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*Some Thoughts on the Creation of a
Popular Iconography for the Ten
Kings of Hell in Imperial China*

In 1932 the Finnish National Museum in Helsinki received a donation of Chinese art from Danish businessman Sophus Black (1882-1960). Black had worked for Det Store Nordiske Telegraph-Selskab (The Great Nordic Telegraph Society) in China 1902-1930 and had lived for most of that time in Beijing. He spoke Chinese fluently and had the greatest admiration for Chinese culture. Chinese religious art was what interested him most, and it formed the core of the collection of paintings and objects he acquired in China. Black had been in the habit of visiting the local curio-dealers there and had got to know some of them quite well.¹

The donation to the Finnish National Museum included two portraits, one Daoist image and five Buddhist paintings.² The last group of five paintings were discussed decades later by Harry Halén, who identified them as part of a series representing the Ten Kings of Hell (Figs. 1 and 6).³ Today the paintings are part of the Museum of Cultures collection. The pictures are painted with ink and colours on paper, each sheet

¹ Cedergreen Bech, Sv., ed. *Dansk biografisk lexikon* (third edition), vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1979-1984), 210. He had first been stationed in Shanghai, Yantai (Shandong Province) and Tianjin and even after moving to Beijing he periodically visited these cities as well as Hong Kong. Most of his collection (more than 400 objects) found their way to the National Museum of Denmark, both as gifts and as acquisitions. My deepest thanks to John Richards for ensuring that my English reads smoothly.

² The handwritten inventory entries are dated 14.1.1932. The two portraits are in fact ancestor portraits and the Daoist image remains unidentified. The inventory numbers of the Ten Kings paintings are: VK5132:3-7. National Museum Catalogue, National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki. Museum of Cultures and National Museum of Finland are both organizationally under the National Board of Antiquities.

³ Harry Halén, *Mirrors of the Void: Buddhist Art in the National Museum of Finland* (Helsinki: Museovirasto, 1987).

measuring 78 x 120 cm and each image surrounded by a painted orange frame. The note on the provenance of these images in the collection catalogue says that the paintings were acquired in Beijing and that they date to the Wanli 萬曆 period (1572–1620) of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644); however, their exact place of origin is not known. The paintings have no inscriptions. In all of the paintings, a judge/king sits behind a desk surrounded by assistants and passes judgement on the deceased who are brought in front of him. Those who are found to have committed crimes are cruelly punished and tortured. This paper will take a closer look at the possible origins of the compositional formula featured in these paintings and it will discuss representations of the underworld in relation to the verbal tradition.

Chinese conceptions of afterlife

The earliest surviving textual evidence of the story of the Ten Kings and their Netherworld courts is *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* 十王經, which in its written form, as far is known to us, dates to the early tenth century. It was based on ideas that were already in circulation much earlier and the American Professor Stephen Teiser maintains that these ideas took definite shape in the seventh century.⁴ However, the Chinese had devised various strategies to negotiate with the Netherworld long before that. The rich archaeological record of burials and tombs from the Neolithic period onwards is testimony to that, and this lengthy history shows that conceptions of what the afterlife might be like had evolved over time.

Ancestor worship played a central role in Chinese culture and established a continuity between the living and the dead. In China the idea that one cannot escape the grip of bureaucracy even after death is an ancient one, dating back at least to the fourth century BCE, and so preceding the arrival of Buddhism.⁵ The dead met with far harsher officials scrutinising their past deeds as they stood in 'court' than ever they did when they were alive. Buddhism, arriving in China around the first century CE and gaining popularity during the fourth century, introduced ideas of rebirth, karma and samsara. These ideas were not assimilated or

⁴ Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003 [1994]), p. 1.

⁵ See, for example, Wu Hung, *The Art of the Yellow Springs* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), p. 35.

accepted uncritically; instead, Buddhism had to contend with indigenous thought systems such as Confucianism and Daoism in addition to diffuse popular traditions, all of which encompassed some notions of an afterlife and even a kind of rebirth. This encounter resulted in a fascinating fusion of ideas with regard to the afterlife and particularly its bureaucratic nature as manifested in the establishment of the courts ruled by the Ten Kings.

In their discussion of the Ten Kings, the Chinese use an expression *diyu* 地獄, (literally ‘earth prison’) which is usually translated in English as Hell, though Purgatory might be the nearest equivalent, since in the Chinese case there is no question of eternal damnation.⁶ Instead, *diyu* is a place where one’s deeds in life are judged and accordingly rewarded or punished. The journey through these courts takes three years altogether: the meetings with the Kings take place on the 7th, the 14th, the 21st, the 28th, the 35th, the 42nd, the 49th, the 100th day and then the 1st and 3rd year after death. The Kings are like judges and they are exclusively concerned with making just judgements of the dead.⁷ They decide what form one takes in the next reincarnation: a god, a human being, an animal, a ghost or a denizen of hell.⁸ There is in the Underworld an additional realm which could more accurately be called Hell. One may be sent to it after the trial at the tenth court and that sentence will last for eternity. In *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* this is called ‘the Avīci Hell’.⁹

Pictorial composition

In the Helsinki paintings, the vertical compositional format is divided horizontally into two parts (Figs. 1 and 6). In the upper part we see a gentleman, who is dressed in a Ming style official robe tied with a sash at the waist and wearing a crown, similar in shape to those worn by the

⁶ Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, pp. 1-2.

⁷ See, for example, Anne S. Goodrich, *Chinese Hells: The Peking Temple of Eighteen Hells and the Chinese Conceptions of Hell* (St. Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1981), pp. 67-68; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 2007), p. 35.

⁸ There are variations to the number of paths of reincarnation. A sixth path is sometimes added between gods and human beings, that of a titan: Stephen F. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples* (Seattle, WA and London: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 60-61.

⁹ Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, p. 202.

imperial princes of the Ming dynasty.¹⁰ He is seated behind a table draped with cloth and he has writing utensils and an open scroll in front of him. He is sitting on a round-back chair, also covered with a textile. Behind him is a sumptuous standing screen displaying a narrative image painted in black ink outline. The borders of the screen are decorated with a pattern which combines swastikas in squares with yin-yang roundels and yellow, blue, green and red octagons, and though it is difficult to decipher exactly what is on them, they are reminiscent of extant silk velvet panels patterned with flowers and Buddhist treasures.¹¹ Several attendants – scribes, officials and guardian figures – surround the gentleman. They are conducting various tasks, for example, holding up documents (records of good or bad deeds). The shelves storing these scrolls are seen either on the upper left or the upper right corner of the picture. The whole upper scene is placed on a terrace with an elaborately decorated balustrade in the background. Finally, a cloud formation decorates the upper edge of the image, covering in part the top of the screen and the storage shelves.

If the upper part repeats a similar compositional formula from painting to painting, the lower part displays a chaos of varying elements and events. These are mostly depictions of gruesome tortures, but in two cases, groups of people are serenely passing by. Each one of these lower scenes is different with regard to its compositional structure. One of them shows an entrance gate on the lower right corner where a figure dressed in Buddhist attire seems to be greeting the arrivals. Another one has a gate through which the deceased enter the wheel of rebirth and another a bridge over a river full of snakes. Since the paintings have no inscriptions, these differences might offer a pointer to the correct sequence of Kings.

This would need to be established by close visual comparison with other sets of the Ten Kings whose identities have been established. However, this is not as straightforward as it sounds. The text, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, provides a list of the order of the Ten Kings but it does not specify which tortures and punishments are related to each court – it just states in general that people suffer in the earth

¹⁰ See Craig Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall (eds), *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China* (London: The British Museum, 2014), p. 68: Fig. 45.

¹¹ Shelagh Vainker, *Chinese Silk* (London: The British Museum Press, 2004), p. 148, plate 94.

prisons.¹² The only references to particular iconographical features place ‘the crossing of the River Nai’¹³ to the second court and the ‘mirror of actions’¹⁴ to the fifth. Iconographical identification in its entirety is too broad a topic for the present essay, as its scope is limited primarily to tracing the origins of the compositional formula.

The two-part compositional formula dates back at least to the Southern Song dynasty. The earliest surviving depictions of the theme of the Ten Kings of Hell are from Dunhuang and date to the ninth and tenth centuries, but these are different in their compositional structure.¹⁵ The ones in handscroll format show the kings seated at their desks, one after the other as the viewer unrolls the scroll (Fig. 2).¹⁶ The deceased pass in front of them in procession: the devout are carrying sutras they have copied or sculptures they have donated to temples, whereas the wicked are wearing wooden cangues around their necks and handcuffs – some are being beaten by demons. The hanging scrolls feature the bodhisattva Dizang 地藏 (Kṣitigarbha) as the central figure and the Ten Kings are arrayed in rows next to him, five on each side and again sitting at their desks (Fig. 3).¹⁷ Dizang had the power to rescue people from the Underworld prisons and he is frequently depicted with the Ten Kings.

When we come to the late twelfth century, we find that each of the Kings is occupying his own court and dominating the scene where various punishments are meted out in front of him. Dizang seems to have vanished. This compositional formula appears to be fully formed in the nine surviving paintings of a set of ten divided between the Metropolitan

¹² Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, pp. 197-219.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁵ See Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, Appendix 4 for a list of early visual representations. Depictions of the Netherworld in general can be found earlier, for example, Cave 321 at the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and Cave 19 at Yulin, see Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, p. 126.

¹⁶ More details of the scroll are found on the British Museum website: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=322984001&objectId=6640&partId=1#more-views (accessed 23.3.2016).

¹⁷ More information on the painting on the British Museum website: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=6568&partId=1&searchText=ten+kings+of+hell&page=1 (accessed 23.3.2016)

Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 4)¹⁸ and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.¹⁹ The Kings sit at their desks, as they did already in the images where Dizang occupied the central position, but behind each of them is now a screen with a painted image. The desk of each King is on the same level as the execution of the punishments and tortures. Depictions of the Ten Kings in later paintings of this theme repeat this two-part compositional structure, though in time there will be a clearer separation between the domains of the judgements and the punishments – the upper and lower sections of the pictorial space. But how did the formula originate? There is an imageless gap of ca. 200 years between the scrolls found at Dunhuang and these luxurious paintings on silk with their vibrant colours.

Screens have traditionally formed an important part of the furnishings of an interior in a Chinese house or palace as dividers of space or as protection from drafts. In paintings, screens have served as pictorial devices helping to structure pictorial space and the narrative flow of a story. The most famous example of this approach is *The Night Banquet*, a long handscroll reckoned to depict the evening parties hosted by Han Xizai 韓熙載, Southern Tang dynasty official.²⁰

Screens have also been used as backdrops behind seating in formal settings, particularly behind thrones. However, the practice of representing emperors sitting in front of a screen seems to be a later phenomenon. Scenes from Li Gonglin's 李公麟 (1049–1106) *Filial Piety* handscroll show the ruler sitting on a couch, which has a carved ornamental railing with a raised back in the middle. However, there is no screen behind him. The only occasions a screen is depicted in these

¹⁸ Jin Chushi (active late 12th century), *The Ten Kings of Hell*, one of a set of five hanging scrolls, ink and colour on silk, 129.5 x 49.5 cm (Rogers Fund, 1929/30.76.293, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Image in the public domain: [http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44509? sortBy=Relevance&ft=ten+kings+of+hell&pg=1&rpp=20&pos=4](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44509?sortBy=Relevance&ft=ten+kings+of+hell&pg=1&rpp=20&pos=4) (accessed 1.4.2016).

¹⁹ For the five paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see Wen Fong, *Beyond Representation* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), pp. 332-343; for the four paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, see Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1997), pp. 167-170.

²⁰ Details of the painting and its attribution are found in De-nin Lee, *The Night Banquet: A Chinese Scroll through Time* (Seattle, WA and London: University of Washington Press, 2010). For images, see also <https://scrolls.uchicago.edu/scroll/night-revels-han-xizai> (accessed 1.4.2016).

scenes are when we are shown a domestic setting in which the screen is placed behind the seat of the head of the family.²¹ Song imperial portraits depict the emperor sitting on a chair, but there is no screen behind him. In fact, a screen behind the seat of an emperor does not appear until the Ming dynasty, in the portrait of the Hongzhi Emperor (1487-1505).²² So the source for this idea of depicting a king seated with a screen behind him does not come from imperial portraiture.

Li Gonglin's *Filial Piety* handscroll also shows a scene of a judge holding court: he is sitting on a chair but not behind a desk; instead, the desk has been placed beside him. The judge is sitting on a terrace of a building, a few steps higher than the petitioners and accused below. However, the pictorial space is divided diagonally into two different spheres, whereas in the images of the *Ten Kings of Hell* the division is more usually horizontal. The Kings on the British Museum handscroll look like judges at their desks with scrolls of writing – the registers of the names of the deceased – in front of them. The same can be said of the hanging scrolls where Dizang's image is the focal point, though in some examples the kings are seated on a dais and not at a desk.

It appears to be the case that the source for the use of screens as backdrops is to be found in religious art. Deities were depicted sitting in large armchairs (reminiscent of the royal seats in *Filial Piety*) and with a screen behind them. The statue of Yi Jiang 邑姜 of 1087, in the Hall of the Sage Mother (Shengmudian 聖母殿) in the Jinci 晉祠 temple (Taiyuan, Shaanxi) is a good example of this practice (Fig. 5).²³

Leaves from an *Album of Daoist and Buddhist Themes* (Cleveland Museum of Art; Southern Song to Yuan) contain, amongst other religious subject matter, sketches of the Netherworld Kings.²⁴ Some of

²¹ For details of this scroll, see:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39895?sortBy=Relevance&ft=li+gonglin&pg=1&rpp=20&pos=1>
(accessed 1.4.2016).

²² Anonymous, *Portrait of the Hongzhi Emperor* 明李宗坐像 (*Ming Lizong [Hongzhi] zuoxiang*), hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 208.6 x 154.3 cm), National Palace Museum, Taipei.

²³ She was the wife of King Wu, founder of the Zhou dynasty and the mother of the first lord of the state of Jin, thus called the Sage Mother. See Figs. 2 and 3 in Amy McNair, 'On the Date of the Shengmudian Sculptures at Jinci', *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 49, No. 3/4 (1988 - 1989), pp. 238-253.

²⁴ The album consists of 50 leaves, painted with ink on paper; for details see [http://www.clevelandart.org/art/2004.1?f\[0\]=field_collection:828](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/2004.1?f[0]=field_collection:828) (accessed 1.4. 2016).

the images present the King sitting at a desk with a screen behind him. However, several leaves depict him on a chair with the screen in the background and the desk partly hidden behind the screen and occupied by a scribe preparing documents for the King's perusal. This shows that artists were still experimenting with how best to arrange the King in the composition, though the presence of the screen behind the King seems to have become a norm.

Several of the sets depicting the Ten Kings and dating to the Southern Song dynasty came from the workshops in Ningbo – including the set divided between Boston and New York. Ningbo had become the most dominant point of call for maritime trade in the late twelfth century.²⁵ Ceramics from Fujian and Zhejiang formed an important class of objects for export, but the city also had a thriving quarter of painting studios providing mostly religious paintings for a clientele which included visitors from Korea and Japan.²⁶ These workshops produced a great variety of Buddhist paintings, not only on the Ten Kings theme, but pictures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, in addition to series of Lohan paintings.

In these Song dynasty examples of the Ten Kings, the judgements are taking place in a garden, whereas in the Helsinki sequence the setting is more office-like with the shelves of full of scrolls on either side and a profusion of attendants circling around the judge-King. How were real-life courtroom scenes depicted in visual art? Earlier depictions seem to be only of the Netherworld courts, which are assumed to imitate and take their inspiration from real-life situations. Woodcut illustrations to novels and dramas in the Ming and Qing dynasties show us courtroom proceedings and in these the judges sit at their desks with a screen behind them and the claimants and accused in front.²⁷

The album is dated to the thirteenth century, but may, in fact, include leaves done over a longer period of time during the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties.

²⁵ Richard von Glahn, 'Ningbo-Hakata Merchant Network and the Reorientation of East Asian Maritime Trade, 1150–1350', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 74:2 (Dec. 2014): pp. 249-279 [at p. 250].

²⁶ Von Glahn, 'Ningbo-Hakata Merchant Network', 271 (ceramics trade); Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons*, pp.160, 170.

²⁷ See, for example, Fig. 4.40b in Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); or, Fig. 157 in Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

Picture within a picture

The screens become a site where artists can elaborate on the meaning of the painting's subject. A 'picture within a picture' convention is fairly common in Chinese painting. When on a screen it may be just what it is: a representation of a decorative screen as used in an interior. However, there are cases when it is more than that, particularly if the screen is placed behind a person.²⁸

The most common subjects on the screens in the Ten Kings series seem to be flowers, landscapes and dragons. The screen images in the Helsinki paintings are unusual in connection with this subject matter because they are narrative scenes. These are painted in outline and on closer inspection there is some element of drama in them. For example, in Fig. 1 the screen features two men and one child who are on a pavement leading to a building of which we are shown only a corner of a terrace. The gestures and the appearance of these figures might remind one of Chinese theatre: one of them wears a headdress with long feathers like a military official and the other a hat worn by court officials; the latter is clutching the boy at his side as if to protect him. In addition, we see trees and a garden rock and the upper part of the screen image is framed by a cloud formation.

Theatre and death met each other in many ways: plays were performed at funerals and representations related to drama furnished tombs. Several dramas and stories include passages where the main protagonist visits the Netherworld courts. In the background of all this is the idea that drama can be connective between human and divine realms. Drama and popular storytelling offered an oral tradition, which informed the less literate audience of what might be awaiting them after they died. Though we have the text, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, the basic idea of the Ten Kings and their courts was elaborated and developed through oral tradition. Therefore, in order to understand the changes in the iconography of the representations of the Ten Kings, it is important to remember that the text an artist may have used as the source for his imagery would rarely be the scripture itself. Rather, the inspiration would be stimulated by oral storytelling and performances of plays or, in

²⁸ This 'picture within a picture' phenomenon is extensively discussed in Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996).

more literate circles, by novels.

The most commonly and popularly known story is probably the narrative of Monk Mulian's 目連 search for his mother in the Underworld. The origins of the story can be found in the canonical Buddhist sutras dating to the sixth century or maybe even earlier. However, as a play it made its appearance in the sixteenth century.²⁹ It is an elaborate and vivid account of Mulian's experiences during his journey through the different parts of the Underworld: the descriptions of the details of punishments and tortures encountered (as a spectator) on the various stages of the journey are hair-raising and effective. He comes across sinners being thrown into an ice-pond, sawn in half or pushed into vats of burning oil; roosters with their bronze bills and iron spurs pecking out the sinners' eyes; and demon-soldiers cutting open chests and bellies, pulling out tongues and guts and so forth.³⁰

Another popular story (which also existed as a play) was the novel *Journey to the West* (西遊記) and its sequel *The Tower of Myriad Mirrors* (西遊補). The scenes of Sun Wukong's 孫悟空 (*The Monkey King*) and his comrades' visits to the Underworld take on spectacular dimensions, particularly in the sequel, which tells the additional exploits of Sun Wukong. Among these, Sun is asked to be deputy to King Yama (one of the Ten Kings, Yanluo Wang 閻羅王), who had been taken ill and died.³¹ In these texts, as in the Mulian story, the punishments and tortures are described in a level of vivid detail which is hard to capture in paintings. It is also difficult to express in visual imagery the spectacle that Sun Wukong faces when confronted with 'red-haired devils, green-toothed devils, and a motley group of masterless, homeless devils, numbering in all eighty million four thousand and six hundred' or when he summoned 'a unit of six hundred grassy-haired, tattoo-faced, insect-throated, windy-eyed, iron-handed, copper-headed marshals and put Bailiff Ts'ui in charge of them' and so on.³²

However, our anonymous painter has tried his best to include as

²⁹ Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang* (Seattle, WA and London: University of Washington Press, 2011), pp. 4-8.

³⁰ Grant and Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell*, pp. 72-87.

³¹ Dong Yue (1620-1686), *The Tower of Myriad Mirrors*, transl. Shuen-fu Lin and Larry J. Schultz (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2000; Kindle edition, loc 1286 of 3043).

³² *Ibid.*: quotations from the Kindle edition, loc 1299 and 1335 [of 3043], respectively.

much horror as possible. In Fig. 1, on the right is a brown brick gate with a flaming roof. The gate is decorated at the top with a feline animal face – possibly a lion since one can see the curling hair of the mane – with a third eye perpendicular to the two (normal) eyes. A demon-soldier is leading a person wearing a wooden cangue around the neck through the gate and the person dressed in Buddhist attire standing by the gate is most likely bodhisattva Dizang.³³ Demon-soldiers, assisted by small demons, are carrying out various punishments: poaching the eyes of some sinners, operating a bladed wheel which grinds people into pieces and hanging men onto hooks fastened on a ridge pole like meat suspended in a butcher's shop. Here and there on the ground, more sinners await their turn with their hands tied at the back and a headless torso wanders about holding his head by the hair and swinging it around. In another example of this series (Fig. 6), on the right of the lower section is a pool filled with snakes surrounding the four sinners already thrown into it. Around the pool, demons are butchering body parts of men and women. Toward the left, demons grind body parts on a millstone into a bloody mush. Some of the demon-soldiers and small demons are green, black or brown, possibly reflecting a verbal source.

On a calmer note, a glance at the desks and the objects in front of the Kings shows that some details in the paintings come very close to the description of 'a tin ink-well containing vermilion ink and a copper brush-stand against which leaned two bright red brushes' in *The Tower of Myriad Mirrors*.³⁴ These few examples already make it clear that popular novels and dramas may have inspired painters when they made choices for the visual description of characters involved in the action and the details of the setting. However, more research needs to be done in order to elaborate on this aspect. Another important question relates to the screen images in the paintings: are they drawn in a similar manner from drama, novels and short stories? Also, what would the function of these screen images be in the context of the representations of the Ten Kings?

The answers to the questions are beyond this short essay. One of the challenges of research is that we have in Helsinki only five paintings

³³ Dizang is often portrayed wearing monk's robes and having a shaved head; however, he appears to have a headdress of some kind in many of the images where he is accompanied by the Ten Kings.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Kindle edition loc 1323 [of 3043].

from a set of ten. We may say with a certain amount of security that the two examples presented here are the first (Fig. 1) and the last (Fig. 6) paintings of the set: as discussed above, the first one has a gate where people enter for the first time (met by bodhisattva Dizang) and the last one has a gate through which they leave to enter the wheel of rebirth.

Conclusion

The paintings were sold to Sophus Black as dating to the Wanli reign of the Ming dynasty. However, since the paintings are on coarse paper and not of particularly high quality, and are also made for use, what are the chances that they would have survived from the early seventeenth century to the early twentieth century? These types of paintings, like so much religious painting, were functional works and if they were damaged, new ones would be commissioned or bought from a workshop to replace them. Though the characters wear Ming style clothing it does not mean that the paintings themselves date to the Ming. We know from theatrical productions that Ming costumes were not changed to those of the Qing when the dynasty changed; instead, drama remained visually anchored in the Ming.³⁵

This essay has only scratched the surface of the variety of issues arising in the study of the visual representations of the Ten Kings. The paintings in the collection of the Museum of Cultures in Helsinki were modelled after a compositional formula established in the Song dynasty. The series dated to the Southern Song and divided between the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston gives us a glimpse of what a luxury production of this theme would have looked like. Popular versions of the theme emulated their composition in general outline, but added more narrative detail, drawing from the rich oral/textual tradition which transmitted eyewitness accounts of visits to the Underworld and which had accumulated along the way as the centuries passed by.

³⁵ Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness*, pp. 226-227.



Fig. 1.
Painting from the series *The Ten Kings of Hell*; ink and colour on paper, 78 x 120 cm;
Museum of Cultures, Helsinki (from Halén, *Mirrors of the Void*, VK5132: 3).



Fig 2.
The Ten Kings of Hell, 10th century, from Cave 17 at Qianfodong, Dunhuang; detail of a handscroll, ink and colour on paper, h. 27.8 cm; (Stein Collection) The British Museum (artwork in the Public Domain; photograph © The British Museum).

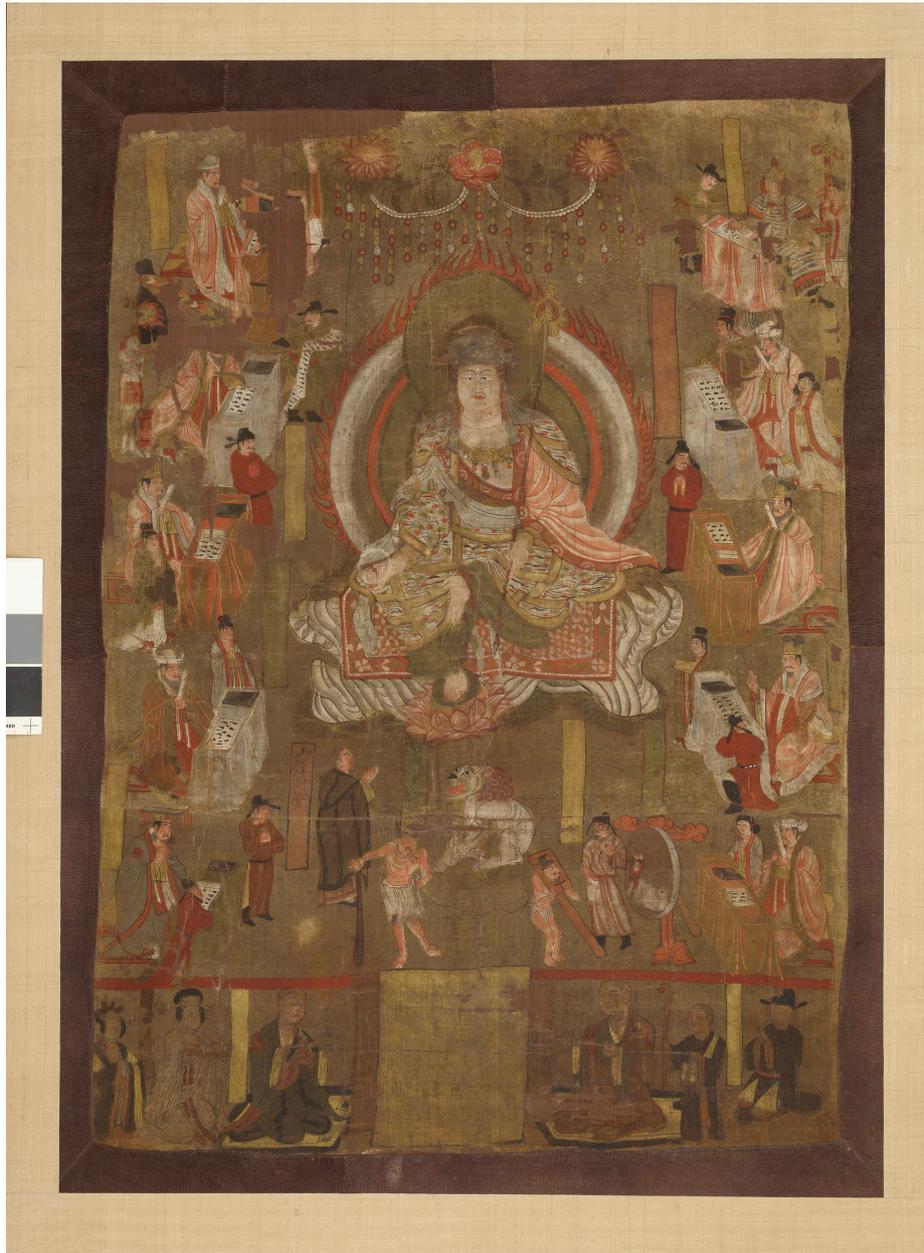


Fig. 3.
Kṣitigarbha (Dizang) and the Ten Kings of Hell, 10th century, from Cave 17 at Qianfodong, Dunhuang; hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 91 x 65.5 cm; (Stein Collection) The British Museum, London (artwork in the Public Domain; photograph © The British Museum).



Fig. 4.
Jin Chushi 金處士 (active late 12th century), *Ten Kings of Hell*, before 1195; hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 129.5 x 49.5 cm; Rogers Fund, 1929 (30.76.293), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (artwork in the Public Domain; photograph © The Metropolitan Museum of Art).



Fig. 5.
Detail of Yi Jiang (Sage Mother), ca. 1087; Shengmudian, Jinci Temple (from *Chinese Sculpture*, Fig. 4.45).



Fig. 6.
Painting from the series *The Ten Kings of Hell*; ink and colour on paper,
78 x 120 cm; Museum of Cultures, Helsinki (from Halén, *Mirrors of the
Void*, VK5132:6).

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