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# Chapter I

## The Symbolism of Evil in Traditional China<sup>1</sup>

The ethics of medieval Chinese religion are characterized by a thorough integration of several levels of morality. The taboos of antiquity that guard against potential cosmic evil join almost seamlessly with the socially defined rules of Confucianism, and both together are further linked with the precepts of Buddhism, directed primarily toward the individual. The five major precepts—to abstain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication—in due course come to represent both the cosmic and the social level of morality. As a sixth-century Daoist scripture has it,

The five precepts in heaven are the five planets. As soon as the Dao of heaven loses its precepts, there are natural catastrophes. On earth, they are the five sacred mountains. As soon as the Dao of earth loses its precepts, the hundred grains can grow no longer. (*Taishang laojun jiejing*, DZ 784, 11b-12a)<sup>2</sup>

In addition, every single precept is connected with one of the five directions, with different phases of yin and yang, with the five organs or energy centers in the body, and with the five Confucian virtues. This in turn leads to a situation, in which, for example,

The precept not to lie belongs to the center and to the phase earth. Its corresponding virtue is faithfulness. A person who lies will be

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as: “Zur Symbolik des Bösen im alten China.” In *Der Abbruch des Turmbaus: Studien zum Geist in China und im Abendland. Festschrift für Rolf Trauzettel*, edited by Ingrid Krüssmann, Hans-Georg Möller, Wolfgang Kubin (St. Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1995), 113-34.

<sup>2</sup> “DZ” stands for *Daozang* and refers to texts in the Daoist canon as numbered in Schipper 1975a. A complete and annotated translation of the *Taishang laojun jiejing* is found in Kohn 1994.

punished by a feeling of shame in his spleen. (*Taishang laojun jiejing*, 15a)

Human beings in this ethical system are firmly tied into the combination of all three levels of cosmos, society, and individual despite the fact that each level has its own kind of moral thinking and proposes a different agent of punishment. The taboos of the cosmos are prohibitions centered on space and time; their violation leads to natural catastrophes and epidemics sent by heaven and the gods. The formal rules of society depend on social classes and family structures; any breach is punished by exile from the group and social isolation. The precepts of Buddhism are carried internally by the conscience of the individual; their transgression brings, besides formal punishment by the order, a deterioration of individual karma and leads to bad rebirths and tortures in the hells.

The dimension of suffering caused by the evil deed is different on each level. Cosmic thinking sees the individual connected so closely with nature and the universe that the violation of a taboo may lead to the devastation of whole landscapes. The socially centered vision of Confucianism excludes nature from the effects of individual evildoing but links the group as a whole with anyone's misbehavior. Only in the precepts of Buddhism, which concentrate primarily on the individual, is the person fully responsible for his own deeds and suffers alone the appropriate punishments.

From cosmos to society to the individual, the punishment framework is narrowed successively as evil is increasingly internalized. It does not matter what people directly linked with the cosmos think and feel, as long as they control their physical deeds or, more particularly, their deeds at a particular time and place. Similarly, societies with socially centered ethical values focus foremost on outward actions, judging the severity of evil by the degree to which social harmony has been interrupted. Only individual ethics acknowledge the role played by the intention and will of the acting subject and admit the possibility of unintended, inadvertent evil. Only here is guilt measured in degrees, and the tragic failure of perfect goodwill becomes possible.

Evil in these modes of thinking is defined differently. In relation to the cosmos, it is the violation of the boundaries of the taboo; in society, it is the disruption of the community; and in the individual, it is the inadequacy before one's own conscience. These three levels and dimensions of evil are found not only in China; they also appear in the history of Western thought.

## Stages of Evil in Western History

In his classic study *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), Paul Ricoeur distinguishes three historical stages, through which the Western awareness of evil has developed in ancient Judaism, classical Greece, and in Christianity. He calls them defilement, sin, and guilt.

Defilement is characterized by the relation between the individual and the cosmos. Its practice consists of “a dread of the impure and rites of purification” (Ricoeur 1967, 25). All evil is externalized in nature: heaven and the gods are doing evil to people by visiting them with natural catastrophes, fires, droughts, famines, and disease. Evil and misfortune are not separate in this world; purity, moral good, and good fortune are one and the same.

The stage of defilement is typical for the world of primitive cultures.

In such a universe, the elemental forces are seen as linked so closely to individual human beings that we can hardly speak of an external, physical environment. Each individual carries within himself such close links with the universe that he is like the center of a magnetic field of force. Events can be explained in terms of his being what he is and doing what he has done. (Douglas 1966, 81)

The answer to evil in this cosmos-centered world is a detailed system of interdictions, “minute prescriptions in domains that for us are ethically neutral” (Ricoeur 1967, 27). Defilement is answered by taboo, defined as restrictions “on man’s arbitrary use of natural things, enforced by dread of supernatural penalties” (Smith 1927, 142; Douglas 1966, 10), and by ritual cycles of purification and sacrifices. Over both “stretches the shadow of vengeance which will be paid,” if the proper order is violated (Ricoeur 1967, 33). The power of the interdict, the need to reaffirm life in rituals and sacrifices, is ubiquitous; its anticipatory fear is the prime root for human thought and action. Evil, symbolized as defilement, is exorcised and controlled by regular rituals and formal avoidances. The myths at this stage explain the establishment of the ritual order and depict the dreadful consequences of the violation of taboos.

With the development of economy, society, and culture, the consciousness of evil changes. A more modern and thus more diversified environment develops.

Primitive means undifferentiated; modern means differentiated. Advance in technology involves differentiation in every sphere, in techniques and materials, in production and political roles. (Ricoeur 1967, 77)

Societies begin to concentrate on themselves and less on their relationship with the cosmos and defilement is replaced by sin, defined by Ricoeur as the “violation of a personal bond” (1967, 52). Sin so understood is a religious and social dimension still prior to guilt, understood as the fully ethical and individual dimension of evil. Sin signifies the development of a higher individual awareness yet defines the individual as a predominantly social being. Accordingly, during the stage of sin codes emerge, “elaborated ritual, penal, civil, and political codes to regulate conduct” (Ricoeur 1967, 53).

Evil at this stage is a transgression against one’s fellow human beings and the dreaded punishment is social chaos or expulsion, or—in the Jewish context—the wrath of God (Ricoeur 1967, 63). Still, the framework is entirely natural and historical, there is no hell or after-death punishment of supernatural proportions. The most serious transgressions are injustice, adultery, arrogance, disobedience—anything that disrupts the interpersonal relationships. Recovery is found through redemption, the return to the fold, the reestablishment of social harmony. From the cosmic level of defilement, evil has emerged into the personal and communal. The taboo has been replaced by the code, the gods by the agents of society and law, the vague vindictive power of nature by a horde of demons, located both in the body and in the social sphere.

At this stage, there is as yet no distinction between sickness and fault. Whereas the primitives identify any form of disaster as personal misfortune, people in more developed societies recognize their personal involvement in events. Yet the separation of the independent self from nature and others is not complete. What I experience within is ultimately linked with events without, my sickness is the punishment for my sin, my misfortune the result of my evil intentions. The individual only comes fully into his own at the stage of guilt. Guilt means the emergence of a delicate and scrupulous conscience, the recognition of personal responsibility for one’s own intentions and actions, and the acceptance of an inner rather than a cosmic or a social control of evil impulses (Ricoeur 1967, 100). Punishment, too, is internalized as pure guilt—the unadulterated feeling that one deserves punishment and the powerful anxiety that comes with its anticipation. “Guilt is the achieved internality of sin” (Ricoeur 1967, 103).

The multiple interdictions of the cosmos, the various codes of society are internalized and placed in a position of the absolute, symbolizing a moral perfection that can never be reached. Guilt in its fully developed and conscious form is the eternal strife for altruistic perfection, the never-ending fight against egoistic impulses—a strife that can never be won, a fight that is eternally lost. Guilt is the full recognition of the potentially evil nature of the individual, by himself, for himself, and through himself.

Guilt can be expiated through penance, confessions, and altruistic good deeds. But just as guilt becomes a basic fact of existence, so the expiation of guilt has to be a continuous process.

In the Western tradition, the emerging consciousness of guilt led into three directions. First it brought about the ethico-judicial experience, where the individual was judged not only according to his or her actions but also according to his intentions and where guilt was allotted in varying degrees. This experience, in turn, allowed for true tragedy in the Greek sense, the possibility of a fatal but fundamentally innocent error that caused major transgressions but was not culpable in itself. It also brought about the internal conflict within the individual between the feeling of guilt and the necessity to be active in the world (Ricoeur 1967, 108-18).

In a second direction, guilt in the West led to an extreme scrupulousness of conscience. To make the guilt bearable, the individual subjected himself to voluntary heteronomy under the sway of detailed rules and regulations. This experience taken to its extreme led to the hypocrisy and self-righteousness associated with the Pharisees in the Jewish tradition (Ricoeur 1967, 118-39).

Third, the fully developed consciousness of guilt led to an "impasse of guilt," recognized most powerfully by St. Paul. An ever increasing number of laws and regulations led to a continued commitment of ever new sins and offenses. These, in turn, created a bottomless pit of guilt, a vicious circle of law and offense. Rules and transgressions developed a "deadly circularity," from which only the powerful grace of God could liberate (Ricoeur 1967, 139-50).

Looking at the development of the symbolism of evil in general, the transition from one stage to another goes together with social and political developments. In all cases, it involves changes in the dominant mode of thinking and perception and transforms the major symbols of evil. Nevertheless, any preceding stage, although superseded, is never completely lost so that extreme culpability in the guilt stage can still be expressed in the symbols of defilement.<sup>3</sup>

Ricoeur summarizes his analysis by proposing the concept of the "servile will" (1967, 151). The servile will is the opposite of evil, a free volition that pursues the egoistic interests of the individual yet also coincides with a sense of servitude that allows altruistic acceptance of the needs of others. Essentially a contradiction in terms, the servile will is an ideal that can never be realized. Every stage in the development of the symbol-

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<sup>3</sup> An example of this are demons and devils present in Catholic thinking until well beyond the middle ages (Douglas 1966, 61).

ism of evil has tried to create the servile will in its own way not only as ideal but in practice, striving for a sense of individual contentment under conditions of varying forms of heteronomy. Every stage has expressed the necessary precautions and dangers in different metaphors and varied symbols and has found its own myths to give them expression.<sup>4</sup>

## The Chinese Lack of Guilt

The symbolism of evil in China developed differently from its Western counterpart and yet contains the same basic three levels. It also reveals some fascinating parallels to and differences from Ricoeur's scheme. The most obvious difference is that the Chinese never attained the full stage of guilt, as has been pointed out variously, not least in Ruth Benedict's famous distinction of shame culture in the East from guilt culture in the West (Benedict 1947; Eberhard 1967, 1-4).

This lack of guilt is also discussed in numerous studies on the self in China. Traditional Chinese culture knew no self in the sense of a complex, fully individualized, autonomous (guilt-centered) personality. Questions like "Who am I?", "What am I?", or "Why am I?" are not asked. "In China, the idea of the unity of all beings dominates the thinking and does not allow the division of I and not-I" (Kubin 1990, 101). There is neither the concept of critical self-reflection nor the true tragedy of an individual caught in an inescapable dilemma.

In China, "the individual was allowed only identification with the family or clan as the smallest social unit, excluding the attainment of personal autonomy" (Trauzettel 1977, 341). The philosophy of ancient China did not develop "a concept of the subject and did not divide the world according to the separation of subject and object" (Trauzettel 1990, 89). Among the two words for "self" in classical Chinese, *ji* and *zi*, only the latter is valued positively. *Zi* denotes an impersonal self that has become fully one with nature and the flow of the universe. *Ji*, on the contrary, the personal self, is identified with passions and desires and as such has to be subdued rigorously (Kohn 1992b, 123).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Myths in this context contain the essence of the symbolic and theoretical understanding. They are a "two-way mirror," through which philosophy and ritual praxis may regard one another. Myths of evil, with their descriptions of the origins of evil, the fall of humanity, and so on, express the universal and eternal predicament of humanity. At the same time, they offer a wholeness of vision and integration of worldview, explaining and consoling, showing the world and thus easing the burden of life. O'Flaherty 1976, 9; O'Flaherty 1980, x.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of desire in the Chinese understanding of the self, see Kubin 1990, 87-100.

The same phenomenon is also evident in Chinese autobiography. Although an ancient and varied genre, it does not encourage critical self-questioning or self-analysis. The individual emerges only as the conglomerate of different standardized patterns and critical evaluations or questioning searches of the self do not appear before the contact with Western culture (Bauer 1964, 12; see also Bauer 1985). The same tendency toward stereotype and the predominance of established models is found in the literary self. Chinese literature does not dwell on quests for self-knowledge, on extended self-pity or self-mortification. Rather than facing severe moral choices, the protagonist of traditional Chinese fiction only follows the lessons of the ancients. His or her given social situation always provides the only possible mode of action (Lau 1985, 363; see also Hegel 1985).

In Chinese traditional law, too, the individual self is denied. Serving to restore social harmony after a breach, the law determines punishment entirely on the basis of the severity of the disruption, disregarding whether the deed was done with or without harmful intention. The individual does not count; only his or her impact on the whole of society (Trauzettel 1977, 347-50). No guilt in Ricoeur's sense, therefore, means that in traditional China there was neither classical tragedy nor the ethico-judicial development of codified law. There were neither the extreme scrupulousness of individual conscience nor the impasse of guilt with its sense of utter helplessness and individual aloneness.

Nevertheless, even Chinese culture underwent tendencies toward the stage of guilt, most obviously but not only during the introduction and adaptation of Buddhism in the early centuries CE. Despite these tendencies, however, traditional China never reached the fully developed consciousness of individual guilt with its accompanying cultural characteristics. Faced with the stage of guilt at various times in their history, the Chinese always reverted to symbolizing evil as cosmos-centered defilement and socially focused sin. They never went on to develop individual guilt to its fullest—not, as I argue, because they could not but because they would not. In this, I follow the argumentation of Mary Douglas, who relies on Lévy-Bruhl. Discussing his work *La Mentalité primitive* (1922), she says:

He [Lévy-Bruhl] insisted that their [the primitives'] alleged dislike of discursive reasoning is not due to intellectual incapacity but to highly selective standards of relevance which produce in them an "insuperable indifference to matters bearing no apparent relation to those which interest them." The problem then was to discover the principles of selection and of association which made the primitive culture favor explanations in terms of remote, invisible mystic agencies and

to lack curiosity about the immediate links in a chain of events.  
(Douglas 1966, 75)

In analogy, I think that the Chinese were not incapable of developing a fully individualized sense of guilt but rather chose consciously and actively not to do so.

Beginning like its Western counterpart with the stage of defilement in a cosmos-centered world, the Chinese symbolism of evil similarly proceeded to the stage of sin. After that, however, although the stage of guilt became accessible, the Chinese returned to the level of defilement and defined evil as disharmony—linking cosmos, society, and individual in one overarching system. Their third stage, disharmony rather than guilt, did not come about through the continued internalization and narrowing of evil and the increased relevance of the individual. Rather, it was achieved in a movement of expansion toward the external that went together with a deepened immersion, if not total dissolution, of the individual in cosmos and society. Confronted with the emerging stage of guilt, Chinese thinkers again and again merged the individual with cosmos and society in an overarching effort toward universal integration. Rejecting guilt, the Chinese fought an ongoing struggle of varying intensity against it ever since antiquity. They refused to let the consciousness and conscience of the individual as a sole and isolated entity dominate the culture or even make a serious impact. Their failure to develop a full self in the Western sense is, therefore, not a failure at all.<sup>6</sup>

From the point of view of the Chinese it is, on the contrary, the victorious outcome of centuries of hard struggle, the result of a specific selection and setting of unique cultural priorities.

## Early Stages of Evil in Ancient China

The oldest evidence on Chinese beliefs and ritual practices clearly indicates the presence of a cosmos-centered vision as it is typical for primitive cultures and the stage of defilement. In the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 BCE), the individual human being was linked closely with the cosmos, and the various activities of nature were considered his good and bad fortune. Heaven and the gods of nature, mediated by the ancestors, were willful, purposeful agents; all human activity had to be properly aligned with them to prevent disasters (Keightley 1978, 38; see also Keightley 1984).

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<sup>6</sup> The view that interprets the Chinese development as a failure in comparison to Western culture is very common and based on a Hegelian interpretation of world history and cultural development. For a detailed analysis and summary of the current debate on this issue, see Roetz 1993.

Evil was bad fortune and defilement. It could be prevented through taboos and regular ancestral sacrifices, propitiation of the gods and service to the spirits of the dead. Under the Shang, everything including all bodily symptoms—toothache, headache, bloated abdomen, leg pains, and so on—was thought to be caused by the “curse of an ancestor,” the willful interference in human affairs by a supernatural agent. Poor harvests, natural disasters, and other misfortunes were laid at the same door and seen as signs of universal disease (Unschuld 1985, 19). The character for “sickness” (*ji*) that developed at this time consisted of the image of a bed and an arrow, showing how evil was understood as “an injury caused by the evil action of a third party” (Unschuld 1985, 20). Purity, the ideal state of harmony of the various cosmic and earthly forces, was beset by dangers. The primitive world, however unified in its patterns, was in constant jeopardy through defilement. Evil was cosmic and externalized; it was defilement and, thus, had to be answered by interdiction, taboos, and regular rites. Myths at this stage consist appropriately of explanations of planetary movements and descriptions of ancestral lineages (see Allan 1991).

In a second stage, Chinese society advanced to greater differentiation and the ethics of sin emerged. Evil was understood as the disruption of a personal bond, the destruction of social integration and harmony. This was most explicitly formulated in the philosophy of the Warring States period (479-221 BCE), especially in Confucian thought. For the thinkers of fifth-century China, the highest arbiter of moral judgment was no longer the cosmos at large although that dimension was never fully lost. Of more immediate importance was the social community, the clan of kinship group. Good or bad was measured less in relation to heaven, the gods, and the ancestors than within the immediate context of the social sphere. Reward and punishment, good and bad fortune were defined socially: living in harmony, having plenty of descendants, gaining status and wealth as opposed to social unrest and strife, childlessness and bodily harm, poverty and dishonor. The reality of the social life came to the foreground, and with it a set of moral rules and intricate codes that emphasized the restraint of the inner nature of the individual rather than his or her formal outward action.

The word *jie*, later used for the precepts of Buddhism, shows this quite clearly. It follows the radical *ge*, “spear,” “lance,” to which it adds *gong*, the image of joined hands. The picture of the entire graph therefore shows a phalanx of people with spears in hand who guard something or warn someone off. More psychologically, the word means to be prepared for unforeseen dangers, to guard against unwholesome influences, and to abstain from harmful actions. It has both a cosmic and a social dimension. In its cosmic sense it occurs in the *Liji* (Book of Rites) to denote a

sense of preparedness against the dangers lurking in the workings of the cosmos. In the *Lunyu (Analects)*, the recorded sayings of Confucius, however, it is strictly social:

The Master said: The gentleman has three things to be cautious about [*jie*; abstain from]: In his youth, when his blood and energy are not yet settled, he must be cautious about sex. In his middle years, when his blood and energy are just strong, he must be cautious about fighting. In his old age, when his blood and energy are already weak, he must be cautious about greed [*gain*]. (16.7)

Ritual behavior, the taboos and interdictions that dominated the relationship with the cosmos, was thus socialized. The code of propriety, so central to Confucian thinking, accordingly developed from the cosmic taboos to suit the preponderance of the social.<sup>7</sup>

Propriety became the framework that regulated the interaction of any two individuals who, placed at opposite ends of a hierarchical relationship, continually had to balance each other off, and the internal harmony of the group was the main goal of the Confucian rules. It was related immediately to a personal integrity within and a larger-scale cosmic state of peace without. In a strictly hierarchical system, ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, friend and friend always and under all circumstances had to know their proper places and follow set patterns of behavior. Before, the individual human being had been submerged in the group of humans vis-à-vis heaven and earth; now he or she became part of a subtly interwoven social pattern, fulfilling a role, corresponding to the cues of a part. What had been interdictions and taboos became rules directed against any excesses of temperament and personal inclination that could propel people to leave their social niche and cause disharmony: sex, aggression, greed. What had been punishment from heaven because of ritual impurity now became shame and a sense of separation from the group. Where the myths had been concerned with the phenomena of nature and the positions of the ancestors, they now dealt with the perfection of the golden age and the harmonious delights of sage government.

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<sup>7</sup> The most extensive document of the detailed social taboos and the harm their violation would do to the human community is the *Liji*. Here, every single aspect of human life is regulated in great minuteness, from the proper activities during different seasons to the interaction between the sexes and the right treatment of food. For a study, see Emmrich 1992.

