"A Flock of Ghosts Bursting Forth and Scattering": Healing Narratives in a Sixth-Century Chinese Buddhist Hagiography

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As Buddhism was transmitted to China in the first millennium BC, texts, doctrines, and narratives concerning Indian models of healing embedded in the Tripitaka were repackaged, reconceptualized, and recreated for Chinese audiences through a sustained project of literary and cultural translation. Like all translators, the Chinese interpreters of Buddhism defined and explained foreign ideas by placing them into relationship with familiar ideas from the indigenous context. They did not adhere to a single approach in this undertaking, however. Like all authors writing at the interface between cultures, their translation decisions were inseparable from their cultural contexts, social strategies, and individual historical

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1 This paper was first presented at the Colloquium Series of the Johns Hopkins Program in the History of Science, Medicine, and Technology in 2007. I would like to thank the participants in that discussion, as well as Marta Hanson, James Benn, John Kieschnick, Stephen Teiser, Venerable Jianrong, Michael Stanley-Baker, Jonathan Pettit, and EASTM’s anonymous reviewers for reading and commenting on various incarnations of this paper. I have not been able to individually recognize their many helpful suggestions I have integrated below, but all have been much appreciated.
This paper focuses on one small slice of the medieval Chinese Buddhist literary world, the *Traditions of Eminent Monks* (Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳, T. 2059; below *Traditions*) compiled around 530. While it is an indigenous composition and not a translation from a foreign language, this hagiographic collection played an important role in the cultural translation of Buddhist healing by modeling monastic ideals in terms that were readily accessible to Chinese audiences.

*Traditions* is among the most significant indigenous Buddhist compositions of the early medieval period. It was both a collection of previously available material and a model for future hagiographic collections. Owned by emperors, read by the sangha (Ch. seng 僧 or sengjia 僧伽; i.e., the monastic order), and used as a proselytizing and didactic tool, the text circulated widely. Though healing is by no means their primary subject matter, the biographies in *Traditions* present in narrative form a panoply of Buddhist ritual healing practices. Precisely because it was meant as a tool of proselytism, the hagiography sheds light on how Buddhist ideas about the body, disease, and cure were presented to a wide audience in and outside the sangha.

*Traditions* is by no means the only early Chinese Buddhist source of healing narratives. The healing of the sick also features prominently in the Chinese writing and rewriting of texts concerning Guanyin, the Medicine Buddha, Amitābha Buddha, Nāgārjuna, and a number of other deities and heroes from across Buddhist literature. Such compositions characteristically create connections between Buddhist figures and familiar Chinese archetypes in order to appeal to Chinese sensibilities. For example, in a recent study of Jīvaka, the Buddhist “King of Physicians” or “King of Medicine” (yiwang 醫王), I demonstrated that the translation into Chinese of the narrative of his life and healing exploits involved the mobilization of Chinese medical terminology, narrative tropes, and frames of legitimacy in order to recreate the Buddhist hero as a Chinese “numinous physician” (shenyi 神醫). As the authorship of the received

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3 The work is traditionally dated 519, but see arguments for a later date in Wright (1954), pp. 399-400. Numerical citations to Chinese Buddhist texts in this paper are preceded by T. for the Taishō-Era Newly Revised Tripitaka (Jp. Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經) or X. for the Continued Tripitaka (Ch. Xu zangjing 続藏經). I have used the corrected digital versions made available by the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA) online and on the CBReader CD-ROM v. 3.7, Feb. 2008. All page and line number citations and all quotations come from this source. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

4 Salguero (2009).
text of the Jīvaka biography was an ongoing process involving more than one person, the narrative as we have it today is the product of multiple acts of cultural translation that were undertaken with the larger strategy of demonstrating Buddhism’s healing efficacy to wider audiences.

Like these other Buddhist tales, Traditions also engages in the cultural translation strategy of equating Buddhist heroes with Chinese wonder-working healers. Within the hagiography, the sangha’s ability to access divine and magical healing powers is a ubiquitous theme that frequently takes center stage. This is clearly part of a strategy to demonstrate their relevance and conformity with the Chinese expectations of religious clerics. But, at the same time that it employs language and narrative tropes to make Buddhist healing fit with indigenous repertoires, the text also employs clear strategies of differentiation, capitalizing upon Buddhism’s foreign origin in order to demonstrate its uniqueness and superiority over other contemporary traditions. The protagonists of these tales wield a therapeutic armamentarium stocked with foreign rituals and spells and the invocation of foreign deities. The text is careful to continually remind us that such wondrous feats of mastery are held in secretive, foreign hands that only patrons of Buddhism can open. Thus, Traditions is exemplary of both the process of assimilation by which Indian ritual technologies were fit into the Chinese context, and also of how exoticizing language and tropes could be deployed as tools of legitimization and persuasion.

**Authorship and Context of the Hagiography**

Several previous studies have discussed the authorship, genre, and social milieu of Traditions in fuller detail than can be given here—including most notably a 1997 study of Buddhist hagiographic collections by John Kieschnick upon which I have drawn heavily in this paper. Among the

5 Kieschnick (1997). The authorship of Traditions is discussed in detail in Wright (1954). While no complete translation has been published in English, the entire collection is available in annotated Japanese translation in Funayama (2009-2010). The first three fascicles are available in French in Shih (1968). For additional complete and partial translations, see Wright (1948); Zürcher (2007); and sources listed in Wright (1954), pp. 429-432. Additionally, individual biographies translated into English by Arthur Link have appeared in a series of articles along with Japanese translation and commentary in Hirai (1991, 1992, 1993, 1994). Traditions was translated in its entirety by Link, but to this day exists only in manuscript format, held at Komazawa University. I have been unable to consult the full translation in preparing this paper.

The first extant Chinese hagiographic collection, the *Accounts of Traditions of Famous Monks* (Mingseng zhuan chao 名僧傳抄, X. 1523), was compiled between 510 and 519 by the monk Shi Baochang 释寶唱. Huijiao’s composition was in-
earliest indigenous hagiographies of Chinese Buddhism, the text was composed around 530 by the monk Huijiao 慧皎 (497-554), of the Jiaxiangsi 嘉祥寺 temple in the Kuaiji 会稽 district of the Liang. It consists of 14 fascicles, which include biographies of 257 monks who lived in China from the mid-first century to the author’s time. Subsumed within these are another 259 subordinate biographies of less well-known individuals, which often amount to no more than a few lines each.

These narratives lie at the intersection of different traditions of Chinese biography. At the same time that they draw on the genre conventions of classical historiography, biographies of eminent members of the sangha are iconoclastic, bending and often circumventing these conventions with both the range and tenor of their content. While biographies in the dynastic histories tend to list the family lineages, titles, honors, and government posts of their subjects, for example, Buddhist hagiographies tended to rectify what he saw as the shortcomings of this work. Later texts in this genre include the seventh-century Continued Traditions of Eminent Monks (Xu gaoseng zhuān 許高僧傳, T. 2060) by Daoxuan 道宣 as well as collections from the Song and Ming (T. 2061, 2062).

The literature also extended across the gender divide to include Traditions of the Nuns (Biqiuni zhuān 比丘尼傳, T. 2063), a collection said to have been compiled by Shi Baochang 十四 years before Huijiao’s Traditions, but which may in fact be a later composition (De Rauw [2005]). Less than a third of the length of Traditions of Eminent Monks, Traditions of the Nuns does not include a wealth of healing episodes. While nuns are paragons of piety, chastity, and Buddhist learning, the nuns’ hagiographer does not present them as powerful miracle-healers. Nuns do indeed mediate others (Tsai [1994], pp. 48-49), ascend to paradise accompanied by omens and signs (pp. 38-39, 91), and possess deathless bodies (p. 71), but they do not manifest the range of thaumaturgical and transformational abilities the monks exhibit in healing others. The reason for this difference is not immediately apparent. It perhaps may indicate a bias against female healing, a gendered conception of the ability to wield magical powers, or simply a difference in the interests of the compilers. See discussion of the genre of nun’s hagiographies more generally in Georgieva (1996).

* Wright (1954), pp. 387-392. Beginning with the second- to first-century Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji 史記), imperial historians created conventions that determined in large part both the range of materials that could be used as sources, as well as the requisite format for the presentation of biographical narratives. Buddhist hagiographers largely emulated these conventions both in the structure of the text as a whole, and in the presentation of information within each biographical sketch. Huijiao, for example, groups his biographical subjects according to their activities, adds subordinate biographies to the major one, and appends a general discussion of the biographies in a commentary at the end of each section. On historical conventions of Chinese biographical writing, see Nivison (1962); Twitchett (1969).
tend not to dwell on such worldly concerns. Instead, a different ideal emerges, typically involving a poor or despised individual who is discovered to have surprising abilities of memorization, clairvoyance, and/or wisdom, and who after ordination goes on to great achievements in asceticism, religious scholarship, and thaumaturgy. Exemplars of thaumaturgy, comprising about a third of the biographies in Traditions, are particularly interesting for our purposes. Monks in these narratives exert control over a wide range of phenomena by rainmaking, predicting the future, disappearing and re-appearing, or causing objects to manifest. Spontaneous healing is also a frequent topic, although Huijiao does not explicitly separate healing from other forms of magical power.

Historians of Chinese literature have considered many of the thaumaturgical episodes in Traditions to be representative of the medieval genre of “anomaly accounts” (zhiguai 志怪), tales of the wondrous and strange that center on ghosts, the occult arts, and magical objects. Huijiao indeed seems to have consciously positioned Traditions within this literary context: his preface cites eighteen sources for his compilation, including not only Buddhist texts but also secular compositions like local histories and geographies, “separate biographies” (biezhuan 別傳) of individuals, letters, oral interviews, and other miscellany that were also frequently mined for anomaly accounts. Nowhere is the connection between Traditions and this genre clearer than in the healing narratives. The themes central to Huijiao’s uplifting and entertaining stories—humble people with surprising powers over the natural world, redemption from sin and misfortune, the intervention of divine beings into human affairs, and sudden bodily transformation—are ubiquitous plot elements in tales of the anomalous as well.

If Huijiao’s accounts of the victories of magic-wielding monks over demons and disease fit well with other literature circulating in the medieval period, these stories were also crafted with the explicit purpose of persuading contemporaries about the superiority of Buddhism. Huijiao himself says of the text that it was intended as a tool of proselytism. In his words, it was necessary to tell the eminent monks’ stories because “for spreading the Way and explaining the Teaching, nothing surpasses eminent monks.” He was no doubt also keenly aware of the need to

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9 Wright (1954), pp. 408-429.
compete with narratives circulating in other religious and medical circles at the time. Competition, emulation, and direct borrowing are indicated by the many similarities between Huijiao’s collection and Daoist hagiographies such as the Traditions of Divine Immortals (Shenxian zhuan 神仙傳; attrib. to Ge Hong [283-343]), as well as early medieval lore about popular healers (wu 巫), mantic technicians (fangshi 方士), and numinous physicians.12

At the same time, Traditions also represents an appeal to the sensibilities of local social and political elites.13 The text, for example, reveals a concern to ally eminent monks with the interests of the state. In several stories, eminent monks are said to have enjoyed close relationships to secular power. Zhu Fakuang 竺法龐, Yu Fakai 于法開, and Zhu Fotucheng (variant pronunciation Fotudeng) 竺佛圖澄—all monks that figure in healing narratives—are said to have served emperors, princes, and military rulers as personal fortune-tellers, ritual specialists, military consultants, and healers.

Huijiao evidently was successful in these efforts at entertainment, proselytism, and currying official favor. Traditions found wide distribution in medieval China, was incorporated into and distributed as part of the official Buddhist canon, and was used as didactic reading for young monks.14 While they sometimes criticized Huijiao’s opus for various errors of inclusion or omission, later Buddhist writers often cited it, and subsequent hagiographers emulated it in tone, structure, and content. It is not known whether the emperors of the Liang dynasty financially supported Huijiao’s compilation of hagiographies, but Emperor Yuan (508-554) is known to have owned a personal copy.15 The text is also likely to have served as a template for the telling and retelling of stories to illiterate lay audiences, and thus achieved a wider circulation than was possible for many contemporary written texts.

For centuries, Buddhist exegetes and historians alike have used Huijiao’s biographical sketches to reconstruct the lives, careers, and doctrinal teachings of influential monks. Despite its potential value for this endeavor, in this paper, I do not attempt to determine the historicity either of the monks mentioned or the healing practices depicted. Instead, I treat this text strictly as a literary production, and interpret its cast of charac-

12 For a comparison with Traditions of Divine Immortals, see Poo (1995); see translation of that text in Campany (2002). For tales about wu, see Lin Fu-Shih (1994). For hagiographies of numinous physicians, see Cullen (2001); Salguero (2009). A variety of such stories are translated in DeWoskin (1983).
13 Wright (1954), p. 386, jokes that “the index to laymen mentioned in [Traditions] reads like a Who’s Who of the period it covers.”
14 Kieschnick., p. 8, 12.
15 Ibid., p. 7.
ters not as historical actors but as examples and exemplars of religio-medical ideals. Furthermore, although it is in fact in many parts a collection of preexisting sources, I read *Traditions* as a product of Huijiao’s brush and ink, a composite text rewritten in a specific time and place to forward a specific social agenda. From this perspective, I argue that a close analysis of the narratives in this text can demonstrate how talking about healing was a way to talk to both monastic and lay audiences about what Buddhism had to offer to contemporary society in the Liang dynasty.

The Extraordinary Body of the Eminent Monk

Before discussing the healing practices appearing in *Traditions*, I should briefly examine the wondrous bodies possessed by many of the monks introduced in the text. Such tales emphasize the powers of bodily transformation available to the enlightened.

In many hagiographies, the corpse of an eminent monk is found to be incorruptible. For example, when burned on the pyre for a succession of days, the body of He Luojie 訶羅竭 was not consumed by the fire—a common attribute of transcendents in Chinese tradition and a sure sign of his superior attainments. In other narratives, the eminent monk’s tran-

16 This approach to hagiography has been fruitful in recent scholarship on religion and medicine. Read as an example of the construction of religious self-image, *Traditions* has given us a sense of the contemporary religious values and the function of the sacred in medieval China (Shinohara [1994]). Read as texts for entertainment and proselytism, this and other contemporary collections of miracle stories have provided information about the culturally diffused “religious mentality” and the popularity of stories of ghosts, exorcism, and thaumaturgy with Chinese audiences (Poo [1995, 2000]). Likewise, when read by historians of medicine, hagiographies from other traditions have made visible the tensions between religious and medical bodies of knowledge, and granted access to conflicts otherwise unavailable in the historical record (Magoulas [1964]; Flint [1989]; Skinner [1998]; Pilsworth [2000]).

17 On compiling as “rewriting,” see Lefevere (1992). While it is not my focus here, collectanea such as *Traditions* also give us a window into contemporary consumption of texts and reading practices. Even when copying verbatim from previous hagiographies, by choosing which specific passages to copy and transmit, a compiler like Huijiao tells us that these passages were interesting, important, and relevant to him.

18 T. 2059: 389a13. See discussion of incorruptible bodies, spontaneous combustion, and other signs of sanctity at death in Benn (2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). For comparison, bodily signs of sanctity in the medieval European context are discussed in Park (2006). Imperviousness to fire is also a sign of the magical powers of scriptures (see, e.g., a miracle story in the biography of An Huize 安慧則 in T. 2059: 389b).
scendence of the physical world is demonstrated by his comportment at the moment of death. For example, the biography of Shi Huiyong 釋慧永 tells of a time that the monk became severely ill:

However, he was focused and cautious about following the precepts and monastic discipline, and held to them all the more. Although he was bedridden with his malady and harbored suffering, his countenance was harmonious and pleasant. A short time had gone by when, suddenly, he arranged his clothes and, joining together his hands, asked for his slippers because he wanted to rise. It was as if he had seen something. Everyone was alarmed and asked him [what it was]. He answered saying, “The Buddha has come.” As he finished speaking, he died.19

For Huijiao, then, illness and death are not tragic events, but opportunities for the eminent monks’ virtues and personal connections with the Buddhist deities to become visible, confirming their special status and abilities.20

In many narratives, the monks’ spiritual attainments are made clear not at the moment of death, but by the appearance of light, fragrances, spontaneous combustion, disappearance and reappearance, or other corporeal wonders while they are still alive. To give only one example, the biography of Fotucheng includes the following passage in which he emits light from his abdomen:

On the left side of Fotucheng’s breast in front there was a hole four or five inches round. It connected with the inside of his abdomen. Sometimes his intestines came out from inside, and sometimes he stopped up the hole with silk waste. If in the night he wanted to read a book, he always removed the silk waste, and then the whole room was thoroughly lighted. Moreover on fast days he always went to the bank of a stream, took out his intestines and washed them and put them back inside.21

19 而專嚴戒律誓志愈勤，雖病病痛苦顏色怡悅，未盡少時，忽敘衣合掌求屣欲起，如有所見，眾咸驚問，答云：“佛來，言終而卒。”T. 2059: 362b06-09.
This passage suggests that, by the wondrous way in which he washed out his intestines, Fotucheng’s body became so pure that even his excretory organs—site of the body’s most foul and loathsome substances—were able to emanate light.

Monks as Healers

Eminent monks are not always in possession of such extraordinary bodies, however. Many of the instances in which the most common Chinese characters for “illness” or “disease” (bing 病 or ji 疾) appear in Traditions are cases where the subject of the biography himself falls sick. Often, the protagonist dies from his afflictions, indicating that not all monks were thought to have the power to heal themselves. There are also cases in Traditions in which monks are said to have studied or to possess knowledge of healing, but in which no further detail appears. For example, the text states that An Shigao 安 世 高 was knowledgeable in the practice of medicine (yifang 医 方) and that Shan Daokai 蕭 道 開 treated eye-disease and -pain. Likewise, in the biography of Zhu Fotiao 竺 佛 調, two brothers hasten 100 miles into town to the temple in order to beseech the monk to perform a healing. Though the source materials Huijiao consulted for at least one of these biographies contained more detailed information about the specific kinds of healing knowledge the monks possessed, such details are not his main concern in these instances. Medicine appears here only to add to an already impressive list of skills and powers at the fingertips of the eminent monk. Such references to healing knowledge are not claims to specific abilities, but part of the construction of an aura of all-encompassing proficiency that contributed to the sangha’s relevance, their importance in society, and their ability to intercede on behalf of the laity.

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22 Intestinal washing is mentioned later in this paper in the context of dreamsurgery. The trope is found in other places in the Chinese Tripitaka (see, e.g., Yü [2001], pp. 172-173), as well as in the biography of the numinous physician Bian Que 扁 鵲.

23 Although Traditions is not a medical treatise and the fine-grained distinctions one would find in such a source do not apply, see Hsu (2001), pp. 63-66, for a discussion of the semantic range of these two terms in early Chinese medical literature.


25 T. 2059: 387b22-23.


27 Huijiao’s source for the biography of An Shigao was the Compilation of Notices on the Translation of the Tripitaka (Chu sanzang jiji 出 三 藏 記 記), which explicitly mentions the monk’s knowledge of acupuncture, pulse-reading, and facial diagnosis (T. 2145: 43b19-20; translated in Forte [1995], p. 68).
More revealing than these passing references are those episodes of at least several lines in length that present encounters between healers and patients within a narrative context. In these stories, eminent monks interact with patients (either sick monastics or members of the laity) or else deal with their own illnesses. As we might expect in a collection focused primarily on the hagiographic, in no case do these stories provide detailed descriptions of theoretical knowledge, medical training, or therapeutic practice. Instead, they are short narratives never more than ten lines long that tersely describe the patient’s condition, the monk’s therapeutic intervention, and the wondrous results.

**Appropriating Classical Chinese Medicine**

Only two healing narratives appearing in *Traditions* mention conventional therapies from the classical Chinese medical repertoire. The first appears in the entry for Shi Sengjin 釋僧瑾, in which it is briefly stated that the emperor called for the application of acupuncture and moxibustion for his Wind Illness (*fengji* 風疾), but as this did not alleviate his condition, he was read Buddhist scriptures instead.²⁸

More significantly, the second narrative illustrates the use of classical Chinese therapeutics by a Buddhist healer. In the biography of Yu Fakai, the monk employs acupuncture in conjunction with a dose of sheep’s broth (despite Buddhist vegetarian mores) to relieve a difficult birth:

He came upon a married woman who was giving birth [lit. “on the grass”] and in imminent danger. No treatment had been successful, causing her family consternation and worry. Yu Fakai simply said, “This is easy to cure.” The woman’s husband just then had killed a sheep desiring to make a heterodox sacrifice.²⁹ Yu Fakai ordered him first to fetch a small amount of meat to be made into soup. When she had taken it, he applied ac-

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²⁸ T. 2059: 373c28. On Wind as a constituent part of the body and a source of disease in Indian and Chinese traditions, see Zysk (1993, 2007); Kuriyama (1994); Hsu (2007); Salguero (2010), pp. 159-163.

²⁹ The text literally reads “perverse sacrifice” (*yinsi* 淫祀). This was a common slur for cultic practices that were considered beyond the pale by a given religious group. In official writing, the term refers to treacherous or seditious rituals threatening imperial interests. In Buddhist materials, it is often used to denigrate sacrifices that involved the killing of animals. The rite in this episode may be a sacrificial healing ritual such as described in Lin Fu-shih (1994), p. 200.
upuncture according to her qi. Shortly thereafter, the child inside her womb emerged.\(^3\)

In a second episode that immediately follows the above events, Yu Fakai “inspects the channels” (shimai 视脉) of an emperor who has fallen ill—a reference to classical Chinese pulse diagnosis. Since he knows the case is hopeless, Yu Fakai refuses to treat the emperor. As the Empress Dowager berates the monk, the emperor suddenly collapses. Fleeing for his life, Yu Fakai escapes back to the safety of the monastery.

These cases indicate that Huijiao included knowledge of learned medical techniques from the classical Chinese tradition in his ideal of the exemplary monk. The narratives are also arguing that it is laudable for a monk to relieve a laywoman of an obstetric crisis, and that the sangha is available to perform such services for the laity. Huijiao also is making or perpetuating the claims that monastics possess the power to predict life and death (which was also an important skill in classical Chinese and Indian medical diagnostics), and that the sangha could be called upon by emperors to find out the truth of their medical conditions. Moreover, some of the narrative details of the story explicitly posit Yu Fakai in direct competition with the numinous physicians Bian Que 扁鹊 and Hua Tuo 華陀, who were said to have performed similar healings for pregnant women and ailing rulers.\(^3\)

While they may portray classical therapeutics and mobilize native Chinese literary tropes, however, these episodes situate Yu Fakai’s practice of medicine squarely within Buddhist frameworks of legitimacy. As I have argued elsewhere, this biography asserts a Buddhist basis for the monks’ medical authority: Yu Fakai’s knowledge is attributed not to the medical classics or the Yellow Emperor, but to the “wondrous medical methods” (niaotong yifa 神通醫法) of Jīvaka, the Buddhist “King of Physicians.”\(^3\)

By claiming this pedigree for Yu Fakai, Traditions joins a num-

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\(^3\) Literally “amniotic sac” (yangmo 羊膜), a term that contains the character for “sheep” (yang 羊) and that may point to a logic of sympathetic magic behind this particular cure.

\(^3\) 史記太史公曰：民治不動擊冢遊，開口。此易治耳。主人正奉羊誠為深愛。開令先取少肉為羹 [·] 進覺因氣何之。須與羊腸裏見而此。T. 2059: 350a15-18. In my translations, rather than follow Huijiao’s convention of referring to people by the last character in their names, for clarity, I have written out their full names each time they are mentioned.

\(^3\) The biography of Bian Que is found in the Records of the Grand Historian, one of the templates for the formal structure of the biographical sketches in Traditions. For discussion of the Bian Que biography, see Cullen (2001); Lu & Needham (2002), pp. 79-87; Ma (2007), pp. 204-206. For translation, see Berkowitz (2004).

ber of other texts in the construction of a Buddhist medical lineage to rival the text-based lineages of classical Chinese physicians.

Furthermore, the hagiography also legitimates the appropriation of classical medicine by the sangha with a patently Buddhist doctrinal justification. When asked why he practices medicine, the monk responds: “I cultivate the Six Perfections to eliminate the illnesses of the Four Maras, and read the Nine Indicators to treat illnesses of Wind and Cold.” In other words, he cultivates the six Buddhist virtues (generosity, morality, forbearance, effort, meditative absorption, and wisdom) in order to defeat four types of mental delusion, and employs the classical Chinese diagnostic tool of the Nine Indicators to deal with illnesses of the physical body. This synthesis of Buddhist and classical therapies for mind and body, continues Yu Fakai, is a means of simultaneously benefiting other beings while advancing on his own bodhisattva path.

### Invoking Divine Assistance

The above examples of appropriation of classical Chinese medical terms and practices notwithstanding, the vast majority of the medical narratives in *Traditions* does not draw on classical medical doctrines or therapeutic repertoires. Instead, these hagiographies emphasize the fortuitous intercession of monks wielding Buddhist healing rituals. At the eleventh hour, they bring succor from sickness, drive out demons, conquer imminent death, and prevent other calamities from afflicting the devout through the invocation of deities, spellcasting, and a range of other magical interventions.

Even while discussing these nominally Buddhist healing practices, however, Huijiao most frequently frames the eminent healers he introduces as powerful intermediaries in the indigenous Chinese cosmology of spirits (shen 神), retribution (bao 報), magical transformation (hua 华 or bianhua 變化), and sympathetic resonance (ganying 感應; i.e. “stimulus-response”). His stories also liberally borrow elements from pre-existing Daoist hagiography, stories about wondrous healers, and other popular tales. Nevertheless, the narratives invariably maintain focus on the patently Buddhist aspects of the episodes and are concerned to demonstrate Buddhism’s superiority over these other traditions.

In Huijiao’s time, many contemporary healing narratives featured the intervention of spirits, ghosts, and other superhuman beings as supernatural assistants in the human quest to vanquish disease. Similarly, in *Traditions*, eminent monks are able to transform demons into allies. For example, the text tells that as Zhu Fakuang wandered the “Eastern...
Lands” in a time of great pestilence, he “always had dozens of ghosts and
spirits protecting him, both before and behind.” The monk, like so many
heroes from a wide variety of Chinese literature, harnessed the danger-
ous forces of the spirit world and converted demonic beings into pow-
ful helpers and protectors.  

In this collection, however, divine assistance is most often attained by
the invocation of important Buddhist deities through Buddhist practices
of asceticism and devotion. In the biography of Zhu Sengxian 朱僧顯, to
cite an example, the monk’s illness is eradicated when Amitābha Buddha
descends in a flash of light in response to his meditation on the Pure
Land:

[Zhu Sengxian] met with a disease both persistent and
serious. So, he fixed upon thinking of the West [i.e.,
meditated on Amitābha’s Paradise]. The deep suffering
in his heart was extreme. He saw Amitābha Buddha
descend, and [the Buddha’s] radiance illuminated his
body. Thereupon his pain was completely healed, and
that night he easily rose and bathed.  

At the conclusion of this narrative, Huijiao tells us that a fragrance re-
mained in the room for more than ten days, evocative of the wondrous
aromas said to permeate the Western Pure Land.

The biography of Zhu Fayi 朱法義 likewise includes a passage
wherein the sick monk is visited by the bodhisattva Guanyin, who per-
forms abdominal surgery in a dream in direct response to the monk’s
practice of chanting:

Suddenly, [Zhu Fayi] felt his heart’s qi to be diseased.
He consistently abided in chanting [the name of] Guan-
yin. Then, in a dream, he saw a person split open his
abdomen and wash out his intestines. When he awoke,
his disease was cured.  

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35常有鬼神數十衛其前後。T. 2059: 357a02-03.
36 On ghosts as spirit helpers, servants, and friends, see Campany (1991a),
monks themselves often became protector spirits for villages.
37後遇疾備急。乃屬想西方一心甚苦至。見無量壽佛降以真容光照其
身。所苦都愈 [ ] 是夕便起澡浴。T. 2059: 395b28-c01.
38忽感心氣疾苦。居念念觀音。乃夢見一人破腹洗腸。覺便病愈。T.
2059: 350c23-24. See discussion of this story and additional versions in Campany
(1991b), p. 61 n. 32; translation in Gjertson (1989), pp. 18-19. Guanyin is one of the
chief deities with whom healing magic is associated in medieval China, and the
primary deity called upon in Traditions (Kieschnick [1997], p. 97). See further
discussion of therapeutic rites associated with Guanyin in Strickmann (1996),
Such narratives as these, of course, underscore the beneficence and accessibility of Buddhist deities willing to intervene in the affairs of human-kind. However, they speak primarily to the monks’ close relationship to these divine beings. Regardless of the specific deity or the details of the occasion, the eminent monks’ power to easily access such divine blessings through Buddhist practices remains at center stage.

In addition to causing deities to appear in person, many other narratives in Traditions depict eminent monks tapping into another type of divine assistance: magical boons. The biography of He Luojie, for example, tells of the time that the monk went into the mountains to sit in meditation within a cave:

Then, he picked himself up and used his left foot to stomp the cave’s western wall, which was made of stone. The wall collapsed, covering his toes. As he pulled away his foot, water came from within. Clear, fragrant, and sublime, for four seasons it was never used up. For all who came to drink from it, thirst and hunger ceased, and their diseases were eradicated.

The healing water mentioned in this story brings to mind both the consecrated water (shenshui 神水) used in Buddhist rituals across Asia and the charmed water (fushui 符水) used by Daoists for healing and other ritual magic. A frequent trope in medieval Chinese anomaly tales and hagiographies, its appearance in Traditions amidst other types of magical healing is not surprising. What is worth noting is that, here, the appearance of such beneficial water is causally related to the monks’ practice of seclusion and meditation.

In a similar vein, in the biography of An Huize 安慧則, the gods or devas (tianshen 天神) send down curative water in response to the monk’s prayers:

During the Yongjia reign-period [307-312] of the Jin all under heaven were sick from an epidemic. An Huize prayed day and night, beseeching the gods to send down a medicine to cure humankind. One day, while exiting the temple gates, he saw two stones shaped like urns. He suspected these were miraculous objects, and went to go see them. It turned out that there was...
consecrated water inside. When patients drank a dose, there were none who were not completely healed.\textsuperscript{41}

In this case, it is not clear what types of prayers were made, or to whom. However, those are not the important details: like the previous examples, the focus of the passage is on the ability of the monk to communicate with the unseen world, and the responsiveness of the divine realm to the pleas of eminent Buddhists.

**Incanting Healing Spells**

In addition to accessing divine assistance, monks in Huijiao’s narratives frequently wield spells (Skt. dhāraṇī; Ch. zhou 咒 or shenzhou 神咒) to heal their patients. In fact, eminent monks in Traditions utilize spells for a variety of ends, including rainmaking, the summoning of dragons, the manifestation of lotuses, and other feats.\textsuperscript{42} Spellcasting also played a major role in the medieval Daoist ritual repertoire, and is one of the most notable areas of crosspollination between Buddhism and indigenous Chinese traditions.\textsuperscript{43} In the Buddhist context, spells can be understood as a kind of indirect divine intervention, as the power of a Buddhist incantation is typically derived from its having been taught or sanctioned by a supernatural being from the Buddhist pantheon.

When used therapeutically in Traditions, spells are said to have rapid and efficacious results. Sometimes the narratives provide only terse statements about the spellcaster’s victory over disease, stressing his superiority over other healers. Bei Du 杯度, for example, instantly heals with a single incantation a sick woman who had had “many treatments but no cure.”\textsuperscript{44} He Luojie and Zhu Fakuang, already mentioned above, both are credited for saving many lives with their healing spells during epidemics. In other cases, the focus is on what is driven out of the patient—a ghost perhaps, or a fox-spirit, or some type of pestilential poison.\textsuperscript{45} However,
the narratives in *Traditions* often add additional elements to underscore the foreignness of the healing rituals and to more explicitly situate the monks’ actions within the indigenous cultural context.

In one hagiography that is especially rich in material on healing, a monk named Qiyu 耆域 cures a patient who is debilitated by illness with a spell and ritual gestures with a willow branch dipped in consecrated water:

[The governor of Nanyang, Teng Yongwen,] contracted an illness that continued many years without letting up. Both his feet were twisted and bent, and he has was unable to rise and walk. Qiyu looked at him and said, “Do you wish to be cured of the illness?” Then, he fetched a cup of clean water and his willow branch. He used the willow branch to whisk the water. He lifted up his hand toward Yongwen and said a spell. He did this three times. Then, he rubbed Yongwen’s two knees with his hands and told him to rise. Immediately, he rose and took steps as before.47

Used by monastics in India as a toothbrush, the willow branch in this story is both an example of Buddhism’s usage of foreign material culture for magical purposes and also an obvious symbol of cleansing and purification. The appearance of the willow branch and a receptacle of water together surely are also intended to associate Qiyu’s ritual actions with the healing powers of Guanyin, who is often depicted with these attributes. However, in the Chinese context, the stick also would have been understood as being imbued with unusually strong magical powers by its frequent and intimate contact with the interior of the monk’s body.

In another of his exploits, Qiyu uses spells and ritual actions to relieve a patient’s body of a putrid substance that was about to cause his death:

There was a man who had been sick with an obstruction of his bowels (*zheng癥*) and was about to die. Qiyu laid his alms-bowl upon the patient’s belly. With a white cloth, he fully covered him. He chanted an spell a thousand times. Thereupon, offensive-smelling fumes

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46 This is one of the various Chinese translations of the personal name Jīvaka, here referring to a foreign monk said to have arrived in China in 296. I have left his name in Chinese for clarity in differentiating him from the abovementioned Jīvaka, the King of Physicians.

47 餓病經年不差，兩腳攣屈不能起行，域往看之曰：君欲得病疾差不。因取淨水一杯，揚柳一枝，便以楊柳拂水。舉手向永文而咒，如此者三，因以手撮永文兩膝合起，即起行步如故。T. 2059: 388b05-09.
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filled the room. The patient simply said, “I am alive!” Qiyu had the man lift the cloth. Within the alms-bowl there was a quantity of something like sediment or mud that had been lifted [out of the patient’s body]. One could not get near it for the stench. The patient survived.48

The characters used in this passage to translate the Sanskrit pātra, or alms-bowl, are yìngqì, literally meaning “response-implement.” The bowl, of course, is another foreign object imbued with magical powers because of its association with Buddhist ritual practice. However, the appearance of the character yìng 应 in this translation also evokes the indigenous Chinese doctrine of sympathetic resonance, thereby asserting that the alms-bowl is a ritual tool able to manifest transformation in the indigenous Chinese model of the cosmos.49

Qiyu’s spells are not limited to curing illnesses, but extend to control over life and death itself. After curing Yongwen’s crippled legs, he demonstrates that he can revive dead trees:

Within this temple there were several dozen Bodhi trees that had withered and died. Qiyu asked Yongwen for how long the trees had been dead. Yongwen said, “Many years already.” Qiyu then faced the trees and chanted a spell similar to the type of spell he had used for Yongwen. The trees shot forth sprouts, and their branches became glorious and luxuriant.50

Not to be outdone, the light-emitting Fotucheng uses spells to overcome the death of a human victim. In this episode, the foster son of the ruler Shi Le 石勒 (r. 319-333) of the Later Zhao dynasty (319-351) unexpectedly becomes ill and dies, but this proves to be no impediment for the healing magic of the eminent monk:

When two days had passed, Shi Le said, “We have heard that when the heir apparent of the state of Guo 胄 died, Bian Que was able to bring him to life. The [Great Monk] is the most extraordinary (shén 神, i.e., magically potent) man in this state. You should go quickly and in-

48 有一人病將死，域以應器著病者腹上，白布覆之。白布通覆之，咒願數千言，即有臭氣薰徹一屋，病者呪曰，我活矣。域令人舉布，應器中有若垽淤泥數升，臭不可近，病者遂活。T. 2059: 388b12-16.
49 On the alms-bowl as an object of magical power and sacred significance, see Shinohara (2002); Kieschnick (2003), pp. 107-112.
50 此寺中惟思樹數十株枯死，域聞永文此樹死來幾時。永文曰：積年矣。域即向樹咒如咒永文法，樹尋開裂枝葉茂。T. 2059: 388b09-12.
form him. He will surely be able to bring about a happy issue.” [Fotucheng, upon being informed], then took his [tooth-cleaning stick] and said a spell over it. In a moment [the son] was able to get up and in a little while had fully recovered.51

The main point of this story, of course, is that death is not to be feared by the devout. Even if the patient has lain lifeless for several days, this condition can easily be overcome by an eminent monk wielding Buddhist ritual technologies. This story of resurrection also models the ideal relationship between sangha and the ruler’s family: as a direct result of Fotucheng’s revival of Shi Le’s foster son from death, we read, the ruler made offerings, bathed the Buddha in a temple, and henceforth raised most of his sons as Buddhists.52

More importantly for our purposes, however, the reference to Bian Que in the narrative is another example of the Buddhist appropriation of a figure of authority from classical Chinese medicine. In his own biography in the second- to first-century bc Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji 史記), Bian Que revives the Prince of Guo, who is on the verge of death, by needling a single acupuncture point. By time of the compilation of Traditions, Bian Que’s name would have been synonymous with the healing powers of acupuncture. Invoking his name in a narrative where an eminent monk revives a patient that actually has died makes a none-too-subtle claim of superiority over the archetypal medical hero, and announces that the most effective healing skills are to be found in the hands of Buddhist clerics, not physicians.

Employing Other Forms of Magical Healing

Other forms of magical healing in Traditions also serve to situate Buddhism within the indigenous Chinese cosmology while drawing attention to the superiority and effectiveness of eminent monks as healers. An example linking the appearance of healing deities to the performance of repentance rituals, for example, is found in the biography of Zhu Fakuang:

[Zhu Fakuang’s teacher] Yin became deathly ill. Zhu Fakuang then for seven days and seven nights prayed and performed rituals of repentance. On the arrival of the seventh day, suddenly he saw five colors brightly

\[51 \text{已涉二日，勒曰。朕聞虢太子死，扁鹊能生。大和上國之神人，可急往告必能致福。澄乃取楊枝咒之。頇臾能起。有頃平復。} \quad \text{T. 2059: 384b22-24. Translation by Wright (1948), pp. 345-346, edited and brackets added.}

\[52 \text{Fotucheng is also said to have been given the title “Great Jewel of the State” by his patron (Zürcher [2007], p. 182).} \]
shining at the door of Yin’s residence. Yin felt as if there was a person’s hand pressing on him. Thereupon, his suffering was healed.\footnote{T. 2059: 356c12-15.}

In another story of repentance, it is not the deity himself but a statue that plays a pivotal role in the healing. The ruler Sun Hao 孫皓 (r. 264-80) of the Wu dynasty (222-280) had heard the Dharma but, as he was “ignorant and cruel,” he had a golden statue of a Buddha or bodhisattva set up in a urinal and relieved himself on it in order to amuse his ministers. His body suffered immediate retribution for this affront:

Suddenly his whole body became greatly swollen, and his privates caused him intense pain. His cries mounted up to heaven. The Grand Astrologer, having made a divination, said that this was caused by a great god who had been offended. He immediately had them offer prayers and sacrifices in all the [non-Buddhist] temples, but this never made him feel the least bit better.\footnote{T. 2059: 326a03-05, translated by Arthur Link in Hirai (1993), brackets are mine. Note that in this episode an eminent monk is not directly involved in the patient’s cure. Though the immediate cause of healing is repentance, the proximal cause is the advice of a laywoman.}

In conformity to Chinese principles of divine retribution and sympathetic resonance, Sun Hao’s discomforts—swelling (i.e., retention of liquid) and pain in his privates—mirrored the nature of his own offensive act. Furthermore, Sun Hao’s body remained afflicted until he had redressed the situation by confessing his sins and bowing before the very statue he had desecrated:

Among the ladies of the palace there previously was one who reverenced the Dharma; she therefore questioned [the emperor]. “Has Your Majesty gone into a Buddhist monastery to seek for blessings?” Sun Hao, lifting his head, asked, “Is the god Buddha great?” The palace lady replied, “The Buddha is a great god.” Sun Hao’s heart thence awakened, and he related all that had passed. The palace lady immediately went to welcome the image and set it up in the palace hall. She bathed it several tens of times with perfumed water, burned incense, and made confessions and repentance. Sun kowtowed on a pillow and accused himself of his crime. In a little while his pain stopped.\footnote{T. 2059: 336a03-05, translated by Arthur Link in Hirai (1993), brackets are mine. Note that in this episode an eminent monk is not directly involved in the patient’s cure. Though the immediate cause of healing is repentance, the proximal cause is the advice of a laywoman.}
While in these cases the performance of rituals of repentance occasion the healing, in other episodes, merely hearing the sutras is enough. In the biography of Shi Zhiyan 釋智嚴, for example, the Liu family invited him to heal a clanswoman who had become ill due to affliction by ghosts:

[The sick woman] habitually saw ghosts approaching and their sighs were startling and frightful. At that time, [the family] invited Shi Zhiyan to preach the Dharma. When [he] first arrived at the outer hall, the Liu clan could plainly see a flock of ghosts bursting forth and scattering. Shi Zhiyan then entered, and lectured on the sutras for the lady. This cured the illness. 56

This passage emphasizes the talismanic powers of an eminent monk wielding sacred Buddhist texts. As soon as he walks into the hall, the ghosts that plague the lady scatter. The additional exorcistic power of his preaching the sutras then ensures her recovery. Moreover, the narrative states that upon being cured the Liu clanswoman took the Five Precepts (Ch. wujie 五戒; Skt. pañcaśīla) of the Buddhist lay devotee, again underscoring the link between healing and proselytism that appears throughout the collection.

**Constructing the Superiority of Buddhist Healers**

It is apparent from the above excerpts that the hagiographies in *Traditions* are concerned to situate foreign healing rites, implements, and clerics within the indigenous cosmology, literary conventions, and repertoires of religiomedical practice. But, at the same time that Huijiao framed his material in ways that asserted Buddhism’s compatibility with autochthonous Chinese knowledge, it is equally clear that he was at pains to set Buddhist healing off as superior to contemporary alternatives. In this section, I will look more closely at how Huijiao pursued this second strategy—that of differentiation—by emphasizing Buddhist healing’s exoticism, esotericism, authenticity, and accessibility.

As already mentioned, the magical objects wielded by Huijiao’s eminent monks—such as tooth-sticks and alms-bowls—are often part of Buddhism’s foreign material culture, a fact that lent them an aura of exoticism and mysteriousness. However, *Traditions* is also concerned to...
showcase the foreignness of the healing monks themselves. This decision stands in marked contrast to the tone of the composition as a whole, which highlights the fact that different portions of a text can simultaneously employ different strategies. Generally speaking, Traditions exhibits a bias in favor of the homeland of the author in central China. Huijiao lived in the economic and political heart of the Liang, in the Yangzi basin in central coastal China. Of the 151 monks whose personal geographies are mentioned in the text, 121 originate from that general area. In contrast, the monks whose medical encounters are discussed in this paper typically are said to have come from foreign homelands such as India, Sogdiana, Kucha, and the "Western Regions," to be of northern or northwestern Chinese origin (territory that was in the sixth century controlled by foreign nomadic tribes from the steppes), or to be of unknown extraction (which in the Chinese context equally sets them off as Other). Likewise, when geography is mentioned in the narrative, the healing episodes typically are said to have taken place far from Huijiao’s homeland as well.

In addition, the names of these healers also would have stood out as conspicuously foreign. Buddhist personal names typically consisted of characters transliterating or translating Sanskrit words and thus often had an unmistakably non-Chinese ring. Following the lead of Dao’an 道安 in the fourth century, many monks took the surname of the Buddha, Shi 释 (an abbreviation of Shijia 释迦; Skt. Śākya), indicating their rejection of traditional patrilineal clan affiliation in favor of a direct association with the lineage of the Indian progenitor of Buddhism. This surname appears, for example, in the cases of Shi Huiyong, Shi Sengjin, and Shi Zhiyan mentioned above. When they do not incorporate this surname, the names of healing monks are often preceded by ethnikons, characters signifying their foreign origin or allegiance to foreign Dharma masters. The initial Zhu 竺 in many of the healing monks’ names means “Indian,” while An 安 in An Shigao and An Huize translates as “Parthian.”

If they emphasize the exotic origins and lineages of healing monks, the medical narratives in Traditions also construct an aura of esotericism and secrecy around their abilities. As Robert Campany has written, secrecy is always socially constructed, representing not the absence of social

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58 It is not only healing thaumaturgy that is marked by its association with the foreign. Storch (1993), p. 9, notes that in Traditions and other early hagiographies, the use of any kind of dhāraṇī is generally the domain of foreign monks. “If the Chinese use them, which happens very rarely,” she writes, “it always occurs in the West and not in China proper.” See also Kieschnick (1997), p. 87.
discourse but a specific set of socially agreed upon gestures and a specific stance vis-à-vis society. While the methods of esoteric arts must by definition remain hidden from the uninitiated, paradoxically, the wondrous effects of such knowledge must be proclaimed to the world. Traditions is emblematic of this balancing act between revealing and concealing. Even as the results of Buddhist thaumaturgy are proclaimed in dramatic narrative form, the ritual knowledge required to harness such capacities remains hidden from the reader. Huijiao portrays monks at work meditating, casting spells, chanting scriptures, or using ritual implements, but he does not cite their words, name their texts, detail their actions, or explain how to tap into the source of their powers.

It is probable that those who read or heard Huijiao’s stories, particularly monastics, would have been familiar with the many Buddhist texts available at the time that did detail the performance of such ritual healing. However, the hagiographies do not demand the audience have access to the scriptures, and the stories can just as easily be read or retold in isolation from any technical knowledge or expertise. Like most Buddhist stories of the extraordinary, these episodes were meant not to teach or explain how such feats are achieved, but to provoke awe, inspiration, and faith in the transformative power of the Dharma.

Thus, healing in Traditions is administered in mysterious ways by foreign men with extraordinary bodies and secret powers. But, while suggesting that healing was a wondrous or even miraculous occurrence beyond the expectations of quotidian life, Huijiao was also concerned to emphasize the authenticity and historicity of the accounts he recounted in Traditions. Historians of Chinese literature have shown an important role for anomaly tales in the origins of Chinese fiction; however, the conclusion that the authors of anomaly tales did not believe the veracity of these exploits, or saw them as fictional in the modern sense of the word, is not tenable. On the contrary, tales of anomalous happenings were in medieval China considered to be historical accounts of factual events (shi 史). Buddhist miracle stories, in fact, frequently refer to

\[\textit{Campany (2006).}\]
\[\textit{Ibid., p. 517.}\]
\[\textit{See list of these texts in Salguero (2010), pp. 335-340.}\]
\[\textit{Scholars have debated the applicability of the word “miracle” in the Buddhist context (see, e.g., Brown [1998]). I follow other scholars in using the English term to underscore the unusual and faith-confirming nature of the healing (e.g., Kieschnick [1997], pp. 96 ff).}\]
\[\textit{DeWoskin (1997).}\]
themselves as “proofs” (yan 驗), to be taken as prima facie evidence of the efficacy of Buddhist magical healing and other forms of thaumaturgy.

Traditions, like other texts in the genre, employs specific strategies to bolster the perceived reliability of the author’s stories. The association of healing narratives with named patients—particularly those with official titles—lent credibility to the accounts. Huijiao also includes references to eye witnesses. In the biography of Zhu Sengxian, for example, when Amitābha descends to the monk’s bedchamber and spontaneously heals him, the author adds that those who lived with the monk and attended him in his illness witnessed and attested to the events he is recounting.

Finally, Huijiao also emphasizes that the healing powers featured in the hagiographies are readily accessible by the devout. In his extensive analysis of anomaly accounts, Campany has argued that their writing is a cosmographic exercise in which the boundaries between the human and spirit worlds and man’s place within these boundaries are continually renegotiated. In outlining several different narrative modes within the genre, he argues that the Buddhist anomaly accounts differ from those of other contemporary groups in that they tend to domesticate—rather than distance—the miraculous. Whereas narratives of mantic technicians and Daoist adepts emphasize the hero’s mastery over the dangers of the periphery of the knowable, Buddhist stories stress the availability of the extraordinary.

Traditions is a case in point illustrating this strategy. To be sure, the wielding of powerful transformative magic remains the privileged domain of the monks in the narratives, but in keeping with Buddhism’s promise of salvation for all sentient beings, the rewards of their ministrations extend to all. In these episodes, eminent monks heal a wide range of people—not only elites, rulers, and other members of the sangha, but also a range of less illustrious individuals and more general groups like “all under Heaven” or “the people.”

Moreover, Huijiao stresses the humble origins of the monks whose exploits he depicts, and is adamant about basing his criteria for inclusion in the collection on “eminence” (gao 高) rather than “fame” (ming 名). In suggesting that not all monks with efficacious powers are necessarily well-known or of elite backgrounds, Huijiao hints that one of the unsung monks in the reader’s local temple may indeed have reached such a level of attainment. Such transformative powers, announces Traditions, are not confined to the far-away places and long-ago times when Śākyamuni Buddha first tamed the demons and converted the deities, nor to the far-

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67 Ibid., p. 323.
68 Ibid., p. 331.
flung Pure Lands of the afterlife. Here and now, anyone can be healed, transformed, and saved—provided, that is, they patronize the sangha.

**Healing Narratives and Proselytism**

It is a commonplace that healing was central to Buddhist proselytism in medieval China. Indeed, the ability to stop epidemics and cure individual patients was expected of religious clerics and ritual specialists of all persuasions, and Buddhism necessarily competed in the battle against disease as much as it did in other arenas. However, attention to the strategies of cultural translation I have been discussing here makes more readily apparent exactly how historical authors made connections between foreign and local healing knowledge, and mobilized both in arguing for Buddhism’s relevance and superiority. Huijiao’s collection of tales is one particularly successful example of an author weaving together Indian and indigenous elements in order to appeal to and convince his Chinese audience.

*Traditions* was successful in no small part because it bore a welcomed message of victory and hope. In Huijiao’s time, the world was experienced as a dangerous and unpredictable place. By 530, China had seen over three hundred years of a rapid succession of governments ranging from military rule to foreign domination to complete anarchy. Except for a brief reunification of most of China during the late third century, the realm had remained divided in a continuous state of war since the fall of the Han dynasty in 220. At the time of the compilation of *Traditions*, the Liang dynasty was clinging to power in the Yangzi basin. While Emperor Wu (r. 502–549), a generous patron of Buddhist institutions and translators, was lionized in subsequent Buddhist literature for being a model ruler and a lavish patron of the Dharma, his dynasty’s survival was far from guaranteed. Court intrigue and uncertain succession plagued the dynastic family. Aristocratic clans with private armies vied for power and leveraged their influence to extract special privileges from the state. Foreign “barbarians”—often equated with demons by the Han Chinese—ruled the North and made continual incursions into Chinese-held territory in the South. Though he could not have known it at the time, Huijiao’s homeland of Kuaiji would be overrun by rebel forces in 550.

Mirroring the sociopolitical landscape, danger and unpredictability also marked the spiritual realm. A “seething mass,” as one scholar has put it, of malicious beings seemed to be intervening unpredictably and catastrophically in human affairs, causing epidemics, social disharmony,

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70 On the emperor’s treatment in Buddhist literature, see Shinohara (1998), p. 152. For an historical chronicle of the period, see Bielenstein (1996).
and other varieties of misfortune. Messianic literature, Buddhist and otherwise, whipped up fear that the plagues, floods, and other disasters unleashed upon early medieval China heralded the end of the world. It was the age of the “decline of the Dharma” (mofa 末法): the forces of good were increasingly inaccessible and evil was inexorably on the rise. The world seemed to be crying out for divine assistance.

Huijiao presents eminent monks as beacons of light in this darkness, the bearers of effective knowledge and practices that could bring solutions to all sorts of contemporary problems. Since state, cosmos, and body were homologous in Chinese thought, the monks’ abilities to bring order to the political, spiritual, and medical realms amounted to the same thing. In these narratives, eminent monks advise kings and officials, converting them and teaching them to rule benevolently, assisting them to preserve their lineages and their grip on power, and helping them uphold their mandate to rule. They transform their bodies, read the future, tame demons and malevolent spirits, and invoke the presence of all-powerful deities at will. They also perform wondrous feats of healing for rulers as well as the powerless and suffering populace who call upon their aid.

Though miraculous transformative powers remained hidden from the uninitiated, they were available in the here and now. For those who knew how to access them, any and all disharmonies in the three realms could be immediately and effortlessly set right in a blaze of light, or in a dream, or with the wave of a tooth-cleaning stick, or with other means of magical intervention. Such mastery over the universe, Traditions promised, was held in compassionate Buddhist hands and was available readily to devotees who called upon the sangha for assistance. The most fearsome of calamities—including epidemic disease and even death itself—is territory that was well mapped and easily negotiated.

The success of Huijiao’s cultural translation strategy, the broad popular appeal of this type of narrative, and the central importance of healing in Buddhist proselytism are all confirmed by the prolific amount of hagiographic literature that took up and repeated the stories and themes popularized by Traditions. As such narratives were written and rewritten again and again, the power of Buddhist practice to heal and the compassionate assistance of monks and deities in curing the illnesses of human-kind were to remain among the most pervasive and persuasive aspects of Chinese Buddhism’s social positioning throughout the premodern period.

73 On state-body-cosmos homology in classical Chinese thought, see Sivin (1995).
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