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The Road to Redemption: Killing Snakes in Medieval Chinese Buddhism

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Abstract: In the medieval Chinese context, snakes and tigers were viewed as two dominant, threatening animals in swamps and mountains. The animal-human confrontation increased with the expansion of human communities to the wilderness. Medieval Chinese Buddhists developed new discourses, strategies, rituals, and narratives to handle the snake issue that threatened both Buddhist and local communities. These new discourses, strategies, rituals, and narratives were shaped by four conflicts between humans and animals, between canonical rules and local justifications, between male monks and feminized snakes, and between organized religions and local cultic practice. Although early Buddhist monastic doctrines and disciplines prevented Buddhists from killing snakes, medieval Chinese Buddhists developed narratives and rituals for killing snakes for responding to the challenges from the discourses of feminizing and demonizing snakes as well as the competition from Daoism. In medieval China, both Buddhism and Daoism mobilized snakes as their weapons to protect their monastic property against the invasion from each other. This study aims to shed new light on the religious and socio-cultural implications of the evolving attitudes toward snakes and the methods of handling snakes in medieval Chinese Buddhism.

Keywords: snakes; Buddhist violence; Buddhist women; local community; religious competition

1. Introduction

Snakes, like other non-human animals, can exist in multiple layers of human experience. In ancient and medieval China, they could live in the cultural, historical-physical, and psychological-cognitive domains. Reading and visualizing cultural products in the form of literature, legends, stories, paintings, and sculptures produce cultural experience. The snakes encountered in this way can be culturally constructed from traditional thinking and religious discourses, from indigenous Chinese culture, Buddhism, or other traditions, have culturally constructed the images of snakes in their own ways. Historical and physical experience refers to the actual contact between humans, as individuals and in communities, and snakes as individuals or as groups in the wilderness. Psychological and cognitive experience, meanwhile, refers to the imagined snakes that are both perceived and conceived from the previous two kinds of encounters. In the pre-modern period, these three different layers of experience often intermingled and mutually influenced each other. While discussing how medieval Chinese Buddhists handled the threat of snakes, it is worth noting that they had to deal with them on all of these layers. The cultural experience of Buddhist monks comes from literary works, which include both indigenous Chinese writings and early Buddhist literature.

In the early twelfth century, there was a serpent's cave at the back of the Pure Dwelling Cliff 淨居巖 in the Southern Peak mountain ranges. A monk called Zongyu 宗譽 constructed a chamber as a temporary residence in this place. Due to being constantly disturbed by a woman, he left for a temple within the mountain. Later, in 1141, a monk called Shantong 善同 came to the Pure Dwelling

Cliff and expanded the residence to several rooms. A 28-year-old traveling monk, Miaoyin 妙印, stopped by this area but died several days after having been seduced by a woman for sex. Another monk who practiced solitarily in the same area also became sick. In the middle of the fourth month, a rainstorm with thunder and lightning suddenly attacked this area. Shantong saw a giant snake coiling around his chamber at midnight. Working with his monastic colleagues, Shantong managed to kill this snake in a vast cave, which stopped the rainstorm. Soon after, monks found out that this snake had rectangular black stripes and it killed eight monks and their attendants (T. 51, no. 2097, 2: 1079c–1080a; Robson 2009; Wei 2015, pp. 138–62). This story is instructive for many reasons. It reflects various conflicts that deserve detailed scrutiny and discussion, such as conflicts between humans and animals, between canonical rules and local justifications, between male monks and a feminized snake, and between organized religion and local cultic practice. In this paper, I contextualize the discourse around, and the practice of, killing snakes, by looking into how Chinese Buddhists understood and handled these four conflicts.

In regard to the conflict between humans and animals, the story above reveals the confrontation between a group of monks who lived in the deep mountains and the snake that claimed the mountain as its realm. On the one hand, in Buddhist literature, snakes often appear as a threat. Monastic and lay Buddhists across Asia had to deal with snakes as they walked, lived, and practiced in the wilderness.[1] The story above shows the monks facing the threats of snakes and of the rainstorm brought by the snake while practicing alone or living as a group deep in the mountains.[2] In other words, living in the wilderness is dangerous because one might invade the realm of the snake. On the other hand, the conflict between humans and animals—including snakes—in the wilderness was already noted in pre-Buddhist literature in ancient China. A particularly common theme is people being vastly outnumbered by beasts in the ancient wilderness. As Han Fei 韓非 (279–233 BCE) already noted, "In the earliest times, when the people were few and birds and beasts were numerous, the people could not overcome the birds, beasts, insects, and snakes. Then there appeared a sage who created the building up of wood to make nests to hide the masses from harm (then the people called him the One Having Nests)." (adapted from Puett 2000, p. 77; see also Han 1969, p. 685; Gavany 2013, p. 89). Thus, the struggle for living space would break out between human beings and animals. The monks could lose their lives to a venomous snake.

Attending to the conflict between canonical rules and local justifications, this story reveals the gap between the Buddhist Vinaya rule against killing and the local practice of execution. At the end of the story, it states that the serpent has killed eight monks and their attendants, so the serpent was killed as retribution for its bad karma from killing monks. The monks' killing of a snake seems to violate the most important Buddhist precept that prohibits taking the life of any sentient being. As many scholars have noted, in Buddhist traditions, monks should never kill sentient beings, including both humans and animals (Chapple 1993; Tucker and Williams 1998; Pu 2014).[3] The story I recounted above about the killing of a huge snake is an exception in medieval Chinese Buddhism. It raises several questions, such as how a local Chinese Buddhist community justified the act of killing and what doctrinal and ritual resources could be mobilized by that community to make such a justification.

On the conflict between male Buddhist monks and a feminized snake, this story seems to liken the snake to a lustful woman who would sicken a man and eventually kill him. Although it does

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1 From the perspective of religious history, the serpent was one of the most important animals in Indo-European culture and religion. It was notorious for tempting Adam and Eve in Abrahamic religions and becoming the symbol of one of the three poisons that result in suffering in Buddhist cosmology. Snakes are also regarded as evil animals in Zoroastrianism. See (Moazami 2005, pp. 300–17). For the study on the evolving symbolism of the serpent in the Near Eastern religious tradition, see (Charlesworth 2009). Earlier studies on the religious symbolism of the snake include Mundkur (1983) and Morgan (2008).

2 One example can be found on the wall painting of Cave 112, see Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan (Dunhuang Academy), p. 108.

3 However, there are always exceptions. For example, as Klaus Vollmer noted, killing animals could be justified in pre-modern Japanese Buddhism (Vollmer 2006, pp. 195–211; see also Harris 1994; Bartholomeusz 2005; Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010; Jerryson 2011; Tikhonov and Brekke 2015).

not explicitly state that the woman who killed Miaoyin was the giant snake transformed, the story indicates that Miaoyin's cold-blooded snake-like body was corrupted by the snake. The allegory here is of a weak male monk being corrupted and eventually destroyed both physically and spiritually by a snake-like woman. Both in Buddhist literature and in the pre-Buddhist tradition in ancient China, the woman and the snake were linked in an association that should be documented and analyzed.[4]

In regard to the conflict between organized religion and local cultic practice, this story tells that the snake was capable of bringing up thunder, lightning, and a rainstorm. These were common powers granted to the snake as a deity in ancient cultic beliefs. A conflict is revealed here between the Buddhist community and the local cult. Storms brought danger and threatened the monastic chamber and its residents, and the snake seems to be portrayed as the lord or deity in control of these natural forces. However, Buddhist monks, who represented human beings in this story, could keep these forces under control by killing the snake. Through this killing, the group of monks eventually brought forth a bright shining day, banishing the darkness. Finally, this group of monks used whatever was available to attack and kill the bothersome snake. The monks' use of weapons and force to defeat it seems to be well justified due to the fact that the snake had killed eight monks and their attendants. The monks enjoyed a peaceful environment for their daily lives and practice afterwards.

In the following discussion, I hypothesize that several different factors have played roles in shaping the attitudes and practices of handling these conflicts centered on the snake. The first factor is the tradition of killing snakes, which has a long history in ancient China. The second factor is the link drawn between women and snakes in ancient China, which was based on the discourse of the feminized snake in the traditional Yin-Yang theory. The third factor is the acceptance by the medieval Chinese Buddhist community of the Mahāyāna tantric tradition, which introduced rituals for killing sentient beings and justifications for doing so. The fourth factor is the competition of Buddhism with local cultic traditions and with Daoism in medieval China. In medieval Chinese religious discourse, tigers and snakes appeared as the most dangerous threats against both the Buddhist and Daoist communities. Taming tigers and killing snakes became significant in terms of cultural capital—a way for both religious traditions to display their power. Chinese Buddhist and Daoist communities learned from each other while dealing with threats from dangerous animals at the local level. In other words, they could mobilize whatever resources were at hand when developing their strategies to deal with the challenges they faced (Campany 2012, pp. 99–141).

2. Confrontations between Humans and Snakes

Scientific studies indicate that venomous snakes have existed for about 60 million years. Colubroid snakes in Asia evolved a highly potent venom delivery system. Colubroid snakes include some deadly venomous snakes, such as *Viperidae* (vipers and pit vipers), *Elapidae* (cobras, mambas, and coral snakes), and *Colubridae* (racers, gopher snakes, and kingsnakes) (Isbell 2009, p. 98). Some scientists suggest that evolutionary exposure to snakes contributed significantly to the evolution in mammals of neural structures for detecting and avoiding them, and these structures associated snakes with fear (Isbell 2006, pp. 1–35; LoBue et al. 2010, pp. 375–79; Deloache and Lobue 2009, pp. 201–7; LoBue and DeLoache 2008, pp. 284–89; Keil 2013, pp. 15857–58; Tierney and Connolly 2013, pp. 919–28; Stanley 2008, pp. 42–58). Although people in ancient China did not possess modern knowledge of snakes, fear of snakes seems to have been universal across the empire.

The early record on the confrontation between humans and snakes can be traced back to as early as the sixth century BCE when snakes—along with tigers—were regarded as threats both to human lives and to the political and social order. In the sixth century BCE, while Duke Jing of Qi (Qi Jinggong 齊景公, ?-490 BCE; r. 547–490 BCE) went out hunting, he asked Yan Ying 晏嬰 (578–500 BCE) if it was

[4] The motif of monks facing a female sexual aggressor in the form of a coiling snake is also seen in Japanese Buddhist didactic tales. See (Klein 1995, pp. 100–36; Dix 2009, pp. 43–58; Ambros 2015, pp. 91–92).

inauspicious to see tigers in the mountains and snakes in the marshes (Yan 1991, p. 80).[5] But Yan Ying responded to him that only poor governance could bring up three inauspicious things for the state.[6] Although it seems that the tiger and snake served as metaphors in this story, it nonetheless clearly shows that the tiger and snake were considered dangerous threats to humans in the wilderness. In the Han Dynasty, Wang Chong (27–100 AD) noted that there were numerous snakes and vipers in the South because of its humid environment (Wang 1979, p. 1301). Nevertheless, the confrontations between humans and snakes spanned from the Yellow River region to the Yangtz River region.

In the ancient and medieval periods, the southern regions of China were described as teeming with threats from snakes. Humid weather in summer and lands exposed to water provided a hospitable habitat for numerous vipers and snakes carrying infectious diseases and plagues (Ban 1962, p. 2781; Ouyang 1975, p. 6345). *Erya* 爾雅, an early Chinese lexicon that might be dated in the 3rd century BCE, lists four major types of snakes including flying snakes (*tengshe* 螣蛇) and a mythical snake-like animal. However, according to *The Classified Compendium of Literary Writing* (*Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚), a collection of literary works compiled in 624, ancient and early medieval writers wrote about five major types of snakes. This classification can be regarded as the literary tradition about snakes in early medieval China (Ouyang 1982, pp. 1664–67). These five types of snakes are the extremely venomous long snake (*changshe* 長蛇) that could bite anything, a mythical flying snake (*tengshe*), the giant, python-like Ba snake (*bashe* 巴蛇), a mythical giant snake (*jushe* 巨蛇) that could swallow an elephant (Strassberg 2002, p. 190), and the two-headed "bramble-head snake" (Zhishou she 枳首蛇) (Sterckx 2002, p. 156). The second type of snake is not a reptile species that can be found in nature, but the third type might be a sort of python.

In the Tang period, some local regions were famous for being home to different species of snakes. The assumption was that some of them were venomous and should be despised and even killed, while others were not venomous and might simply be avoided. However, some snakes were valued for economic, medical, and aesthetic reasons, so local governments authorized local catchers to obtain them as tributes to higher offices. For example, in the Tang Dynasty, Qichun County (modern Qichun 蘄春, Hubei Province) offered numerous indigenous products as a local tribute to the court, including white clothing, deer-hair brush-pens, tea, white-flower snakes, and dried meat of black snakes (Ouyang 1975, p. 1054).[7]

The Tang court had expectations for local areas within the empire to submit snakes as local tributes. The court then used the snakes or some of their body parts for making medicine. According to the *Comprehensive Statutes* (Tongdian 通典) compiled by Du You 杜佑 (735–812) in 801, many prefectures—including Xinping (modern Xianyang, Shaanxi), Qichun (modern Qichun, Hubei), Chaoyang (modern Chaozhou, Guangdong), Nanhai (modern Guangzhou, Guangdong), Gaoliang (modern Enping, Guangdong), and Haifeng (modern Haifeng, Guangdong)—offered dried snake meat and snake gallbladders to the court (Du 1988, vol. 5; Huang 2000, pp. 173–212). Due to the high demand for these tributes, local governments mobilized some local residents to risk their lives to catch snakes. A vivid description of the life of snake catchers can be found in Liu Zongyuan's 柳宗元 (773–819) acclaimed piece "Catching Snakes." It says that there is an extraordinary kind of deadly fatal snake having a black body with white rings in the wilds of Huguang (Hubei and Hunan). The flesh of this snake can nevertheless soothe excitement, heal leprous sores, remove sloughing flesh, and expel

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5 Roel Sterckx used this story to discuss how Yan Ying as a sage master refuted the anomalous character of a species in its natural habitat, see (Sterckx 2002, p. 106).

6 These three inauspicious things include having a wise man without discovering him, knowing of his presence without employing him, and employing him without giving him the trust. For the discussion, see Milburn 2015, p. 214.

7 Another Song scholar Luo Yuan 羅願 (1136–1184) also noted that, though there were numerous species of snakes, the venomous white-flower snakes were active in the Qichun region. This species of the snake was weird because its eyes kept open even after its death while other species closed their eyes once died. He also pointed out that the most venomous snake was the viper with short size, reversing nose, and colorful stripes. And, in the Lingbiao region (modern Guangdong area), there was a species of two-head snake. See (Luo 1999, 32-1a).

evil spirits. Therefore, the imperial court ordered each family to pay two snakes as the tribute every year (Liu 2000, p. 1050; trans. by Giles).

In medieval Chinese literature, snakes and tigers often appeared together as major threats toward local villages (T. 50, no. 2059, 10: 394a). Medieval Chinese sources often mentioned tiger violence (hubao 虎暴 or tiger disaster 虎災) and snake disasters (shezai 蛇災) as set phrases. Dealing with violent tigers and disastrous snakes became leading concerns for local communities. For example, in Gan Bao's *The Account of Searching for the Spirits* (Soushenji 搜神記), a giant snake in a crevasse of the Yung range of the Dongyuan area killed several local officials. Local residents offered the snake oxen and sheep as sacrifices but with no luck. The local government also requisitioned children born to slaves of ordination families and the daughters of criminals as offerings for the snake. Over several years, nine girls lost their lives to the snake. In Jiangle 將樂 County, Li Dan had six daughters. The youngest one, Li Ji 李寄, volunteered to deal with the snake. She brought a sword and a dog to the mouth of the cave where the snake was dwelling and eventually killed the snake (Gan 1996, pp. 230–31). Given all this conflict between human and snake at the local level, could medieval Buddhists provide the local community with alternative approaches to the snake problem? Social and historical realities brought many challenges to Buddhist monks who traveled in the wilderness. Local communities also called on monks for help in dealing with the serpent challenge.

3. Conflicts between Early Buddhist Principles and Local Approaches

Confronted with the threat of snakes in the wilderness, individual Buddhists and Buddhist communities responded with a mixture of different attitudes and practical approaches. Many elements may have shaped the attitudes of medieval Chinese Buddhists toward snakes and the ways in which they handled snakes in their social and religious life. Collectively, medieval Chinese Buddhists lived in a disciplined community that was ruled by Buddhist doctrines, morality, and disciplines. The textual and literary tradition inherited and developed from early Buddhism certainly had an impact on the attitudes of some Chinese Buddhists, which means that some of the non-violent doctrines and principles for handling snakes that were taught in early Buddhist literature could still be found in Chinese Buddhism. I first offer a general survey of the nonviolent handling of snakes in the early Buddhist textual tradition and then discuss how this nonviolent legacy continued in Chinese Buddhism.

Snakes often represented the threat of real non-human animals in social and religious life in the Vinaya collection of the Pāli canon, and the Vinaya texts provided concrete cases for handling encounters between snakes and monastic members (Daniel 2002, pp. 74–158).[8] Supplementing the Pāli Vinaya, I provide some cases from the Chinese translations of the Vinaya. Although we have to separate metaphorical snakes and natural snakes in early Buddhist literature, both the doctrines and disciplines of early Buddhism advocated and enforced nonviolence and therefore were against the killing of snakes. Reading the canonical texts, it is not difficult to find evidence that killing a living being is never an option in early Buddhism. The first precept for any Buddhist is never to take the life of any sentient being (McDermott 1989, pp. 269–80; Aristarkhova 2012, pp. 636–50).[9]

In early Buddhism, the most important rule while dealing with animals, no matter how harmful they are, is not to kill. James Stewart calls this the notion of total pacifism, in which "Even killing a snake in self-defense is considered inappropriate. This pacifism is born from two causes. The first motive is the Buddhist virtue of compassion . . . the second motive for this extreme pacifism is

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[8] Two of most common venomous snakes in South Asian Buddhism might be the Common Krait (Bungarus caeruleus) and cobra snake (Ophiophagus hannah). For the Common Krait in India, also see (Sharma 2003, p. 188ff). Nevertheless, the sutras often use the snake as a metaphor for expounding their doctrinal discussions.

[9] Aristarkhova noted that "the Jain concept of 'Ahimsa' is usually translated as 'nonharm' or 'nonviolence.' In this early translation, 'himsa' was translated as 'injury,' 'sin' and 'killing,' 'damaging' and 'slaying.'" As we can see, in early Buddhism, injuring an animal is not allowed either.

more self-interested, however, and is derived from a strange kind of self-preservation" (Stewart 2015). In ancient South Asia, snakes appeared to be tremendously dangerous to human beings, and Buddhist texts show numerous cases of this danger. In general, snakes might bite monks, and protection against this danger was deemed necessary. In the Vinaya collection of the Pāli canon, the Buddha was often consulted about how to handle these issues. In the *Cullavagga* 3 (Khandha paritta), Gotama granted permission to the almsmen to make use of a safeguard for their security and protection against snake bite (Horner 1930, p. 287).

Killing snakes by accident and having the intention to kill snakes are both counted as offenses in the Vinaya. In the Chinese translation of the *Mahīśāsaka-Vinaya* 彌沙塞部和醯五分律, a group of monks wearing wooden shoes in the monastic quarter were making noises that disturbed the other monks' meditation. Then one of the monks killed a snake with his sharp wooden shoes at night. In responding to this accident, the Buddha ordered to ban wooden shoes for the offense of Duṣkṛta (T. 22, no. 1421, 21: 146c3). For a monk, according to the Chinese translation of the *Mahīśāsaka-Vinaya*, even having the intention to kill a snake would be counted as an offense. When a monk who used a stone to try to strike a snake accidentally killed a person, the Buddha said that in attempting to attack the snake this monk had committed the offense of Duṣkṛta (Pāli:Dukkaṭa) (T. 22, no. 1421, 28: 184a26). Furthermore, the Pāli Vinaya does not allow monks to consume the meat of snakes because the snake was loathsome and disgusting. According to the *Mahavagga* VI, in ancient time, lay people once offered snake flesh to monks, and the latter made use of it. This behavior irritated some people who regarded snake as the loathsome and disgusting animal. (Horner 1962, pp. 299–300).[10] While this rule was attributed to the historical Buddha, who maintained the position of preventing monks from consuming snake flesh because he was questioned by the serpent-king. Interestingly, the snake is often depicted as the symbolic animal of the hatred (Skt. *dveṣa*), one of three poisons (Skt. triviṣa) in early Buddhism, posing against Buddhist compassion and purity.

Some cases in the Vinaya texts show several methods taught by the Buddha to protect monks from the danger of the snake, but this protection should not come at the cost of the lives of the snakes. The Buddha instructed monks to make lamps, ropes, and canisters to keep snakes away or contain them and later release them. For example, a story in the Chinese translation of the *Mūlasarvāstivādavinayakṣudrakavastu* tells that the Buddha instructed the monks to make lamps for reciting scriptures at night in order to prevent snakes from disturbing them (T. 24, no.1451: 263a24–263b5). In the Chinese translation of the *Caturvargika-Vinaya*, the Buddha taught those monks who did not detach from desires that they could use canisters to contain the snakes and tie the snakes up by ropes and then release them without harming them (T. 22, no. 1428, 42: 870c13). In the same chapter of the *Caturvargika-Vinaya*, after a venomous snake emerged from a hollow beam in the bathroom and killed a monk, the Buddha told the monks that if they had compassionate minds for all eight kinds of snake and all sentient beings, nobody would get killed by venomous snakes (T. 22, no. 1428, 42: 0870c22). The Buddha's teaching here might have come from his own experience of cultivation yet did not apply to all monks. As an enlightened teacher, his own cultivation led him to develop a strong psychic power to control the snake, as the following discussion shows.

All examples above teach that in the Vinaya texts even a powerful man like the Buddha would not take the life of a fierce snake. Instead, it says that the Buddha could use his psychic power to tame the snake. A story in the Mahāvagga (I) illustrates that the Buddha used his psychic power to battle with a serpent king in a fire-room during his stay at Uruvelā. He controlled the serpent king without having destroyed its skin, flesh, and bones. Once he placed it in his bowl, he convinced the ascetic Uruvelakassapa to convert to Buddhism and offered him a constant supply of food

[10] The Chinese translation of the *Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya* similarly prevented monks from consuming the flesh, fat, blood, and muscle of snakes, but not snake bones; See T. 23, no. 1435, 26: 186c. Many medical texts in medieval China, such as *Gexianweng zhouhou beiji fang*葛仙翁肘後備急方（Juan 7), *Zhenglei bencao* 證類本草 (juan 4), claim that snake bones can be used for making medicines to heal diseases.

(Horner 1962, pp. 32–35). In this story, the Buddha demonstrated his power of controlling the snake, without harming the snake. His power of controlling a dangerous animal from the Buddhist realm of beast serves to demonstrate a Buddhist compassionate approach to dealing with the snake to attract lay patrons. This method of using psychic power to tame snakes echoes some of the narratives in the *Avadāna* literature. Reiko Ohnuma analyzed a story in the *Avadānaśatakasūtra* (No. 52) about a black snake. In this story, a venomous black snake is pacified by the Buddha and dies after giving rise to faith (prasāda). Eventually, it is reborn as a deity in the Trayastriṃśa Heaven. Ohnuma argued that in this story the suicide of the snake was "a symbolic assertion of the total incompatibility of the animal state with moral agency, self-cultivation, or the final release from suffering" (Ohnuma 2017, pp. 35–40). Only if the very animality of the animals is eradicated can they be saved and reborn as deities in Trayastriṃśa Heaven. In the Chinese translation of the *Avadānaśataka-sūtra*, while the Buddha was staying in the Kāraṇḍa-veṇūvana near Rāja-gṛha, a wealthy elder was reborn as a snake because of his greed, envy, and selfishness. The Buddha went to visit the snake and tamed it with his compassionate power by shining five-colored lights from his five fingers (T. 4, no. 200, 6: 228a16).

In general, modern and contemporary Theravāda Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia follow the principle of non-violence.[11] In his study on Thai Buddhist masters, Kamala Tiyavanich notes that Thai Buddhists believed an old saying that those who make a living by killing snakes would die from a snake (Tiyavanich 2007, p. 208). In Burmese Buddhism, some Buddhists still believe that a poisonous snake can be caught and released but not killed whenever it is found in a house or in the wilderness, even a person's self-defense cannot justify killing a snake. If a person attacks a poisonous snake but gets killed by this snake, it is karmic retribution. The poisonous snakes will not attack and kill the Buddhists who are ordained (Spiro 1982, p. 46).

The early Buddhist discourse on karmic retributions for killing animals, including snakes, continued in medieval Chinese Buddhism.[12] Many stories said that killing snakes would lead to nasty retribution. One can be spared from being harmed if avoiding the killing. If one has to kill a snake, conversion to Buddhism and constant practice of confession would ease the karma of killing. One story described the snake as a force bringing destructive power to the humans who killed it. Zheng Hui 鄭翬, a native of Gaoyou, said that his cousin Lu's village was near water, and several neighbors—but not Lu—killed a white snake. Soon after, there was tremendous lightning and rain, and the resulting flood sunk those families who were involved in executing the snake. Only the Lu family survived (Li 2011, p. 8184). Another story took place in the early Yuanhe 元和 period (Yuanhe r. 806–20). Five or six guests were studying in Mt Song 嵩山 in early autumn. While taking shelter from the heat under the Two-emperor Pagoda, they saw a giant snake coiled in the center of the pagoda. After a discussion, most of the guests agreed to kill it, so the snake was killed and cooked in the kitchen. One guest who disagreed with killing the snake was unhappy and left. Soon later a heavy rainstorm arrived and killed several guests under the pagoda. The guest who argued against the killing went to an empty Buddhist chamber and prayed for his innocence without participating in the killing. Eventually, he was the sole survivor of this storm (Li 2011, p. 8176). This story echoed one feature of the story I introduced at the opening paragraph of this paper. The snake, as the deity who

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[11] However, there might be some exceptions. As Martin Southwold noted, in Polgama, a small village in Sri Lanka, some Buddhists do kill when they have to. He writes that "Most village Buddhists will kill snakes of one particularly dangerous species, the polanga or Russell's Viper: they know that its bite is normally fatal and that it is also aggressive, attacking unprovoked, and even chasing people." See (Southwold 1983, p. 67). In studying both canonical literature and medieval Sinhalese literature, Mahinda Deegalle noted that in Theravada tradition "violence cannot be justified under any circumstance, violence and its manifestations in Buddhist societies can be viewed as a deviation from the teachings of the Buddha"; see (Deegalle 2014, pp. 83–94).

[12] Killing an animal was never an option for the Vinaya master Daoxuan. In his text titled *Measuring and Handling Light and Heavy Property* (*Liangchu qingzhong yi* 量處輕重儀), Daoxuan discussed thirteen categories of monastic property in light of the *Dharmagupta-Vinaya*. For dealing with animals as monastic property, Daoxuan listed three methods: keeping some domestic animals within the monastic community, releasing wild animals to the wilderness, and raising young animals before releasing them (Chen 2009, pp. 31–51).

controlled the rainstorm, could mobilize the overwhelmingly dangerous rainstorm with lightning and thunder that threatened human lives. The difference is that this story tells that killing a snake would meet retribution of death punishment to the killer.

In medieval Chinese Buddhist discourse, one can avoid karmic retribution from killing a snake by converting to Buddhism and practicing confession and chanting the Buddha's name. Feng Min馮 was a hunter from Shangyu 上虞. He answered the call to fight with a giant serpent that often harmed local villagers. He brought a long spear but later killed the serpent by crushing it with a rock. Then he was worried about the retribution from his killing of the snake, so he converted to Buddhism and practiced confession and chanting the name of the Buddha. In ten years, he passed away peacefully (T. 49, no. 2035, 28: 285c). In this story, the method of killing the snake that troubled local community is the same as the one in the story of monks in Southern Peak Mountain. Here, besides killing a serpent, Feng might have committed to many other killings. From a non-Buddhist perspective, killing a snake that threatened the safety of a local community might earn merit from shouldering social responsibility. Yet killing clearly violated the first Buddhist precept, which must be compensated by confessions and chanting practice.

Furthermore, it seems that the Chinese Buddhist community inherited the idea that Buddhist psychic power could automatically drive snakes away, which shows that medieval Chinese Buddhists attempted to follow the historical Buddha's teaching and practice. When killing is not an option, a Buddhist monk should try to control a wild beast, including a snake, by his psychic power cultivated from his Buddhist morality and practice. A monk called Yuanzhen 圓震 (705–790) the Zhongshan 中山region used to study Confucian five classics but he converted to Buddhism after having listened to the talk of a traveling monk hosted by his father. Later, he received ordination from master Zhiyou 智幽 and studied the Chan method with master Shenhui (688–758). During his stay in Mt. Wuya 烏牙山 in Nanyang 南陽, he resolved the problem of the snake disaster that bothered the local villagers by driving them away without killing them. So his disciples preserved his whole body in a stupa to honor him (T. 50, no. 2061, 20: p. 838c). In this story, Yuanzhen was portrayed as an eminent monk who was well trained in Chan method with the acclaimed master Shenhui. His eminence was manifested by his power that drove the snakes away without hurting them. On the one hand, he extended his Buddhist power by controlling the behaviors and activities of snakes. On the other hand, he helped the local community by eliminating the threat of snakes

Finally, there is also a legacy of taming rather than killing snakes in Chinese Buddhism. Buddhist monks could ordain the snake and convert it to Buddhism. For example, Huifu 惠符 (631?–730), a monk at the Tianzhu temple 天柱寺 in Mt Huo 霍山, Qian County潛縣 (Modern Huoshan County, Anhui), confronted a giant snake in the mountain. He offered the snake two options, either swallowing him or receiving Buddhist precepts. The snake suddenly appeared as a human body and requested to be ordained. So Huifu ordained it (T. 50, no. 2061, 19: p. 829b). This legend tells that an eminent monk could use his psychic power to verbally communicate with a snake and convert the snake to Buddhism by ordaining it while it transformed into a human body. However, it does show that all sentient beings including cold-blooded snakes could receive ordination and live with Buddhist precepts. If a snake converted to Buddhism, it would purify its bad karmas from its previous lives. Finally, this story reminds us that the body transformation would offer the inferior sentient being to accelerate the path toward enlightenment in the Mahāyāna tradition as we see the story of nāga girl in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

With the rise of the Mahāyāna tradition, many doctrines and practices were transformed, revised, and reinvented. At first, snakes were associated with hell. The *Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on the Sea of Samādhi Attained through Contemplation of the Buddha* (*Fo shuo guan Fo Sanmei hai Jing* 佛説觀佛三昧海經), translated by Buddhabhadra, has a graphic description of the Avīci Hell, in which three species of animals appeared. The Buddha told Ānanda that in this hell was an iron city with seven circles of walls. Four copper dogs guarded the four corners of this city. Fierce fires came out from their bodies, and the smoke was foul and disgusting. Within the city, there were eighteen sectors, in each sector, there were 84,000 iron serpents. The serpents vomited poison and fires that spread throughout the entire city

(T. 15, no. 643, 5: 668c–669a). This passage describes the graphic scene of the hell as a poisonous city where the dog and the serpent served as the source of fires that rendered the hellish city horrible for all sentient beings. Although in the early Buddhist discourse, the snake was used to symbolize hatred, one of three poisons that produce all sufferings, the early Mahāyāna tradition further states that snakes have four poisons. For instance, in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, it says that snakes have four poisons: the seeing poison, the touching poison, the air poison, and the biting poison (T. 12, no. 374, 23: 499b). Apparently, these four poisons refer to visual, tactual, olfactory, and gustatory senses that cause suffering. This statement is different from the symbolic meaning of the snake in early Buddhist discourse of three poisons, but it makes the negative image of the snake even more visible.

Furthermore, the snake metaphorically appeared as the power of the heretical teachings that the Buddha was in combat with. This metaphor seems to have been well received among Buddhists in early medieval China since it appeared in a popular Buddhist collection titled *Extraordinary Aspects of the Sūtras and Vinaya* (*Jinglü yixiang* 經律異相) compiled in 516. It tells a story that after the flood attacked a kingdom ruled by a king called Dāna, an enormous snake circled the city and swallowed some of its residents. Two ascetics Sahādeva and Mahādeva came to tell the king that they could eliminate the problem of the snake. It turns out that once these two ascetics transformed into a giant toad and a garuda, respectively, the giant snake fled into the mountain. Then, they revealed that they were the Buddha and Maitreya and the giant snake was the Buddha's jealous cousin Devadatta. Since Devadatta fled, two Buddhas bestowed five precepts to the king and the residents of his kingdom (T. 53, no. 2121, 29: 158a–b).[13] Three animals including toad, garuda, and snake appeared in this story. The snake appeared as the heretic enemy of Buddhism but was defeated by the power of the Buddhas who did not kill the snake but drove it away. The departure of the defeated snake secured the kingdom with safety and tranquility, and most importantly, the conversion to Buddhism. These tropes can be seen in many stories in medieval Chinese Buddhism.

When Buddhism was introduced into China, the marginalized Mahāyāna tradition from South and Central Asia became dominant. Some of the Buddhist doctrines and practices were intermingled with local and indigenous ideas and practices in China. Unlike the Buddhist concept of hell, Buddhist ideas about animals were not exotic and foreign to Chinese Buddhists, though they did come across some fascinating new animals in Buddhism, such as lions, that they had never met in China. This was not the case with snakes. From the discussion above, on the one hand, the poisonous and disgusting image of the snake continued its legacy in early medieval Chinese Buddhism, yet the Buddhist principle and precept of not killing sentient beings including venomous snakes also found its place in China. Furthermore, as I will show in the following discussion, snakes were seen as wicked demons associated with women, and they became a favorite theme in the Buddhist narrative of karmic retribution in early medieval China.[14]

4. The Conflict between Buddhist Patriarchy and Feminized Snakes

Discourses about women in early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna tradition are diverse and multi-dimensional (Sponberg 1992, pp. 3–36; Gross 1993; Skilling 2001, pp. 241–74; Crosby 2009, pp. 31–47); even in the late-imperial Chinese religious tradition, women were portrayed as Buddhist deities with some gendered qualities, such as compassion, mercy, and nurturance (Sangren 1983, pp. 4–25; Yü 2000). However, the misogynistic voice quickly earned its currency in Chinese Buddhism, drawing from the ancient patriarchal society. This section will examine how this misogynistic discourse brought

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[13] On seeing the snake diminished by the frog's judgment, the fish found the strength to escape the net and kill the snake. The frog judge is identified with the Buddha-to-be, the snake with King Ajātasatru, who, according to Buddhist legend, seized the kingdom from his father (a just king), imprisoned him, and eventually starved him to death. In addition to illustrating the notion of dharma as pragmatic justice, this story indirectly provides some justification for defying an unjust king. See (Gethin 2014, p. 73).

[14] Religious scholarship has suggested that the demons came from the souls of the dead who have been unjustly treated or killed and come back to seek retribution, or from the ghosts of the wicked dead. See (Baker 2008, pp. 206–20; Brakke 2006).

death to snakes in medieval Chinese Buddhism in order to pave the way toward redemption for both women and snakes as evil beings.

In fact, Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist Chinese tradition shared a common discourse that linked women and venomous snakes. The Yin-Yang theory in traditional Chinese cosmology played a pivotal role in the pre-Buddhist Chinese discourses of associating animals with either the Yin or Yang energies that give rise to all material objects and lives. Along with women, the snake is associated with the *yin* energy,[15] which is regarded as cold and dark in nature, in contrast to the warm and bright *yang* energy. In ancient China, the diviner interpreted dreams in which black and brown bears meant boy-children, but snakes and serpents meant girl-children.[16] Suspicion of the snake as the sign of women continued in court politics throughout the medieval period. In 634 in the Longyou 隴右 region (modern Gansu Province), a giant snake often appeared, which was regarded as the sign of femininity (Ouyang 1975, p. 951). Many scholars have noted that early Buddhism metaphorically linked snakes with women. For example, women were likened to black snakes and accused of ensnaring men. Women were portrayed as monsters, demons, and venomous black snakes. Elizabeth J. Harris points to "the image of woman as temptress, the incarnation of evil. Here the woman appears as the witch, the serpent, and the siren. She is a danger to man's spiritual progress—a force that can lure a man with false promises of fulfillment, only to bring him to destruction" (Harris 1999, pp. 49–65; Faure 2003, pp. 319–23; Tsomo 2012, p. 66). Early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature further linked snakes with women. For example, snakes and dogs were compared with women as evil beings. In the "Tale of King Udayana of Vasta", contained within the Mahāyāna text *The Collection of Jewels* (*Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*), it says that "As the filth and decay of a dead dog or dead snake are burned away, so all men should burn filth and detest evil. The dead snake and dog are detestable, but women are even more detestable than they are" (T. 11, no. 310, 97: 545a; Paul 1985, pp. 41–42).

Feminized snakes are more visible in Chinese Mahāyāna texts, and are one of the most noticeable features of early medieval Chinese Buddhist narratives.[17] The feminized snake of early medieval China was manifested in a sixth-century story about the karmic demise of an empress who becomes a snake. The emperor Xiao Yan was one of the longest-reigning emperors in Chinese history, having reigned for 46 years of his 85-year lifespan. He married Xi Hui, who Confucian historical narratives claim was a very jealous woman who often badmouthed other concubines and consorts in the court and so was viewed as a "venomous snake." Unhappy with the emperor's Buddhist beliefs and practices, she ripped up his copies of Buddhist scriptures. The emperor often hosted Buddhist monks at court and supported their monasteries, which irritated Xi Hui. She hatched an evil plot to harm the Buddhist monastic community by secretly using flour to wrap green onion, garlic, chives, and even meat in vegetarian meals that her husband offered to monks. However, as it turned out, these monks were wise enough to discover her conspiracy and were quietly replacing Xi Hui's evil meals with their own. Xihui died unexpectedly at just 30 years of age and fell into the realm of animals to be reborn as a snake who was tormented by hunger and plagued by venomous worms crawling on her body. She communicated with her husband for help. Due to his Buddhist compassion, the emperor composed a liturgy to perform the Buddhist confession ritual. After all these efforts, Xi Hui was released and reborn as an angel (T. 45, no. 1909, 1: 922b). This story is a great manifestation of the power of Buddhist compassion. The emperor held the ceremony to perform confession ritual and transfer the

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[15] Kang Xiaofei discusses the fox in the Chinese cosmology of the yin-yang dichotomy, see (Kang 2006, p. 18); in pre-modern Japan, the fox wife was regarded as the yin imagery; see (Bathgate 2004, p. 40).

[16] *The Classic of Poems*, 189, "Sigan 斯干" (86/29); for the English translation, see Waley 2012 (trans), p. 283. Roel Sterckx noted that the Yin-yang specialist in the Han associated snakes with signs for the involvement of women by citing this poem and it was because snakes were said to be produced by *yin*, see (Sterckx 2002, p. 209). This divination was well received in later writings, such as Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79–8 BCE) *New Preface* (Xinxu), Wang Fu's 王符 (79–165 AD) *Comments of a Recluse* (Qianfu lun 潛夫論), and *The Chapter on Five Phases* (Wuxing zhi 五行誌) and *Chapter on Arts and Letters* (Yiwen zhi 藝文誌) in the *History of Han Dynasty* (Hanshu 漢書).

[17] The femilization of the snake and the demonization of the female body can be also found in pre-modern Japanese folklores, see (Ambros 2015, pp. 91–92; Koopmans-de Bruijn 2005, pp. 60–88).

merits to his evil wife who fell into the realm of animals and was reborn as a snake. Why did she reincarnate as a snake? Not only was she a woman cruel to other concubines and her attendants from the Confucian perspective, but also she damaged the Buddhist scriptures (Dharma) and intended to harm Buddhist monks (Sangha) by supplying fake vegetarian food with onion, garlic, chives, and meat. These ingredients were all prohibited in the Buddhist monastic code because they were thought to arouse an emotional response in the monks and disturb their concentration and mindfulness. This story explicitly portrays a woman as a wicked being who could be reborn as a snake after her death and tormented in the realm of animals, but she could be saved from torture in her snake-embodied afterlife by requesting her husband to perform a confession ritual.

The combination of Chinese misogyny and Buddhist ophidiophobia in the form of Buddhist retribution on evil women as snakes seems to be attested in some narratives of medieval China.[18] If a woman did not fulfill her family obligations or treat her household well, she would be punished by being transformed into a snake. One story about the older sister of the Aid to Censor General Wei 御史中丞衛 shows that she became very ill and eventually transformed into a huge snake for treating her several servants brutally, which resulted in death. So her family was frightened and took her to the wilderness (Li 2011, p. 8194). As a sister of a government official, Ms. Wei was a privileged woman who was served by her attendants. She was expected to treat her servants nicely. However, she held pride for beating them and murdered them, which violated the Buddhist precept of not taking lives of other sentient beings. She was kicked out from the realm of humans in this life, rather than in her rebirth of next lifetime. The punishment of being transformed into a snake is not limited to the laywoman. Another story is about a nun called Wang Sangu 王三姑 at Jingming Temple (Jingmingsi 靜明寺) in Xingyuan 興元, who transformed into a snake in her coffin after her death. Before she became a Buddhist nun, she was the Wife of Du 杜. But she did not care for her husband when he became old and fragile. She left him alone to die of cold and hunger (Li 2011, p. 8206). Even though she converted to Buddhism and devoted herself to the monastic community, it did not purify her sin of treating her late husband with cruelty and cold blood. Transforming into a snake in her coffin meant that she would not be reborn as a human in her next lifetime but would be hunted as a troublesome beast.

Furthermore, a woman who converted to heretic teachings could also be reincarnated as a snake. A story from *Evidential Accounts of Upholding the Diamond Sūtra* 金剛經持驗記 tells a very interesting account from the late Tang period about Ms. Wang, the wife of Wu Kejiu 吳可久. During their stay in Chang'an, they converted to Manichaeism. One year later, the wife suddenly died. After three years, she appeared in her husband's dream and told him she had become a snake because of her deviant belief in Manichaeism and was trapped under the stupa of Huangzibei 皇子陂浮圖. She was worried about being killed the next day. She begged her husband to invite monks to recite the *Diamond Sūtra* to release her. Wu Kejiu then asked monks to recite the scripture to release her. Since then, Wu Kejiu converted to Buddhism and venerated the *Diamond Sūtra* (X. 87, no. 1635, 1: 535a13). This story serves to demonstrate the Buddhist rhetoric that the Manichean belief would result in the reincarnation as a snake but the Buddhist monks' recitation of the *Diamond Sūtra* could release it from the bad karmic retribution. This story does not specify if Ms. Wang was a cruel woman who harmed her husband or others but simply mentions her personal Manichean belief. Nevertheless, it illustrates that the reincarnation into a snake was used in Buddhist apologetic literature against Manichaeism in the late Tang period.

In all these stories, Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist Chinese tradition found a common place of portraying women as callous, cruel, violent, and irritating sentient beings—physically and emotionally, and they were like violent, poisonous, and cold-blooded snakes. When they were alive, they could rip off their husbands' Buddhist scriptures, manipulate prohibited food into the meals of monks, and follow the deviant teachings, such as Manichaeism. In short, they could be harmful to Buddhist

[18] Daoxuan (596–667) claims that women have ten vices and are same evil as venomous snakes; see T. 45, no. 1893, 1: p. 824.

Dharma and Sangha, just as the snake who appeared as the heretic teaching opposing and damaging Buddhism. In early medieval China, the Confucian community also developed a strong voice for denouncing women as dangerous forces against the patriarchy and hierarchy of Confucian family and society. It seems that, in order to take deep root in Chinese society, the Buddhist community quickly shared this sentiment and developed its own narrative against women by binding women and snakes together. This narrative teaches that both women and snakes could die in misery due to their evil karmic retributions, but they could be saved as long as these women/snakes converted to Buddhism, followed Buddhism, and respected Buddhism. Eventually, their death was transformed into redemption.

5. Conflicts among Different Religious Practices

In the medieval period, religious competition between Daoism and Buddhism forced the two traditions to learn much from each other. Medieval Chinese Buddhism was also involved in a fierce contest with Daoism in terms of combat with snakes because Daoism weaponized snakes against Buddhism while competing for the monastic property. Dealing with snakes thus appears as a fascinating aspect of the exchange between Buddhism and Daoism in medieval China. Meir Shahar suggested that the snake-like creature shows a connection between the Daoist god and Tantric Buddhism. He wrote, "the equine deity is associated with snakes. His second-in-command is the Heaven-Blasting Silk-White Snake (Hongtian Sulian Bai She). The associate of the Daoist god with the serpent-like creature likely derives from Tantric Buddhism. Dating from the Tang period, one esoteric scripture decrees writhing snakes for the adornment of the Horse-Headed Avalokiteśvara. The ultimate source of the ophidian motif might have been Śiva, who is similarly bejeweled by snakes" (Shahar 2016, p. 173). I suggest that both Buddhist monks and Daoist priests used snakes for protecting lives and monastic property against danger. And both sides used snakes as weapons for killing each other.[19]

Before examining the conflict between Buddhism and Daoism with dealing with snakes, it should note that the Daoist attitudes toward snakes and Daoist methods of handling snakes experienced an evolving development from the ancient time to the medieval period. In the ancient era, the killing of a serpent had enjoyed a long history in Daoist tradition as a praiseworthy act. Later, Daoist community developed narratives and ritual techniques for taming snakes. And finally, in the medieval period, Daoists claimed that they could mobilize snakes as their protectors to kill invading Buddhist monks. The Daoist tradition of killing snakes can be traced back to the third century, centered on Xu Xun (ca. 239–292), one of the most important Daoist priests, who became famous for killing a giant snake. He was a disciple of Wu Meng 吳猛 (d. 274). In the third century, the lower Yangtze River region suffered the disaster of snakes. Wu Meng selected about a hundred disciples to engage in the battle with these snakes. Xu Xun used his sword to kill the snake king, claiming his reputation for resolving the snake problem for local communities (Duan 2015, p. 203; Despeux and Kohn 2003, pp. 131–32). This story mainly depicts that Daoists could engage their service with local communities by eliminating the so-called snake disaster.

In the early medieval period, Daoism developed a series of techniques and rituals for taming snakes, as Daoist priests realized that traveling deep in the mountains and forests was dangerous and that beasts and reptiles might attack Daoist hermits. In his *The Master Embracing Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱朴子, occasionally written as 抱樸子), master Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) says "The most successful Daoist master is able to ascend mountains, to transgress water, to live hidden in the hills and swamps among snakes and tigers without being harmed by them. He feels no wind nor moisture nor heat nor frost" (Schafer 1955, pp. 73–89; Pregadio 2006, p. 138; Copp 2014, p. 48). In Ge's passage, the

[19] Many scholars have discussed the exchanges between Buddhism and Daoism in medieval China. One of the most notable studies can be found in (Mollier 2008).

snake and the tiger represented two most frequent animals one could encounter and be attacked by in the swamps and mountains, respectively. The snake often hides in the swamp because of its humid environment. Yet the tiger was regarded as the fiercest beast in the mountain area. Later, in the Tang dynasty, Daoists often used talismans as protection to shield themselves from venomous snakes. During the reign of Baoli (825–827), Deng Jia 鄧甲 learned from Qiaoyan 峭岩 from Mountain Lao 嶗山 the methods of using talismans to summon demons and spirits, including snakes. His fame of controlling snakes reached the Kuaiji County where local people faced the disaster of venomous snakes. By setting up a Daoist ritual altar, Deng killed the snake king and also more than ten thousand snakes who followed the snake king (Li 2011, pp. 8177–78). This narrative seems to suggest that Deng followed Xu Xun's tradition of resolving the snake disaster by killing the snake king. However, the concrete killing method was not using a sword but a Daoist ritual involving talismans on a ritual altar.

Although snakes often appeared as threats to Daoist communities, in medieval Daoist narratives, once snakes had been tamed they could also become the protectors of Daoist monastic property, defending Daoism from the governmental and military invasions.[20] Many stories in the *Records of the Numinous Efficacy of the Taoist Teaching* 道教靈驗記, compiled by Du Guangting (850–933), show snakes serving as protectors of Daoist temples in the late Tang dynasty (Verellen 1992, pp. 217–63). They could kill government intruders and, when the government officials and troops were about to burn down the Daoist temples, the snakes could bring up rainstorms to protect the temples. Two stories indicate both that the Daoist monastic community was armed with venomous snakes, and that Daoists could use deadly force against invasion from the local government. The first story tells of a giant snake serving as a protector for a Daoist temple in Xingyuan 興元. When Yang Shouliang 楊守亮 lost Xingyuan in 891, he went back to Liangcheng. However, he found that the government office there was heavily damaged, so he ordered its restoration. One of his clerks suggested taking beams and bricks from the nearby Daoist temple of Lord Lao 老君觀. Local residents gathered a large sum of money to pay the government to spare the Daoist Temple, but no deal was cast. While some workers ascended the temple under his order, a giant snake appeared and frightened the workers, who fell and died. Yang was irritated, so he ordered burning down the temple. However, a sudden rainstorm with thunder and lightning prevented his soldiers from executing his orders, and saved the Daoist temple (Du 2013, p. 158). A similar story tells that snakes also mobilized the rainstorm with thunder and lightning that protected the Daoist temple Suling Gong 素靈宮 (Suling Palace) in Yangzhou 洋州 (modern Xixiang 西鄉縣, Shaanxi Province), which demonstrated the Daoist numinous efficacy. In 784, Emperor Dezong visited Yangzhou and ordered a renovation of the governmental office. A local warlord Feng Xingxi 馮行襲 (?–910) who commanded the Wuding Military District 武定軍 ordered his son to command workers to take material resources from the Suling Palace. However, after the workers started destructing the building, they discovered innumerable snakes hidden under the bricks. Feng's son attempted to burn the temple down, but a rainstorm killed his clerks (Du 2013, pp. 158–61, 163–64, 166, 211–12, 238–39). These two stories fall into the category of medieval Chinese Daoist apologetic narrative, which illustrated how Daoist monastic communities weaponized the snake to protect their monastic property. It claims that the snake mobilized the rainstorm against the government power to protect the Daoist temple by killing soldiers and clerks who committed to destruct Daoist buildings. Hence, once the snake is tamed, it can play a decisive role in helping Daoist monastic community to defend itself against the invasion of the governmental and military forces.

More interestingly, not only could the tamed snakes help Daoist monastic communities against the governmental and military invasions, but also the tamed snakes could protect Daoist communities against the Buddhist invasion. Some medieval Daoist narratives told that when some Buddhist monks attempted to invade the Daoist realm and damage Daoist property, snakes would come to assist the

[20] In medieval China, the combination of snake and tortoise became the Dark Warrior (Xuanwu 玄武), the guard in the north, one of the four protectors for four directions. The Dark Warrior later transformed into Zhenwu 真武, one of the Daoist deities. For the study of the Zhenwu, see (Chao 2011).

Daoists and kill Buddhist monks.[21] A story tells that more than thirty Buddhist monks once occupied the Daoist Qiling Temple 啓靈觀 in Qin Prefecture during 880–885. One day they attempted to damage the statue of the Celestial Honored One because they planned to use the Hall of the Celestial Honored One as their meditation hall. However, when they were about to move the seat of the statue, a giant snake came out from the seat, spraying poisonous air. In the meantime, thunder and lightning came out. The Buddhists monks were scared and ran away, several of them dying. Later, Daoist priest Zhang Faxiang came to reside there. Although the giant snake occasionally appeared in the local village, it did not harm any villagers (Du 2013, p. 202). In stating that the giant snake did not hurt local villagers, this story specifically targeted Buddhist monks who attempted to damage the statue of the Daoist deity, so they would receive the karmic retribution of death. All stories above show that the Daoist community could control the mystical power ruling these natural phenomena, in the form of rainstorms with thunder and lightning, and this power was brought up by a snake.[22]

Within the Buddhist community, various sub-traditions have mobilized different strategies and approaches to deal with different species of snakes. In medieval China, the Tantric tradition, developing from early Mahāyāna Buddhism by following its principle of skillful means 方便, and perhaps also under the influence of Daoism, developed spells to cast on giant snakes and kill them. This can be viewed as a new technology for handling the threatening snakes, making this tradition distinctive from the other Buddhist sub-traditions that developed in medieval China.

In the Tang Dynasty, the biographies of two Esoteric Buddhist masters seem to link them with the esoteric ritual of killing snakes (T. 50, no. 2061: 715c; Liu 1975, p. 1371). The biography of Shanwuwei (Śubhakarasiṃha, 637–735) tells of a giant serpent appearing at Mt. Mang. Shanwuwei, worried this serpent would flood the city of Luoyang, recited the esoteric dhāraṇī of several hundred syllables in Sanskrit. A few days later the snake was found dead. Contemporary audiences believed that this was the omen for An Lushan's occupation of Luoyang (Chou 1945, p. 269). A similar story also appeared in more detail in the biography of another Esoteric Buddhist master, Bukong (Amoghavajra). It tells of a giant serpent frequently appearing to woodcutters on North Mang Mountain with its huge head like a hill. When the serpent saw Amoghavajra, it spoke in human tongue to Amoghavajra that it often wanted to stir up the water in the river to destroy the city of Luoyang, so it received bad karma. Amoghavajra ordained it with the Buddhist precepts and taught it Buddhist teachings. He told the serpent that its serpent body could be abandoned. Soon after this, the woodcutters saw the serpent dead in the valley (Chou 1945, p. 304). In both stories, serpents die, although neither explains in detail how the esoteric ritual worked. Other sources say that Esoteric Buddhism introduced new ritual techniques for dealing with the danger of snakes.[23] In the biographies of two esoteric masters, it seems that the killing of giant serpents was justified as an auspicious act to benefit the local community. Does this mean that the killing of an animal can be regarded as being auspicious in Chinese Esoteric Buddhism? Or was it a new development? Mahāyāna Buddhism seems to develop a new notion of auspicious killing. For example, Fujii Akira notes that the *Miscellaneous Collection of Dhāranis* (*Tuoluoni zaji* 陀羅尼雜集) and other commentaries on Tantric texts developed discourses justifying the killing of demons in Mahāyāna Buddhism ((Fuijii 2017, pp. 376–361 (L)); Schlieter 2006, pp. 131–57). David B. Gray suggests that "Despite their emphasis on universal compassion, some Mahāyāna Buddhists did not, and do not, unequivocally rule out the practice of violent actions such as killing" (Gray 2007, pp. 239–71).

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[21] Earlier in *Treatise on Two Teaching* (Erjiao lun 二教論) by Dao'an, it tells of Zhang Ling's bold claim of being a celestial master and his karmic retribution of being swallowed by a python, see T. 52, no. 2103, 8: 140a.

[22] In these stories, the appearance of the giant snakes is accompanied by thunder, lightning, and rainstorms. This association of snakes and rainstorms also has a long history in ancient China (Qiu 1983–1985, pp. 290–306; Takizawa 1962, pp. 18–34; Loewe 1994, pp. 142–59; Schafer 1973; Lei 2001, pp. 245–89; Kanai 2015, pp. 1–15; Katz 1995, pp. 19–21; Snyder-Reinke 2009; Matsumae 1970, pp. 1–22; Kawano 2006, pp. 57–130).

[23] According to the Esoteric Buddhist text, the Buddha once taught his disciple Ānanda that the *Kingly Spell of the Great Peacock* (Skt. *Mahāmayuri-vidyārājñī-dhāraṇī*) could be used against snakebite (T. 19, no. 982, 1: 416a; Davidson 2002, p. 278).

He noted that, in their commentaries on the *Mahāvairocana-abhisambodhi Tantra*, Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing endorsed subjugating evil teachings as expedience.

Stephen Jenkins points out that Candrakīrti's commentary on Āryadeva's verse suggested that since "any act that reverses the cycle of rebirth becomes auspicious, the possibility is opened that any action may be auspicious depending on a variety of factors. If an act of killing may make merit, then it is neither a necessary evil, nor merely value-free, but is clearly auspicious." (Jenkins 2011, pp. 299–331). He uses an example of a bodhisattva having to cut off one of his fingers that had been bitten by a venomous snake. He also cites another example of a bodhisattva using the roar of the elephant to frighten a huge snake in order to save a group of people. Neither case directly involved killing a snake. However, they show the ways in which violence was accepted and justified in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In a study on the transformation of the image of snakes in Japan, W. Michael Kelsey points out that initially Buddhists and other Japanese regarded the snake as an evil and violent creature that often terrorized the populace but later it became a manifestation of Buddha (Kelsey 1981, pp. 83–113). Kelsey further categorized five images of the snake in mythological and early sources: the mythical snake, the mythical snake as saved (defeated) by Buddhism, the Buddhist snake, the mytho-Buddhist hybrid, and the snake of salvation. In fact, in medieval Chinese Buddhism, Buddhists faced a similar situation. On the one hand, the snake cult was already developed, and the snake was regarded as a deity that controlled water and rain.[24] On the other hand, snakes often terrorized local communities.

However, snakes do not always deserve to die. They might, for instance, serve monks as companions and protectors. In the early Tang dynasty, a monk called Huiyu 慧瑜 (563–641) moved to Jade Spring Mountain in Changsha. He stayed alone in a grass chamber near a spring. The spring occasionally served him, and a huge snake occasionally showed himself, protecting Huiyu against local bandits. A group of bandits attempted to kill the snake, but they fell ill from the confrontation with this snake, and seven of them died. Huiyu recited the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Scripture of the Great Vidyā Spells of Mahāprajñāpāramitā* 摩訶般若波羅蜜大明經 to save three ill bandits (T. 50, no. 2060, 14: 537b28). In this story, the snake posited as the protector of the monk against the bandits. It killed seven bandits. On the one hand, these bandits might have died of their bad karma. On the other hand, they were miserable sentient beings that deserved Buddhist compassion. So Huiyu appeared as a Buddhist preacher who could recite the Buddhist spells to heal these bandits who were punished by the snake. Another story in the Jin'gang borejingjiyanji 金剛般若經集驗記 (*Collected Evidential Accounts of the Diamond Sūtra*) compiled by Meng Xianzhong in 718 tells of a huge snake that acts as a protector of a Maitreya Pavilion in the Wuzhen Temple 悟真寺, located in Southern Mountain in Lantian 藍田 County. There was a Maitreya Pavilion 彌勒閣 in the center of this Chan quarter which was located in the upper section of this temple. It was always locked because many monks said that a huge black snake protected this pavilion and prevented monks from accessing it. In 703, a monk called Qingxu 清虛 arrived here for a summer retreat, and he told these monks that in South China there was a lake deity who was also a huge snake and could bring up the rainstorm. Even though this snake deity was powerful, he still tamed it, so he thought he could also tame this huge black snake in the Maitreya Pavilion. He then entered the pavilion and performed an invocation ritual in meditation and recited the *Diamond Sūtra* for three days and nights. Eventually, he found a spring in the Chan Quarter (Z. 87, no. 1629).[25] This story shows that a monk could tame a fierce snake and mobilize its power to identify the location where he could find water to benefit the monastic community. On the one hand, the snake

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[24] Similarly, in medieval Japan, esoteric Buddhist monks also developed their rain-making skills; see (Ruppert 2002, pp. 143–74).

[25] Jingang borejing jiyanji 金剛般若經集驗記 was compiled by Meng Xianzhong孟獻忠 in 718, vol. 2; Bernard Faure reads this variant of the snake story as the tension between the universal Buddhist doctrine and the local spirit. For him, the snake appears as a potentially harmful but eventually benevolent messenger of the invisible world. "The venom of the snake is transmitted into a gift of water, the discovery of a source that allows the construction of a temple." See (Faure 1987, pp. 337–56). In light of the Nāga worship tradition in both Hinduism and Buddhism through the ages, some scholars suggest that it was a cultural adaptation, since Nāga worship was always associated with the water resources; see (Weaver and Hibbs 2011, pp. 1–16).

was responsible for controlling the water. On the other hand, a monk could communicate with a snake by doing meditation and reciting the *Diamond Sūtra* without being hurt. It reminds us of the story about the Buddha using his psychic power to tame the snake in the previous discussion. So, literarily, this monk just inherited the Buddha's legacy.

While Daoist priests took responsibility for resolving the violence of snakes and tigers in aid of local villages, later Buddhist literature portrayed eminent monks as heroes who could pacify snakes and tigers (Chen 2012). While eminent Buddhist monks would never kill a tiger, they did kill snakes. Why did they treat snakes and tigers differently? In terms of Buddhist doctrine, it is commonly known that the serpent was the symbolic animal of greed, one of three poisons for producing delusions. Furthermore, in early Buddhist literature, the snake was used in the metaphor of the four great elements, also called the four poisons. Therefore, removing or eliminating the serpent is a means for eliminating a poison. In addition, Daoist competition seems to have had an enormous impact, and Daoist narratives often use snakes as weapons against Buddhist monks.

6. Concluding Remarks

To summarize the discussions above, it is clear that dealing with snakes in early Buddhism followed the principle of nonviolence found in canonical texts. This legacy can also be found in medieval Chinese Buddhist texts. However, medieval Chinese Buddhism faced many challenges while dealing with snakes. First, snakes and tigers posed the biggest threats toward both Buddhist and local communities. Chinese Buddhists often encountered snakes while traveling in the wilderness. Second, medieval Chinese Buddhists found that they had to engage with the local communities by extending their Buddhist power by eliminating snake disasters. Third, there was a conflict between Buddhist patriarchy and the snakes in medieval China. The idea of an association between feminized snakes and women was manifested in many Chinese Buddhist narratives, especially those about miserable women whose greedy, jealous, and evil acts resulted in the karmic retribution of being reborn as snakes who would be tortured in the realm of animals. In offering confession rituals, medieval Chinese Buddhism attempted to save both women and snakes victimized by Chinese misogyny and Buddhist ophidiophobia. Fourth, medieval Chinese Buddhism faced competition from Daoism and local cultic practice.

One of the most distinctive new developments regarding the handling of snakes in medieval Chinese Buddhism was the killing of snakes to protect monks and monastic property. Although early Buddhism did not support the killing of any animal, including snakes, medieval Chinese Buddhist monks adapted the strategy of killing snakes to aid local communities, to heal illnesses in local villagers, and to compete with Daoist priests for religious power. In ancient times, Daoist priests had developed techniques and rituals for killing snakes—seen both as dangerous animals and as demons—by mobilizing spirits and deities. Meanwhile, in medieval China, Daoist priests transformed snakes from demons into protectors of monastic properties. Snakes in medieval Daoist narratives became weapons that were used against both political power and religious adversaries.

The medieval Chinese Buddhist killing of snakes was a new development shaped by a number of factors. First, it seems that the evolving Mahāyāna teachings offered a doctrinal foundation for auspicious killing. The new teaching in the Mahāyāna tradition authorized radical responses by a Bodhisattva for the sake of sentient beings. Auspicious violence, such as self-immolation and killing evil sentient beings, became widely acceptable for medieval Chinese Buddhists, and sometimes even served as supportive evidence for the eminence of monastic members. Second, social and historical demands to kill snakes to benefit local communities and save local villagers drew the attention of, and a response from, Buddhist monks. Third, there were exchanges of ideas and practices between Buddhism and Daoism about how to handle venomous snakes. Buddhist monks developed techniques and rituals, and especially esoteric methods, for killing snakes in order to compete with Daoism. I view this new development as a challenge–response process. Doctrinal, historical, social, and religious

challenges shaped the Buddhist acceptance of killing snakes in response to the social, cultural, and religious crises in medieval China.

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Abbreviations

T	1924–1929. *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai
X	1905–1912. *Manji Shinsan Zoku Zōkyō* 卍新纂續藏經. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai
Z	1975–1989. *Shinsan Dai Nihon Zokuzōkyō* 新纂大日本續藏經. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai, 90vols

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T. 12, no. 374. *Daban Niepan Jing* 大般涅槃經 (*Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*).
T. 15, no. 643. *Fo shuo Guanfo Sanmei Hai Jing* 佛說觀佛三昧海經.
T. 19, no. 982. *Fomu Da Kongque Mingwang Jing* 佛母大孔雀明王經.
T. 22, no. 1421. *Mishasaibu Hexi Wufenlü* 彌沙塞部和醯五分律 (*Mahīśāsaka-Vinaya*).
T. 22, no. 1428. *Sifenlü* 四分律 (*Caturvargika-Vinaya*).
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T. 52, no. 2103. *Guang Hongming Ji* 廣弘明集.
T. 53, no. 2121. *Jinglü Yixiang* 經律異相.
X. 87, no. 1635. *Jingang Jing Chiyan Ji* 金剛經持驗記.
Z. 87, no. 1629. *Jingang Borejing Jiyanji* 金剛般若經集驗記.

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