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Reimagining Individual Karma and Collective Family Destiny in Yuan Drama: A Buddhist-Confucian Synthesis in *A Slave to Money Buys a Creditor as His Enemy*

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Abstract

This article examines how Yuan dramatist Zheng Tingyu, in his play *A Slave to Money Buys a Creditor as His Enemy*, adapted Buddhist concepts such as karma and “blessing power” (*fuli*) within *zaju* to reinforce Confucian ideals of collective family responsibility. Through a close analysis of the play’s performative dimensions, this study argues that its portrayal of karmic retribution reflects not a new synthesis but a creative continuation of narrative traditions dating back to Tang-era *pienwen*. By situating the play within Yuan *zaju*—a genre aimed at diverse public audiences—the article highlights how Zheng Tingyu used drama to dramatize moral tensions between individual ambition and familial duty during a period of Confucian marginalization under Mongol rule.

Introduction

In this article, I examine how educated Chinese writers during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) creatively adapted Buddhist and Daoist ethical principles, particularly notions of karma and “blessing power” (*fuli* 福力), to reinforce Confucian familial ideals within the popular genre of *zaju* (雜劇). Focusing on Zheng Tingyu’s play *Kanqiannu mai yuanjia zhaizhu* (看錢奴買冤家債主; hereafter *A Slave to Money*),¹ I analyze how its narrative employs a paradigm of collective karmic retribution that intertwines the fates of unrelated families. The story follows the decline of the Zhou lineage after a patriarch destroys a Buddhist temple, resulting in the forfeiture of ancestral blessings. Central to this process is the Marquis of the Spirits (Lingpaihou 靈派侯), a recurring deity associated with the Mount Tai bureaucracy who acts as a celestial arbiter, first transferring these blessings to the impoverished Jia family and later adjudicating their restoration when the new patriarch descends into greed and deceit.

I argue that the play reflects a sophisticated “hybrid cosmological system” that reinterprets Buddhist concepts through the machinery of indigenous religious administration. While mainstream Buddhist doctrine typically views merit (*gongde* 功德) as a quantifiable force accumulated by individuals and transferred through specific rituals,² *A Slave to Money*

¹ *Kanqiannu mai yuanjia zhaizhu* 看錢奴買冤家債主 (*A Slave to Money Buys a Creditor as His Enemy*), is included in *Yuankan zaju sanshizhong* 元刊雜劇三十種 (*Thirty Yuan-Printed Zaju Plays*), which is the earliest extant version of the texts of Yuan drama (*zaju*), printed in the fourteenth century. *A Slave to Money* is also preserved in *Maiwang guan chaojiaoben gujin zaju* 脈望館抄校本古今雜劇 (*Zaju New and Ancient Copied and Collated in the Maiwang Studio*) and the *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (*Selection of Yuan Plays*), a Ming Dynasty collection. On Guan Hanqing’s editing, compilation, and publication of the *Yuangu xuan*, as well as the differences between Yuan and Ming editions, see Wilt L. Idema, “From Stage Scripts to Closet Drama: Editions of Early Chinese Drama and the Translations of Yuan Zaju,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 3, no. 1 (April 2016): 175–202.

² For a discussion of the concept of “transference of merit,” see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2009), 203.

depicts the wholesale reallocation of *fuli* between living households as an administrative act. This dramatic device represents a creative continuation of narrative traditions dating back to Tang-era *pien-wen* (變文), where the figure of Mulian was used to monasticize filial piety and resolve tensions between monastic practice and lineage continuity. Furthermore, by utilizing the Daoist logic of “inherited guilt” and “afterlife lawsuits,” the play provides a performative “machinery” of justice that makes the collective consequences of individual actions tangible to a public audience.

Ultimately, this synthesis served as a vital cultural platform for classically educated Han Chinese navigating the complex social landscape of Mongol rule. During a period of Confucian marginalization and state patronage of Buddhism, dramatists like Zheng Tingyu appropriated widely understood karmic motifs not to reject Buddhist thought, but to reassert the cultural authority of classical ethics. By embedding these motifs within a familial structure, *zaju* functioned as a performative instrument of discourse, underscored the moral accountability of each individual within the collective fate of the lineage, and offered a compelling lens into the dynamic interplay of religion, ethics, and social order in premodern China.

Confucian Appropriation of Buddhism for Familial Ethics: A Historical Perspective

The Confucian appropriation of Buddhist principles to fulfill shared family responsibilities has long been a subject of scholarly interest, reflecting a complex dialogue between indigenous Chinese values and imported religious practices that shifted across different dynastic conditions. This connection between family-oriented moral responsibility and Buddhism not only made Buddhist ethics more accessible to medieval Chinese society but also facilitated the integration of Buddhist rituals into Confucian

frameworks of filial piety. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), for instance, filial sons engaged in pious acts such as merit transfer (*huixiang* 迴向) to benefit deceased family members, a practice that underscored the adaptability of Buddhist concepts to Chinese familial ethics.³ By the Song Dynasty (960-1279), this relationship had matured significantly, as evidenced by the widespread construction of merit cloisters (*gongde yuan* 功德院) and family Buddha halls (*jiafo tang* 家佛堂), as well as the use of monks to perform rituals for the deceased families. Mark Halperin, in his seminal work *Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279*,⁴ meticulously documents how Song literati increasingly linked ancestor worship with temple constructions, highlighting the deepening synthesis of Confucian filial piety and Buddhist practices. These developments illustrate how Buddhist rituals and ethical frameworks were strategically employed to reinforce Confucian ideals of familial duty, offering a compelling example of how Buddhist traditions were adapted to meet the evolving needs of Chinese society. This historical trajectory not only reinforces the flexibility of Confucian thought but also demonstrates the enduring relevance of Buddhism in shaping Chinese familial and social ethics. In this sense, by the Yuan, long-term processes of acculturation had rendered many Buddhist values and concepts no longer

³ For the practices of merit transfer and filial piety, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 43-112. Teiser explores how Buddhist rituals, such as the Ghost Festival, were adapted to Chinese familial ethics, emphasizing the role of merit transfer in benefiting deceased ancestors. For the discussion of merit transfer by Chinese exegete Huiyuan 慧遠 (523-592) in the *Dasheng yi zhang* 大乘義章 (*Chapters on the meaning of Mahayana*), see Wendi L. Adamek, "The Impossibility of the Given: Representations of Merit and Emptiness in Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 45, no. 2 (2005): 143-50.

⁴ Mark Halperin, *Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 203-227. Halperin's work provides an analysis of how Song literati engaged with Buddhism, particularly through the construction of merit cloisters and family Buddha halls, to fulfill familial and ancestral obligations.

“foreign,” and more a normative part of Chinese “common sense” and the vernacular ethical landscape.

The Mongol establishment of the Yuan Dynasty in 1271 did not disrupt Chinese practices of using Buddhism to fulfill familial and filial obligations. Han Chinese continued to construct Buddhist temples for the repose of deceased family members, engage monks to tend graves, and conduct ceremonies aimed at transferring merit to the dead. These are all practices aligned with longstanding indigenous values of family continuity and reciprocal care between generations.⁵

However, the Mongol regime’s pronounced patronage of Buddhism, particularly under Emperor Toghon Temür (Huizong, r. 1333–1370), altered the socioreligious landscape in ways that profoundly challenged the Confucian scholarly elite. The repeated suspension of the Confucian-based imperial examinations—notably in 1336 and 1339—significantly curtailed the primary pathway to official status and social prestige for classically educated Han Chinese. Meanwhile, Buddhist clerics enjoyed state-sponsored privileges, including avenues to official appointments, which led some families to encourage sons to enter the *sangha* as a strategy for social advancement, thereby leveraging Buddhist institutions to benefit the natal family. As Jinping Wang’s study of the monk Zhiyu at Mt. Wutai shows, the formal and informal ties that such clerics cultivated with monasteries and the Mongol government could translate into tangible advantages for their kin: Zhiyu’s religious standing became a crucial source of prestige and opportunity for the Zhangs of Anheng Village, a large but socially modest lineage whose male members otherwise worked mainly as

⁵ For more concrete cases of Yuan Chinese people building merit cloisters for the dead and having Buddhist monks perform the rituals, see Mark Halperin, “Buddhists and Southern Literati in The Mongol Era,” in *Modern Chinese Religion I: Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan (960–1368 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone (Brill, 2013), 1472–1479.

farmers, craftsmen, village teachers, or low-level clerks.⁶ In this way, the Yuan Dynasty reconfigured the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism, placing increasing pressure on the former to adapt to the institutional power and social practices of the latter.

Within this context of diminished Confucian institutional influence and expanding Buddhist prominence, educated playwrights—many of whom were steeped in the classical tradition but excluded from conventional routes of influence—turned to *zaju* drama as a cultural platform. Through this popular medium, they creatively engaged and reinforced Buddhist narrative concepts such as karma and merit, not to reject Buddhist teachings outright, but to articulate and reaffirm core ethical values that resonated with Confucian ideals of familial solidarity, intergenerational moral responsibility, and the collective consequences of individual actions.

By dramatizing stories in which family fate hinged on the ethical behavior of its members, these writers did not simply defend so-called “Confucian family values” against an ideology—for neither Mongols nor Buddhists were inherently “anti-family.” Rather, they appropriated widely understood karmic logic to reinforce the social importance of familial integrity, mutual obligation, and moral accountability within a changing world. In doing so, they used theatrical images and language not to restore examination-based scholarship per se, but to reassert the cultural authority of classical ethics and reclaim a voice for the values of collective family ethics. This strategic adaptation illustrates how *zaju* became a vital tool for educated Han Chinese to negotiate the challenges of Mongol rule, re-embedding Confucian norms in popular consciousness through the compelling medium of drama.

⁶ See Jinping Wang, “Clergy, Kinship, and Clout in Yuan Dynasty Shanxi,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (July 2016): 209–15.

Zaju Genre as a Medium for Ethical and Religious Narratives

Yuan *zaju* was a dominant form of popular entertainment that reached broad audiences through performance, distinguishing it from other more literati-focused forms, such as *shi* 詩 (poetry) or *sanwen* 散文 (classical prose essays). As James Irving Crump emphasizes, traditional Chinese theater is “perhaps the most persistently musical stage medium in the history of the theater,” and Yuan *zaju* in particular is a poetic-musical drama whose scripts are shaped by demanding musical requirements: each play is organized into four acts (often with a short “wedge”), and every act consists of a set of arias in a single mode, fitted to pre-existing tune patterns and sung by a single lead role, interspersed with spoken dialogue, dance, pantomime, and occasional farce. Emerging from a long tradition of variety entertainment that combined songs, skits, narrative ballads, and acrobatics, *zaju* employed stock role types and well-known historical figures in a stylized performance idiom that could range from broad comedy to near tragedy, while drawing at once on refined literary verse and pungent street language.⁷ Designed to be sung, acted, and seen rather than merely read, these plays were staged by professional troupes in urban entertainment quarters and at temple fairs, attracting mixed audiences of commoners and local elites. *A Slave to Money* by Zheng Tingyu belongs squarely within this vibrant performance culture, even as it turns the resources of *zaju* toward probing moral dilemmas and familial ethics in a society adjusting to Mongol rule and the diminished authority of the Confucian examination system.

Zaju drama served as a powerful vehicle for the dissemination of religious and philosophical ideas. Its performative nature—incorporating song, dance, dialogue, and costume—allowed complex karmic and ethical

⁷ For a detailed introduction to the nature of the genre and a general background of Yuan drama, see James Irving Crump, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan* (University of Arizona Press, 1980), 177–96.

concepts to be visualized and emotionally grasped by non-literate audiences. Unlike the later *Selection of Yuan Plays* edited by Zang Maoxun, whose reworked texts often functioned as “desktop literature” for educated readers and, as Stephen H. West shows, tend to recast the workings of karma in terms of individual virtue and filial womanhood,⁸ Yuan *zaju* was fundamentally public and communal. Building on but redirecting West’s framework, my analysis suggests that the dramatic logic of Yuan *zaju* does not merely stage individual karmic consequence; it structurally amplifies the tension between personal retribution and a distinctly Chinese form of shared, family-based karma. Its narratives are constructed to maximize moral clarity and dramatic impact precisely by foregrounding collective fate, intergenerational obligation, and the ways in which one person’s actions reverberate across an entire lineage.

The play *A Slave to Money* exemplifies this capacity in concrete ways. Its plot—structured around the intertwined rise and fall of the Zhou and Jia families—does not merely “tell” a moral story; it *performs* karmic justice onstage. Early in the play, Lingpaihou appears in a dream and announces that the Zhou lineage’s “three generations of hidden merit” will be temporarily transferred to the destitute Jia Ren (贾仁), a decision that soon materializes in sharply contrasted stage images: Zhou Rongzu (周荣祖) sinks into debt and humiliation, while Jia Ren suddenly prospers, flaunting his new wealth and abusing his creditors. The transfer of *fuli* between the two households, the Marquis of the Spirits’ accounting of ancestral merit as a kind of celestial ledger, and the ultimate “return” of that *fuli* to the son Zhou Changshou in the final act of the play, are all dramatized through familiar *zaju* devices—dream revelations, formulaic entrances and exits, and tightly structured song suites that comment on the action.

⁸ Stephen H. West, “A Study in Appropriation: Zang Maoxun’s *Injustice to Dou E*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 2 (1991): 283–302.

As the audience watches Jia Ren purchase his creditor as an “enemy” and squander borrowed blessings, the workings of karmic causality are made emotionally legible rather than abstract and obtuse. When Marquis of the Spirits finally declares that Jia has merely “kept watch” over Zhou wealth for twenty years and orders the restoration of Zhou family fortunes, the resolution simultaneously satisfies expectations of dramatic retribution and affirms a vision of shared, family-based karma. In this way, the play uses the conventional machinery of *zaju* to stage *fuli* as a collective moral force that binds generations together and redistributes fortune according to both karmic logic and Confucian ideals of lineage responsibility.

Asserting Literati Values Through Drama Genre: The Case of Zheng Tingyu

Scholarly discussion of Zheng Tingyu’s *A Slave to Money* must account for its complex textual history. The earliest available version of this play is in *Yuankan zaju sanshi Zhong* 元刊雜劇三十種 (*Thirty Miscellaneous Comedies Printed in the Yuan*).⁹ Although Zheng Tingyu composed this play during the Yuan dynasty, the most popular version comes from Zang Maoxun’s (臧懋循) *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選 (*Selection of the Yuan Plays*), compiled in the early seventeenth century.¹⁰ As scholars such as Wilt Idema have demonstrated, Zang did not simply reproduce earlier texts; he actively edited, revised, and at times rewrote plays to suit Ming literary tastes, theatrical

⁹ *Yuankan zaju sanshi Zhong* 元刊雜劇三十種 (*Thirty Miscellaneous Comedies Printed in the Yuan*), fourteenth-century block-print edition. The only extant Yuan-Dynasty *zaju* anthology, containing 30 plays in their earliest known printed form with minimal editorial intervention. See Idema, “From Stage Scripts to Closet Drama,” 181-184.

¹⁰ Sui Shusen 隋樹森, ed., *Yuan qu xuan wai bian* 元曲選外編 (*Zhonghua shuju*, 1959; repr., *Zhonghua shuju* 1961).

conventions, and ideological expectations.¹¹ Idema also argues that court scripts during this period underwent significant ideological interventions, reflecting the political and cultural priorities of the ruling elite.¹² Unlike fourteenth-century printings, which frequently featured emperor roles, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century court editions systematically removed these roles. This deliberate excision highlights the court's efforts to control the representation of imperial authority and align theatrical content with its ideological agenda. Through this transformation, Yuan drama not only adapted to the demands of its new audience but also reinforced the court's cultural and political dominance. Consequently, while the core plot and themes of *A Slave to Money* likely reflect Yuan-era concerns, the specific language, structure, and emphases of the version we study today may also bear the imprint of late Ming editorial intervention.

Despite these textual complexities, the moral and social concerns embedded in the play's narrative align with what we know of Zheng Tingyu's oeuvre and the broader milieu of educated Han writers during the Yuan. Although biographical records on Zheng Tingyu are exceedingly sparse,¹³ early catalogues such as *Luguibu* single him out as a major dramatist, ranking him immediately after Guan Hanqing (關漢卿) and Gao Wenxiu (高文秀). Of the roughly twenty-three *zaju* attributed to Zheng Tingyu, at least five survive in full: *Kanqiannu mai yuanjia zhaizhu* 看錢奴買冤家債主 (*A Slave to Money Buys a Creditor as His Enemy*), which exposes a miserly landlord whose greed shatters kinship bonds; *Baodaizhi zhikan Houtinghua* 包待製智勘後庭花 (*Judge Bao Cleverly Tries "Rear Courtyard Flowers"*), an early courtroom drama; *Chu Zhaowang shuzhe xia chuan* 楚昭王疏者下船 (*King Zhao of Chu Pardons the Boatman*), a historical play; *Budai*

¹¹ Idema, "From Stage Scripts to Closet Drama," 176-78.

¹² Idema, "From Stage Scripts to Closet Drama," 182-84.

¹³ It has been a common phenomenon that very little is known about the personal biographies of Yuan-Dynasty playwrights. Zheng Tingyu is no exception in this regard. See Crump, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan*, 5-23.

heshang renziji 佈袋和尚忍字記 (*The Cloth-Bag Monk's Record of Forbearance*), a morality piece intertwining adultery and supernatural retribution; and *Song Shanghuang yuduan Jinfengchai* 宋上皇禦斷金鳳釵 (*The Retired Emperor of Song Adjudicates the Golden Phoenix Hairpin*), another legal drama centered on injustice and redress. Taken together, these works reveal a sustained interest in everyday ethical dilemmas—money, sexuality, legal justice, and familial obligation—rendered through accessible plots and strongly moralized endings.

The later reception of *A Slave to Money* further suggests that Zheng was neither marginal nor obscure. The play was canonized in Zang Maoxun's influential *Yuanqu xuan* and subsequently adapted into *huaben* form by Ling Mengchu in *Chuke Pai'an jingqi* 初刻拍案驚奇 (*The First Collection of Amazing Tales*), while its miser figure helped shape the avaricious protagonist of Xu Fuzuo's Ming-Dynasty *zaju*, *Yi wen qian* 一文錢 (*One Copper Cash*). These afterlives indicate that Zheng's exploration of greed, contract, and kinship resonated well beyond his own time. In *A Slave to Money*, he adapts Buddhist karmic discourse—especially the redistribution of *fuli*—to reinforce a Confucian ethics of familial responsibility, using the popular medium of *zaju* to invite public reflection on the tensions between profit-seeking, moral integrity, and obligations to one's lineage.

Furthermore, the play's emphasis on collective karmic retribution unfolding across generations resonates strongly with Confucian conceptions of ancestral worship and the family as the fundamental unit of society, even as it draws on Buddhist narrative frameworks. This thematic synthesis echoes arguments by John Kieschnick and Stephen Bokenkamp that the perceived opposition between Buddhist karma and Chinese notions of shared familial responsibility is often overstated: close readings of medieval sources reveal multiple attempts to reconcile individual karmic

causality with obligations owed to ancestors and kin.¹⁴ At the same time, the depiction of *fuli* as a form of family-shared karma in *Zaju* represents a distinctive conceptual development. It diverges notably from the seven types of sociokarma systematically outlined by Jonathan Walters, suggesting a uniquely Chinese dramatic reinterpretation of karmic collectivity.¹⁵ This strategic synthesis suggests that Zheng, like many educated contemporaries whose political aspirations were limited under Mongol rule, sought in popular writing an alternative means of sustaining and disseminating Confucian social values in a changing world.

Thus, what distinguishes Zheng's treatment is his integration of these critiques into a family-based narrative wherein an individual's moral failure impacts the entire household. I argue that this represents a characteristically Yuan-era negotiation between Confucian familialism and Buddhist retributive logic—a synthesis vividly enacted through *zaju*'s dramatic conventions, even as we must recognize the Ming editorial layers that shape our reading of the text today.

Karmic Dynamics and Familial Fate in *A Slave to Money*

In *A Slave to Money*, the playwright Zheng Tingyu dramatizes the concept of karma by weaving together the fates of two unrelated families—the Zhou (周) and Jia (贾) clans—through the mechanism of karmic

¹⁴ For discussions of the relationship between karma and collective family responsibility, see John Kieschnick, *Buddhist Historiography in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 236; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China* (University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Jonathan S. Walters, "Communal Karma and Karmic Community in Theravada Buddhist History," in *Constituting Communities: Theravada Buddhism and the Religious Cultures of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. John Clifford Holt, Jonathan S. Walters, and Jacob N. Kinnard (State University of New York Press, 2003), 9–39.

retribution and the transfer of “blessing power.”¹⁶ The rise and fall of these families hinge on the moral conduct of their members, illustrating how individual actions can shape collective familial destiny. While drawing on broader cultural notions of karma, the play also incorporates the agency of a deity, the Marquis of the Spirits, reflecting a characteristically Chinese narrative strategy that harmonizes cosmic moral mechanisms with divine mediation.

The play begins by introducing the Zhou family, whose patriarch, Zhou Rongzu, recounts their history in the prologue:

My ancestors were once wealthy, and my grandfather, Zhou Feng, was a devout Buddhist who built a Buddhist temple. He recited sutras daily, praying for peace and prosperity. However, my father, focused solely on expanding our family estate, demolished the temple to obtain materials for construction. Soon after the house was completed, my father fell ill, and despite all efforts to cure him, he died. Many believed this misfortune was a punishment for his disrespect toward Buddhism.¹⁷

小生先世廣有家財，因祖父周奉記敬理釋門，蓋起一所佛院，每日看經念佛，祈保平安。至我父親，一心只做人家，為修理宅舍，這木石磚瓦，無處取辦，遂將那所佛院盡毀廢了。比及

¹⁶ The family names Zhou (周, “complete”) and Jia (賈, “false”) are likely employed by the playwright as meaningful puns. The Zhou family, whose name suggests wholeness or virtue, is initially blessed due to the grandfather’s pious actions. While the Jia family, whose name can imply falsity or commercial greed, ultimately fails to maintain their unearned blessings. The name of the patriarch of the Jia family, Jia Ren (賈仁), may further pun on the concept of “false benevolence” (假仁), foreshadowing his hypocritical and morally corrupt behavior. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁷ Zheng Tingyu 鄭廷玉, *Kanqiannu mai yuanjia zhaizhu* 看錢奴買冤家債主 (A Slave to Money Buys a Creditor as His Enemy), in *Yuanqu xuan* 元曲選, ed. Zang Maoxun 臧懋循 (1616; repr., Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 1584. All subsequent citations of the play are to this edition. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

宅舍工完，我父親得了一病，百般的醫藥無效，人皆以為不信佛教之過。

This opening establishes a framework of moral causation that operates through what I call a “hybrid cosmological system.” On the one hand, the sequence—destroying a temple and then suffering illness and death—invites a Buddhist reading in which immoral acts against the *sangha* naturally generate negative karmic consequences. On the other hand, the play embeds this karmic logic within a recognizably Chinese religious universe of ancestral responsibility and divine bureaucracy, where family fortunes are assessed, redistributed, and punished through official-like gods who keep ledgers of merit and guilt. Rather than depicting karma as a purely impersonal mechanism, the drama stages it as a process mediated by concrete deities and tied to the collective fate of a lineage.

The key mediating figure is the Marquis of the Spirits, introduced as an underworld official associated with the Mount Tai (泰山) complex and the adjudication of human fortunes. In late-imperial religious practice, Taishan-linked deities supervised registers of life, death, illness, and disaster; as Michel Strickmann shows, many cases of sickness or bad luck were interpreted as penalties imposed by this infernal bureaucracy for the moral failings of the convalescent or their ancestors, to be remedied through confession, ritual, and moral reform.¹⁸ Stephen Bokenkamp likewise demonstrates how concerns about ancestral transgressions and the fate of the lineage were increasingly articulated through the language of divine judgment and rebirth.¹⁹ *A Slave to Money* draws on this religious complex: the Marquis appears not as a Buddhist bodhisattva but as a powerful local deity who applies karmic-style reasoning to the Zhou family’s

¹⁸ Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 45–57.

¹⁹ Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 168–170.

case, explicitly recalculating their “blessing power” in light of past deeds, as we see in the following excerpt:

Observing the Zhou family of Caozhou, I [the Marquis of the Spirits] see that their accumulated blessing power, earned through three generations of hidden merit, has been forfeited due to one misguided act. They should now face collective punishment.²⁰

看的有曹州曹南周家庄上，他家福力所積，陰功三輩，為他一念差池，合受折罰

Here karmic retribution is simultaneously Buddhist in its emphasis on the moral consequences of actions and Chinese in its depiction of a deity who tallies ancestral “hidden merit” (*yin gong* 陰功) and imposes a *collective* penalty on the household. By having a non-Buddhist god administer what is effectively karmic justice, Zheng dramatizes how Buddhist ideas of moral causality had been absorbed into a wider religious field in which Mount Tai officials, ancestral spirits, and karmic ledgers all participated in determining a family’s destiny.

The consequences of the Zhou family’s misdeeds are vividly portrayed through the protagonist Zhou Zurong’s lament:

Do they not say that the vast blue heavens cannot be deceived? Before acting, one should consider the consequences, for regret comes too late. The gods watch from above, and my father, alas, should never have destroyed the temple. Now, on this journey, whom can I blame but fate!²¹

可不道湛湛青天不可欺，舉意之前悔後遲。空內有神祇，（帶雲）俺父親呵！（唱）不合興心兒拆毀，今日個客路裡怨他誰！

²⁰ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1588.

²¹ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1584.

This is surely the karma of my past life, and I must bear its burden in this one. Did I burn some ill-fated incense in a past life? I cannot wipe away the tears on my cheeks, nor scratch the itch in my heart. I cannot sever this karmic bond. Ah, my son Changshou, even as I close my eyes, I am haunted by thoughts of you.²²

這都是俺前生業，可著俺便今世當，莫不是曾燒著甚麼斷頭香？
搵不住腮邊淚，撓不著心上癢，割不斷俺業情腸。（帶雲）哎！
（唱）俺那長壽兒也，我端的可便才合眼又早眠思夢想。

This monologue poignantly illustrates the devastating effects of ancestral misdeeds on familial fate. Zhou Zurong's failure in the imperial examinations, the loss of the family's wealth, and the heart-wrenching decision to sell his son all stem from his own father's destruction of the temple. Through this plot, the playwright drives home the message that immoral behavior not only brings suffering to the individual who commits the wrong but also jeopardizes the well-being of their descendants, reinforcing the ideal of intergenerational moral accountability. The devastating effects of ancestral misdeeds on familial fate, as lamented by Zhou Zurong, are mediated through the pivotal figure of Lingpaihou (Marquis of the Spirits). Rather than a Buddhist bodhisattva, Lingpaihou is presented as an underworld official associated with the Mount Tai complex, a traditional locus for the adjudication of life, death, and human fortune. In this cosmological system, Lingpaihou functions as the celestial accountant who translates the abstract Buddhist law of cause and effect into a legible, bureaucratic process of divine administration. As Michel Strickmann has demonstrated, the infernal bureaucracy of medieval China often interpreted illness and disaster as legal penalties for the moral failings of

²² Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1601.

ancestors,²³ a framework Zheng Tingyu skillfully employs here to quantify and reallocate the Zhou family's "three generations of hidden merit" (*yin gong san bei*) as blessing power. The presence of a non-Buddhist deity enforcing karmic retribution is not a theological contradiction but a strategic narrative synthesis. By using a Mount Tai official to administer what is effectively a karmic ledger, the play bridges the gap between the impersonal mechanism of Buddhist karma and the Chinese preoccupation with ancestral responsibility and lineage continuity. Lingpaihou's role as an intermediary demonstrates how Buddhist ethics were domesticized; he makes what may be called the "bonds of karma" tangible by framing them as a divine debt that must be settled through the lineage, thereby reinforcing the Confucian ideal of intergenerational moral accountability, especially in mundane, economic terms.

Meanwhile, the Jia family, as recipients of the Zhou family's transferred blessing power, rise from poverty to prosperity. However, this newfound wealth is not guaranteed to last, raising a critical question: can transferred blessings be sustained without corresponding virtuous conduct? This tension sets the stage for the next phase of the drama, where the moral behavior of Jia Ren and his family comes under scrutiny, revealing the fragility of prosperity that is not supported by ongoing ethical action.

In the play, we are told that Jia Ren's early life was marked by hardship. Orphaned as a child, he struggled to make ends meet, working as a mason for others. His fortunes changed when he received the unexpected transfer of blessing power, propelling his family into wealth and prosperity. However, Jia Ren's newfound status as a rich man transforms him into the titular "slave to money," a dishonest, stingy, and morally corrupt

²³ On the role of Lingpaihou and the Mount Tai bureaucracy, see Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 45-57, which details how Chinese religious practice often viewed misfortune as a penalty imposed by an infernal bureaucracy for ancestral transgressions.

miser. The play vividly portrays his character and the consequences of his turn of character:

Although he has become a wealthy man, he refuses to spend even a single coin. He covets others' possessions, seizing them without hesitation, yet clings fiercely to his own, unwilling to part with even the smallest thing. The thought of giving anything away pains him deeply.²⁴

雖然做個財主，爭奈一文也不使，半文也不用。別人的東西恨不得擘手奪將來，自己的東西捨不得與人；若與人呵，就心疼殺了也。

He feigns compassion but has never given a single coin in charity. Despite amassing a fortune of gold and silver, he has no children to inherit his wealth.²⁵

滿口假悲慈，可曾有半文兒布施？空掌著精金響鈔百萬資，偏沒個寸男尺女為繼嗣。

Jia Ren's immoral actions bring karmic retribution upon himself and his family. He remains childless, with no heir to inherit his fortune. Desperate, he instructs his bookkeeper, Chen Defu (陈德甫), to purchase a son for him. However, Jia Ren's greed and deceit are evident in the contract negotiations. He deliberately avoids specifying the amount he will pay for the child, promising only verbally to offer a fair price. This sets the stage for his eventual fraud. The dialogue between Jia Ren and Chen Defu highlights his duplicity:

Jia Ren: "Chen Defu, since we're buying this child, we must draft a contract."

²⁴ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1598.

²⁵ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1604.

Chen Defu: “You dictate, and I’ll write.”

Jia Ren: “Write this: ‘Zhou Xiucan, due to financial hardship and inability to provide for his family, willingly sells his son, aged [X], to the wealthy Squire Jia as an heir.’”

Chen Defu: “Everyone knows you’re rich. Why emphasize ‘wealthy Squire’?”

Jia Ren: “Chen Defu, you flatter me. If I’m not a wealthy man, what am I? A beggar?”

Chen Defu: “Yes, yes, a wealthy man indeed.”

Jia Ren: “Add this: ‘Both parties agree to the terms, and neither shall renege. If either party breaks the agreement, they must pay the other 1,000 strings of cash as penalty. This contract serves as proof for all time.’”

Chen Defu: “Understood. But how much will you actually pay for the child?”

Jia Ren: “That’s none of your concern. I’m a wealthy man; whatever I give will be more than enough.”²⁶

（賈仁云）陳德甫，咱要買他這小的，也索要立一紙文書。

（陳德甫云）你打個稿兒。

（賈仁云）我說與你寫：立文書人周秀才，因為無錢使用，口食不敷，難以度日，情願將自己親兒某人，年幾歲，賣與財主賈老員外為兒。

²⁶ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1593.

（陳德甫云）誰不知你有錢，只要員外勾了，又要那"財主"兩字做甚麼？

（賈仁云）陳德甫，是你抬舉我哩，我不是財主，難道叫我窮漢？

（陳德甫云）是、是、是，財主，財主。

（賈仁云）那文書後頭寫道：當日三面言定，付價多少。立約之後，兩家不許反悔。若有反悔之人，罰寶鈔一千貫與不悔之人使用。恐後無憑，立此文書，永遠為照。

（陳德甫云）是了，反悔之人罰寶鈔一千貫。他這正錢可是多少？

（賈仁云）這個你莫要管我，我是個財主，他要的多少，我指甲裡彈出來的，他可也吃不了。

（陳德甫云）是、是、是，我與那秀才說去。

Jia Ren's vagueness about the payment foreshadows his deceit. When Zhou Xiucan sells his son to Jia Ren, the dramatic conflict reaches its climax. Jia Ren offers only a paltry sum, sparking outrage:

Jia Ren: "Give him one string of cash."

Chen Defu: "How can you offer so little for such a precious child?"

Jia Ren: "One string of cash is worth many treasures. Don't underestimate it. Giving even this feels like tearing a tendon from my flesh!"

Chen Defu: "Very well, I'll give it to him."

Zhou Xiucan's Wife: "I raised this child with so much care, and you offer only one string of cash? You couldn't even buy a clay doll with that!"

Zhou Xiucan: (sings) "Oh, my child, how can this be your fate?"²⁷

(贾仁云)与他一贯钞。

(陈德甫云)他这等一个孩儿，怎么与他一贯钞？忒少。

(贾仁云)一贯钞上面有许多的宝字，你休看的轻了。你便不打紧，我便似挑我一条筋哩！倒是挑我一条筋也熬了，要打发出这一贯钞，更觉艰难。你则与他去，他是个读书的人，他有个要不要也不见的。

(陈德甫云)我便依着你，且拿与他去。

(做出见科，云)秀才你休慌，安排茶饭哩。这个是员外打发你的一贯钞。

(旦儿云)我几盆儿水洗的孩儿偌大，可怎生与我一贯钞！便买个泥娃娃儿，也买不的。

(正末云)想我这孩儿呀，(唱)

This shocking act of greed and exploitation brings karmic retribution upon Jia Ren and his family, especially because it is directed at his adopted son, the locus of the family's future prosperity. It is, in a sense, an act of betrayal of the responsibility father has to son, and thus family to society. As a result of this transgression of basic moral codes of responsibility, both Jia Ren and his wife succumb to serious illnesses, and the family loses the accumulated merit that once supported their prosperity, plunging them back into decline. The playwright invokes the idea of transferring such fortune as a dramatic parallel to the Buddhist concept of merit transfer. Yet the narrative emphasizes that accumulated merit or fortune does not ensure permanent prosperity or guarantee further moral advancement. Instead, the destiny of a family ultimately depends on the

²⁷ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1595.

ethical conduct of its members. As demonstrated by Jia Ren's actions, immoral behavior can lead to the downfall of an entire household, with repercussions extending across generations.

In the play, the transfer of blessing power between the Zhou and Jia families serves as a popularized representation of karma, one mediated by deities such as the Marquis of the Spirits. This plot strategy echoes the communal focus of karma in syncretic Chinese Buddhism, where merit transfer and ancestral rituals reflect a shared concern for familial well-being. By portraying karma as a force that *operates* between families, the play bridges Buddhist and Confucian ethics, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual morality and collective family destiny. In the next section, I will further explore how this interplay of collective karma and familial responsibility reflects broader cultural and ethical frameworks in Yuan Dynasty society.

Blessing Power and the Flow of Merit: A Buddhist-Confucian Dialogue

To understand the karmic logic underpinning *A Slave to Money*, the play in question, it is essential to examine the concept of *fuli*, which I translate as “blessing power.” The key to my argument is that this concept permeates the plot and structures its moral framework. This term, while bearing traces of Buddhist origins, had by the Yuan Dynasty become integrated into a shared cultural lexicon that transcended strict sectarian boundaries. In what follows, I analyze the play's use of *fuli* and its karmically driven plot, showing how the work creatively adapts and popularizes ideas of moral causation within a framework that resonated with both Buddhist and Confucian worldviews. The result is to reinforce the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism at a time when the new socio-political climate was challenging the role of Confucian ideas in courtly and conventional culture.

In the play, blessing power functions as a literary mechanism through which the deity Lingpaihou transfers blessings between families, thereby generating dramatic tension and laying out the ethical landscape on which the story unfolds. The term *fuli* itself implies a force derived from beneficial actions, and though it is not equivalent to the classical Buddhist concept of merit (*gongde* 功德, Skt. *punya*), it operates within a similar conceptual field concerning the rewards of virtuous conduct. Canonical usages of *fuli* suggest an established meaning close to what Jonathan Walters has termed “overflow karma,” one of the relational forms of “sociokarma” in which karmic effects extend beyond the individual agent to a wider community, thus foregrounding an inherently collective dimension of karmic causation.²⁸ Building on recent calls by Susanne Kerekes and Jessica Zu, as well as Zu’s proposal to think in terms of “collective-karma-cluster-concepts,” *fuli* as deployed in this *zaju* can be read as part of a broader, understudied repertoire of categories that articulate shared karmic responsibility.²⁹ Unlike the more doctrinally specific notion of merit, which in Mahāyāna contexts could be transferred by buddhas and bodhisattvas for the salvation of beings, *fuli* in the play reflects a broader, popular understanding, one that both draws on and departs from its canonical resonances. Its usage suggests a synthesis of indigenous ideas and Buddhist-inspired interpretations of cause and effect, now presented in a form that would have been familiar and meaningful to contemporary audiences. While a full reconstruction of *fuli*’s historical evolution from canonical sources to Yuan *zaju* would require a separate study, my focus here is on how its collective orientation in *A Slave to Money* reveals a new

²⁸ Walters, “Communal Karma,” 9–39.

²⁹ See Jessica Zu, “Collective-Karma-Cluster-Concepts in Chinese Canonical Sources: A Note,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 24, no. 2 (2023): 88–94; Susanne M. Kerekes and Jessica Zu, “Introduction: Critical Notes on the Lived Karma Conference,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 24, no. 2 (2023): 83–87.

dimension of karmic logic centered on family responsibility and intergenerational obligation.

In *A Slave to Money*, *fuli* diverges from typical religious merit transfer, which is usually tied to ritual acts such as ancestral dedications. In the crucial scene, Lingpaihou, together with the deity *Zengfushen* 增福神 (Deity of Increasing Blessings), explicitly “borrows” the accumulated blessings of the Zhou lineage—described as the “three generations of hidden merit” of Zhou Rongzu’s ancestors—and reallocates this *fuli* to the destitute Jia Ren for a fixed term of twenty years. Rather than a one-way transfer of ritual merit to the dead, *fuli* here is treated as a movable surplus that can be reassigned among the living, directly reshaping the material and moral fortunes of two unrelated families. This is not a strict doctrinal application of Buddhist ideas, but a literary reworking of moral concepts that had already entered the broader cultural imagination. *Fuli* thus functions simultaneously as a vehicle of karmic retribution and as a salvific force, a dual role that highlights its narrative utility.

Crucially, *fuli* is depicted as dynamic and conditional: it can be both granted and revoked. Lingpaihou’s initial decision to “lend” Zhou family blessings to Jia Ren is matched, at the drama’s conclusion, by his retrospective pronouncement that Jia Ren has merely “kept watch” over Zhou Rongzu’s ancestral wealth for twenty years before it must be returned to its rightful owner. This framing sets *fuli* apart from more individually accumulated and ritually transferred Buddhist merit, presenting it instead as a resource subject to divine administration, temporal limits, and human ethical conduct. Such staging suggests that Zheng Tingyu is less concerned with reproducing orthodox Buddhist doctrine than with exploiting familiar karmic tropes—dream revelations, divine account-keeping, and time-bound recompense—to probe questions of family responsibility, economic justice, and the volatility of fortune.

While *fuli* clearly echoes Buddhist discourse on merit and karmic causality, it is reconfigured within an emphatically familial and social framework that emphasizes collective destiny over individual fate. The play's redistribution of Zhou ancestral blessings to Jia Ren, and their eventual restitution through the son Zhou Changshou, dramatizes the entanglement of kinship, wealth, and moral debt in ways that resonate with Confucian concerns about shared obligation within the lineage. By presenting *fuli* as a transferable, family-oriented force, the drama offers a popularized vision of moral retribution that speaks directly to the social and ethical anxieties of its time, while also reinforcing the permeability between Buddhist and Confucian moral worlds. This configuration of karmic power as a resource that circulates through family networks parallels the historical patterns Jinping Wang has traced,³⁰ in which Yuan families strategically encouraged sons to enter the *sangha* in order to preserve or enhance lineage status and maintain kinship ties amid the crisis of Confucian authority under Mongol rule.

The Confucian-Buddhist Synthesis of Collective Responsibility

The concept of collective family responsibility, while often aligned with Confucian social ideals, has deep roots in pre-Buddhist Chinese legal and religious thought. As John Kieschnick observes in *Buddhist Historiography in China*, prior to Buddhism's introduction, the closest indigenous concept to karma was the notion that moral responsibility was shared collectively among ancestors and descendants.³¹ This belief, which underwrote early Chinese legal codes and ritual practice, held that an individual's suffering or prosperity could derive from the actions of their forebears, just as the misconduct of descendants could impact the well-being of their ancestors

³⁰ Wang, "Clergy, Kinship, and Clout," 209-15.

³¹ See Kieschnick, *Buddhist Historiography in China*, 79-84.

in the afterlife.³² This traditional emphasis on intergenerational moral continuity is vividly reflected in the opening scene of *A Slave to Money*:

I have studied both Buddhist sutras and Confucian classics, and they all emphasize the importance of accumulating good deeds and cultivating a virtuous heart. Our family's wealth was built by our ancestors' benevolence and virtue, all for the sake of fostering filial sons and virtuous wives.³³

也曾將釋典儒宗細講習，無非是積善修心為第一，則俺這家豪富祖先積，他為甚施仁布德，也則要博一個孝子和賢妻。

A few stanzas later, the speaker continues:

Yet some refuse to live contentedly in poverty and keep to their station, always seeking to wait for lucky breaks. They wield a knife concealed by a smile that kills their own children and grandchildren, leaving no good offspring to cherish.³⁴

不肯甘貧守分，都則待僥倖成家。自拿著殺子殺孫笑裡刀，怎留得好兒好女眼前花。

Here, the intrinsic bond between ancestors and descendants is emphasized, illustrating a moral worldview that long predates the play's Yuan-era setting yet remained deeply influential under shifting socio-

³² The connection between ancestral conduct and descendant's physical affliction has deep roots in early Chinese thought. As evidenced by a renowned oracle bone inscription from the Shang dynasty, a king inquired whether his toothache was caused by one of his ancestors. David N. Keightley notes that the selection of Fu Keng as the recipient of the sacrifice recorded in charge 7 on the front of the plastron implies that the diviners had identified him as the ancestor responsible for the toothache. See David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (University of California Press, 1978), 86–88.

³³ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1584.

³⁴ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1586.

political conditions. While Buddhist scholastic writings often stressed karma as an individual phenomenon, as exemplified by the seventh-century layman Li Shizheng's assertion that "fate is tied to karma, and karma arises from human actions" (命繫於業，業起於人).³⁵ In practice, East Asian Buddhist communities widely embraced the idea of shared karmic burden and transferable merit.

To understand how the play navigates the tension between Buddhist individual retribution and Confucian familialism, one must look to the hybrid cosmological system that characterized medieval Chinese religion. Stephen Bokenkamp's research on early Daoist traditions is particularly relevant here, as it highlights a persistent indigenous critique of the Buddhist notion of individual karma.³⁶ While Buddhist doctrine initially posited that one's parents were not the true source of one's being, Daoist frameworks such as those found in Shangqing scriptures retained and codified the concept of "inherited guilt" (*chengfu*), where the "lawsuits" of deceased ancestors in the afterlife resulted in the illnesses and misfortunes of their living kin.³⁷

In the specific context of the Yuan dynasty, this Daoist-inflected model of collective liability served as a vital cultural bridge. For the disenfranchised Han literati, the use of what I am calling a "divine bureaucracy" represented in the play by deities like Lingpaihou was not merely a theatrical device but a strategic appropriation of the Daoist "afterlife lawsuit" mechanism to enforce the Confucian moral imperative. By staging a world where family fortune is a blessing power that can be legally transferred or

³⁵ *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集 T no. 2103, vol. 52. For a biographical overview of Li Shizheng, see Kieschnick, *Buddhist Historiography in China*, 236.

³⁶ Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 165, 171-174. Bokenkamp argues that Daoist concepts of "inherited guilt" and the "lawsuits of the dead" were crucial in maintaining the Chinese focus on familial continuity against the Buddhist emphasis on individual liberation.

³⁷ See Erik Zürcher, "Buddhist Influence on Taoist Scripture," *T'oung-pao* 66 (1980): 121.

revoked by divine officials based on a lineage's collective ledger, Zheng Tingyu provides a visible, dramatic resolution to the moral anxieties of his time. This synthesis effectively "Confucianized" Buddhist karma, turning an individual spiritual law into a collective instrument of familial integrity and intergenerational accountability.

Devotees of Chinese Buddhism regularly engaged in practices aimed at transferring merit to others, especially deceased ancestors, through rituals such as funeral ceremonies, sutra recitations, and the dedication of votive steles. Inscriptions like those on the Zhai Man Maitreya Stele (斋满弥勒碑) and the Wang Lingwei Stele (王令维碑) attest to how families sought to ensure the welfare of deceased kin in the next life, highlighting the communal understanding of karma that developed in China.³⁸ These practices, though Buddhist in form, often served ends consistent with long-standing Chinese values regarding family continuity and moral reciprocity. It is within this synthesized cultural and religious context that *A Slave to Money* operates. The play draws on a widespread discourse of collective moral cause and effect—by this time neither exclusively Confucian, Buddhist, nor Daoist, but woven into the fabric of Chinese social thought—to dramatize the consequences of individual actions on familial destiny.

However, the synthesis of Confucian and Buddhist ethics in vernacular story sequence is not unique to the Yuan period. Chinese vernacular fiction, traceable to Tang Dynasty *pien-wen* 變文 (transformation texts), functioned as *upaya* 方便 (skillful means) to disseminate Buddhist ethics. This is exemplified by the eight versions of the "Mulian Rescues his Mother from Hell" plot found in the caves at Dunhuang, dating back to the

³⁸ For the Zhai Man Mile Bei 斋满弥勒碑 (Zhai Man Maitreya Stele), see Dorothy C. Wong, *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 96–104. The inscription records a family's merit dedication to their deceased patriarch. The Wang Lingwei Bei 王令维碑 (Wang Lingwei Stele) is analyzed in Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 131–134. The stele demonstrates multi-generational merit transfer practices.

eightth century. Stephen F. Teiser's analysis of the *Mulian* cycle highlights that these transformation texts did not merely juxtapose two different value systems; rather, they refashioned the ascetic, world-renouncing monk into a "filial son" whose monastic powers were the only means capable of fulfilling the ultimate Confucian obligation: the salvation of a parent from the underworld.³⁹ Teiser argues that the *Mulian* story effectively monasticized the indigenous virtue of *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), positioning the Buddhist *Sangha* as an indispensable mediator for the welfare of the lineage. By framing the ritual of merit transfer as the highest expression of filial service, these texts resolved the tension between monastic celibacy and familial continuity, presenting Buddhist practice as a collective instrument for ancestral care. In the *Mulian* story, we thus see a clear interweaving of Confucian filial piety with the Buddhist mechanism of merit transfer, suggesting that the reconciliation of these ethical systems was a feature of popular Chinese literature since the mid to late Tang.

Within this longer tradition, *A Slave to Money* represents a significant continuation and reworking of these themes. The play's plot illustrates the interplay of individual actions and collective familial fate, progressing through several key stages. It begins with a moral foundation, as the play opens with a plot emphasizing the importance of accumulating good deeds and cultivating virtuous intentions—a moral code shared by both Confucian and Buddhist traditions. This is followed by good deeds rewarded: the Zhou family initially prospers due to the grandfather's devotion to Buddhism, including the construction of a temple and the copying of sutras. Their fortune shifts, however, with bad deeds punished,

³⁹ For a detailed study of *Mulian jiumu bianwen* 目連救母變文 (*The Transformation Text on Mu-lien Saving His Mother from the Dark Regions*) (c. 800), see Teiser, *The Ghost Festival*, 87–91. For the discussion of Mu-lien's biography and his role as a bridge between asceticism and filial duty, see Teiser, *The Ghost Festival*, 116–120. Teiser demonstrates that the filial monk became a cultural hero who validated the social presence of Buddhism by making it the ultimate tool for lineage preservation.

when the father's destruction of the temple brings misfortune upon the family, demonstrating how one immoral act can jeopardize the entire family's well-being. Subsequently, a transfer of blessing power occurs: the deity Marquis of the Spirits transfers the Zhou family's blessing power to the impoverished Jia family, illustrating the Buddhist concept of merit transfer. Yet this blessing proves fleeting due to moral corruption and decline: the Jia family patriarch's greed and deceit, particularly in defrauding another in a contract to buy a son, leads to the loss of their blessing power and eventual decline.

Finally, the plot culminates in the restoration of blessings under the direct adjudication of the Marquis of the Spirits. Acting as a divine judge, the Marquis delivers a retrospective pronouncement that Jia Ren has merely "kept watch" over the Zhou ancestral wealth for a fixed term of twenty years. By presiding over this restoration, the Marquis ensures that the Zhou family is reunited and returned to prosperity, effectively using the conventional machinery of *zaju* to close the karmic cycle and affirm the vision of shared, family-based responsibility.

This plot structure underscores the play's central message: individual actions, whether good or bad, have corresponding consequences for both the individual and the family. As the Marquis of the Spirits proclaims at the close of the first act:

Good deeds bring good rewards, and evil deeds bring evil retribution. If retribution is delayed, it is only because the time has not yet come. If heaven did not send frost, pine trees would be no better than weeds. If the gods did not mete out justice, doing good would be no better than doing evil. Do not deceive heaven or your own heart, for a clear conscience wards off disaster. Do good deeds at all times, and calamity will turn into blessing.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Zheng Tingyu, *Kanqiannu*, 1589.

「善有善報，惡有惡報，不是不報，時辰未到。」天若不降嚴霜，松柏不如蒿草。神明若不報應，積善不如作惡。莫瞞天地莫瞞心，心不瞞時禍不侵；十二時中行好事，災星變做福星臨。

Through the deployment of common karmic motifs in a plot of entangled family fates, the play *A Slave to Money* vividly illustrates the interplay of Buddhist karma and Confucian familial ethics. By dramatizing the transfer of blessing power and the consequences of individual actions on collective family fate, the play bridges the gap between Buddhist notions of karmic retribution and Confucian ideals of shared moral responsibility. The plot's focus on the gradual, intergenerational impact of karma reflects a creative synthesis of these two traditions, offering a compelling vision of social and familial order that resonated with the sociopolitical realities of the Yuan Dynasty.

Conclusion: Beyond Individual Retribution, Toward Lineage Responsibility

In this article I have explored the interplay of Buddhist and Confucian ethics in the Yuan *zaju*, *A Slave to Money*, emphasizing its embeddedness in both a long literary tradition and the specific sociocultural context of Mongol-ruled China. Rather than presenting a wholly novel synthesis, the play reanimates a narrative pattern that had evolved since the Tang Dynasty, a pattern which is exemplified in texts such as the Mulian transformation tales where familial karmic retribution and merit transfer serve as vehicles for negotiating filial and moral responsibility.

What distinguishes Zheng's drama, however, is its use of the *zaju* form, that is a popular, performative, and highly accessible medium to stage these concerns for a broad audience. In dramatizing the decline and restoration of family fortunes through a framework of karmic causality, the play underscores the moral accountability of each individual within

the collective fate of the lineage. This narrative strategy not only reflects Buddhist notions of merit and retribution but also reinforces core Confucian values surrounding family cohesion and moral reciprocity, reasserting these ideals at a time when state support for Confucian institutions had waned. In this way, while the play reanimates a narrative pattern, it also recasts this pattern into a shifting socio-political context where the dynamic between Confucianism and Buddhism, and between these two systems and the state, was undergoing profound change. My study of *A Slave to Money* is another step in better understanding such changes in the cultural and religious landscape.

The play's enduring resonance lies in its ability to weave metaphysical ideas into emotionally compelling human stories, leveraging the power of performance to render abstract ethical concepts tangible and socially meaningful in a new historical context. In doing so, *A Slave to Money* offers more than a doctrinal synthesis; it represents a dynamic example of how popular theater mediated between religious worldviews and everyday moral life in premodern China. Ultimately, this article demonstrates that Yuan *zaju* does not merely serve as literary texts but as performative instruments of ethical and cultural discourse, through which complex ideas of moral responsibility, spiritual causality, and social order were palpably enacted and continually reimagined.

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Notes on Abbreviations

T: *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka). Edited by Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924-1932.

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