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A Reflection on McMaster's Religious Studies Department's Yehan Numata Lecture with Dr. Constantino Moretti

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On Friday, February 12, 2016, several members of McMaster's Department of Religious Studies took a break from our usual work to join Dr. Costantino Moretti in embarking upon a fascinating journey to the Chinese underworld. Dr. Moretti was our second speaker for the 2015-2016 University of Toronto / McMaster University Numata Buddhist Studies Program. He is a Research Associate with the Centre de Recherche sur les Civilisations de l'Asie Orientale at L'école Pratique des Hautes Études, Sorbonne (Paris, France). Dr. Moretti's research interests include Chinese Buddhist apocryphal texts, Dunhuang manuscripts and representations of hells in Chinese Buddhist sutras. He captivated our department with his lecture titled "Preventative Morality and 'Last Resort' Buddhist Devotion in Chinese Medieval Apocrypha."

In this study, Dr. Moretti focused on two apocryphal sutras: the *Jingdu sanmei jing* 淨度三昧經 (Sūtra on the Samādhi [Leading to] Pure Salvation) and the *Tiwei boli jing* 提謂波利經 (Sūtra of Trapuṣa and Bhalika). The *Jingdu sanmei jing* was likely composed in China during the fifth century, perhaps as a reaction to the persecution of Buddhism from 446-

452. Various manuscripts of this sutra have been found at Dunhuang. Buddhist commentaries, treatises and encyclopaedias often make reference to it. This sutra informs its readers about avoiding karmic retribution and the ways to obtain a favourable rebirth. The *Tiwei boli jing* was also composed in China during the fifth century, and promoted the advantages enjoyed by lay practitioners of Buddhism.

Some common themes found in the aforementioned sutras are what Dr. Moretti refers to as “preventative morality” and “religion de recours,” or deriving benefits in present and future lives. Both of these scriptures incorporate non-orthodox elements and were thought to contain “Daoist contamination.” They are concerned with worldly forms of salvation, appeasing the supernatural beings that have control over human behaviour, and punishments for those who do not observe basic morality. A complex underworld bureaucratic system (unique to these two sutras), and its procedures for punishment, awaited those who did not take the advice expounded in these apocryphal texts.

Retreats (*zhai* 齋) provided lay practitioners with a way to engage in spiritual activities as a group and to produce positive karmic effects. These retreats have been linked to retreats in the Daoist tradition and served as preventative measures, a way for people to protect themselves from forces that were out of their control. Retreats followed a particular schedule (the “eight noble days”), based on the celestial officials who maintained careful accounts of people’s actions. In order to be effective, these practices had to be performed in Buddhist temples. For those who did not choose to participate in measures of preventative morality, such as retreats, more foreboding prospects awaited them.

According to the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and the *Tiwei boli jing*, there are one hundred and thirty-four hells, consisting of thirty separate levels. Eight great kings and thirty lesser kings administer these hells. If lay practitioners observed the five precepts and performed the retreat on

the eight noble days, their lives would not be unduly shortened and they would avoid suffering in the hells. Dr. Moretti displayed very detailed charts of the various hells and their administrators, much to the delight of his audience.

Although we do not know much about how the retreats prescribed by these two scriptures were conducted, Dr. Moretti suggested that they were very specific to this period and were influenced by Daoist scriptures. These sutras highlight the importance of looking beyond canonical sources and studying apocryphal texts in our attempt to uncover religious practices of the medieval period. Our department was most grateful to have Dr. Moretti as a guest speaker, and we thank him for his visit.

Our 2015-2016 Numata Buddhist Studies Program will continue on Friday February 26th, 2016. Dr. José Cabezón from the University of California, Santa Barbara will present a lecture entitled “An Indigenous Buddhist Theory of Gender.”

All are welcome!