

eras in which they occurred. Although the final forms of medieval otherworld accounts reveal traits associated with narrative imagination, the common features within these stories lend support to Hufford's experiential source hypothesis. In all probability, actual episodes were a source of tales selected and shaped to meet prescriptive requirements.

Because early sutras presented guidelines portraying primary NDE features, we cannot preclude cultural diffusion as an explanation for commonalities within later accounts. The experiential source theory and diffusion model are not mutually exclusive. We might hypothesize that the primary features inherent within NDEs contributed to the diffusion of specific Buddhist ideologies, such as Pure Land, rather than other doctrines.

Cultural source theorists might argue that similarities within Asian and European medieval social structures produced correspondences in anomalous experiences. The evidence presented within this study is not definitive enough to refute this argument, although it would seem that this process could occur contiguously with the "experiential source" mechanism. Previously published studies indicate that various anomalous experiences, gathered from highly divergent cultures, harbor equivalent primary features (McCLENON 1988, 1990).

Although the narratives reviewed within this study do not fully "prove" the experiential source theory, they tend to support it. It should be regarded as an adjunct to previously devised explanations explaining the convergences of Christian, Moslem, and Buddhist ideologies pertaining to heavens and hells. NDEs seemingly contributed to the diffusion of specific doctrines, since they provided rhetorical tools for some ideologies, but not all. This theory has important implications within religious history, since it suggests that NDEs have contributed to convergences within religious ideologies.

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