
Cynthia Brokaw provides us with the first detailed survey of the Ledgers of Merit and Demerit in a Western language, although Richard Shek had already paid attention to the genre of late Ming ethical handbooks as a whole in his unpublished PhD dissertation. Brokaw builds to a considerable extent on the work of four Japanese scholars, Yoshioka Yoshitoyo, Sakai Tadao, Akizuki Kan’ei, and Okuzaki Hiroshi, but adds much information, especially on the later Ledgers. Her book is also much more coherent in structure and very easy to read.

A Ledger of Merit and Demerit (gongguoge 功過格) consists of two lists; one of good deeds for which one can earn merit points (gong), and one of bad deeds for which one is awarded demerit points (guo). Different (mis)deeds are awarded different numbers of points. By keeping track of one’s good and bad deeds, it becomes possible to calculate a final balance, which provides an indication of the degree of good or bad fortune that one can expect in the future. These Ledgers, together with Morality Books (shanshu 善書), form a subgenre of ethical handbooks that became extremely popular among members of the intellectual and social elites from the late Ming onwards. The genre should be distinguished from the Precious Scrolls (baojuan 寶卷), which were produced predominantly by non-elite, lay religious groups.

The book starts with a general historical introduction, followed by a survey of the history of the belief in merit accumulation up to the late sixteenth century, in which the existing secondary literature is summarized. Its principal contribution is contained in the chapters on Yuan Huang 袁黃 (1533–1606) and his writings on the merit-demerit system as a means of controlling and shaping one’s own destiny (Chapter Two); the ensuing criticism of Yuan Huang’s

use of ledgers, because this usage entailed notions of profit, instead of moral cultivation for its own sake (Chapter Three); and the changing use of ledgers after Yuan Huang’s time during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a means of restoring the old paternalistic social order, which had fallen apart in the late Ming and early Qing (Chapter Four). These chapters are all very clearly written, and give a detailed picture of the way members of the intellectual elite thought about moral cultivation and the traps inherent in the use of formalized Ledgers of Merit and Demerit.

The oldest extant ledger is the Ledger of Merit and Demerit of the Taiwei Immortal (Taiwei xianjun gongguo ge 太微仙君功過格; I shall refer to this work as the Ledger), which is preserved in the Ming Daoist canon (HY 186; ce 87). Our only basis for determining the background of the text is its preface, which is dated Dading xinmao sui zhongchun er ri 大定辛卯歲仲春二日, or the second day of the second month of 1171. On this day, the author went in his dream to the Purple Residence (cifu 紫府) to worship his Lordship Taiwei, upon which he received the Ledger. Dading is a Jin year-title, indicating that the author of the preface lived in northern China under Jin occupation. The second day of the second month is the birthday of the god of the earth, who is part of the bureaucracy supervising man’s moral behaviour and without sectarian affiliations. The preface is signed xishan huizjientang wuyouxuan youxuan zi xu 西山會真堂無憂軒又玄子序. This can be translated as Preface by Master Youxuan from the Studio without Sorrows of the Hall of Meeting Trueness on Western Mountain. Clearly, the interpretations You Xuanzi (i.e. as an ordinary name) or Master You (Brokaw, pp. 46–47) are incorrect; youxuan is a reference to the first section of the Classic of the Way and the Virtue (Daodejing 道德經): “And even more mysterious”.

Brokaw (pp. 43–52) follows the analysis by Akizuki Kan’ei, who sees the Ledger as the product of the Jingming zhongxiao dao 淨明忠孝道, a Daoist group from Jiangxi that originated from followers of a cult for True Lord Xu (Xu zhenjun 許真君) during the Song.² He interprets the reference to the Western Mountain as the

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² Akizuki Kan’ei, Chūgoku kinsei dōkyō no keisei 中國近世道教の形成 (Tōkyō, 1978) pp. 197–216, especially pp. 197–199 and pp. 210–212. Akizuki’s view is shared by Yoshioka Yoshitoyo, but opposed by Sakai Tadao. Additional evidence against Akizuki’s hypothesis is provided by the lack of references to the Ledger of Merit and Demerit in Southern Song sources, whereas the Southern Song Morality book Tract of Taishang on Action and Response (on which more below) is mentioned in three different catalogues, including the imperial catalogue from 1145 and a
mountain where this Daoist group was located. In their local monastery there was also a Hall of Meeting Trueness. However, the name Western Mountain is very common all over China and the same applies to the name Hall of Meeting Trueness; this type of general information has to be corroborated by more conclusive evidence, before it can be accepted. The remainder of Akizuki’s argument, however, is based on even more circumstantial evidence, which would turn many other contemporary religious groups into offshoots of this particular group. Even if the author had originated in this group, it is unlikely that he would still have been involved in it by the time he had his vision in the North. It also is extremely unlikely that a Southern Chinese would have fled from Jiangxi to the distant north of the barbarian Jin, without alluding to it in his preface. Therefore, to place the Ledger within the context of the Southern Song history of the Jingming zhongxiao dao, as Akizuki has done, seems unjustified.

An alternative hypothesis can be constructed, which explains far more of the available evidence and—unlike Akizuki’s hypothesis—does no contradict it. Daoism flourished in Northern China during the Jin, eventually leading to the founding of the Complete Perfection (quanzhen 全真) and other traditions. In its capital (modern Beijing) was located the Tianchang 天長 Monastery on Western Mountain, where the Jin Daoist canon was compiled (completed in 1192). Liu De/shanren 劉德／善仁 (1122–1180), the founder of the [True] Great Way tradition ([zhen] dadao 善道) also lived in this monastery for a number of years. He was also called Master Without Sorrows (Wuyou zi 無憂子). In 1142, when in a dreamlike state, he had received instructions concerning the inner meaning of the Classic of the Way and the Virtue from a man with white hair. The Classic played an important role in Liu’s teachings (also called xuanxue 玄學, in Mysterious Teachings) and is frequently referred to in extant inscriptions of the tradition, including repeated references to the first section of the book (which also inspired the name of the tradition). Liu practiced healing and exorcism; his only other systematized teachings consist of nine rules concerning correct behaviour.3 The Ledger of Merit and Demerit fits in perfectly with the

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ethical teachings by Liu Deren. It was written by someone to whom the *Classic of the Way and Virtue* clearly mattered (in view of his autonym Master Youxuan), living and working in the Studio Without Sorrows on Western Mountain in 1171. Like Liu Deren, our author also received his text in a dream. The work could easily have been incorporated in the Jin Daoist Canon and thus have been transmitted to us.

We know very little about the transmission of the *Ledger* until its reappearance in the sources during the second half of the sixteenth century. The underlying methodology for keeping track of bad and good behaviour, and the link between fixed quantities of good or bad deeds and retribution, permeated religious life. People could participate in so-called Gengshen meetings, to mark the day in the sixty-day cycle on which the Three Worms would leave an individual’s body to report to the Jade Emperor on the person’s transgressions (*guo*過, the same word as “demerit”). In the temples of the City God and the God of the Eastern Marchmount, there were the Judicial Officers in Charge of Good and Evil (*shan’e panguan*善惡判官), as well as many small shrines for specific deities in charge of retribution for general and specific good and bad deeds. Early Ming local officials designed charts for use in Community Compacts, with separate columns for good (shan) and bad (e) behaviour. It was widely believed that certain quantities of religious acts (especially the recital of names of Buddhas and other deities, or of religious texts) could earn certain rewards in one’s present life, such as the birth of a son or recuperation from an

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60–70. Incidentally, on, or near, the former location of the Tianchang Monastery (which was burned down by the Mongols in 1215) on Western Mountain, was also located the later White Cloud Monastery of the Complete Perfection tradition. However, I have been unable to trace any person from that tradition in the Daoist canon who might be the author of the *Ledger*. On the Jin Canon and this monastery, cf. Van der Loon (1984) pp. 45–47 or Judith M. Boltz, *A Survey of Taoist Literature* (Berkeley, 1987) p. 6 and pp. 127–128.

4 Kubo Noritada 窪徳忠, *Kōshin shinkō no kenkyū* 廣中信仰の研究 (Tōkyō, 1980 reprint); Sawada Mizuho’s 塩田瑞穂 *important supplement to* *Kōshin shiryou zasshō 广中史料雜抄*, *Chūgoku no minzoku shinkō* 中國的民間信仰 (Tōkyō, 1982) pp. 476–487.

5 *Kuang Zhong 亢鋒*, *Ming Kuang taishou zhi Su ji* 明朝太守治蘇集 (author 1383–1442; 1764 edition in Naikaku bunko in Tōkyō, Japan) 13: pp. 5b–7a; *He’nan junzhi* 河南郡志 (1499) 2: pp. 19a–20a. Maybe these activities were themselves inspired by a kind of Ledger.
illness. It is not difficult to see how a text like the *Ledger* might have continued to attract a following of its own, but we lack documentation until the late Ming. This is, as a matter of fact, a technical problem for many developments during the mid-Ming. Unlike Brokaw, I do not think we can deduce from this gap in information that the *Ledger* could not be attractive to Confucian scholars of the intervening period (the critics quoted by Brokaw, pp. 63–64, in support of this assumption are all slightly younger contemporaries of Yuan Huang). It is probable that we may find information on this topic in anecdotal collections that have not yet been consulted.

Some suggestions concerning the use of ethical handbooks in the period until the late Ming can be made on the basis of the history of the *Tract of Taishang on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇) (on which Brokaw, pp. 36–43, makes some general remarks). The *Tract* originated from a similar Daoist environment as the *Ledger*, and shared its belief in supernatural retribution for good and bad deeds. Like the *Ledger*, it only acquired widespread popularity in the late Ming. It was reprinted in 1324 with a commentary and illustrations by Chen Jian 陳堅, *Taishang ganying lingpian tushuo 太上感應靈篇圖說*. Chen came from Hangzhou, in the same region where the late Ming revival of the *Ledger of Merit and Demerit* and this *Tract* took place. As the various postscripts to his text show, Chen was active in a larger environment of Confucians (rujia 儒家) who were very much interested in cultivating moral behaviour and earning merit for it. In fact, in 1352 some of them decided to have Chen's publication carved in stone (without the pictures), adding a lengthy discussion on the importance of good moral behaviour and with many concrete historical examples of it. They placed the stones in a hall near West Lake in Hangzhou, but these were later moved to the prefectural school. It would be interesting to compare the attitudes in these texts (and elite responses to Song and Yuan lay activist Buddhist movements, such as the White Lotus movement) with those of Yuan Huang and late Ming Confucians as discussed by Brokaw. From the postscripts to the *Tract*, it becomes clear that numerous different editions were in circulation at the time, which have now been lost. This confirms

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my above suggestion that historical accident, rather than a lack of interest, could have been responsible for the lack of information concerning Morality Books and the Ledger after the Southern Song/Jin until the late Ming. Probably, this particular question should be investigated within the larger context of the transmission of Encyclopedias for Daily Usage (riyong leishu 日用類書) and similar works during the early and mid-Ming periods.

The increased use of various types of Ledgers since the late Ming was not an isolated phenomenon, but part of the larger history of the use of ethical handbooks. By ethical handbooks I mean both the Morality Books (shanshu), and other types of elite guides to good behaviour that became especially popular during the late Ming. Different Ledgers and Morality Books were often published under one general title. In this context the Charitable Halls (shantang 善堂) (i.e. the benevolent societies, cf. Brokaw, pp. 141–142, pp. 145–8, p. 222, but no systematic treatment) should also be mentioned. These societies carried out a variety of good works, in addition to publishing ledgers and morality books. A future study should consider all these phenomena in combination, since they often involved the same social (literati) networks and were probably inspired by the same socio-economic developments and elite responses to these.

The following anecdote provides rare information on the religious context of the practice. It appears in the Kouduo richao 口霙日抄 (under the date 23 April 1633), a kind of daily record of conversations between Giulio Aleni and members of the local social elite in Fujian province in the last decades of the Ming. “In Zhangzhou, some have founded a Gathering to Cultivate Trueness (xiuzhen hui 修真會), taking Lü Chunyang 呂純陽 [=Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓] as their patriarch (zong 宗). On the sixteenth day, a gentleman from that Gathering came to visit. He asked the Teacher

9 E.g. Dangui ji 丹桂籍 (text tradition going back to the late Ming; as a compilation first published around 1703; many reprints; I have used a Japanese edition from 1829, printed on the original Chinese blocks); Taiwei xianjun chunyang zushi gongguo ge 太微仙君純陽祖師功過格 (1790 reprint; edition in the National Diet Library in Tōkyō, Japan).
10 Cf. Dangui ji and Yoshioka Yoshitoyo, Dōkyō no kenkyū 道教の研究 (Kyōto, 1952) pp. 120–121.
11 Līlì zhǐ 黎里志 (1805) 8: p. 3a, 12: pp. 3a—6b gives the example of Ru Kefa 汝可法, who eventually became a Surveillance Commissioner (rank 3a) in Shaanxi. He took part in a Buddhist Gathering to Set Free Living Beings (fangshenghui 放生會) in 1616, devoted himself to charitable affairs in general, wrote numerous ethical handbooks and also loved to recite the Tract and Yuan Huang’s Ledger.
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(xiansheng 先生, [i.e. Aleni]): ‘With respect to the doctrinal rules of our Gathering, they consist partly of a Ledger of Merit and Dismerit. Each first and fifteenth day of the month, we burn it [incense] for Patriarch Lu (Lu zushi 岳祖師). This is also intended to teach people to do good. What does the Teacher think of it?’ . . . [here follows an evaluation by Aleni]. The guest said: ‘Our Gathering also sometimes worships Shangdi [i.e. the Jade Emperor, or Yuhuang shangdi 玉皇上帝]. . . . ’

The religious context of the practice is confirmed by a compilation of Ledgers and Morality Books reprinted in 1790 (of the Immortal Lord Taiwei and Patriarch Chunyang) ¹³ The mention of Lü Dongbin also suggests that this group practiced a spirit-writing cult, which was widespread among literati and also common in combination with the use of Ledgers and Morality Books. ¹⁴ Although, as pointed out correctly by Brokaw, the contents of the ledgers had been secularized, they were still often practiced within a clear religious (and in this case probably Daoist) context. ¹⁵

Brokaw (pp. 157–161, pp. 225–226) remarks that we know next to nothing on the use of ledgers by people below the social and intellectual elite, until the twentieth century. ¹⁶ Basically this is true, but Yoshioka Yoshiyeko mentions an early example, from between 1684 and 1714. A lay (Buddho-Daoist) group in Tianjin prescribed the investigation of adherents’ moral behaviour at special meetings four times each year, on the basis of Yuan Huang’s “Determining Your Own Fate” (leiming pian 立命篇) and Zhuhong’s 袁宏 “Record of Self-Knowledge” (zizhili 自知錄) (1606). The former work is

¹² Li Jiubao 李九標, Koudao nchao 口鐙日抄, 4 12a–b This reference was pointed out to me by Linda de Lange, who is preparing a PhD thesis on this book at Leiden University. Also, cf E Zurcher, “The Jesuit Mission in Fujian in Late Ming Times: Levels of Response”, in E B Vermeer ed, Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries (Leiden, 1990) pp 417–457 and especially note 26 on the edition used. On Yuhuang shangdi, cf for instance Xinke chuxiang zengbu soushen ji daquan 墨刻出像增補搜神集大全 (Zhongguo mingjuan xinyang ziliao huiban 中國民間信仰資料彙編 Vol 04 [Taipei, 1989]) pp 29–33

¹³ Taiwei xianjun Chunyang zushi gongguo ge (1790 reprint) pp 1a–b

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¹⁵ An additional example is an edition of the Taishang ganying pian (reprint in 1831 by the Fuwentang shufang 福文堂書坊 in Foshan, from an edition by Zhou Qifen 周其芬 from Shunde, colophons for reprints by someone who succeeded for the examinations in 1808, 1813, in the Wade Collection at Cambridge University). Although it does not contain a Ledger, it includes numerous Morality Books, various dharani, a survey of days for vegetarian fasting (zhain 禪), a portrait of Guanyin, and other religious and ethical information

¹⁶ Justus Doolittle, Social Life of the Chinese (London, 1866) Vol II, pp 164–170, pp 169–170, stresses the use of ledgers by members of the elite in Fuzhou (Fujian)
Yuan Huang's explication of the benefits of the ledger-system, while the second work is Zhuhong's version of the original Ledger. We do not know the exact social background of the adherents, but generally the followers of such lay groups did not belong to the social or intellectual elites, although they probably were not peasants either (since a fair degree of literacy seems to have been presumed of such adherents).

The fact that old types of Ledgers remained in usage is relevant, because it indicates that in order to understand people's attitudes towards Ledgers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we should not confine ourselves to new compilations, but also include new editions of old versions. In this respect Brokaw's argument in Chapter Four which is based on the changing contents of newly compiled Ledgers, rather than the publication history of old and new Ledgers alike, may have to be qualified.

Cynthia Brokaw has produced a very readable and instructive monograph on the history of the Ledgers of Merit and Demerit. The great strength of her book is her treatment of intellectual history, which clearly also has her own personal interest. Hopefully, readers of anecdotal collections will be able to provide us with more concrete examples of the use of these Ledgers. No doubt, Cynthia Brokaw will continue to enrich us with further detailed studies of late Ming intellectual history.

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LI Mingbin 李明濬, Zhongguo wenxue zai Esu 中國文學在俄蘇, Guangzhou, Huacheng 花城 chubanshe; 300 pp.

The work reviewed here is the last of three books on Russian sinology which have been published in succession in China lately. The first one is “A Handbook on Chinese Studies in Russia and Soviet Union”, vols. 1-2 (俄蘇中國學手冊. Beijing, 1986); the second one is “Soviet Studies on Chinese Ancient Literature: Romances, Short Stories, Drama.” (中國古典文學研究在蘇聯小說、戲曲). Beijing, 1987, 156 p.) by the well-known Russian sino-

18 This point is underlined by the anecdotes quoted in this review, but also by the fact that the Taiweii xianjun Chuyang zushi gongguo ge reprint of 1790 and the Taishang ganying pian reprint of 1831, both practised in a religious context, were cheap editions. Since mostly the more expensive and secularised editions have been preserved, this distorts our perspective considerably.