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Stories from an Illustrated Explanation of the *Tract of  
the Most Exalted on Action and Response*

Catherine Bell

Late imperial China (1550–1911) saw a remarkable proliferation of religious books written for nonelite social classes, which were growing in strength and status in conjunction with the economic expansion of the period. The availability of inexpensive mass printing at this time also promoted both widespread literacy or near-literacy and the broad marketing of books. In many of these popular religious works, Daoist, Buddhist, and neo-Confucian ideas were woven into a type of nonsectarian, heavily moralistic message concerning virtue, universal laws of cause and effect, and systems for calculating merit and demerit. Such works are generally known as “morality books.”

The oldest and most famous morality book is the twelfth-century *Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian*). It is a relatively short work of about 1,200 characters that presents itself as the words of the Most Exalted, usually understood to be the Daoist deity, Laozi. His message is that good and bad fortune do not come into one’s life without reason; rather, they follow as natural consequences of what people do, just as a shadow follows a form. Alluding to a complex cosmology in which a variety of deities oversee human behavior, the *Tract* teaches how the merit earned from good deeds will bring long life, wealth, and successful descendants, while the retribution that attends evil deeds ensures the eventual suffering of the wicked.

Within a century of its first published appearance in 1164, a Song dynasty emperor printed and distributed thousands of copies of the *Tract* in order to convey this message to his subjects, launching a long history of reprintings for didactic and meritorious purposes. The brief tract was republished with prefaces, commentaries, and stories to help illustrate its principles. Later editions added miracle tales, woodblock illustrations, proverbs, ledgers with which to calculate one’s balance of merit and demerit, as well as lists of those who had donated to the printing of the text. In contrast to the direct message of the Most Exalted,

which comprises the original short tract, many of these expanded editions began to call attention to the physical text itself, urging the reader to venerate the book and disseminate it in every way possible. Such piety and enthusiasm gave rise to innumerable large- and small-scale devotional projects to reprint the text. When D. T. Suzuki and Paul Carus published one of several English translations in 1906, they suggested that more copies of the *Tract* had been published in China than any other book in all history.

An “Illustrated Explanation” of the *Tract* compiled by Xu Zuanzeng in 1657 was the basis for an expanded edition published by Huang Zhengyuan (fl. 1713–1755) in 1755. Huang’s edition stresses two themes. First, he argues that the *Tract* contains the eternal wisdom of the Confucian sages, but in a form that even the most simple-minded can understand. With the easy commentaries and the selection of appealing stories that he has provided, he goes on, everyone can now read, appreciate, and profit from the message of the *Tract*. Second, Huang repeatedly declares that the most meritorious deeds of all are those activities that help to make the *Tract* available to others. Doing one good deed, such as setting free a caged animal, is certainly laudable, but how can it compare to making others aware of the consequences of their own actions? Hence, in the stories and segment from one of Huang’s prefaces that follow, distributing the *Tract* is the height of virtue and sure to bring to anyone the formulaic rewards of prosperity, official position, and filial children.

The ideas of virtue and retribution expressed in these excerpts reflect the neo-Confucian idea that anyone, not just the educated elite, could become a virtuous sage. However, scholars have noted that this idea appears to be highly nuanced by a somewhat mercantile perspective: actions count over intentions; good and bad deeds not only add up or cancel each other out, they are also investments that bear fruit and testify to one’s true character; and a practical, this-worldly orientation locates the causes and effects of morality and immorality in the here and now. At the same time, the goals of moral action include not only material prosperity, but also the time-honored goals of social prestige through official recognition by the emperor and a position in the government. It has been suggested that this particular vision of moral action flowered in an era marked by heightened social mobility and the social restructuring that attended urbanization and the expansion of commercial activity. Certainly, morality books like the *Tract* appear to have worked out a simplified and generalized Confucian moral ethos readily appropriated by major segments of the population. This achievement has been linked to the unity and traditionalism of Chinese culture in the late imperial period, on the one hand, and to the emergence of a modern style of moral individualism, on the other.

Huang Zhengyuan, *Taishang ganying pian tushuo* (*Illustrated Explanation of the Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Response*), also called *Taishang baofa tushuo* (*Illustrated Explanation of the Precious Raft of the Most Exalted*), 8 juan.

### Further Reading

Catherine Bell, "Printing and Religion in China: Some Evidence from the *Taishang Ganying Pian*," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (Fall 1992): 173–86; Judith A. Berling, "Religion and Popular Culture: The Management of Moral Capital in *The Romance of the Three Teachings*," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed., David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 188–218; Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Evelyn S. Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies of the University of Michigan, 1979); Sakai Tadao, "Confucianism and Popular Educational Works," in Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); D. T. Suzuki and Paul Carus, trans., *Treatise on Response and Retribution by Lao Tze* (La Salle: Open Court, 1973).

### "On Distributing Morality Books" by Huang Zhengyuan

It is said that those who do good deeds will obtain good fortune, while those who are not virtuous will experience misfortune. This is the reason for the blessings or calamities that befall the moral and the immoral. How clear it is! There is more than one road to virtue, but none can compare to distributing morality books. By transforming one person, a morality book can go on to transform ten million people. Spreading its teachings through one city, it can spread them through ten million cities. By exhorting one generation to virtue, it can effectively exhort ten million generations. This is different from all other means of virtue, which do things one at a time in only one direction.

If people can make use of this book, they will develop a virtuous heart; then they can be taught how to calculate their merits and demerits, thereby gradually extending their moral character until their virtue is complete. They will come from the towns and villages to advance the nation. The intellectuals will teach the ignorant. Preserving "the way" in this world, they will reverse the degenerate customs of our day. All depends on this book!

Although the book has a philosophy that divides things up into cause and effect, this is the only way to teach people to act virtuously. There is an old saying, "With upper-class people, one talks philosophy; with lower-class people, one talks of cause and effect." Now, it is difficult to exchange talk about philosophy, but there are many who can talk about auspicious or calamitous retribution. And such talk is enough to influence people's hearts. Therefore, while it is appropriate to have books on philosophy, there should be at least as many books on cause and effect.

Those who have composed, compiled, published, or donated to the printing of morality books and were subsequently saved from calamity and danger, amassing blessings and years of long life, both in the past and the present—well, they are too numerous to count! . . . These forebears attained high positions, prosperity, prestige, and longevity because they distributed morality books. These are just some of the good effects that distributing morality books has on the world and on people's hearts. It is not a small thing and yet it does not burden people. Why then are there so few believers and so many unbelievers? People just do not know the truth within morality books. But if you want people to know the truth of morality books, you must first encourage them to be distributed. After they are disseminated, then one can hope that many will actually see the books. The greater the number of people who see it, then naturally the number who come to know its truth will also increase. Those who can sincerely grasp the truth in morality books will grow in virtue.

#### STORIES

A. Zhu Jiayou of the Qiantang District in Zhejiang Province was employed in the salt business and fond of doing good deeds. When Mr. Lin Shaomu was the General Surveillance Commissioner for Zhejiang, Zhu begged him to write out the two morality books, *Tract on Action and Response* and *Essay on Secret Merit* (*Yinzhi wen*), in handsome script in order to engrave the texts in stone. He also asked him to contribute more than ten thousand sheets of paper to make copies. All those who obtained a copy treasured the fine calligraphy. Night and day Zhu made copies. After a while, he gradually became able to understand the full meaning of the text, fortifying his body and soul. Both the one who wrote out the texts and the one who gave copies of them away received blessings in return. Zhu's son was given an eminent position in Anhui Province, while Lin was later appointed to an office with jurisdiction over the provinces of Hubei and Hunan. (Huang, 1:20b)

B. Once there was a man from the Wu Xi District in Jiangsu, named Zou Yigui, also called Xiaoshan (Little Mountain). At the time of the provincial examinations people were contributing to the printing of morality books and wanted him to donate also. Zou declined, saying, "It is not because I am unwilling to give money. Rather I fear that people will be disrespectful to the text and that would put me at fault." That night he dreamed that the god Guandi appeared to scold him, saying, "You study books and illuminate their basic principles, yet you also speak like this! If all people followed your example, virtue would practically disappear." Zou prostrated himself and begged forgiveness. He printed and circulated one thousand copies in order to atone for his fault. Moreover, by himself he painted a religious image on a board and devoutly chanted in front of it morning and night. Later, in the year 1727, he placed first in special examinations and entered the prestigious Hanlin Academy,

where he held a series of official positions, culminating in an appointment as Vice Minister in the Ministry of Rites. Zou always said to people, “One word is enough to incur fault. And among evil doers, no one is worse than the person who hinders the virtue of others.” This story demonstrates that anyone who impedes contributions to morality books is guilty of the greatest fault and will be punished by Heaven. (Huang, Zushi shanshu bian section, 1:20a–b)

C. Shan Yangzhu lived at a small Buddhist temple. When he was born, he was weak and often ill. His mother prayed for him, vowing that if her son were cured, he would be a vegetarian for his whole life. In addition, she nursed him at her breast for six full years until he began to eat rice at the age of seven. When his mother died, he continued to live at the temple for forty-one years, yet he was in constant pain and suffering for half his life. One day he read the *Tract on Action and Response* and, thinking about his parents, suddenly repented of all his bad deeds. Thereafter, he collected different editions of the *Tract* and amended them with his own understanding of its meaning—revising, distinguishing and analyzing point by point. Altogether his study came to 330,000 words, divided into eight volumes and entitled *An Exposition of the Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Response*. He did this in order to make amends for all his misdeeds, but also as an attempt to repay some small part of the boundless loving kindness of his parents. In 1655 he organized people to donate the money for publishing it. Because of these activities, everything that was painful and unhappy in his life gradually improved. (Huang, 1:28b)

D. At the end of the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368) there was a man named Chu Shaoyi, who not only diligently practiced the teachings of the *Tract on Action and Response*, but also printed and distributed it. He set each phrase to music so that his wife and the women in their quarters could understand it and be enlightened.

At that time the country fell into strife caused by rival warlords. One of them was Chen Youliang. When Chen was young and very poor, Chu had once helped him. Many years later, after Youliang and his army had occupied the provinces of Hubei and Guangdong, Youliang falsely proclaimed himself emperor of the country. He summoned Chu to come work for him and frequently gave him gifts of gold and silk. Chu did not dare refuse the gifts, but stored them in a bamboo chest and used them only to aid hungry families. Although he himself needed firewood and rice, he was not willing to use any of the gifts.

After the Ming emperor Taizu quelled the chaos and ascended the throne (1368), he sought out retired scholars of virtue throughout the empire. Civil authorities communicated the proclamation and recommended Chu, who was summoned to the capital. The emperor asked him: “Dear sir, what would give you the most pleasure?” Chu replied: “As for me, I am just an ordinary man who is pleased to live now in an age of great peace and prosperity. I only want the strength and diligence to plow and plant my fields. Virtue comes naturally

that way. In addition, I want to instruct my children in virtue and teach my grandchildren. Nothing can give me more pleasure than these things.”

Taizu then said: “The day that Chen Youliang usurped the throne, you sir did not join his side. Youliang honored and respected you, so we can see that even though he was an evil man, he was capable of rewarding virtue and righteousness. Virtue can influence anyone—you can trust that. The *Book of Chu* says that only virtue should be treasured. You sir will be called ‘the treasure of the nation.’” Then the emperor himself wrote out those four characters, “regard as the treasure of the nation,” and bestowed it on him. In addition, the emperor gave him elegantly spun silk and a special one-horse chariot to take him back home. By imperial order, each month the civil authorities were to provide Chu with grain and meat for the rest of his life. His son was appointed a provincial governor in Yunnan and his grandson entered the national university to study. As soon as the grandson’s studies were completed, he received an official post in accord with his abilities. (Huang 3:6a)

E. Zhou Guangpu developed an upset stomach and became so ill that for more than twenty days he could not eat or drink. He was so sick that two deputies from the underworld arrived, put him in chains, and led him out the door. When they had traveled approximately ten miles, he saw a man off in the woods calling his name. He quickly went over to him and saw that it was none other than his dear old friend Ji Yunhe. The two men clasped hands and wept, greatly moved to talk with each other again after such a long separation. Then Ji drew close to Zhou’s ear and whispered: “While I was alive, I was without fault because of all my education. I am trusted by the chief officers and judge of the underworld beneath Mount Tai. The fates of all the living and dead pass through my hands, so I can help you in the other world. The most important thing is the *Tract on Action and Response*. In a little while, when you come before the court, just say that you once made a vow to recite it ten thousand times. Beg to be released and returned to life in order to complete the vow. If the judge has any questions, I will plead for you myself.” When he finished speaking, he left.

The two deputies escorted Zhou to a huge government office where he saw lots of people coming and going. Some were welcomed or sent off with drum rolls in their honor. Some wandered about freely, while others, manacled with chains, were led to and from the hells. Suddenly he heard his name called out as his case was summoned before the court. Zhou went up to the desk and kneeled. The judge spoke: “You are said to have been well-behaved and devout, but you were fond of eating animals and birds—even catching insects for food. If you please, are they not living things too? It is appropriate for you to be sentenced to the hell of the hungry ghosts for punishment.”

Weeping and pleading, Zhou repeated what Ji had told him. The judge asked his officers if the story was true or not. Ji, who had been waiting on the side, cried out “It is true!” and presented his record book to the judge. When he

had examined it, the judge smiled and said: "Because of this virtuous vow, it is proper to return him." Ji then spoke up again, saying, "This person was very sick. You should order a heavenly doctor to cure him." So the judge issued a command that Zhou be attended by a heavenly physician. The same two deputies escorted Zhou back home where he saw his body lying on the bed. The deputies pushed his soul back into its place and Zhou immediately regained consciousness.

Thinking that the heavenly doctor would be one of the Daoist immortals, Tao [Hongjing] (456–536 C.E.) and Xu [Mi] (303–373 C.E.), Zhou made a great effort to get up and with a cane started off for the Tao and Xu Temple across the river to pray. By the time he got to the middle of the bridge, he was doubled over and stumbling. A traveler from Shanxi stopped to help him. "I can see from your fatigue and the look on your face that you are troubled by a sick stomach. If it is not cured, you will surely die. I have some small skill and can cure you immediately. Why not follow me?"

They went together to a small house where they found a stove. The traveler started a fire to boil water for tea. From his side he pulled out a silver needle. He inserted it approximately an inch into the right side of Zhou's heart, and then twice lit some herbs on the end of it. Zhou cried out with pain. The traveler immediately stopped the burning, pulled out the needle, and applied a medicated bandage.

By this time the tea was ready. The traveler filled a small cup and asked Zhou to drink. Zhou declined, saying, "For many days I have not been able to consume even small amounts." The traveler replied, "This tea is not the same. Please try it." Zhou then drank two cups without any trouble. He felt his energy suddenly renewed. The traveler advised him, saying: "When you return home, it is best to drink rice soup at first, then eat only diluted rice gruel. After seven days you can eat and drink normally."

Zhou did as he had been told, and as a result he recovered in several days. He went to find the traveler in order to thank him, but there was no trace of him—even the house was gone. Only then did he realize that the stranger must have been the heavenly physician sent to cure him. Throughout his life Zhou faithfully recited the *Tract on Action and Response*, acquiring success, blessings, and long life. (Huang, Lingyan section, 10a)

F. Li Dezhang was a middle-aged man whose wife had died. He had only one child, a fourteen-year-old son named Shouguan. Dezhang acquired some merchandise, one thousand carrying poles, and proceeded to the provinces of Hunan and Guangdong in order to sell them. Liyong, a man-servant with the household, accompanied the merchandise to keep an eye on it, while Li himself and Shouguan looked for a fast boat in order to take a trip on the Wujiang River. Father and son leisurely went ashore to visit the great royal temple there. Inside there was a Daoist priest with a book, who inquired of them, saying: "This temple prints the *Tract on Action and Response*. Would you be so kind as



to make a contribution?" Dezhang hesitated without answering. Just then the boatman arrived to say that the wind was favorable and he wanted to set sail. So Li Dezhang put down the book and they hurried away to depart in the boat.

When they came to the middle of the river, they suddenly encountered a storm that overturned the boat. Father and son both fell into the water, but the two were not able to find each other. Dezhang was rescued by a fishing boat, which let him off where he could meet his own cargo ship. He thanked and generously rewarded the fishermen. Then the master and his servant, Liyong, returned to the temple where they prayed for an explanation. The response was: "The *Tract on Action and Response* is a sacred text to save the world. Earlier you were not willing to make a contribution to it. Hence, you have come to this end." Dezhang replied: "If the Most Exalted has the divine power to enable my son and me to meet again, I will put up the whole cost of the project, and you will not have to use a cent that has been contributed." He ordered Liyong to fetch two hundred ounces of silver from the bank and hand it over to the temple as an offering.

Master and servant supervised the loading of the cargo on the ship and traveled to the city of Wuchang. On route they met an old traveling merchant named Fu Youcai who had lost money and was having trouble making his return trip home. This man was an engaging talker who could flatter people with his charm. Dezhang developed a close friendship with him. While they were traveling, the merchandise was greatly delayed, so Dezhang left half of it in Wuchang and half with Youcai. Liyong left them to go to Jingxiang. Less than a month later he received a letter from his master telling him that the merchandise had already been sold for two thousand ounces of silver. Since Liyong was in Jingxiang taking care of things and unable to get away, he arranged for the receipts to be given to Youcai, who would go to Wuchang and collect the money. When Youcai had the silver in his hands, however, he immediately rolled up his conscience and fled with the money. When Dezhang learned that Youcai had taken the money, he was grieved and depressed, losing all interest in returning home. He drifted for two years before he made any plans to go back. But Heaven helps virtuous people, and Dezhang had already contributed to the *Tract on Action and Response*. When there is virtue, there will be recompense.

When his son Shouguan fell into the water, he grabbed hold of a large piece of wood and floated to a village. There a widow took care of him as if he were her own son. He studied and entered school. Unexpectedly one day at the bank of a stream he saw a young woman throw herself into the water. He immediately dove in to rescue her. When he asked her why she had done it, she answered: "My father's name is Fu Youcai. Years ago he left on business and arranged for me to stay with the family of my maternal uncle, who has no scruples at all. He wanted to sell me into a house of prostitution, so I tried to commit suicide." Suddenly there were lots of people all around. One of them

was an old man who asked the young woman in surprise, "You, why are you here?" The woman looked at him and saw that it was her father. Father and daughter were reunited; you can imagine their happiness. Youcai was moved to gratitude by Shouguan's righteousness, so he gave his daughter to the young man as a wife and also arranged that the thousand ounces of swindled silver be entirely turned over to him as well.

Shouguan missed his father, and his heart pressed him to try to find him. So with his father-in-law he bought a boat and went to the Wujiang River to search for clues to his father's whereabouts. Not far from the royal temple, he saw the back of a boat with its sails set in readiness to depart. At the prow stood a man who looked just like his father. When they came up to each other, both father and son rejoiced in wild excitement, stopping only to question the other about what had happened since they had been parted. Shouguan told how he had taken a wife and obtained so much silver, recounting his story detail by detail. Dezhong asked to meet his new in-laws and entered the other ship's hold. He noticed that his son's father-in-law lay in bed with his face covered, not rising to get up. Dezhong lifted the cover and saw that it was Youcai. He laughed and said: "Once we were good friends. Now we are relatives by marriage and the thousand ounces of silver you have given to my son. What harm has there been? Let us be friends as we were before."

Together they went to the royal temple to fulfill Dezhong's vow. The carving of the blocks was completed, so they contributed another three hundred pieces of silver to print one thousand copies and have them distributed widely to exhort people to virtue. Families that were separated are brought back together again—is this not a reward for printing the *Tract on Action and Response*? (Huang, Lingyan section, 14a)