

Good Begets Good: Buddhist Apologies for Merit in Medieval China, ca. 580

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As received records of the contestation between Buddhism and Chinese indigenous teachings during the formative period of Chinese Buddhism, Buddhist apologetic literature compiled in medieval China has often served scholarly communities as a repository of historical facts. This study instead brings into focus the political context and rhetorical strategies of Buddhist apologetics through the hitherto understudied case of the anti-Buddhist dismissal of merit. In sixth-century China, Buddhist proponents frequently encountered skeptics calling the karmic theory of merit a hoax. Although the skeptics did not articulate their reasons, the Buddhists responded to them with carefully crafted defenses of merit. By analyzing a few representative examples of those asymmetrical exchanges, this study sheds light on the significance of seemingly flippant utterances in the formation of Buddhist apologetic stances on crucial soteriological and ethical issues. As the dismissal of merit was part of a concerted attack on Buddhist teachings at large, the Buddhist counterargument defined the soteriological notion of merit as moral causality universally applicable beyond religious denominations, calling for unconditional belief in the workings of merit.

Keywords: Buddhist apologetics, anti-Buddhist polemics, Northern Zhou, *Guang hongming ji*, *Yanshi jiaxun*, merit

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist notion of merit, at first glance, looks elegantly simple: salvific currency one can reap from good Buddhist work. It encourages Buddhists, both lay and cleric, to do good deeds out of good intention while assuring they will be recompensed accordingly. Despite this straightforwardness of the notion itself, the precise mechanism

that enables merit to operate is not easy to comprehend. What sort of Buddhist work is counted good enough to gain merit? In what manner should such meritorious work be done? What benefits does merit bring? How can one know whether one has earned a sufficient amount of merit to receive benefits? To answer some of these questions, Buddhist doctrine often uses agricultural metaphors. Merit works like seeds sown on a field. Any seeds have potential to germinate once planted. Observation of Buddhist precepts and moral codes or any charity work would yield merit. But seeds grow more fruitful on a fertile field. The most fecund one, the explanation goes, is the monastic community. Sending them material gifts, whether to support monastic members or to be re-distributed via the monastery, including contributing to monastery construction, providing vegetarian feasts, and sponsoring rituals, is deemed the most effective way of earning merit. Merit can be stored or transferred to and shared with others for receiving benefits such as immediate well-being and good fortune in this life, better rebirths for the next, and eventual liberation from such cyclic existence. The notion of merit, in other words, links the theory of karma with the practice of pure giving (*dāna*). At the same time, it serves practical purposes, justifying any devotional and liturgical activities officiated by clerics, and, thereby, sustaining the sangha.¹ Were the Buddhist religion a mechanical clock, merit would be its impulse. While its continuous release from the escapement keeps the clock ticking, interference in that process may stop the clock.

This article explores what medieval Chinese Buddhists perceived as attempts of such interference and their reaction to those perceived attempts. It has been aptly acknowledged that the soteriology of merit was conducive to the formation of Chinese Buddhism and its material

1. The centrality of merit to the Buddhist doctrine and practice has been so widely acknowledged that it would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list of all the scholarly titles. I list only a few recent English works on which my summary here is directly based: Wendi L. Adamek, "The Impossibility of the Given: Representations of Merit and Emptiness in Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 45, no. 2 (2005): 135–180; Jamie Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 155–62; John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 157–219; Reiko Ohnuma, "Gift," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 103–23.

culture.² The story of merit's success on Chinese soil, however, has led scholarly discourse to pay little attention to the negative reception of the Buddhist soteriology of merit in China. In that regard, John Kieschnick's seminal study is an exception. He astutely observes that the Chinese literati outside Buddhist communities sometimes expressed misgivings about the doctrine of merit due to its materialistic concerns and mechanical application. Yet, his keen observation, based on late Tang and Song sources, leads to the concessive conclusion that even the fiercest assailants of Buddhism rarely took aim at the notion of merit *per se*.³ This deliberation makes sense in light of the extant records of the criticisms of Buddhism from medieval China. There is no evident sign of systematic critiques on the theory of merit, for instance, in the *Collection of Propagation and Illumination of Buddhism* (*Hongming ji* 弘明集, ca. 515) by Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518) and its expanded sequel (*Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集, ca. 664) by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), two of the most notable compilations of the exchanges between Buddhists and their opponents in medieval China. Records compiled in these collections suggest that the most pressing issues for the Buddhist Chinese literati were either metaphysical or socio-political, such as the immortality of the spirit and the monastic exemption from obeisance to rulers and parents.⁴ This standard account, however,

2. Walter Liebenthal, "Chinese Buddhism during the 4th and 5th Centuries," *Monumenta Nipponica* 11, no. 1 (1955): 54; Robert H. Sharf, "Introduction: Prolegomenon to the Study of Japanese Buddhist Icons," in *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 2; Kieschnick, *Material Culture*, 157.

3. Kieschnick, *Material Culture*, 194–98.

4. Much scholarship has been devoted to these two subjects. In the interest of space here, I list only a few representative English studies. For the immortality of the spirit, see Walter Liebenthal, "The Immortality of the Soul in Chinese Thought," *Monumenta Nipponica* 8, nos. 1–2 (1952): 327–397; W. Pachow, "The Controversy Over the Immortality of the Soul in Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 (1978): 21–38; Whalen W. Lai, "Beyond the Debate on 'the Immortality of the Soul': Recovering an Essay by Shen Yüeh," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 19 (1981): 138–157; Ming-Wood Liu, "Fan Chen's 'Treatise on the Destructibility of the Spirit' and Its Buddhist Critics," *Philosophy East and West* 37, no. 4 (1987): 402–428; Jungnok Park, *How Buddhism Acquired a Soul on the Way to China* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012); Michael Radich, "Ideas about 'Consciousness' in Fifth and Sixth Century Chinese Buddhist

leaves out a somewhat aberrant phenomenon that these compilations do contain what appears to be Buddhist defenses of the karmic theory of merit, together with the critics' occasional remarks calling merit futile or even deceptive. The Buddhists could have easily disregarded these dismissive but passing comments, but they instead went to some lengths to offer expositions of merit. Why?

This article seeks to make a modest contribution to the study of medieval Chinese Buddhism by exploring the hermeneutical significance of a minor fault-finding in the formulation of Buddhist apologetic position. In what follows, I examine a few examples of the Buddhist writings that illustrate the context in which Buddhists felt the urgency to defend the karmic workings of merit. Those examples indicate that the dismissal of merit figured prominently in the charges that situated Buddhist monasticism at odds with the interests of the imperial court and even led to proposals to launch anti-Buddhist campaigns. This political gravity, I argue, prompted Buddhist proponents to explain the workings of merit further than that readily available in Buddhist scriptural sources. The first part of this article takes a close look at the way that skepticism of merit underpinned hostility to Buddhism. The second part examines Buddhist responses to such anti-Buddhist polemics. To conclude, I briefly discuss the significance of this case study in light of the nature of medieval China's Buddhist apologetics.

Debates on the Survival of Death by the Spirit, and the Chinese Background to **Amalavijñāna*,” in *A Distant Mirror: Articulating Indic Ideas in Sixth and Seventh Century Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Chen-kuo Lin and Michael Radich (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2014), 471–512; idem, “A ‘Prehistory’ to Chinese Debates on the Survival of Death by the Spirit, with a Focus on the Term *shishen* 識神/*shenshi* 神識,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 44, no. 2 (2016): 105–126. For the monastic exemption from obeisance to rulers and parents, see Leon N. Hurvitz, “‘Render unto Caesar’ in Early Chinese Buddhism: Hui-yüan’s Treatise on the Exemption of the Buddhist Clergy from the Requirements of Civil Etiquette,” *Sino-Indian Studies* 5, no.3–4 (1957): 80–114; Eric R. Reinders, “Buddhist Rituals of Obeisance and the Contestation of the Monk’s Body in Medieval China” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997); Thomas Jülch, “On Whether or Not Buddhist Monks Should Bow to the Emperor: Yancong’s (557–610) ‘Futian Lun’ (Treatise on the Fields of Blessedness),” *Monumenta Serica* 60 (2012): 1–43.

MERIT AS DECEIT: SKEPTICAL VIEWS

In his *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan* (*Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓, ca. 590), Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–590s), a southern literatus who served the Northern Qi (550–577), encourages his children to study Buddhist teachings along with Confucian classics, for he considers the two learnings mutually complementary.⁵ Concerned that the children are too young to appreciate the profundity of Buddhism, Yan explains its essentials by way of rebutting five points of the common criticism of Buddhism. His summary of the five critical points is worth citing in full because it represents what was thought to be a typical criticism of Buddhism in the late sixth century.

Common criticism of Buddhism can be summarized into five points. First, [the critics of Buddhism] think the other-worldly matters and unbounded divine transformation are preposterous. Second, as fortune and misfortune, calamities and blessings have not yet been realized in the form of karmic responses, [they] regard [Buddhism] as deceitful. Third, [they] dismiss monks and nuns as nefarious because they do not have pure intention in practicing [Buddhism]. Fourth, [they] consider [Buddhism] to be harmful to the state as [Buddhism] wastes gold and treasures and curtails corvée labor. Fifth, even though the [Buddhist] principle of causes and conditions works for goodness and wickedness to be requited, [the critics] question, “How come one who toils today becomes another to receive benefits in next lifetime? They are two different persons.”⁶

5. As the *Yanshi jiaxun* is arranged by topic, most of the existing studies on the text are also topical. See, for example, Albert E. Dien, “Instructions for the Grave: The Case of Yan Zhitui,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 8 (1995): 41–58; idem, “A Sixth-Century Father’s Advice on Literature: Comments on Chapter Nine of ‘Yanshi jiaxun,’” *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 13, no. 1 (2000): 65–82; Mark Edward Lewis, “Writing the World in the Family Instructions of the Yan Clan,” *Early Medieval China* 13–14, no. 1 (2007); Jack W. Chen, “On the Act and Representation of Reading in Medieval China,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 1 (2009): 57–71. For English translation, see Teng Ssu-yü, *Family Instructions for the Yen Clan, Yen-Shih chia-hsün* 顏氏家訓 by Yen Chih-T’ui 顏之推: *An Annotated Translation with Introduction* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968). For a new translation, Xiaofei Tian, trans., *Family Instructions for the Yan Clan and Other Works by Yan Zhitui (531–590s)* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2021).

6. Yan Zhitui 顏之推, *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解, annotated by Wang Liqi 王利器 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 5:342. I consulted Teng’s 1968 translation but only selectively followed it. Teng, *Family Instructions*, 139.

Taken together, these five points suggest the criticism of Buddhism was built on skepticism about the karmic workings of merit, or “blessings” (*fu* 福) in Yan’s wording: while Buddhism tends to speak of mysterious and otherworldly affairs, what it says is tenuous, for the good or bad karmic results it preaches have not yet come to pass; monastics promote the idea of such otherworldly rewards since they have ulterior motives to wallow in material gifts from lay donors who buy into that idea; as the notion of afterlife rewards is groundless, such donation to the monastery is a waste of precious resources that only serves to lure into monasticism those who want to avoid corvée labor; and even if the idea of karmic rewards is true, it is pointless if, as Buddhism claims, you earn a reward this life and enjoy it next life. Yan’s iteration points to the anti-Buddhist conception that the false notion of merit is behind Buddhism’s wrongdoings.

This skepticism, at least twice removed from what the detractors of Buddhism in sixth-century China actually said, may seem to owe more to my reading than to Yan’s writing. Yet, other records also similarly betray the suspicion that Buddhism was abusing the notion of merit. The decree issued in 577 by Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou (r. 560–578) offers a case in point.⁷ In denouncing Buddhist material culture with an advance notice of anti-Buddhist campaigns, the emperor singled out the notion of merit. “Buddhists adorn pictures and *stūpas* magnificently, hoping for excessive merit. But pictures and *stūpas* are inanimate—how could they bestow such kindness? The gullible are deluded by such beliefs and exhaust their valuable possessions in donations, which the monastics are only too ready to extract.”⁸ This assertion that Buddhist scriptures spoke about merit only for Buddhist clerics to swindle trusting lay followers is not a direct attack on the soteriology of merit in itself. But it was the notion of merit that the

7. For the anti-Buddhist suppressions during the reign of Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou, see Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, “Hokugi Taibutei no haibutsu kishaku 北魏太武帝の廢佛毀釋,” *Shina bukkyō shigaku* 支那佛教史學 1, no. 4 (1937): 104–122; idem, “Hokushū no haibutsu ni tsuite 北周の廢佛に就いて,” *Tōhō gaku* 東方學報 16 (1948): 29–101; idem, “Chūgoku no haibutsu to kōbutsu 中國の廢佛と興佛,” *Zen kenkyūjo kiyō* 禪研究所紀要 8 (1979): 129–145; Shi Longdu, “Buddhism and the State in Medieval China: Case Studies of Three Persecutions of Buddhism, 444–846” (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2016), 121–125.

8. T. 2103, 52:153b4–8.

emperor used to inculcate the Buddhist monastic community as a whole.

These late sixth-century examples suggest that the dismissal of merit was a way station to condemnation of the Buddhist religion writ large. While the detractors did not spell out why they thought the notion of merit was invalid, this polemical strategy had precedents. Noteworthy is the case of Xun Ji 荀濟 (d. 547), a former associate of Emperor Wu of Liang (r. 502–549) and vocal critic of the emperor's ardent devotion to Buddhism. Even though Daoxuan, who collected Xun's anti-Buddhist writings, described him not so much critical of Buddhism as resentful of the emperor, Xun linked the karmic notion of merit with the nefarious dealings in which he asserted Buddhist monastics were engaging to usurp upon imperial sovereignty.⁹

... Fourth, they (Buddhist clerics) receive money in exchange for the futile effects of the five kinds of blessing granted by the heavenly hall. This is to divest the ruler of his authority to bestow virtuous rewards. Fifth, they collect bail money and sureties in advance on the pretext of remitting the six extremes of retribution in hell. This is to divest the monarch of his authority to decide punitive measures.¹⁰

Anyone familiar with Buddhist soteriology would instantly recognize that this excerpt is targeting the Buddhist practice of generating merit. As per the theory of merit, a good amount of accumulated merit helps one to avoid descending into the three lower realms and to earn a spot in one of the upper realms for next lifetime. In this passage, Xun trivializes this generation of merit as monastics' pursuit of pecuniary interests while calling the operation of merit futile. This dismissal of merit itself may have been derived from the long-standing controversy over the immortality of the spirit as the agent of transmigration of rebirth.¹¹ That said, Xun pushed this age-old polemic further to compare the monastic mediation of merit to the monarchical prerogative of commendation and punishment, thereby portraying Buddhist monasticism as a threat to the imperial authority.

This anti-Buddhist polemic trading on the skepticism of merit continued in the early seventh century, when Fu Yi 傅奕 (555–639),

9. T. 2103, 52:130c6–8.

10. T. 2103, 52:130c11–13.

11. Radich, "Ideas about Consciousness," 471. For scholarship on the controversy over the immortality of the spirit, see above, n. 4.

one of the most virulent anti-Buddhists in Chinese history, proposed a wholesale abolition of Buddhism.¹² Although the Tang imperial court did not adopt his proposals, it was conventional disbelief in merit that informed his criticism of Buddhism. His memorial to the throne in 621 faulted Buddhist monasteries for having amassed wealth and maintained armies of monastic recruits, implying that Buddhist monasticism harmed the imperial treasury and military forces.¹³ To buttress this claim, Fu associated the affluence and manpower of Buddhist monasteries with the notion of merit and used that association as a testament to Buddhism's pernicious impacts on state governance.¹⁴ As in Xun's case from the early sixth century, the skepticism of merit still continued to underlie the condemnation of Buddhism in the early

12. On Fu Yi, see Ogasawara Senshū 小笠原宣秀, "Tō no haibutsu ronsha Fu Eki ni tsuite 唐の排仏論者傅奕について," *Shina Bukkyō shigaku* 支那佛教史學 1, no. 3 (1937): 84–93; Arthur F. Wright, "Fu I and the Rejection of Buddhism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 1 (1951): 33–47. For the significance of his anti-Buddhist memorials in understanding early Tang religious policies and interreligious court debates, see Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 215–16; Tang Yongtong 汤用彤, *Sui Tang fojiao shikao* 隋唐佛教史稿 (repr., Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2008), 8–12; Reinders, "Buddhist Rituals of Obeisance," 90–96; Kang Moon-ho 姜文皓, "Pu Hyōk ūi paebullon gwa tangch'o ūi pulgyo chōngch'aek 傅奕 排佛論 唐初," *Shilla munhwa* 30 (2007), 273–300; Marc S. Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 58–65.

13. "Calling for the Abolition of the Buddha's Law (*Qing fei fofa biao* 請廢佛法表)," *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文, comp. Dong Gao 董誥 (1740–1818), fasc. 133 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 1345–46. This memorial also survives in Buddhist compilations under a different title: "Eleven Points for the Demolition of Monasteries and Stūpas and Abolition of Monasticism (*Jiansheng sita fei sengni shi shiyouyitiao* 減省寺塔廢僧尼事十有一條)." See *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集, comp. Daoxuan, T. 2103, 52: 160a19–c20.

14. For overview of the relationship between state and the Buddhist church in medieval China, see Thomas Jülch, "Introduction," in *The Middle Kingdom and the Dharma Wheel: Aspects of the Relationship between the Buddhist Saṃgha and the State in Chinese History*, ed. Thomas Jülch (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–17. Also see Jinhua Chen, "A Complicated Figure with Complex Relationships: The Monk Huifan and Early Tang Saṃgha-State Interactions," in *The Middle Kingdom and the Dharma Wheel: Aspects of the Relationship between the Buddhist Saṃgha and the State in Chinese History*, ed. Thomas Jülch (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 140–221.

seventh century. By saying the Buddha “deceptively spoke about the merit of monastic construction and ordinary people believe it,” Fu simply reclaimed the stock expression.¹⁵

Garnered from different moments in the history of anti-Buddhism in medieval China, these four instances suggest that the Buddhists considered the skepticism of merit to be undermining the foundation of Buddhism. Xun’s criticism, for instance, implies that the skeptics call merit invalid because they disbelieved the karmic theory of transmigration of rebirth. It is questionable whether such polemic actually weighed in the implementation of anti-Buddhist policies because these records of anti-Buddhist writings and Buddhist responses do not survive outside the Buddhist collections. After all, it was the Buddhists who preserved these anti-Buddhist writings. That means this skepticism of merit mattered more to the Buddhists than their opponents. The next section examines how the Buddhists explained the workings of merit in response to such anti-Buddhism.

UNIVERSALIZING MERIT: BUDDHIST APOLOGETIC EXPOSITION

It has been well noted that since the earliest extant examples of Buddhist apologetic literature from the fourth century, Chinese Buddhist apologists often argued for the compatibility of Buddhism and the indigenous teachings. Episodic history of High Antiquity and indigenous classical literature frequently served as the source of evidence for that argument.¹⁶ In response to the skepticism of merit, the Buddhist proponents turned to the same strategy. This time, however, they sought to prove not simply the compatibility of the foreign religion and Chinese traditions but also universal applicability of the Buddhist notion of merit beyond religious and cultural denominations.

The memorial submitted by a lay Buddhist Wang Mingguang 王明廣 (dates unknown) to Emperor Xuan of Northern Zhou 北周宣帝 (r. 578–579) showcases the way the Buddhists advanced this apologetic position. The primary purpose of the memorial was to exhort the emperor to lift the anti-Buddhist campaigns implemented by his predecessor, Emperor Wu. Wang’s memorial was not an immediate

15. T. 2103, 52: 134c4–5.

16. John P. Keenan, *How Master Mou Removes Our Doubts: A Reader-Response Study and Translation of the Mou-tzu Li-huo lun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 8–10.

response to Emperor Wu's decree and did not refer to specific critics. Nevertheless, part of the memorial proceeds as if it were to mitigate the blame on merit:

Stūpas and monasteries in the Qi and Liang dynasties have just initiated the causation of meritorious virtues. How can one request the providence of karmic recompense [already]? Zengzi 曾子 said, “[If] one cherishes goodness, even though blessings have not arrived yet, calamities go away. [If] one commits evil, even though calamities have not arrived yet, blessings go away.” Baopuzi 抱朴子 said, “The wise do not necessarily live long, and the silly do not necessarily die young. Goodness may not lead to immediate blessings, and evil may not result in calamities.” How can one ask for instant effects at hand and give up on tremendous tokens from afar?¹⁷

The rhetorical questions in this passage suggest two perspectives on merit. One is the anti-Buddhist construal that Buddhist meritorious projects do not bring merit as promised. The other is the Buddhist reception that such anti-Buddhist denial of merit is a hasty conclusion. To prove the Buddhist point, Wang cites the Confucian and Daoist texts and relativizes blessings and calamities: while the lack of calamities is another form of blessings, it may take time for such moral consequences to transpire fully, and therefore, the absence of immediate blessings should not deter the exercise of good deeds because goodness dispels calamities at least. By making reference to the Confucian and Daoist texts, Wang relates the Buddhist notion of merit to a broader basis of moral causality than Buddhist doctrinal technicalities and cautions against the nearsighted construal of the seeming lack of immediate rewards as a sign of the futility of good actions. This moral exposition, in short, holds that the lack of immediate merit should not be considered the inefficacy of merit.

Wang pushes this moral position further. He compares the Buddhist practice of making merit with Chinese imperial rituals, pointing out that the non-Buddhist rituals also failed to bring about promised benefits. This *tu quoque* defense alone may look like an informal fallacy from the viewpoint of modern logic. In Wang's memorial, however, it is part of the strategy of applying the notion of merit more broadly than the Buddhist merit practice.

17. T. 2103, 52: 157b17–21.

Long ago when Emperor Yao ruled in accordance with the norms of Heaven, Heaven brought a disaster of inundation. When Zhou instated the rites of the Ancestral Shrine, the Shrine did not have the power to bring rain. Let's say *stūpas* do not return merit but harm. Then we can also say the Imperial Ancestral Shrine is good for nothing, [for] it has ceased to display correlative responses. Fathoming the afterlife fate, one will realize that the grace of the Imperial Ancestral Shrine is also likely to be impoverished. Why should monastic halls and *stūpas* alone be able to help out?¹⁸ [...] The earthen dragon cannot invoke rain, but people still venerate it to seek for blessings. Although the clay Buddha does not speak a word, how cannot the devotees receive any evidential signs?¹⁹

Although mentioning the same failure of the Chinese ritual practices as that of the Buddhist merit practice, Wang does not seek to blame the former. He rather explains that while the divine power waxes and wanes, beneficial effects from ritual performance may appear in a way that only the devotee can detect, and therefore, the devotee continues to make offerings irrespective of outward manifestations of blessings. By referencing Chinese indigenous texts and ritual practices, he compares the generation of merit to sacrificial offerings, which ought to be done whether they bring good fortune or not. This comparison situates both ritual observances and Buddhist merit practice under the same category of morally good actions, laying the basis for Wang's point that the inscrutability of moral causality should not deter one from conducting good actions. In this manner, Wang reframes the issue of the karmic workings of merit in terms of moral causality without resorting to the technicalities of Buddhist soteriology.

Wang's emphasis on the inscrutability of universal moral causality echoes the contemporaneous Buddhist apologetic position in the late sixth century. In his *Treatise on the Two Teachings* (*Erjiao lun* 二教論), for instance, Dao'an 道安 (fl. 557–581) also underscored the unfathomable nature of moral causality in karmic terms. He explains that good or evil actions done in past lifetimes resonate in the present and in countless future lifetimes.²⁰ Misfortune, according to him, may follow good deeds due to evil deeds in unknowable previous lifetimes, and

18. T. 2103, 52: 157c21–25.

19. T. 2103, 52: 158a24–25.

20. On the *Erjiao lun*, see Catherine Despeux, “La culture lettrée au service d'un plaidoyer pour le bouddhisme: le «Traité des deux doctrines» («Erjiao lun») de

good fortune may follow evil deeds thanks to good deeds in previous lifetimes. Hence, he argues, ordinary people cannot fully comprehend the causal workings of actions because karmic consequences accrue in accordance with the accumulation of actions done in innumerable previous lifetimes.²¹ He sheds light on this unknowability by stating concisely that “the karma in the present life has not ripened yet but the ones from the previous lives have already responded.”²² Unlike Wang, who turned to Chinese indigenous classics, Dao’an drew straight on a genealogy within Chinese Buddhist apologetic literature, exemplified by Lushan Huiyuan’s (廬山慧遠, 334–416) expositions on karmic consequences and the three lifetimes, that is, innumerable karmic retribution from countless past lifetimes may come true in countless future lifetimes.²³

In the final analysis, the karmic theory of merit was a matter of faith, not of reason, as Huiyuan of Jingying Monastery (淨影寺慧遠, 523–592), a Mahāyāna exponent, noted, “The belief in the rewards of generous giving is part of being on the correct path of cultivation.”²⁴ The emphasis on the enigmatic nature of karmic causality helped the Buddhist writers to call for unconditional belief in merit. In his family instruction, urging his children to embrace the Buddhist religion, Yan Zhitui made the same rhetorical choice:

Sometimes when devotion was not sincere enough, karmic causality may not have been fulfilled yet. Even though it may appear to be postponed, due consequences will come eventually. Good or evil conducts are to be responded with calamities or blessings. The Nine Schools and the Hundred Masters all agree on this theory. Why should the Buddhist scriptures alone be deemed untrue and preposterous? Take for example the untimely death of Xiang Tuo 項橐 and Yan Hui 顏回 and the destitution of Bo Yi 伯夷 and Yuan Xian 原憲,

Dao’an),” in *Bouddhisme et lettrés dans la Chine médiévale*, ed. Catherine Despeux (Paris: Peeters, 2002), 145–228.

21. Dao’an 道安, “Erjiao lun 二教論,” T. 2103, 52: 142b19–c13.

22. T. 2103, 52: 142b26–27.

23. For studies on the *Sanbao lun* 三報論 and the *Baoying lun* 報應論, see Walter Liebenthal, “Shih Hui-yüan’s Buddhism as Set Forth in His Writings,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 70, no. 4 (1950): 243–259; Guo Hong Yue, “Rebirth and Karmic Retribution in Fifth-Century China: A Study of the Teachings of the Buddhist Monk Lu Shan Huiyuan” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2007).

24. Adamek, “The Impossibility of the Given,” 145.

the blissful longevity of Zhi the Robber 盜跖 and Zhuang Qiao 莊蹻 and the wealth and power of Qi Jing 齊景 and Huan Tui 桓魋. If their previous karmic actions and ensuing lifetimes are weighed, all of these will hold up. If you did good deeds but encountered calamitous consequences or did evil deeds but received portents of blessings, you may feel resentful and regard [Buddhism] deceitful. If so, sayings of Yao and Shun should be also untrue, and teachings of Duke of Zhou and Confucius should be also false. Then, what would you believe as guiding principles to establish yourself in society?²⁵

It is surely a universal moral conundrum why virtuous people sometimes suffer from hardship and misfortunes while vicious ones benefit from wealth and longevity. The above passage adumbrates the Buddhist stance on this issue. That is, the Buddhist notion of merit is not different from the principle of moral causality, and, therefore, anyone should abide by it even though its operation may not be readily comprehensible.

On the whole, the above instances suggest that the Buddhist writers construed the skepticism of merit to be a myopic view of moral causality. In their responses, the Buddhists recast the Buddhist concept of karmic rewards into universal moral causality, capitalizing on its incomprehensible nature. This formulation drew on Chinese indigenous classics, as well as the Chinese Buddhist exegetical genealogy. The emphasis on the inscrutability of moral causality, however, led the Buddhists to leave unexplained the question of the transmigration of rebirth, which fueled the skepticism of merit. To the eyes of critics, this move might have seemed to reduce the issue of the integrity of Buddhist soteriology to the matter of belief. Although it was intended to counter the criticism hurled by those outside the Buddhist communities, this call for belief in karmic rewards could exert its persuasive power only on those who had already embraced the notion. In that light, it is not surprising that even though the Buddhists formulated a consistent answer, the opponents of Buddhism continued to disbelieve the efficacy of merit.

The apologetic exposition of merit took a leap a few decades later when the renowned Falin 法琳 (572–640) explained the workings of merit with the monetary metaphor.²⁶ In his *Dispelling Vices* (*Poxie*

25. *Yanshi jiaxun jijie*, 5:354–55.

26. For Falin, see Thomas Jülch, *Die apologetischen Schriften des buddhistischen Tang-Mönchs Falin: With an English Summary* (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag,

lun 破邪論), intended to refute Fu Yi's anti-Buddhist theses, Falin championed the intelligibility of merit, saying, "When you give away your possessions to the Buddha and monks for their meals, *stūpas*, and monastic buildings, even one coin (*qian* 錢) yields twenty-four-thousand-fold. However small deeds are, the reward will be immense."²⁷ Falin's succinct defense of merit differs from the previous strategy in three respects. Unlike his predecessors underscoring the inscrutability of merit, Falin puts merit in quantifiable terms and makes it easy to grasp. By linking merit with specific material activities, rather than the abstract notion of universal morality, he also makes merit as easy to acquire. More importantly, Falin fends off, more effectively than before, the anti-Buddhist criticism that the notion of merit is for monastics to swindle lay donors out of their properties. If merit returns at an exponential rate, as claimed, donors, then, need not give away a fortune, and monastics in turn cannot receive a fortune from them. It was the materialistic orientation of the merit practice that made the notion of merit look deceptive to the skeptics. Yet Falin turned the table on those skeptics by presenting merit as an attractive soteriological investment.²⁸

CONCLUSION

This study takes a close look at the context in which the detractors of Buddhism in medieval China called merit a hoax and the way the proponents of Buddhism explained the workings of merit in response. Except the case of Fu Yi and Falin, each example in question, whether dismissive or defensive of merit, is not immediately interrelated. Nevertheless, when put in the form of dialogue, these examples betray the awareness, shared by both sides, that part of the Buddhist soteriology of merit remains unexplained. The cases above illustrate the

2011); idem, "In Defense of the Saṃgha: The Buddhist Apologetic Mission of the Early Tang Monk Falin," in *The Middle Kingdom and the Dharma Wheel: Aspects of the Relationship between the Buddhist Saṃgha and the State in Chinese History*, ed. Thomas Jülch (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 22–23; Wong Chi-hang, "A Study of the Life and Thought of Falin: A Great Buddhist Defender in China" (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 2016).

27. T. 2109, 52: 478a12–14.

28. For the later development of the merit practice in late imperial China, see Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

exegetical aspect of Buddhist apologetic literature in which external criticisms prompted Buddhist exponents to enunciate the essentials of Buddhist soteriology without resorting to scholastic technicalities of the Buddhist doctrine.

The karmic theory of merit itself was not the primary target of anti-Buddhist criticism. However, disagreement over the workings of merit existed between opponents and proponents of Buddhism. These sporadic episodes call for reflection on how to read apologetic literature of medieval China. Existing studies have used Buddhist apologetic writings as a repository of evidence of cultural conflict between the Buddhist religion and indigenous Chinese traditions under the assumption that certain properties of the two were inherently incompatible, and therefore, Buddhism had to transform in order to fit in with the Chinese culture and value system.²⁹ As a result, medieval apologetic works, penned from the Buddhist perspective, have served modern scholars for the purpose of identifying the elements of Buddhist doctrines and practices that do not conform to Chinese mores.³⁰ In contrast, the dispute over merit, as examined above, was not simply caused by the intrinsic differences between Buddhism and Chinese culture, but rather motivated by different political agendas. The critics dismissed merit in order to discredit Buddhist teachings as a whole, and therefore the Chinese Buddhists took such dismissal seriously and engaged it. This case suggests that Buddhist apologetic

29. In the interest of space, I list a few seminal works published in English. See Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, "Anti-Buddhist Propaganda during the Nan-Ch'ao," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15, nos. 1-2 (1952): 166-192; idem, "On Some Factors Responsible for the Antibuddhist Persecution under the Pei-Ch'ao," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17, nos. 1-2 (1954): 261-273; Liebethal, "Chinese Buddhism during the 4th and 5th Centuries"; Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

30. The essentialist assumption of this explicatory model has been subject to rigorous critique. For example, see Gregory Schopen, "Filial Piety and the Monk in the Practice of Indian Buddhism: A Question of 'Sinicization' Viewed from the Other Side," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 70 (1984): 110-26; Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Robert Ford Campany, "On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)," *History of Religions* 42, no. 4 (2003): 287-319.

literature of medieval China was not so much the faithful testimonial to Buddhism's cultural conflict with Chinese society as a political project out of hermeneutical disagreement within the Chinese learned circles.