BETWEEN DEATH AND REBIRTH: VISUAL AND RELIGIOUS INTERMEDIATE IN CHINESE *TEN KINGS OF HELL* PAINTINGS

SARAH TANG
B.A. in History of Art
Yale University, Class of 2023

With the composition of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* around the 9th century in China, the idea of a liminal, intermediate state of existence between death and rebirth took form.[1] The scripture describes the journey of the deceased soul through the ten courts of the underworld – each ruled by one of the Ten Kings of Hell – before rebirth into one of six realms: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, or hell beings. During this three-year long process, the kings pass judgment on the deceased based on their actions in the previous life and their religious merit.[2] Since the advent of this scripture, paintings of the Ten Kings have appeared in three modes: first, the iconic format in which the kings play an auxiliary role surrounding the central bodhisattva Dizang; second, the narrative handscroll mode in which illustrations of the kings are accompanied by scriptural text; and third, the individual hanging scroll format in which each king is represented in his own court.[3] These latter scrolls act as a physical manifestation of the kings' courts, instilling fear in the viewer through their vivid depictions of the king as a bureaucratic judge overseeing the torture of the deceased.[4] Existing scholarship focuses on the evolution in format and representation of the Ten Kings from the Tang (618-907) to the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasties. However, limited surviving examples from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) leave a gap in the understanding of the Ten Kings during this time period.

Using a rare surviving set of five Ming dynasty *Ten Kings of Hell* scrolls dated to the 15th to 16th century at the Harvard Art Museums (figs. 1-5), I argue that the religious iconographies, visual characteristics, and references to Ming dynasty court arts within these paintings embody the notion of the intermediate, which refers to both something that occurs in-between two points in space or time, and something

[1] The cult of the Ten Kings adopts elements from Indian Buddhism; see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 1-6. The cult of Dizang and the Three Kings likely predated the Ten Kings cult in China; see Xiao Jing, "Dizang and the Three Kings: Constructing Buddhist Hell by Imitating the Bureaucratic System in the Tang Dynasty," *Religions* (2022): 317.
[2] Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 2-7.
[3] For an in-depth discussion of the evolution between these three stages, see Lilian Cheeyun Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld: The Evolution of Ten Kings Paintings in Medieval China and Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 5-30.
[4] Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, vii; 21-26.

that mediates between people or objects.[5] The paintings act as an intermediate on three different dimensions. In the first part of this paper, I demonstrate how the religious iconographies and ritual contexts of the paintings establish an intermediary between the deceased and the living, and visualize the passage between death and rebirth. The second part of this paper assesses how the visual motif of the cloud functions as a vehicle that allows the depicted souls to travel within and across the scrolls. I demonstrate that the prominent clouds in the Harvard set both function as an intermediate vehicle to bridge different realms of existence within each painting, and across the set as a whole to create a continuum across space and time. In the third part of this paper, I discuss how the references to period-specific decorative arts within the paintings connect religious painting to the broader visual and material culture of the Ming dynasty court, and thus mediate the experience of the viewer by forming a vision of hell that mirrors the bureaucratic space of the living world. My argument builds upon formal and iconographic studies on Ming dynasty Ten Kings of Hell murals,[6] and demonstrates how the combination of religious iconography, visual motifs, and secular references within the Harvard paintings creates a comprehensible and convincing representation of hell for the Ming dynasty viewer. Together, these three parts demonstrate the complexity of the intermediate, and underscore the power of mobility and court paraphernalia in the concepts of hell and rebirth during the Ming dynasty.

Between the Living and the Dead: Hell as a State of Intermediate Existence

The Scripture on the Ten Kings renders hell as a state of intermediate existence, and as such, establishes motifs that signal rebirth while emphasizing the role of donors in mediating the experience of the deceased. The Harvard set not only revives the scriptural iconography – a convention that disappeared by the Song dynasty – but also demonstrates that living relatives were instrumental in aiding the deceased in their journey through the ten courts. The Harvard set thus reinforces the possibility of a favorable rebirth and the influence of mediators in the deceased soul's journey through the underworld.

Buddhist hell has been depicted in Chinese art since as early as the 6th century; but the idea of an intermediate state of existence between death and rebirth was not established until sometime between the 8th and 10th century, in the *Foshuo yanluowang shouji sizhong yuxiu shengqi wangsheng jingtu jing* 佛說閻羅王授記四眾預修生也往生淨土經 (The Scripture Spoken by the Buddha to the Four Orders on the

[5] For a definition of the term "mediate" in the formalist sense, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 152-154.

[6] See Liu Wei 刘伟, "Shanxi Gaoping Dinglin *si* Mingdai *diyu shiwang tuxiang kao*" 山西高平定林寺明代地狱十王图像考 (Research on the Ten Kings of Hell murals in Dinglin Temple in Gaoping, Shanxi), *Meishu* 美术2 (2017): 138-139; Qi Qingyuan 齐庆媛, "Yulin Xuankong *si* wanfodong Mingdai *bihua* Dizang *shiwang diyu bianxiang kaocha*" 榆林悬空寺万佛洞明代壁画地藏十王变相考察 (Study on the murals of Dizang and the Ten Kings of Hell in the Thousand Buddha cave of the Xuankong temple in Yulin), *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊 5 (2016): 58-73.

Prophecy Given to King Yama Concerning the Sevens of Life to Be Cultivated in Preparation for Rebirth in the Pure Land; hereafter, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*)[7] written by the monk Zangchuan 藏川. Early representations of hell employ vivid depictions of torture in order to warn the viewer of the consequences that those who commit grave sins will face; however, the introduction of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* altered the perception of karma by introducing the idea that actions performed by family members have influence on the rebirth of the deceased, while simultaneously encouraging veneration of the Ten Kings.[8] Stephen F. Teiser's translations and interpretations of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* lay the groundwork for interpreting the relationship between the scriptural traditions and later pictorial representations of the Ten Kings.[9] Comprising scriptural text and illustrations, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* names the ten individual kings and characterizes the respective courts that the deceased travel through before rebirth. Each king passes judgment on the deceased before entrance into the next court, and subjects those who have committed grave sins in their past life to torture. Throughout the three-year long process, the deceased can earn merit – and thus a less painful journey through hell – if living relatives commission copies of the scripture or artworks on their behalf.[10]

Existing scholarship divides the evolution of Ten Kings of Hell paintings into three primary formats: the iconic mode (fig. 6), the narrative mode, and the individual hanging scroll format (fig. 7); progressively, the Ten Kings gain increasing authority and the paintings achieve a visual vocabulary that defines the court of the king as akin to a secular, bureaucratic court. Venerative paintings in the iconic mode often follow the formula of a central bodhisattva – an individual who delays his or her own enlightenment in order to guide sentient beings – Dizang (Sanskrit: Ksitigarbha) surrounded by the Ten Kings, who pale in size compared to the deity. The narrative mode, used for ritual, pairs image side-by-side with text from *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* in the handscroll format, and as such, adheres to the iconography that is described in the scripture. Finally, the individual hanging scroll format – which originated and proliferated in the Southern Song (1127-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasty workshops of the port city Ningbo – comprises the closest predecessors to the Harvard set. In these hanging scrolls, the Ten Kings each occupy their own court and survey the torture of the deceased beings below them.

[7] Multiple copies of the scripture still exist; for an example, see *Foshuo yanluowang shouji sizhong yuxiu shengqi wangsheng jingtu jing*佛說閻羅王授記四眾預修生也往生淨土經 (The Scripture Spoken by the Buddha to the Four Orders on the Prophecy Given to King Yama Concerning the Sevens of Life to Be Cultivated in Preparation for Rebirth in the Pure Land), Pelliot Collection P2003, Bibliothèque nationale de France.
[8] For a survey of representations of hell from the 6th century to the emergence of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, see Stephen F. Teiser, ""Having Once Died and Returned to Life": Representations of Hell in Medieval China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48, no. 2 (1998).
[9] For an in-depth analysis and English translation of the scripture, see Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 196-219.
[10] Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 7.

These scrolls combine religious and secular elements, often situating the king in a surrounding resemblant of the elite tastes of the time period.[11]

The five existing *Ten Kings of Hell* paintings at the Harvard Art Museums stand at the far bookend of this trajectory discussed in existing scholarship, and as such, demonstrate a departure from their predecessors in their composition, visual and stylistic characteristics, and iconographic motifs. While it is difficult to assign all of the Harvard scrolls to a specific king due to the lack of identifying inscriptions, some of the paintings nevertheless include iconography that references specific motifs discussed within *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* – such as the karma scale (fig. 4a) and the karma mirror (fig. 5a). The five paintings derive their compositional formula from Song dynasty examples, and as such, depict the king's court occupying the top half of the painting while focusing the bottom half on myriad scenes of torture. However, the dense compositions, religious iconographies, and period-specific motifs set these scrolls apart from their Song predecessors. The kings are situated in interior spaces packed with court attendants and references to decorative arts objects. Across the five paintings, the king's courts seem to be adjoined through the back wall behind each king, as well as continuous tiled flooring. Within each painting, swirling clouds loom over the king's head, while additionally providing a ground upon which scenes of torture in the foreground take place. This set of paintings is essential in gaining an understanding of the Ten Kings theme during the Ming dynasty; they are unique in their abundant references to Ming material culture and inclusion of original motifs – both religious and secular.

Iconic paintings of the Ten Kings establish the idea of an intermediary in the journey of the deceased through the underworld through the bodhisattva Dizang; by vowing to save all living beings from an ill fate in hell, Dizang guided the deceased in the bureaucratic processes of the underworld.[12] Dizang's importance as a guide is emphasized in the earliest representations of the Ten Kings (fig. 6). In these hanging scrolls, the Ten Kings play an auxiliary role, surrounding the central bodhisattva on both sides. Dizang's lasting importance throughout the Song dynasty is reflected in the ritual display of Ten Kings scrolls. While the Ten Kings gain increasing authority between the earliest formats and these later formats – like the Harvard set, in which each king is represented in his own court within an individual hanging scroll – Dizang still plays a role in ritual practices. It has been speculated that a hanging scroll depicting Dizang in the iconic format would have hung in the center of the ritual display with five hanging scrolls of the Ten Kings arranged on either side. This

[11] The distinction and evolution between these three stages is outlined and discussed in Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, 5-30.

[12] Dizang's vow appears in the scripture *Dizang pu sa ben yuan jing* 地藏菩薩本願經 (The scripture on the past vows of the Ksitigarbha bodhisattva).

possibility is reflected in the orientation of the Ten Kings, who in each instance are either angled towards the right or the left side to face Dizang.[13]

Scriptural text and illustrations are synthesized in the narrative handscroll format succeeding the iconic format; these illustrations generally adhere to what is described in the text and define specific iconographies associated with some of the individual kings. Most prominently, the Fourth King, Wuguan, is associated with the karma scale, and the Fifth King, Yanluo, is associated with the motif of the karma mirror.[14] These motifs are included in the illustrations accompanying the scriptural descriptions. The idea that living relatives could mediate the experience of the deceased in the underworld is additionally referenced in the scriptural illustrations. Often, deceased figures depicted in the courts are shown evading torture by holding scrolls alluding to the copying of scriptures.[15]

The idea of salvation and the allusion to the possibility of a favorable rebirth diminish in in the Song and Yuan dynasty hanging scrolls that precede the Harvard set; while structurally, these scrolls lay a precedent for later representations of the Ten Kings, these Song and Yuan scrolls place emphasis on torture rather than salvation. Lothar Ledderose has pointed out that the Song dynasty examples seemingly abandon the possibility of a good rebirth, arguing that "the chances to avoid torture and punishment have dwindled."[16] These examples typically condense scenes of torture in the foreground, where no figure is shown mercy. The Song dynasty paintings additionally demonstrate an increased iconographic independence from *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*.[17] While the karma mirror associated with the Fifth King is seen in examples from Song dynasty artist Jin Chushi's workshop (fig. 7), overall the examples rarely identify the specific kings through means beyond the presence of identifying inscriptions.

By reviving some of the scriptural motifs while simultaneously incorporating their own visual vocabulary, the Harvard paintings revive the notion of rebirth and the possibility of mediating one's journey through hell. The allusion to the donor practices discussed in *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* is clearly referenced in the scroll in the Harvard set (fig. 4) where a bridge occupied by human figures dominates the lower right hand corner of the composition (fig. 4b). This painting likely depicts the court of the Fourth King, as indicated by the karma scale in the middle of the composition (fig. 4a). The bridge itself is adorned with lotus motifs, a symbol of rebirth. The two figures at the front of the bridge are of note; the figure dressed in yellow holds a devotional statue of a buddha outwards, while the shorter figure dressed in green carries a stack of books – likely copies of the scripture. This imagery

[13] This theory is proposed in Lothar Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," in *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 180.
[14] For a translation of these verses, see Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 212-214.
[15] Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," 184. For an illustration, see Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, 12.
[16] Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," 184.
[17] Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, 21.

of the bridge appears in some scriptural illustrations from the Tang dynasty – albeit not in the fourth court, but in the second, in which the deceased must tread through the rough waters of the River Nai over the Naihe bridge – a literal proxy between the living world and the underworld.[18] In the scriptural illustrations of the second court, the river occupies a significant portion of the composition and flows in a sharp zigzagging form; within the water, figures struggle to stay afloat. In the scriptural illustration now at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, a figure stands at the foot of the bridge in the same manner as in the Harvard painting and holds a devotional Buddha sculpture out towards the king, which acts as an offering to increase religious merit. The prominence of the bridge in the Harvard paintings signals the importance of familial intervention in the rebirth of the deceased soul, as established in the scripture.

That the bridge in the Harvard painting indicates the importance of donor mediation in the deceased's journey is supported by similar iconography in other Ming dynasty Ten Kings of Hell portrayals, where the proliferation of figures on the bridge signals that the figures are living family members rather than the deceased person undergoing his journey through hell. In the Ten Kings murals at the Ten-Thousand Buddha Cave of the Xuankong Monastery in Yulin, a line of six figures occupies the bridge in the depiction of the Second King's court.[19] The age range of the different figures represented – a woman who holds a banner, an elderly couple, a young man and woman, and a young boy – may represent three different generations of a family. In a departure from the scriptural illustration, where often only one figure is represented – and enacts the role of the deceased crossing the River Nai in the second court – the unique conglomeration of three generations of family members suggests that the figures are not the deceased, but are living family members participating in the act of cultivating merit through commissions and donations.[20] The Harvard painting similarly represents multiple figures on the bridge, including two younger women and two older men proceeding towards the front bearing offerings – thus establishing a clear visual manifestation of the living mediating the experience of the dead.

The iconography of the karma scale in tandem with the bridge depicted in the Harvard painting discussed above (see fig. 4c) further demonstrates the efficacy of cultivating merit in mediating the deceased's experience in the underworld. In an act of mediation or intervention, a blue-colored beast attempts to tip the karma scale by hanging himself onto the middle of the balance. This intervention opposes the mediation of the donor figures on the bridge. Stephen Teiser describes the

[18] For a translation of the scriptural verse See Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 212; for the significance of the River Nai and Naihe bridge in Chinese funerary practices, see Yang Lianfen, "Water in Traditional Chinese Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 2 (1993): 56.
[19] For an image and reconstruction of this iconography, see Qi, "Yulin Xuankong *si*," 65.
[20] The hypothesis that the proliferation of figures represents multiple generations of living family members derives from Qi, "Yulin Xuankong *si*," 65-67.

mechanics of the karma scale, as demonstrated in a scriptural illustration of the Fourth King at the Bibliothèque nationale; one side of the scale holds copies of the scripture donated by the deceased sinner or their relatives, while the other side contains a counterweight. The illustration suggests that the scale will tip in the direction of the counterweight – against the favor of the deceased – as indicated by the positioning of the Boy of Evil (*e tong* 惡童) on the side of counterweight.[21] In the Harvard scroll, the scale is located adjacent to the bridge with donors; the scale very clearly tips towards the side of the donors and their donated scriptures, indicating that the deceased will be redeemed through the intervention of their living relatives. The beast-like figure attempts to rig the scale, pulling down the side of the counterweight. This failed attempt at implicating the deceased in a judgment of morality demonstrates the efficacy of donors in mediating the fate of the deceased.

The Harvard paintings also demonstrate the connection between one's actions in a past life, their experience in the underworld, and the quality of their rebirth, which further implicates the underworld as an intermediate state bridging two lives where the deceased's fate can be altered. The hope for – or possibility of – a good rebirth dependent on moral conduct in one's past life is alluded to in the fifth scroll of the Harvard set (fig. 5). The motif of the karma mirror – or "mirror of actions" – features in two instances in this scroll; the two mirrors are located at either side of the middle register of the composition, flanking the king's desk. The iconography of the karma mirror is specific to the Fifth King of Hell, Yanluo (Sanskrit: Yama rāja), as described in *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*:

With their hair yanked and their heads pulled up to look in the mirror of actions, they begin to know that affairs from previous lives are rendered distinct and clear.[22] While the karma mirror has been represented in predecessors to the Harvard set, (see fig. 7), the Harvard example is unique in its representation of dual mirrors. In the mirror on the left, a man and woman's hair are yanked by two figures with animal-like features. The two figures being punished see the reflection of themselves slaughtering an animal in their previous life – a grave sin, and a common motif in the scriptural illustrations. In the mirror on the right, however, an elderly man and woman stand peacefully with their hands in the prayer position, accompanied by an official dressed in green; they look into the mirror to see a direct reflection of themselves – indicating ethical conduct in their past lives. As such, they seem to evade punishment and torture in the court.

Through the adaptation of scriptural iconography and inclusion of unique motifs that delineate the connections between a previous life and the next one, the Harvard paintings explicitly portray the courts of the Ten Kings as an intermediate state of existence between death and rebirth, during which living family members

[21] For the example and description of this illustration, see Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 174. The Boy of Evil is part of the iconography of the Twin Boys and Good and Evil (*shan e tongzi* 善惡童子), who were shown in early scriptural illustrations as record-keepers within the kings' courts.
[22] Teiser's translation; see *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 213-214.

mediate the experience of the deceased. In the following section, I will move on to a discussion of a prominent visual motif consistent across all five paintings: the cloud. I argue that the clouds function as an intermediate vehicle between realms of existence, signifying the double meaning of vehicle as an object that transports people across spatial boundaries, and an object used to express or embody an idea.

Between Realms: Clouds as an Intermediate Vehicle Across Space and Time

Clouds have been employed in religious and non-religious Chinese artworks across mediums. The cloud motif functions as a vehicle[23] in Buddhist, Daoist, and secular paintings, transporting figures across spatial realms – such as that of the supramundane versus mundane, or the dead versus the living – and facilitating the notion of a temporal journey. Building upon this rich tradition, the clouds in the Harvard paintings transport the deceased between realms of rebirth and across the physical space of the ten courts. The analogous use of the cloud motif across themes and mediums activates the cloud as a vehicle across the intermediate space of the underworld in the Harvard set.

While clouds appear in earlier examples of Ten Kings images, they are used more sparingly than in the Harvard set. The first instances of clouds appear in both the iconic mode and the narrative handscroll mode, where the clouds symbolize movement into the six paths of rebirth following judgment in the courts of the Ten Kings.[24] In an example of a Song dynasty painting from Jin Chushi's workshop, a trail of white clouds intercepts the foreground, though does not engulf the space there as in the Harvard set (fig. 8). Within the Harvard paintings, the clouds organize space pictorially by defining the arena of the tortured beings as separate from the court of the king (see fig. 1). The five paintings are united by swirling clouds, which dominate the composition by looming above the king's court and acting as a ground plane upon which the acts of torture take place. The compositional divide within each painting is created through the juxtaposition of a disorderly realm engulfed by clouds against an interior setting; all scenes of torture occur within the clouds, while the king's court remains largely untouched by the clouds and occupies a clearly-demarcated room upon a tiled floor. This visual tension between the structure and delineation of the court and the lack of compositional order in the torture arena derives from the Song dynasty formula for Ten Kings painting. The scrolls have a modular quality, and follow the same compositional formula – consisting of a king's court represented with order and "serene dignity" juxtaposed against an unruly foreground.[25]

[23] Hubert Damisch uses the term "vehicle" to describe the function of clouds in Chinese and Japanese Buddhist paintings of moving deities; see Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202.
[24] Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, 6 (see p. 14 for an illustration); Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 178.
[25] The modularity of the Song dynasty paintings is argued in Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," 165.

In Chinese Buddhist paintings in addition to the Ten Kings of Hell theme, clouds signal the presence or arrival of a supernatural being. Clouds have been used in Buddhist paintings classified as "apparition images" – in which deities descend onto the mortal world by their own will – and "summoned images," in which people in the mortal world summon the deities through ritual.[26] In the former, clouds indicate the sudden appearance of a supernatural being into a realm in which they normally do not exist, while in the latter, the style of clouds are tailored to represent the physical act of moving between these realms. The use of clouds to traverse between realms is especially pronounced in Buddhist ritual paintings from the series *Five Hundred Luohans (Arhats)* created during the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279). Clouds are one device through which the viewer is able to visualize ritual and thus bridge the tension between "occultism and empiricism," or the "real world and the represented world."[27] The bridging of two realms is exemplified in *Luohans Bestowing Alms on Suffering Human Beings* (fig. 9). The divide between the arhats – the disciples of the Buddha who have achieved spiritual enlightenment – and the "suffering human beings" or beggars is indicated through the bright pigmentation of the arhats versus the muted portrayal of the beggars in ink;[28] nevertheless, the arhats are brought down to the same realm through the use of clouds.

Beyond religious painting, clouds effectively function as a vehicle in paintings depicting "spirit encounters" during the Yuan dynasty, where they suggest the traversing of the boundary between reality and dreams; here, the transience of the cloud form suggests a fleeting moment in time. In Liu Yuan's early 13th century painting, *Sima You's Dream of Su Xiaoxiao*, depicting a popular love story between a spirit and a human, the spirit Su Xiaoxiao appears amidst a mass of clouds in a room where Sima You is asleep (fig. 10). Sima You is scholar on earth, while Su Xiaoxiao is a courtesan who has already passed away; Su Xiaoxiao travels from the ghostly realm to the human realm upon the vehicle of the cloud. The composition of this painting mirrors that of the Harvard paintings and establishes a clear-cut delineation between the respective spaces of the spirit and human; the spirit is engulfed in hazy clouds, while the scholar-official remains static in an angular interior space. In the story's accompanying lyrics, Su Xiaoxiao reveals that the two will once again meet in the future, referencing the progression of time through the "passing of years" and the

[26] The classification of "apparition images" versus "summoned images" is discussed in Ide Seinosuke, "Buddhist Paintings from the Song and Yuan Dynasties: Visual Representations in the Paintings of Devotional Deities," *The International Journal of Korean Art and Archaeology* 4 (2010): 100-106.

[27] These tensions are established in Phillip E. Bloom, "Visualizing Ritual in Southern Song Buddhist Painting," in *Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China*, eds. by Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Shih-shan Susan Huang (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 82; 93. For an in-depth discussion of the function of clouds in Song dynasty Buddhist ritual painting, see Bloom, "Visualizing Ritual," 86-97.

[28] The contrast in materiality of the arhats versus beggars is another way that the artist establishes the inherent "ontological differences" between these figures, as discussed in Phillip E. Bloom, "Ghosts in the Mists: The Visual and the Visualized in Chinese Buddhist Art, ca. 1178," *The Art Bulletin* 98, no. 3 (2016): 308-311.

imagery of changing seasons.[29] The spirit's presence in Sima You's dream is fleeting, as revealed in his response; he describes that "the dream ends, colored clouds are nowhere to be found."[30] The transience of the clouds is here emphasized, imbuing the motif with a sense of temporality. The spirit thus traverses between the real world and imagined world through the dimensions of both space and time.

The mobile and temporal qualities of the cloud are further emphasized in depictions of immortals and mortals in procession, where the horizontal format of the artwork facilitates the progression of a journey through space and time. In the *Album of Daoist and Buddhist Themes* at the Cleveland Museum of Art, ink drawings of Daoist deities in procession are combined with images of the Ten Kings of Hell and celestial armies.[31] Within the images of the Ten Kings in this album, clouds frame and engulf the deceased figures that appear before the king's court. The function of the cloud as a vehicle, however, is encapsulated in the image on Leaf 26, *Procession of Daoist Deities*, where nine figures – six of whom are the namesake Daoist immortals – embark on this procession upon a bed of clouds (fig. 11). The horizontal arrangement of figures allows the paintings to convey the passing of a journey through space and time – rather than just a mere apparition – from the immortal realm into the mortal realm, or vice versa.[32] The clouds are stylized in a wave-like manner, appearing dynamic and evoking movement towards the left side of the composition. The flag in the middle of the composition additionally billows towards the right, simulating movement through the wind.

The transmedial presence of the cloud further underscores the efficacy of the motif in bridging physical spaces. Originally produced in the Song dynasty and restored in the second half of the 19th century,[33] the arhat statues in the Zijin Nunnery in Suzhou – which combine the mediums of sculpture and painting – are united by the use of colorful, swirling clouds. Statues of the arhats project in relief from a painted mural dominated by these clouds. Sculpted clouds additionally connect the painted backdrop into three-dimensional space, forming a platform upon which the arhat statues extend from the surface of the wall. Through the harmonization of sculpture and the painted backdrop, the figures appear to emerge from the realm of the painted clouds and manifest into the space of the viewer – still upon the vehicle of the cloud. The fusion of painted and sculpted clouds thus creates a seamless transition between the two mediums, effectively permeating the space of

[29] For a translation of lyrics and in-depth discussion of this painting, see Fan Jeremy Zhang, "Dreams, Spirits, and Romantic Encounters in Jin and Yuan Theatrical Pictures," in *Visual and Material Cultures* (see note 27), 116-130.
[30] Zhang, "Dreams, Spirits, and Romantic Encounters," 118.
[31] The dating of this album is unclear; see Ju Hsi Chou and Anita Chung, *Silent Poetry: Chinese Paintings from the Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2015), 174-194.
[32] Shih-shan Susan Huang, "Paintings of Mobile Deities," in *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 302-305.
[33] For a scientific analysis of the pigments and repainting of this sculptural program, see Qiang Cui et al., "Analysis of Painted Materials and the Latest Repaint Time of Arhat Statues in Zijin Nunnery," *Journal of Innovation and Social Science Research* 9, no. 2 (2022): 62-71.

the viewer. Pigments play a role in forming this connection as well, as the consistent use of red, green, blue, and orange pigments in both the mural and painted layer of the sculptures constructs a continuum between the painted and sculpted clouds. In this sense, both the symbolism and three-dimensionality of the clouds function as a vehicle that bridges the realm of the representation with the physical space of the viewer.

Embodying this tradition in which clouds act as a transitory vehicle upon which figures can travel between realms, the earliest instance of clouds in the scriptural illustrations of the Ten Kings of Hell functions as a vehicle that leads the deceased into different realms of rebirth. *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* evokes the imagery of movement across space and time in both its scriptural passages and illustrations. The underworld is visualized as having distinct landscapes and temporal checkpoints, of which the finish line is the assignment into a realm of rebirth. In the illustrations of the ninth and tenth courts – as the deceased's journey through the underworld approaches its end – the clouds often become abstracted into trail-like shapes leading from the king's court into the perimeters of the paper, suggesting movement from the courts of the Ten Kings into the possible realms of rebirth.[34] Additionally, clouds feature in the illustration of the Sixth King – the "King of Transformations" – at the Bibliothèque nationale. *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* describes the realization here that the distinction between heaven and hell is a fine line.[35] The juxtaposition of the trailing, upward-moving clouds against the gated hell in the bottom of the composition visualizes the stark differences of a fate in heaven versus hell.

Contemporary to the Harvard set, the *Fourth King of Hell* painting at the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG) (fig. 12) demonstrates the continued use of the cloud within the theme of the Ten Kings as a vehicle to transport figures across spaces. On the right side of this painting, a reborn figure floats to the top of the composition upon a bed of pink clouds. Clouds appear abundantly in this example, simultaneously dominating the foreground and forming the background behind the king and the paraphernalia in his court – such as the landscape screen and bookshelf. In contrast to these clouds which are rendered in ink, the cloud that carries the floating figure is executed in a pink pigment, suggesting that the function of this particular cloud differs from the clouds dominating the rest of the painting. The pink cloud aids the manifestation of this figure in the realm of the Ten Kings; the movement of the cloud from the torture arena into the space of the court is suggested through the trail that connects the cloud to a lotus pot located over a pit of fire at the lower righthand corner of the painting. It is clear that this figure intercepts the space of the king's court and is on its way upward to exit the space. Though the figure is about to exit into a different realm, its presence is explicitly acknowledged by the actors in the

[34] For the iconography of the ninth and tenth courts, see Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 215-216.
[35] For a translation of the scriptural verse, see Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 214.

court, as the king and several of his attendants look up or gesture towards it. Once again, the cloud enables the floating figure to traverse into and out of the realm of the underworld.

Returning to the Harvard set, the clouds within each painting frame the actions that occur within the torture arena as temporary and leading ultimately to rebirth. Here, clouds denote the possibility of movement between realms of rebirth. The clouds do not necessarily bridge the realms of the real and the supramundane, as all of the action takes place within the underworld – an intermediate, liminal space to begin with. Within the clouds, there are references to the six realms of rebirth, such as the lowest realm of hell beings; the clouds function as the passage between the courts of hell and assignment to these different realms of rebirth. This allusion is seen in the third scroll (fig. 3), where the deceased are tossed into a boiling cauldron signifying a hot hell (fig. 3a), and the fifth scroll (fig. 5), where a group of the deceased have become locked within a jagged, cave-like structure drawn in white, indicating a cold hell (fig. 5d).[36] The framing of the torture scenes by these clouds thus expresses the notion that existence in each hell is transitory, while each king remains static in his court. The clouds function as a vehicle and transport the deceased through a liminal space and across spatial boundaries, engulfing these dynamic figures in a manner similar to the paintings discussed above.

Simultaneously, the clouds form a visual continuum between scrolls, creating a channel across which the deceased can move through the paintings as they do consecutively through the courts of the Ten Kings. Viewed together, the ten scrolls that would complete the Harvard set visualize the movement of the deceased through the ten courts of the underworld over a span of three years. The clouds are consistent and occupy the same proportion of space in each painting, and as such, bridge the individual paintings into a perceptible whole. The movement across the liminal space of the underworld is outlined in *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, where each verse describing the individual courts evokes imagery of the landscape forms and punishments that await in each court. For instance, to pass between the second and third courts, the deceased must "cross the River Nai [in hordes of thousands]"; subsequently in the third court, they become conscious of "how long the narrow road that winds through the dark paths [is]."[37] The underworld is thus perceived as a physical space through which the deceased must progress, with each stop along the way taking up a specific period of time. In contemporaneous examples of Ten Kings murals, the progression of this journey is facilitated through the physical arrangement of the ten individual courts. In the murals of the Dinglin Temple in Shaanxi, the counterclockwise arrangement of the ten consecutive courts guides the eye of the viewer from the west end of the south wall to the west end of the north

[36] For a survey of hell damnation images – such as that of the flaming cauldron – in Dunhuang cave murals, see Costantino Moretti, "Scenes of Hell and Damnation in Dunhuang Murals," *Arts Asiatiques* 75 (2019): 5-30.
[37] Teiser's translation; See *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 212-213.

wall – in effect mapping the deceased's physical movement across the underworld.[38] By forming a continuum across the entire set, the clouds in the Harvard set visually facilitate the journey through hell that occurs in the dimensions of both liminal space and chronological time.

Thus, the Harvard paintings embody the notion of the intermediate through their implication of hell as a state of intermediate existence, and their convincing creation of intermediate space through which one can travel both spatially and temporally upon the vehicle of the cloud. In the following section, I will explore how these paintings mediate the experience of the viewer through their period-specific visual motifs.

Ming Material Culture as Mediating the Experience of the Viewer

Since the origins of the "Ten Kings of Hell" theme, its visual presentations have instilled fear in viewers through their imposing representations of the kings and their vivid depictions of torture. This convincing representation of the underworld is achieved not only through the chilling representations of torture, but additionally by the paintings' iconography, composition, and visual motifs that mirror the mortal realm. Altogether, these pictorial elements form a make-believe world for the beholder.

By the Ming dynasty, the Ten Kings of Hell theme permeated into the popular culture and imaginations of people, as reflected in the descriptions of the kings in mediums beyond art. Images of the Ten Kings are mentioned in the Ming dynasty author Fang Ruhao's 方汝浩 1635 novel, *Dongdu ji* 東汝記 *(Journey to the East)*, which tells the story of two Buddhist monks who travel across India and into China with the intention of promoting their religious practices and warding off sins and evils.[39] Chapter 7 of this novel describes the encounter with iconic images of the Ten Kings (*shi dian yanluo shengxiang* 十殿閻羅聖像), prefaced by a discussion between the nun, Ni Zongchi, and a group of lay people on the importance of piety. Lack of piety towards one's parents is described as a grave sin, resulting in subjugation to the Five Punishments (*wuxing* 五刑) within the worldly bureaucratic space (*gongmen* 公門). The novel compares the Buddhist hell and the horrors of punishment inflicted by the government; the punishment for committing sins in the latter is likened to an established hell (*youju de diyu* 有據的地獄). Ni Zongchi instructs his listeners that the administrators can see any evil spirits that reside in their hearts, and to "go forward towards the images of the Ten Kings of Hell, with hands folded together."[40] As illustrated in this encounter, images of the Ten Kings

[38] Liu, "Shanxi Gaoping Dinglin *si*," 138-139.
[39] Fang, Ruhao 方汝浩, *Dongdu ji*東度記 (Journey to the East), *juan* 7.
[40] Fang, Ruhao 方汝浩, *Dongdu ji*東度記 (Journey to the East), *juan* 7, 615-616.

have the agency to instill fear and repentance in the viewer; paying respect to the Ten Kings can restore merit for the tainted soul.

The Ten Kings paintings are also able to mediate the viewer's cognizance of hell through an evocation of a familiar secular setting within each painting. The definition of the "intermediary" as an "[agent that is] not logically necessary to the perception of a visual message but without which the process of understanding would be more difficult"[41] originates from Oleg Grabar's theory on ornament – in the forms of writing, geometry, architecture, and nature – eliciting certain feelings or understandings in the viewer. These different types of intermediaries have the agency to guide or strengthen the experience of the viewer through "evoking" certain emotions or opinions. For instance, the "agent" of ornamentation on religious architectural forms – such as the series of relief statues on the façade of Amiens Cathedral in France, where the more important holy figures such as the apostles are executed in higher relief – communicates to the viewer a statement of religious hierarchies.[42] In the case of the Harvard set, the "agent" is the attention to decoration within the depictions of the kings' courts. While these references are not crucial to the understanding of the Ten Kings theme – as demonstrated in the scriptural illustrations where court paraphernalia is less pronounced – the specificity and arrangement of these objects in the Harvard set effectively evokes the status and power associated with the presence of these objects in the secular, courtly space.

By referencing decorative arts associated with power and prestige of Ming emperors and court officials, the Harvard set stands as an intermediate between the religious subject matter of the Ten Kings of Hell and the secular aesthetics of the Ming dynasty court; these agentic references mediate the experience of the viewer by defining the underworld – something intangible to the living viewer – in familiar and recognizable terms, as well as fostering a power dynamic analogous to the one between a secular king and his subjects. Whether or not a symbol or motif within a work of art can be identified by the viewer impacts his or her ultimate experience of the artwork; as Grabar illustrates, a form of ornamentation such as writing has the ability to influence the sensory experience of certain audiences to whom the message is legible and understandable.[43] The period-specific intermediates within the Harvard set include the attention to the specificities of Ming dynasty dress codes, evocation of emperor portraits, and resemblance to paintings of courtly figures. Together, these elements bridge the religious subject matter of the Ten Kings of Hell with the recognizable setting and artistic traditions of the secular court.

The idea of visual elements within paintings as mediating the experience of the viewer additionally has precedents in Song dynasty Buddhist ritual paintings. The concept of the "representation" as an intermediary between the represented and the

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[41] Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 230.
[42] Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 27-30.
[43] Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 18-19.

real is embodied in paintings within the *Five Hundred Luohans* set at Daitokuji; these paintings mediate between the real and the represented through their composition, pigments, and use of visual intermediaries within the paintings that direct the eyes of the viewer. For instance, the presence of a "liturgical avatar" – a human figure interacting with the arhats – in the painting, *Visit to the Palace*, "encourages the viewer to identify with [the] figure in the painting,"[44] as if interacting with the arhats themselves. Thus, visual elements within the paintings have the power to guide the viewer and simulate the phenomena taking place on the scroll. In a comparable instance in the *Fourth King of Hell* painting at the YUAG, the floating figure on the pink cloud in the upper righthand corner of the composition functions as a visual mediator (fig. 12); the kings and several of his attendants look up towards this figure, beckoning the eyes of the viewer and conflating his existence outside of the painting with a figure within the painting.

Song dynasty examples of Ten Kings images begin the lineage of creating a "familiar" hell to the viewer through the secularization of the kings' settings. Song dynasty Ten Kings paintings follow a modular system, where motifs are recycled throughout the set in the same compositional format to create a distinct formula of representation for the Ten Kings theme.[45] This standardization has advantages from a commercial side; by recycling motifs across the paintings and including varying degrees of detail dependent on the financial means of the patron, the workshop catered to a wider clientele more efficiently.[46] Simultaneously, the patron played a role in determining the final appearance of the scroll by requesting certain details; in this sense, the creation of Ten Kings scrolls during this period involved mediation on behalf of the patron, who had partial agency in determining how the underworld was depicted in their personal scroll. Compared to the earliest depictions of the Ten Kings in the Tang dynasty, the Song dynasty scrolls situate the kings in courtly environments that reference the tastes of the time period. The most common, recurring motifs are the red balustrade, the landscape screen behind the king, and the garden setting behind the screen – all decorative elements from the Song dynasty that function here to simulate a space of authority figures in the secular world, and consequently reinforcing the power of the Ten Kings.[47]

In continuing the lineage of evoking secular spaces, the Harvard paintings swap the Song motifs to include references to Ming dynasty visual and material culture. In the Harvard set, there is arguably more attention to the material wealth of the king's court as reflected through the range of decorative objects displayed around the king, and the sumptuous garments and accessories that the king, his attendants,

[44] The ideas in this paragraph and the concept of the "liturgical avatar" draw from Bloom, "Visualizing Ritual," 101-105.
[45] Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," 179-184.
[46] Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," 175.
[47] Kwon, *Efficacious Underworld*, 21-23; Ledderose, "The Bureaucracy of Hell," 180-181. This secularization occurred simultaneously in other genres of Buddhist painting, such as arhat ritual paintings; see Yu Liang 于亮, "Wudai *liang* Song 'shitaixiang' *luohan tuxiang yanjiu*" 五代两宋'世态相'罗汉图像研究 (Research on 'state of the world' luohan images during the Five Dynasties and two Song dynasties period), *Nanjing yishu xueyuan xuebao* 南京艺术学院学报 (2010): 32-35.

and the court ladies wear. That the artist of the Harvard set made a conscious effort to distinguish the paintings from their predecessors and render them as distinctively "Ming" is seen in the costuming of the kings. While in the Song dynasty examples, the Ten Kings are typically shown in monochrome garments, the Ten Kings in the Harvard set wear robes with elaborate textiles bearing motifs such as the lotus or dragon. The differences in the kings' garments are specific to attitudes about the dress of authority figures respective to the Song and Ming dynasties. The Ten Kings in the Song dynasty adhere to the aesthetic of "subdued luxury," where authority figures such as the emperor are depicted in seemingly more humble, monochrome garments in portraits, with "subtle forms of luxury"[48] hidden in places such as the collar of the garment or the inner sleeves. One of the paintings from a set at the Metropolitan Museum of Art demonstrates careful attention to capturing this understated aesthetic (fig. 8). While the king's garment is predominantly a light gray color, the red collar and sleeve cuffs of the ensemble are embroidered with a swirling gold design. Meanwhile, in the Harvard set, textiles depicting dragons embroidered in gold thread appear prominently on the kings' robes across numerous scrolls (see fig. 1a). The specificity of the dragon motif – which was reserved only for the highest government officials during the Ming – reinforces the bureaucratic authority of the Ten Kings. The particular reference to the five-clawed dragon seen on some of the kings' robes – a detail designated specifically for the emperor and empress[49] – further exemplifies the attention paid to capturing the specificities of Ming dynasty dress in the garments of the Ten Kings.

Notably, the Harvard set also revives the iconography of the *mianguan* crown in the scroll of the Fifth King (fig. 5), demonstrating the conflation of religious and secular authority figures. Though the *mianguan* crown originated in the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), by the early Ming, the *mianguan* was reincorporated into the official imperial dress code and designated specifically for the emperor.[50] The Ming dynasty *Xingning xian zhi* 興寧縣志 (Chronicle of Xingning County) describes the permeation of imperial dress codes into representations of Buddhist deities. The chronicle describes the history and reconstruction of the county's Guandi Temple (*Guandi si* 關帝寺) during the Ming dynasty. The text reveals that Emperor Shenzong once had a dream in which a divine woman (*shengmu*聖母) appeared and assigned the temple's namesake god, Guandi, to the role of "the great emperor who subdues the demons of the Three Realms" (*sanjie fumo dadi* 三界伏魔大帝)," and to rule over the Ten Kings of Hell.[51] By the present-day, Guandi is described as changing into the

[48] This term is borrowed from National Palace Museum, "Facets of Authority: A Special Exhibition of Imperial Portraits from the Nanxun Hall," National Palace Museum https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh110/FacetsofAuthority/en/page-3.html (accessed April 17, 2023).
[49] Terese Tse Bartholomew, "Textiles and Costumes," in *Power and Glory: Court Arts of China's Ming Dynasty*, eds. Li He and Michael Knight (San Francisco: The Asian Art Museum, 2008), 65.
[50] Yuan Zujie, "Dressing for Power: Rite, Costume, and State Authority in Ming Dynasty China," *Frontiers of History in China* 2, no. 2 (2007): 187-188.
[51] *Xingning xian zhi* 興寧縣志 (Xingning county chronicle), *juan* 3, 432-433.

imperial robe and *mianguan*, and subsequently adopting the nine-tasseled crown (*jiuliu* 九旒), which was designated for princes.[52] The Fifth King is first shown wearing the *mianguan* in Tang dynasty scriptural illustrations. In depictions of the same king in Song examples, however, this pictorial convention is abandoned in favor of a more standardized headwear across the entire set. The reincorporation of the *mianguan* in the Fifth King of the Harvard set (fig. 5b), however, reinforces the importance of dress codes in the Ming dynasty court. Likewise, the wearing of this hat by government officials – whether in real life or in representations – would have recalled the images of religious deities in the minds of the Ming dynasty people.[53] In contrast to the scriptural illustration, the *mianguan* headwear in the Harvard painting is rendered to a higher degree of detail, down to the precise number of twelve tassels that was the convention for emperors.[54]

The Harvard paintings further underscore the authority of the Ten Kings by evoking court portraiture from the Ming dynasty, in effect mediating the relationship between the king in the scroll and his beholders. In one significant departure from its Song predecessors, the Harvard set replaces the landscape screen behind each king with a depiction of a dragon among clouds – an element seen in the portraits of the Chenghua, Hongzhi, Jiajing, and Longqing Emperors of the Ming dynasty (see fig. 13). Beginning in the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), the ink landscape connoted political authority, and landscapes became incorporated into the decorative program of imperial spaces; in particular, the landscape screen placed in tandem with the emperor's throne "accentuated the emperor's position at the focal point of the building."[55] As such, the Song dynasty Ten Kings are consistently positioned in front of landscape screens. The significance of the dragon screen as a Ming invention thus denotes contemporaneity to its viewers. During the early Ming dynasty, the theme of the "Old Dragon Leading its Son to Worship in Heaven" (*laolong yinzi chaotian* 老龍引子朝天) originated; these paintings depict an elder dragon among misty clouds, beckoning towards a younger dragon emerging out of the sea and guiding it upwards towards the heavens.[56] The association of the younger dragon with the terms "heaven" and "son of heaven" – a term for the emperor – underscores the imperial authority associated with this theme at the time.[57]

The auxiliary characters in the kings' courts additionally support the general attitude and curiosity during the Ming dynasty for representations of the pastimes of

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[52] For an example of a nine-tasseled crown from the late 14th century, see Jessica Harrison-Hall, "Courts, Palaces, People and Objects," in *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China*, eds. Craig Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall (London: The British Museum Press, 2014), 69.
[53] Harrison-Hall, "Courts, Palaces, People and Objects," 69.
[54] Harrison-Hall, "Courts, Palaces, People and Objects," 69.
[55] Ping Foong, *The Efficacious Landscape: On the Authorities of Painting at the Northern Song Court* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 31; 39
[56] For a description and visual examples of this theme, see Hou-mei Sung, "Dragon," in *Decoded Messages: The Symbolic Language of Chinese Animal Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 130-135.
[57] Sung provides evidence for the political connotations of this theme; see "Dragon," 130-131.

court officials. The proliferate depictions of Ming court officials and court ladies partaking in leisure activities from this time period reflect this sentiment.[58] The Harvard set is distinct among Chinese representations of the Ten Kings in its inclusion of court ladies. Extreme attention is paid to the depiction of these ladies' headwear in the Harvard paintings, which nearly mirrors the costumes in secular paintings depicting court ladies (fig. 2a). For instance, in Du Jin's (ca. 1465-ca. 1509) painting titled *Figures of Ladies in a Garden*, two court ladies arrange decorative objects similar to those in the Harvard set around a table in preparation for a scholarly gathering (fig. 14). The two ladies wear elaborate headwear consisting of beads and animal motifs – a detail that is incorporated in the depictions of court ladies in the Harvard paintings. The 15th-16th century painting, *Palace Women and Children Celebrating the New Year*, (fig. 15) similarly captures the fascination with court figures during the Ming; in this painting's revealing angle into the interior of an imperial space, the viewer gains a glimpse into the decoration and splendor of the palace interior. Well-dressed court ladies stand around a table containing various dinnerware, creating a rich "objectscape" – a term describing the ways in which decorative art objects encompassing varied surfaces and mediums converge into an object landscape.[59] The Harvard paintings thus present a unique lens into the arrangement and workings of the religious court, depicting officials carefully and sumptuously dressed according to the specific conventions and tastes of the time period.

Finally, in the arrangement and proliferation of these various decorative objects within the Harvard set, the artist creates a rich "objectscape" – a hallmark of Ming visual and material culture, and a common indicator of one's social capital and status – within each painting.[60] The objects within the court are not merely placed in isolation, but signify the abundant material wealth of the Ten Kings' courts. The Ming dynasty affinity for this degree of decoration and luxury is exhibited across historical sources and mediums, such as the famous 1610 novel, *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (*Plum in a Golden Vase*), where descriptions of rooms filled with textiles and luxury objects paint a vivid image of a sumptuous interior space in the mind of the reader. During the Ming dynasty, people evidently made judgments on others based on the objects they owned and the ways in which they decorated their homes.[61] For example, the descriptions of interior spaces in *Jin Ping Mei* implicate the role that material wealth and taste played in characterizing one's personality; through satirical descriptions of the interior spaces of the novel's protagonist, Ximen Qing, the reader understands that the superfluous – and often tacky – arrangement of objects in his studies ultimately reveals the "illiterate, dishonest, and corrupt" character of Ximen

[58] Richard Vinograd, "Paintings," in *Power and Glory* (see note 50), 185-188.
[59] The term "objectscape" is adopted from Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 21.
[60] Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 21.
[61] Craig Clunas, "'All in the Best Possible Taste': Ming Dynasty Material Culture in the Light of the Novel *Jin Ping Mei*," *The Bulletin of the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong* 11 (1997): 10-13.

Qing.[62] Just as descriptions of Ming figures' interiors shape others' perceptions and judgments of their inhabitants, the vivid description of the king's court through rich objectscapes shapes the viewer's perception of hell. In this manner, the Harvard paintings create a familiar but courtly space within the depiction of hell to Ming viewers, who would have been well aware of the agency of these objects.

Conclusion

The set of five *Ten Kings of Hell* paintings dated to the 15th to 16th century at the Harvard Art Museums provides insight into the understanding of the Ten Kings of Hell theme and the concepts of hell and rebirth during the Ming dynasty. The set embodies the complexity of the intermediate on three separate dimensions, in effect creating a convincing and comprehensible vision of hell for the Ming dynasty viewer. The religious iconographies and ritual contexts of the paintings visualize the underworld as a state of intermediate existence, during which family members can act as intermediaries in the experience and journey of the deceased. The visual motif of the cloud functions as an intermediate vehicle across the underworld and through chronological time, creating a visual manifestation of the deceased's journey through the liminal, intermediate space of hell. Finally, the abundant references to the visual and material culture of the Ming dynasty court position this set of paintings at a unique intermediate position between a religious subject matter and secular arts of the time period, in effect mediating the experience of the viewer by defining hell in familiar terms. The visual and religious intermediates thus work together to bridge the living and the deceased, as well as the spaces and temporalities of the latter's journey through the underworld – revealing the deep concerns about the afterlife in Ming China.

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[62] Clunas, "'All in the Best Possible Taste,'" 10-13.

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*Foshuo yanluowang shouji sizhong yuxiu shengqi wangsheng jingtu jing*佛說閻 羅王授記四眾預修生也往生淨土經 (The Scripture Spoken by the Buddha to the Four Orders on the Prophecy Given to King Yama Concerning the Sevens of Life to Be Cultivated in Preparation for Rebirth in the Pure Land). 14 illustrations. Pelliot Collection P2003, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Reproduced in Huang, Yongwu 黄永武. *Dunhuang baozang* 敦煌寶藏. 140 volumes. Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1981-1986.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. One of the *Ten Kings of Hell* (1966.89.1), 15th-16th century (Ming dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and colors on silk, 139.5 x 94.2 cm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.

Figure 1a. Detail of figure 1 (photograph by author).

Figure 2. One of the *Ten Kings of Hell* (1966.89.2), 15th-16th century (Ming dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and colors on silk, 139.7 x 94.2 cm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.

Figure 2a. Detail of figure 2 (photograph by author).

Figure 3. One of the *Ten Kings of Hell* (1966.89.3), 15th-16th century (Ming dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and colors on silk, 140.1 x 94.3 cm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.

Figure 3a. Detail of figure 3 (photograph by author).

Figure 4. One of the *Ten Kings of Hell* (1979.406), 15th-16th century (Ming dynasty, hanging scroll: ink and colors on silk, 140.2 x 94.5 cm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.

Figure 4a. Karma scale. Detail of figure 4 (photograph by author).

Figure 4b. Detail of figure 4 (photograph by author).

Figure 4c. Detail of figure 4 (photograph by author).

Figure 5. One of the *Ten Kings of Hell* (2002.57), 15th-16th century (Ming dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and colors on silk, 136.3 x 93.2 cm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.

Figure 5a. Karma mirror. Detail of figure 5 (photograph by author).

Figure 5b. Twelve-tasseled *mianguan* crown. Detail of figure 5 (photograph by author).

Figure 5c. Detail of figure 5 (photograph by author).

Figure 5d. Detail of figure 5 (photograph by author).

Figure 6. *Ksitigarbha and the Ten Kings of Hell*, 10th century (Tang dynasty). Musée Guimet, Paris.

Figure 7. Jin Chushi, *Fifth King of Hell*, from a set of *Ten Kings of Hell*, before 1195 (Song dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and color on silk, 129.5 x 49.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

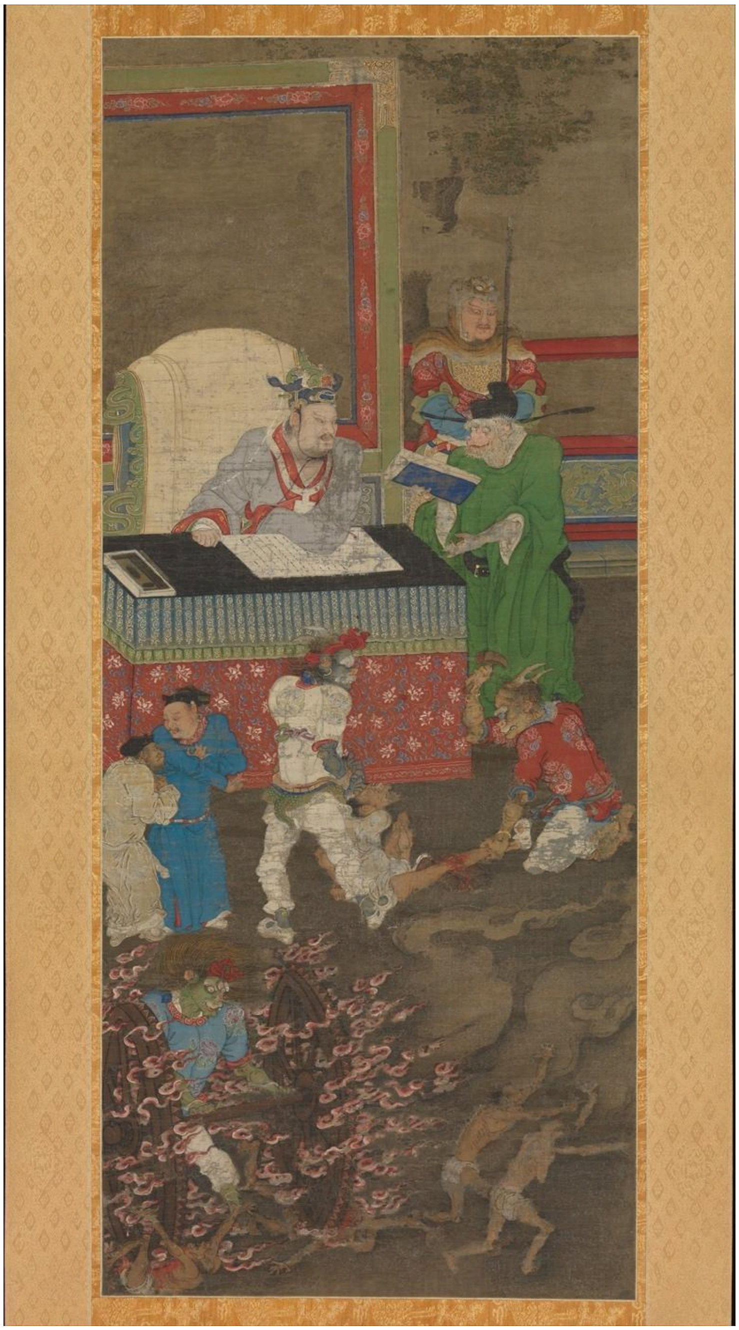

Figure 8. Jin Chushi, one of the *Ten Kings of Hell*, before 1195 (Song dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and color on silk, 129.5 x 49.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 9. Zhou Jichang, *Luohans Bestowing Alms on Suffering Human Beings*, c. 1178 (Song dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and colors on silk, 111.5 x 51.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 10. Liu Yuan, *Sima You's Dream of Su Xiaoxiao*, early 13th century (Yuan dynasty). handscroll: ink and colors on silk, 30 x 411.2 cm. Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati.

Figure 11. *Procession of Daoist Deities*, from *Album of Daoist and Buddhist Themes*, album: ink on paper, 34.1 x 38.4 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.

Figure 12. *Fourth King of Hell (Chunwuguan wang)* from a set of *Ten Kings of Hell*, late 16th-17th century (Ming dynasty), hanging scroll: pigment on silk, 74.9 x 125.7 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Figure 13. *Portrait of the Jiajing Emperor*, Ming dynasty. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 14. Du Jin, *Figures of Ladies in a Garden*, late 15th-early 16th century (Ming dynasty), hanging scroll: ink and color on silk, 97 x 30.5 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Figure 15. Detail of *Palace Women and Children Celebrating the New Year*, 15th-16th century (Ming dynasty), ink and color on silk, 160.3 x 106.2 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.