

# The Nun's Tale

Miaofu, 880–961

This fleeting world is like  
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.  
Prayer from the end of *The Diamond Sutra*.

MIAOFU'S ROOM WAS dark and thick with smoke. Offerings of flowers, fruit and incense had been placed in front of an image of the Amitābha Buddha which hung on the wall above a small shrine. In accordance with death-bed ritual, the abbot asked Miaofu in which Buddha-land she wished to be reborn, and he then described the joys she would encounter there, intoning the Buddhas of the Ten Directions and comforting her by explaining how each in turn would welcome her after her death. Then he led the clergy in chanting *The Sutra of Impermanence*.

Miaofu was the former abbess of a large nunnery in Dunhuang. It was 961 and word had recently reached the city that after half a century of division China had been reunited under the Song dynasty. Miaofu's father, an official in the military governorship of Dunhuang, had been Chinese, while her mother was Tibetan. The Tibetan empire had ruled Dunhuang since 781 and, even after its soldiers were driven out by a local force in 848, many Tibetans remained in the town. Their empire, too, had been subject to years of division and civil war but, unlike China, there was no sign of a new emperor to reunite the country.

Miaofu had always been eager to learn about the world outside

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Dunhuang, her curiosity aroused as a child by the stories her father and grandmother told. Her father spoke with great nostalgia of his youth in China during the Tang dynasty. Her maternal grandmother spoke with equal feeling of the heyday of Tibet and the great Buddhist temples that surpassed anything found in Dunhuang. As Miaofu lay dying, surrounded by the sound of the monks and nuns chanting, she drifted in and out of consciousness, reliving memories of her youth.

She was a girl again, preparing for her ordination which was to take place in a roped-off area within the main monastery building. The ceremony to purify the building and its precincts was over, and only those who were to be ordained and the officiating clergy remained inside the incense-filled hall. Banners of coloured silk with depictions of the Buddha and bodhisattvas hung from the wooden columns and rafters. Miaofu was one of several local girls receiving the initial ordination. When her turn came she stepped forward and prostrated herself in front of the great statue of the Buddha and then saluted the abbess. One of the nuns took a knife and cut off her long hair near the roots, placing it in a small tray held by another nun. Again Miaofu prostrated herself, three times. Her head was washed and shaved smooth while she closed her eyes and recited the name of the Buddha. She then had to recite the ten vows, prostrate herself once more in front of the Buddha and thank the ordaining nuns and monks. She was presented with monastic robes and a begging bowl. The day after the ceremony, she was given a certificate stamped with images of the Buddha and a government seal for which her father had paid two donkeys. Miaofu was now a novice nun in the eyes of both the church and the state.

Miaofu's parents were devout lay Buddhists and had not objected to her entering monastic life. Her father sometimes said that it was fated that she should do so, since she had been born on the same day as the rebels had taken the Chinese capital, Chang'an, and killed his mother and sister. That was in the winter of 880. In the months that followed, refugees fleeing from the rebels brought stories of the violent destruction of Chang'an and reported that few women left there had escaped rape and death. Miaofu's father

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heard more from a courtesan called Larishka who passed through Dunhuang on her way back to Kucha in 881. She had a livid, red scar across her forehead, and she told of how all her fellow courtesans had been raped then murdered by the rebels, and that she had been wounded while trying to protect the youngest girl. Miaofu's father had been awarded three years' leave to mourn his mother, the traditional period for a parent in China, but he was unable to return to Chang'an to arrange a proper burial in the family plot until 884, when the rebels were finally defeated. He went alone, for China was still unsettled, though under nominal control of the Tang dynasty. He found the capital in near anarchy and the emperor still absent.

He returned to Dunhuang several months later with his own stories of the sack of Chang'an, bringing back a poem composed by an examination candidate who had been in the capital in 880. In the poem a young woman, caught by the rebels when they entered Chang'an, recounted what had followed. Miaofu was not allowed to read it but on several evenings she was woken by the sound of her father weeping. After this she found an opportunity to look at the poem without her parents' knowledge. It was difficult for her to read, and when she had struggled through two stanzas she wished she had not. The words conjured up images that she would have preferred to forget, images far worse than any of the scenes from hell depicted on the local temple walls:

Every home now runs with bubbling fountains of blood,  
Every place rings with a victim's shrieks that cause the very earth  
to quake,  
Dancers and courtesans must undergo secret outrage;  
Infants and tender maidens are torn living from their parents'  
arms.

It was at this time that Miaofu learned that she had been born on the day her grandmother and aunt had died. Perhaps this was also when she decided to become a nun. There were certain advantages attached to entering a nunnery for not all nuns did so as a vocation. A nun could study, even though many monks and more nuns remained illiterate, and she was able to avoid an

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arranged marriage: several Chinese princesses entered the Daoist order seemingly for this reason. Other girls were persuaded by their parents, who saw it as a means to avoid paying a dowry and an opportunity to gain influence in the monastic community. A contemporary contract records the loan of 18 pecks of beans by a monk to the father of a novice. The loan carried no interest, which was unusual at this time, for monks were the main usurers in the community and regularly charged interest above the legal rate of 6 per cent. The debtor was to repay the loan at the end of the eighth month, after the harvest, and if he defaulted, his goods would be seized.

Miaofu was only eleven when she was ordained in 891, though the minimum age stipulated by Buddhist law for ordination was twelve. Her father therefore had to apply on her behalf to the military governor for permission for her to enter the nunnery early. The permit was prepared and the governor made his mark after his surname and added three impressions of his large, square seal in red ink. Some parents were less willing to hand over their children. A contemporary collection of stories about famous nuns recounted the argument used by a monk to persuade a reluctant father: 'If you consent to her plan she will indeed raise her family to glory and bring you blessings and honour. She will guide you across the great ocean of suffering to nirvāṇa.' Another story told of the Abbess Miaoyin outside whose house hundreds of carriages bearing visitors with gifts would line up, and who was reputed to be richer than many members of the imperial family. The blessings offered by monastic life could be both spiritual and material, the stories implied.

After Miaofu's ordination, a local monk complained to the military governor about violations of the Buddhist law, citing Miaofu and forty other nuns. 'Their parents', the monk wrote, 'all gave permission for these girls to become nuns and the girls were all happy to receive the precepts. However, some of them are too young and some have not followed Buddha's teachings and have contravened secular statutes. They must be controlled and disciplined.' We do not know what their particular crimes were, but there was considerable prejudice against the institution of female clergy, especially among more doctrinaire monks. Women were



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held to be further down the chain of rebirth than men, and Buddhist texts made it clear that Buddha had only accepted women as part of the monastic order after considerable persuasion from his own mother. Some monks even refused to ordain women and others would not allow them into the monasteries or let them attend their lectures. Nevertheless, there were five nunneries in the Dunhuang area, the largest housing almost two hundred nuns.

The process of ordination was more demanding for women than for men. At twelve both boys and girls took the first set of precepts – vows to abstain from drink, sex, murder and others sins – but boys could undergo full ordination at eighteen, taking between 215 and 263 precepts dictated by the monastic code. Girls at eighteen took only an intermediate stage of ordination and were then supposed to undergo another two years' study before being fully received into the order. This additional requirement had been instituted, so tradition said, after a nun ordained by Buddha at the age of eighteen had turned out to be in the early stages of pregnancy. At twenty, nuns were required to take between 290 and 380 precepts for full ordination. However, Miaofu had heard from Tibetan and Indian monks of the female deity Tārā, worshipped by many in their countries as an equal to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. When it was suggested that she change sex in order to attain enlightenment more quickly, Tārā replied: 'There are many who desire enlightenment in a man's body, but none who work for the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore, until the world of suffering is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman's body.'

Miaofu received her temple name, which means 'Wonderful Blessings', when she took her first set of vows. The ordination took place in the Pure Land monastery in Dunhuang which she had entered several months before to study the precepts. Some of her classmates had already spent many years in the monastery and were only now considered ready to take their vows. Others were, like her, from outside. Their classes were led by experienced monks and nuns in a large hall. Miaofu was taught all the practical aspects of life as a nun: how to sweep floors, how to eat, how to walk (this depended on whether she was wearing the wide-sleeved outer robe or the narrow-sleeved under-robe), how to salute a

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*Tārā, Tantric Buddhist deity*

superior, how to speak, to dress, to make a bed and to make her clothes into a bundle for travelling. In addition, she was taught how to receive guests and how to hand these duties over to another nun the following day. She was expected to learn extracts from the sutras and to recite them throughout the day. In addition, there were many times during her daily activities when she had to recite an appropriate prayer:

On first awaking from my sleep,  
I pray that every living thing  
May wake to saving wisdom, vast  
As the wide and boundless universe.

The boys and girls lived in segregated dormitories on either side of a central courtyard within the crowded buildings of the monastery complex. The privies stood in a corner that backed on to the vegetable garden, making transport of the night-soil to the garden an easy affair. In addition to this small plot inside the walls, the monastery owned much of the surrounding farmland which was cultivated by serf labourers and tenant farmers. The produce

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was stored in granaries inside the monastery, to be lent out at advantageous rates of interest, or used as currency for the purchase of various necessities such as the hemp seed needed to produce oil for cooking and light.

The income earned from such transactions was considerable, and it was supplemented by donations and by the sale of ordinations, sutras and services. But the monastery gained most of its income from its mills and oil-presses and was easily the richest institution in the community. For many of the local residents, it was also the most important since it offered services, whereas the secular authorities always seemed to want to take something. Government was associated with military service, the collection of taxes and law enforcement. No one paid their taxes willingly: many of the local landowners pledged their land to a monastery, thus making it tax-exempt, while they carried on working and profiting from it as before. Others exploited the tax-exempt status of the clergy and purchased ordination certificates so that they were registered as monks and nuns, but they continued to live ordinary lives with their families in the towns and villages. The law was an uncertain ally. Although some found it useful in civil cases, such as broken contracts or the incorrect allocation of land, criminal justice was feared. Many of those arrested did not return from prison. Some were tortured to extract a confession — the mainstay of most prosecution cases — and died as a result, while others died of disease in the noisome prison cells while still awaiting trial. Once a case came to trial the luckiest would receive a comparatively light sentence, a beating with the light or heavy stick, but for more serious crimes men were sent to undergo military service in a distant province and women were assigned to government-owned brothels. For the most serious crimes, capital punishment was meted out, although since the emperor usually announced a general amnesty at the beginning of each new year many of those condemned to death were reprieved. In contrast, the monastery had no prison, and it could help when people were in trouble — with loans of seed-grain for the next harvest, a cooking pot for winter, or a small plot of land. It offered the poor employment, the rich redemption, and a tax haven to both.

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Detail from the frontispiece of *The Diamond Sutra*,  
showing the monk Subūthi flanked by lions

Miaofu drifted back into consciousness. She was aware of the small group of monks and nuns on their prayer mats around her bed. She tried to concentrate but the rhythmic drone of their chanting soon set her thinking once more of her past. She was sitting on the rush mat floor of the lecture hall with ten other nuns, reciting *The Diamond Sutra*. The hall was dim, but the smell of a hot, dry summer's day filtered in, making her restless. It was 900. She had been a novice for almost ten years at one of the several nunneries in the city and was preparing for full ordination.

For several years after her initiation as a novice Miaofu had been expected to run errands and help the other nuns. She also had to attend sutra lectures and classes with the Master of the Law and the Master of the Teaching: monks who were her guides in the monastic rules and Buddhist teachings. Because she was literate, Miaofu was given sutras to read, memorize and chant during her work. She was instructed in meditation techniques and also started to learn Sanskrit sounds so that she could chant sutras and prayers in their original language.

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The Buddhist canon consisted of three parts, known by their Sanskrit name Tripiṭaka (literally 'Three Baskets'): the sutras (the lectures of Buddha); monastic rules (the vinaya); and commentaries on sutras written by monks after the time of Buddha. Works which were considered apocryphal, such as *The Sutra of the Ten Kings*, were not incorporated into the canon. Certainly not written at the time of Buddha and almost certainly composed in Chinese, these sutras were nevertheless often popular among both clergy and lay believers.

The taking of the full vows was a much longer and more complex ceremony than the initial ordination. The ordinands were of all ages. A special platform was erected for the occasion in the neighbouring monastery and its construction took over a week. Cartloads of earth were brought into the courtyard in front of the lecture hall and emptied into an area marked out by a square wooden frame. When the frame was full and the earth piled in a high mound, labourers stamped it down with heavy wooden posts until it was completely flat and flush with the top of the frame. Several layers were created by the same method, and then a smaller platform was built on top. Stairs were then cut from the earth, and the posts erected around the perimeter were festooned with banners and streamers made from colourful silk. Many ordination platforms in monasteries elsewhere were similarly temporary, but at Wutai mountain there was a permanent structure made of great blocks of stone, its sides faced with jade with lotus designs, on which was laid a green silk carpet. There, at the height of Chinese Buddhism, hundreds of monks and nuns were ordained each year.

Miaofu's ordination coincided with the annual spring vegetarian banquet. Like a similar banquet held in the autumn, this was paid for by the military governor of Dunhuang, General Zhang, a descendant of the famous general who had driven out the Tibetans. After the ceremony was over the twenty newly ordained monks and nuns were given 'The Three Sets of Clothing' by the military governor's office: an assembly robe (the *kāṣāya*), an overgarment (the *uttarāsaṅga*), and a shirt (the *antaravāsaka*). They then entered the banquet hall and recited a prayer before the meal started. The ordination had finished early, for the banquet had to be arranged in the morning – no eating was allowed after midday.



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An exception was made only when monks had to carry out manual work in the afternoon: they were then allowed 'night food'. More than fifteen hundred local people attended the banquet – officials, soldiers, rich and influential lay believers and members of the Dunhuang monastic community. The monastery kitchens had been busy for days, preparing the food.

After the banquet many of the monks and nuns left the monastery to return to their family houses in the city and neighbouring villages. Some of them were needed at home to look after aged parents or to help on the land. Miaofu had a sister-in-law who could carry out these tasks and so there was no need for her to return home. Moreover, she wanted to make her life in the monastery. She had read several texts concerning rules for the monastic community and was struck by the disparity between their injunctions and the actions of many of her fellow monks and nuns. She was keen to become an abbess of one of the local nunneries so that she could enforce the rules more strictly.

Miaofu woke again, startled by this recollection. For a moment she could not remember whether she had made a confession. When she had first realized the seriousness of her illness a few months before, she had arranged for seven copies of *The Sutra of the Ten Kings* to be made as an act of repentance. At the end of each she



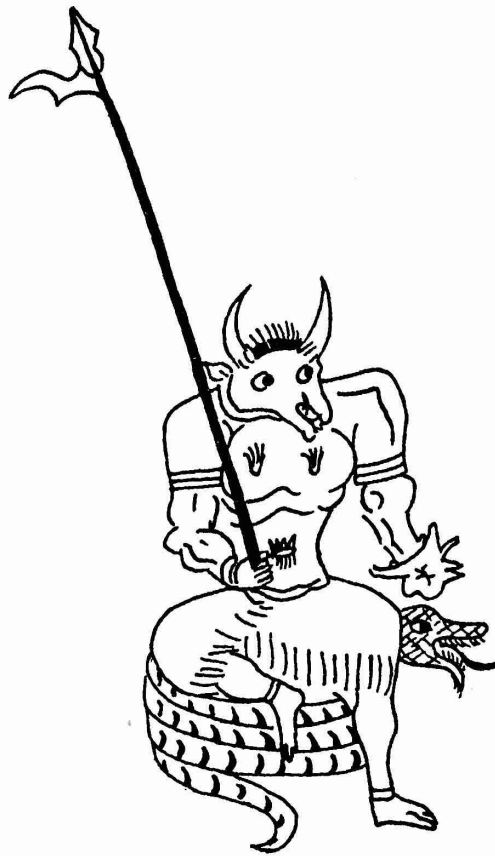
*Demon supporting one of the Heavenly Kings, ninth-century silk painting from Dunhuang*

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wrote: 'The disciple Miaofu, a troubled nun, with the thought of enlightenment in her mind, reverently had this scripture written on seven separate scrolls, and offers them with a concentrated mind.' In addition, in her will she left cloth to pay for offerings and the recitation of prayers at set intervals after her death. These prayers would be said on the days on which she would be brought before each of the ten kings of the underworld, when he would mete out the punishment for her evil deeds. The wall paintings in the cave temples outside Dunhuang showed the kings in the garb of Chinese magistrates sitting behind desks while the dead were brought before them. Those who protested when their sins were recounted were made to look into a mirror which reflected their past deeds. Others, their fates already decreed, were put in cangues, great wooden collars, and herded away by axe-wielding demons to the fiery city of hell.

The opening of *The Sutra of the Ten Kings* pronounced that 'if



Demon guarding the gate to Hell, tenth-century illustrated manuscript of *The Sutra of the Ten Kings*

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any person commissions this scripture or receives and reads or recites it, then after giving up his life he will not be reborn as an animal, a hungry ghost or a being in hell, nor will he enter any of the great underground prisons'. Offerings given on each of the appropriate days – the seventh day after the death, and every seventh day after up to the forty-ninth day, and thereafter on the hundredth day after death, a day during the first year, and another during the third year – also protected the deceased from rebirth as a lesser being.

Miaofu's conscience troubled her because her early intentions of living according to the monastic rules had soon been overtaken by the realities of life in the nunnery to which she moved after her first ordination. The nunnery itself was far less well endowed than the large monastery where she had been trained for her ordination. There monks in need had 'borrowed' food and goods from the monastic holdings and Miaofu had soon realized that these 'loans' were not always paid back. In addition, her Master of Teaching had often used monastic goods to make loans to others, at a high rate of interest, repaying the capital to the monastery but keeping the interest for himself. Often his debtors had defaulted on their loans, and had repaid him by allowing him free use of their land for a set number of years. She remembered how, when his will became public after his death, everyone was amazed at the extent of his wealth. The will had distinguished between those items considered to be monastic property and those originating from family property. The former were left to the monastery and the community. They included 'seven pieces of silk and felt, two suits of fine silk, blankets, fur-lined cloaks, cloth and leather shoes, a belt made from fifteen ounces of silk and gold, silver dishes, copper dishes, oil containers made of wood with lids and handles, a she-ass of five years, and an ass of five years'. His family property, which included items and land obtained as a result of his speculations on monastic holdings, was left to his various nephews, cousins and fellow monks. To one of the novices he bequeathed 'a piece of fine white silk, a square saucepan with handles, the body of a lamp worth seven ounces of silver, a small ivory dish, other sundry items and a four-year-old ox'.

But commerce and usury were the province of men: there were

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few opportunities for nuns to accumulate wealth. Many were orphans or daughters of local peasants whose families had nothing to give them. All the nuns and monks begged in the town, but for some it was their only source of income. Miaofu's family was not poor and they had provided her with a considerable sum on her ordination. Nevertheless she was determined to augment her income. There were fees to be had for the recitation of sutras on behalf of the sick and the dying, and copying sutras was similarly rewarded, although professional scribes were usually men and rarely clergy. Thus, over the years Miaofu gradually increased her wealth, investing in some land which provided a small annuity in grain and gaining patrons from among the local elite who, valuing her education, often presented her with gifts. Her father had taught her to read the Chinese classical texts as a child, and as a novice she had started to learn Sanskrit. Her grandmother had also taught her Tibetan. She enjoyed chatting with the wives of local dignitaries and learning the latest news from China and Tibet, as well as the local gossip of the town.

Ten years after her full ordination, in 910, the Zhang family who had ruled Dunhuang since 848 were supplanted by the Cao family. Cao Yijun, the first ruler, continued to offer allegiance to China and to call Dunhuang the 'Returning to Allegiance Army District'. The Chinese Tang dynasty had just fallen after many years of weak and ineffectual government, and during most of the Cao family's reign China was split into several regions, none powerful enough to reunite the country let alone to re-establish control in Dunhuang, over a thousand miles away. Nevertheless, the city's rulers continued to send envoys to the successive dynasties that claimed Central China, and in turn they continued to be awarded the title of military governor.

It was now 960 and the Cao family still ruled Dunhuang. Cao Yuanzhong, the current king and a keen patron of Buddhism, had been awarded the title of military governor by a succession of Chinese dynasties, and had even visited China in 955, only six years before. At Miaofu's bedside the monks and nuns, sustained by strong green tea to keep them awake during their long vigil, continued to

chant. Miaofu was a senior member of the monastic community, respected as much for her actions as for her age. Not everyone had agreed with her appointment as abbess of the largest nunnery in Dunhuang when she was barely forty. But Miaofu had ruled strictly and well and, most important, she had directed the nunnery's affairs extremely shrewdly. During her tenure, the nunnery gained possession of more land, two mill-wheels and an oil-press.

Monks and nuns were not supposed to involve themselves directly with 'impure' things, which included gold, silver, slaves, agriculture, animal husbandry, blankets and saucepans, as well as mill-wheels and oil-presses. Instead, each monastic institution had families bound to it in perpetuity – effectively serf households – who carried out the work on their behalf. Such families worked the mill-wheels and oil-press that belonged to Miaofu's nunnery, though they were not permitted to carry out work on their own initiative but had to apply for permission to the nunnery. A fixed percentage of the produce – flour and oil – was paid in kind to the nunnery as rent, and the nunnery in turn paid professional millwrights in kind to maintain and repair their property. After major repair work was completed, Miaofu had always ordered that a banquet be arranged for the nuns and artisans. The nunnery also provided the miller with the material necessary for his work – gauze to make sieves and an ox to carry flour to the nunnery's storehouse. A nun was appointed as steward to keep a careful written inventory of all goods entering and leaving the storehouse.

The mill-wheels were driven by water, and since this reduced the water available for irrigation, the local government forbade their use during the growing season. The sluice gates to the diversion canals were padlocked, and a local official was in charge of the key. If during spring or summer there was more than enough water for irrigation then an exception was made and the gates opened: this was an occasion for another banquet, held at night at the mill-race by lamplight. The local government also levied a tax on the mills and presses in spring and autumn.

The mills provided millet and wheat-flour for the nuns. The coarser flour which remained behind in the sieve was used to feed the serf households, and the bran was fed to the horses. Hempseed for the oil-press had to be purchased but the resulting oil was



used both for cooking and to supply the lamps which burned perpetually in the Buddha Hall. Some of the nunnery's land was specifically allocated to defray this expense. Oilseed cakes were also used to fatten livestock.

The sounds of the nunnery filtered through into Miaofu's room. It seemed unusually noisy. But then she remembered: it was the end of the summer retreat and everyone was preparing for the Ghost Festival. The summer retreat was a practice inherited from India where the monsoon rains curtailed the monks' activities. There was no monsoon in the desert, but the clergy still went into retreat from the fourth lunar month to the seventh, the height of summer. They were supposed to spend their time in confession and meditation, but tempers often became frayed as clergy usually resident in the city moved into the monastic buildings, and their permanent residents were forced to share rooms and facilities. This summer one of the nuns complained about another who, she said, made too much noise when walking past her room to get water from the well. Miaofu was asked to speak to the offender, the daughter of one of Miaofu's friends, a wealthy local landowner. The nunnery did not want to lose the patronage of her mother, especially so near to the Ghost Festival, a time when the laity traditionally made generous offerings to the church.

Miaofu's thoughts turned to the central story of the Ghost Festival, that of a disciple of Buddha who rescued his mother from hell. The disciple was named Mahāmaudgalyāyana, but was known in Chinese as Mulian. She imagined the storyteller in the marketplace unfurling the scroll depicting Mulian's mother falling into the deepest hell of all, Avīci Hell, and the audience gasping in horror. He would then go on to explain why Mulian's mother deserved her fate.

When Mulian goes abroad on a trading mission, he leaves his mother money to feed beggars and to pay for vegetarian feasts for the Buddhist clergy. His mother hides the money, and when Mulian returns she lies, saying that she has used it as he directed. After his parents' deaths, Mulian becomes a monk and, when he realizes that his mother is not in paradise, he goes in search of her. The king of the underworld, Yama, summons his karma-watcher, fate-investigator and book-keeper. Mulian sets off and crosses the

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Wathellwedo river where those bound for hell stand wailing on the river's banks, about to be herded across by ox-headed demons. One tells Mulian:

Please inform those sons and grandsons of ours who are still at home

That it is pointless to make coffins and caskets of white jade.

Gold is spent in vain when it is buried in the grave.

Endless sorrow and signs of mourning are ultimately of no avail . . .

If they wish to obliterate the suffering of the dead

They can do no better than cultivate blessedness to save our souls from darkness.

Mulian enters the realm of the General of the Five Ways, whose voice 'rumbles like thunder and whose flashing eyes are like lightning'. Here he sees men and women whose bellies are being ripped open and others whose faces are being skinned. 'Even Mulian', the storyteller relates as he unfurls the scroll showing these horrors in gory detail, 'is frightened out of his wits.' The General tells him that his mother had been sent to Avīci Hell because of the weight of her sins. Mulian goes from one hell to another, his story related in further scrolls that depicted these intermediate hells:

Irons discs from the air constantly plunge into their bodies,  
Fierce fires burn continuously beneath their feet,  
All parts of their skin have been stripped into shreds,  
Every inch of their bones and flesh has been charred.  
Bronze-coloured crows peck incessantly at their hearts,  
While molten iron pours constantly over their heads.

The storyteller continues in a similar vein for some time, enjoying the effect on his audience. Mulian's mother is in an even worse place, the storyteller informs them, 'a place where, though your heart be made of iron or stone, you too will lose your wits and tremble with fear'. This is Avīci Hell. Here Mulian finds his

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mother nailed to a steel bed with forty-nine long spikes through her body. When she is released to see her son, 'she clanks and clatters like the sound of five hundred broken-down chariots' because of the metal thorns in her body. She explains how, though her body is broken a thousand times, yet, at a cry from her gaolers, it renews itself to be tortured once more.

Mulian has to leave his mother for she is not allowed out of hell even though she claims she has repented. He therefore goes to plead with Buddha who agrees to go in person to save her. Because Buddha is impartial, he rescues all those in hell at the same time. Mulian's mother still has karmic debt to repay and so she is reborn as a hungry ghost, fated never to be able to satisfy her hunger and thirst. When her son brings her rice and water, they turn to fire. Buddha then tells Mulian to organize a large, purgatorial feast on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the end of the summer retreat and the only day on which hungry ghosts can eat their fill. After attending this feast, Mulian's mother disappears. Buddha explains that she has been reborn as a black dog – a step up from a hungry ghost. He finds her and together they pray for seven days and seven nights, after which she is again transformed into a woman and thereafter allowed into heaven, her karmic debt now repaid in full.

Miaofu shuddered in her sleep at this vision of hell, and her hand was squeezed by one of the attending nuns. She did not believe her sins to be as bad as those of Mulian's mother, but she hoped she had done enough to be reborn in heaven, or at least to be reincarnated as a human. She felt for her rosary beads and started to recite the *Guanshiyin sutra*. This had always been one of her favourite sutras and she had carried around a small, illustrated booklet of the text. Guanshiyin, or Guanyin, is the Chinese name for bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the manifestation of compassion.

When she was first bed-ridden Miaofu had asked a scribe to come and transcribe her will. Several monks and nuns were called as witnesses and the completed will was handed over to the abbot. Miaofu had her own substantial house and grounds in the nunnery with quarters for her servant girl. Her will was primarily concerned with the disposal of this girl and of some of her moveable goods. She bequeathed the girl to her niece. As for the goods, it

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was not uncommon for such property to be auctioned after their owner had died if an heir had not been specified. The monastic rules laid down certain regulations about the conduct of these auctions. A bid could be raised so long as the previous bid had not been called out three times, but after that it was unlawful to raise it again. 'Unseemly language' was also prohibited, although this did not stop auctions becoming boisterous affairs. Miaofu had witnessed several where wealthy monks from neighbouring monasteries had vied with one another for the finest silks.

Miaofu also owned silk robes, though it was against monastic law to do so since the production of silk resulted in the death of the silkworms that had spun it. Some of the monks had their assembly robes, or *kāṣāya*, made for them out of the most luxurious silk from Central China. The *kāṣāya* was little more than a large patchwork rectangle, draped over one shoulder and across the chest like a shawl. The patches were meant to be old or discarded remnants of cotton or hemp and thus to symbolize the monks' state of poverty. The deep, lustrous colours of the silk *kāṣāya* made a mockery of the robe's significance and the monks' vows. Miaofu left her silk robes to the local community of monks and nuns, along with several thousand feet of cotton cloth. They would be added to the goods received from other monks and nuns, rich individuals and those who had paid for religious services, and distributed at a general meeting of the community.

One such meeting, held in Dunhuang in 936, listed silk brocades, quilted materials, gauze, felt, cotton and other cloth as well as furniture and household items as the property of the local Buddhist community. Over 70,000 feet of cotton cloth had been donated to the monasteries in the previous three years, and after subtracting various expenses – which included a gift of fine silk to the queen of Khotan and a saddle to local officials, as well as smaller gifts to the organizers of the ceremony – each monk and nun received 60 feet and each novice 30 feet for their personal use. There was a surplus of over 4,000 feet, presumably retained by the monastery for future disbursements. Though Chinese copper cash and silver ingots had long been in use, and a system of paper money was just starting to be established among merchants, cloth and grain were the usual currency in tenth-century Dunhuang.

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## *The Nun's Tale*

The Chinese state dealt only in multiples of 1,000 cash, strung together through a square central hole in each coin. A thousand cash, equivalent to about an ounce of silver, weighed more than 1.5 lb. In loan transactions among the local people at Dunhuang, however, the capital and any accrued interest were usually paid in kind – in grain or cloth – as were state taxes.

The day of the Ghost Festival dawned. This was one of the busiest times of the year for the nunnery, especially important since the Ghost Festival was the main festival of giving, so the nuns rose early. Bowls were placed all round the nunnery for the offerings which people would make to prevent their ancestors suffering the same fate as Mulian's mother. After the morning banquet, the streets of the city filled with people who had come to watch the Buddhist procession that always took place on religious festivals. The monks and nuns set up stalls in the marketplace and on the roads leading to the monasteries and nunneries, selling sutras, divination and medicine. The streets were full of music and laughter and entertainers. The storyteller, as Miaofu had imagined, unfurled his scrolls and began his tale of Mulian's journey.

But Miaofu was not there to watch the festivities. She had died during the night.