Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture

Edited by
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Images of Chinese bodies undergoing torment gained a certain notoriety in Europe and North America in the early years of the twentieth century, when China was at its nadir and the West at the pinnacle of its ascendancy. Reproduced in hand-painted watercolors, as private photographs, and on postcards, these images purported to give Western viewers a direct glimpse into the brutality of a distant, alien world. These pictures had largely disappeared from circulation by 1920 as China began to reemerge as a political power in opposition to Western hegemony. Delegitimized as tasteless curios from a more condescending era, they were removed from the walls and sideboards where they had once been displayed as souvenirs of a sojourn that someone—missionary uncle, consular cousin—made to the Far East.

Some of these leftovers from an earlier generation managed to survive in the attics of families whose members had once had ties to China, and some of these have subsequently been donated to libraries or anthropology museums as historical cultural artifacts. Given the egregiously Orientalist aura that emanates from these images of the Chinese body in pain, they are generally regarded today as likely to be offensive to polite and/or Chinese sensibilities. Rarely put on public display, they are left in the purdah of storage along with many of the images discussed in the other chapters of this book. The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia, which received in donation two sets of hand-painted postcards of tormented Chinese bodies from the early twentieth century, has opted for the tasteful middle course of sequestering them in a display drawer of artifacts, which has to be opened by the visitor in order for the objects to come into view.

These sets consist of eight cards each and were all painted by the same artist. One set is labeled by hand in English as Buddhist Hell Series. The other is labeled Punishments. They did not arrive at the MOA alone but came as part of a donation that included postcards from two more sets by the same artist. One is a trio of cards depicting birds identified according to season: a magpie and an eagle, each associated with winter, and a chicken representing spring; the doubling for winter suggests that the series originally consisted of a total of eight. The last set if of four postcards labeled “Farming Series,” which is probably also incomplete. I will not draw on the images from the bird or farming sets in this essay, as they do not share in the iconography of bodily suffering of the two other series. Still, it is worth noting that anodyne scenes of birds and peasants were considered to possess the same capacity to provide the West—the implied audience of these productions—with a visual vocabulary that expressed the essence of that famously essentialized zone known as the Orient.

Let us begin with the images. There are gory scenes in both the Buddhist Hell and Punishments series, as one would expect, yet these postcards are not notably distressing to view. The figures are carefully choreographed, and the depictions are stylized, even cartoonish. Unlike the postcards of photographs showing Chinese executions popular among Europeans early in the twentieth century, these watercolors do not provoke visceral reactions of horror or distress in the viewer. Nor does it seem that they were intended to. Despite subject matter that should call forth a charged emotional reaction, these cardboard images exude a simplicity, a naive artificiality, even a quaint charm, that relieves the viewer of the anxiety normally excited by regarding the pain of others. These are not objects wielding the power to shock; nor do they strive to occupy aesthetic heights that could elevate them to the enchanted realm of fine art. This is not to say that these images have not been expertly and intentionally produced, but the intention, it seems, was to create nothing more than stereotypes: to exemplify, perhaps even to amuse, but not to reveal or shock.

By placing these objects on display, albeit inside a drawer that has to be opened to make them visible, the MOA has authorized them to be viewed, and in consequence, authorized them to be interpreted. In effect, visitors have been invited to regard these paintings as signs of the culture that produced them a century ago, which of course is Chinese culture. This is what museums do: they enlist objects to act as visible traces, or even fetishes, of something that is absent, usually in space and always in time. In the case of these objects, the capacity for fetishization is particularly strong, given the invitation to voyeurism that clings to such images. One way to escape
the closed hermeneutic space that museum display can sometimes induce, often innocently, is to insert a label that draws the viewer’s attention to provenance, and in the case of historical objects, to the steps by which objects were removed, often randomly and sometimes violently, from the cultures they are now made to stand in for. But this is usually not done. The label highlight an object’s originary home, positioning it at the point to which it can never return. The object’s physical point of departure is thus the museum’s narrative point of departure for explaining what the object is, without significant reference to the relay of desires that caused the object to end up in the museum. Every object comes with a biography more farthest from the museum along the circuit it has traveled (which is also the point which is enlisted to narrate. Its passage through time and space left unnoted, the object stands in only for the culture from which it was extracted, not for the practices that induced the extraction.

The postcards on which I focus in this essay proclaim an unmistakably Chinese identity. The scenes of purgatorial torment could not be mistaken for what goes on in a Christian hell, for example. So too the scenes of judicial torment conform to the archetype of “Chinese” cruelty that used to be much in fashion. The physical evidence of their Chinese point of origin is printed on the back of the cards: a Western-style stamp bearing the value of one cent (fen), the label (in Chinese) “Postal Administration Postcard,” and direction for use, which reads, in translation: “This side is for writing only the recipient’s name and address. The other side is for writing the sender’s information.” As postcards were novelties in China at the time, indeed throughout much of the world, such instructions were necessary. The Qing Imperial Postal Administration which produced these cards came into being under that name in 1896, when the postal section of the China Customs Service, which had introduced a European-style postal service to China in 1878, was separated out from Customs. The Qing dynasty came to an end in 1911, and so did the Imperial Postal Administration. The artist has not dated the watercolors, but the medium suggests they were painted in the first decade of the twentieth century, or possibly in the opening years of the 1910s on leftover stock. As these cards were not ever put through the postal system, we cannot date them any more precisely. For the purpose of describing them in this essay, I shall use the date 1910. All the images are hand-painted, and each bears a brief title written by hand in both Chinese and English.

According to the records of the MOA, the postcards were acquired in 1960 as part of a donation from Union College. This information offers little as to the cards’ provenance, for not only is the identity of the original owner unknown, but even that of the college is uncertain. There have been many Union Colleges in North America. This may be the Canadian Union College in Lacombe, Alberta, founded by Seventh Day Adventists in 1947, but then again it may not. The theological character of Union Colleges does at least strongly suggest that the postcards were originally in the ownership of a missionary or the relative of one.

For a maker of visual Chinese artifacts for foreign consumption a century ago, the subjects of the two sets of paintings on which I focus in this essay were not randomly chosen. The body degraded and the body in pain were representational clichés feeding the popular end of the foreign market for images of China at the turn of the twentieth century. The casual museum visitor who happens to pull out the open-storage drawer in which the cards are laid out will not know this. He or she will take them to be transcriptions of Chinese taste, if not of Chinese reality. This misreading is a common problem in anthropological and historical museums, which generally have only a limited number of objects with which to work, and around which curators can construct only so much interpretive scaffolding. The sensationalism of the images in the Buddhist Hell and Punishments series might alert the viewer that these are not neutral samples of a Chinese popular aesthetic but the projection of certain fixed ideas about Chinese culture seen from outside, but that assumes a knowledge that most viewers would not bring with them.

The Buddhist Hell Series consists of eight scenes showing the punishments the sinful could expect to receive for their sins before being permitted to reenter the cycle of rebirth. “Purgatory” would have been theologically more appropriate than “hell,” but “hell” is the language of Protestantism. The cards are not marked to be viewed in any particular order, though nineteenth-century Chinese texts on purgatory would place them in the following order. First comes the “Judgment Bridge” (1 in Figure 8.1), in which an ox-headed demon casts a woman into the River Nai, the Chinese analogue of the River Styx. Next comes the “Midwifery Fiend” (2 in Figure 8.1), a female demon (her gender is signaled by her little embroidered cloth shoes) carrying a bloody and deformed birth. These are then followed by scenes depicting some of the bodily torments the evil could expect to suffer for their sins. Referring to them in order by their English titles, they are “Strung Up” (3 in Figure 8.1), “Disembowelment” (4 Figure 8.1), “The Chopping Knife” (5 Figure 8.1, depicting the archaic execution of being chopped in half at the waist), “Tongue Extractor” (6 Figure 8.1), “Oil Cauldron” (7 Figure 8.1), and “The Heated Copper Stake” (8 Figure 8.1).

The eight postcards in the Punishments series depict less gruesome scenes. They cohere to no native sequence, to my knowledge. Were we to view them in order of the penal severity they carried in Qing law, they would be: “In the Cells” (9 in Figure 8.2), “Pilloried” (10 in Figure 8.2), “The Cangue” (11 Figure 8.2), “Hand and Foot Bound Together and Compelled to Walk” (12 Figure 8.2, a torment that the Chinese title, jian mian- hu, “picking cotton,” expresses more succinctly), “Beaten on the Lips” (13 in Figure 8.2) “Stake, Prisoner Kneeling on Chains” (14 Figure 8.2), “The Cold Stool” (15 in Figure 8.2), and “The High Cage,” subtitled “Capital Punishment” (16 in Figure 8.2). According to a variant of the English title

Figure 8.1 (continued)  Buddhist Hell Scenes: 5. The Chopping Knife, 6. Tongue Extractor, 7. Oil Cauldron, 8. The Heated Copper Stake. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.

that appears on two of the cards, these are “legal punishments” in Chine-
se law. The allegation of legality stakes a strong claim for determining
what the viewer’s right relationship should be to what is viewed. It lodges
a direct indictment of the Chinese system of justice, declaring that what
law in China allows, law outside China does not. To denote these acts as
“legal” in China underscored their patent illegality by Western standards,
view much repeated by nineteenth-century European observers of Chinese
punishments. The English inscription thus invites the viewer to side with
Western law against Chinese: to regard what is “Chinese” as patently infe-
tior to what is “Western.”

The conviction that Qing law accepted the torture of suspects was
widespread among foreign observers circa 1910. This perception was not
without some basis in reality, inasmuch as a magistrate was allowed to let
his officers torture a prisoner when he had a suspicion of the guilt of the
accused arising from other evidence. The torturers had to keep within a set
range of techniques and apply them according to precise legal standards,
however, for what the law allowed, the law also limited. While magistrates
and torturers were obliged to act within a framework of strict expecta-
tions, cultural but also legal, much of what the postcards depict was not
legally permitted. Nowhere did Qing law permit the cold stool or the high
cage, to cite the two most egregious examples. The Qing Code did impose
strangulation as the penalty for lighter capital offenses and decapitation
for heavier, but not in the lingering form that a contraption such as the
high cage would have caused. The magistrate who used such devices faced
impeachment and a minimum sentence of exile if his victim died.

There is the additional consideration that the severest torments in Qing
judicial practice were banned by a sweeping legal reform introduced in
1905. In other words, not only were some of the scenes in the paintings of
doubtful legality before 1905; by 1910 they were without any legal basis
whatsoever. This painter did not feel constrained by actual legal context.
The theme was the caprice and cruelty of Chinese punishments, regard-
less of whether these were actually practiced. The postcards show Chinese
others doing just the sorts of macabre things that others liked to do, in the
allegedly real world at the hands of officers of the law as much as in an
imaginary hell at the hands of devils. These were just the sort of thing that
depraved Orientals got up to; just the sort of thing that civilized Occiden-
tals could not condone; just the sort of memento to send back to Auntie
Gladys to let her know you were in topsy-turvey land.4

These are some of the reasons why these watercolors cannot be taken
as innocent representations of the “Chinese” legal world; or worse, as evi-
dence of a “Chinese” cultural insensitivity to suffering. These are not naïve
representations of any existing reality. They are at work on an entirely
different project in which the foreign view is complicit: the typification of
the culture of the other through tropes that confirm the superiority of the
culture of the self.

Why then would a Chinese artist produce such souvenirs of “China”? Per-
haps the question is pointless in a commercial environment in which
painters happily manufactured whatever sold. Why should there be an inhi-
bition separating the artist from images that sold, if they were what Western
visitors to China were willing to pay for? Indeed, a tradition of manufac-
turing such voyeuristic objects for foreign consumers was fully established
well over a century before these postcards were painted. What are termed
“export watercolors” representing daily life arose in Canton during the
eighteenth century to meet a demand from foreign visitors for pictorial
mementos to take back to Europe and North America.5 These watercolors,
which survive outside China in the thousands, are not just inconsequential
knock-offs for visitors. They are curious hybrids of Chinese technique and
European taste: visibly Chinese in their representational style, as they were
supposed to be in order to assert the authenticity of their origin, yet not
the sort of images that Chinese artists would have painted for domestic
consumption. They include scenes of everyday life as well as scenes of tor-
ture and punishment—all of which nineteenth-century Europeans grasped
as enunciating the peculiarity of the Chinese, by turns quaint and dismal.
Export watercolorists could turn out the most elaborate scenes of torment
and execution that were utterly decontextualized from law as well as life.
Aseptic in their avoidance of gore and their depiction of affectless torment,
they appeared to demonstrate objectively how something was done. That
something could be curing tea leaves, or it could be garroting criminals,
without any attention to the affects attached to either. They were icons for
foreigners, and foreigners bought them.

Are these postcards then simply more of the same—cheap export water-
colors produced for the low end of the market that simply confirmed West-
ern fantasies about China? Before we rush to answer yes, it is worth noting
that whereas punishment scenes became standard fare in export water-
colors, scenes of hell did not. Some foreigners, notably missionaries, did
acquire popular engravings of purgatory, but they were not the engravings’
intended audience, nor was the genre one that most foreigners would have
gone out of their way to acquire. Hell was for domestic consumption. Hell
scenes belonged within the specific domestic religious context of the nine-
teenth century, intended to warn people away from the evil deeds for which
they would suffer terrible consequences after death. They were for public
distribution by the anxiously pious, not for private collection by outsid-
ers. The interest that nineteenth-century missionaries showed in purgatory
scenes arose from the hope that the Chinese theology of the afterlife was
close enough to the Christian version that it might provide a bridge across
which to lead the pious from one religion to the other. Images of judicial
punishment expressed the alterity of Chinese culture; pictures of purgatory
posited a primitive predisposition to Christian conversion.6 The viewing
practices of the uninstructed, though, readily blended these images together,
as indeed the artist seems to have intended by painting both series in the
same style. They were linked signs that spoke in unison of the backwardness, violence, and moral depravity of the space over which the West sought spiritual and economic, if not outright political, dominion.

Having plausibly reconstructed why the implied Canadian Protestant missionary who acquired the images might have done so, we might have been ready to end our Saidian analysis of the consumption of these pictures. But there remains a question that I was all too prepared to ignore until brought up short by my art history colleague, Tsao Hsing-yuan. Who really painted these postcards? We have no direct evidence, but details in the paintings reveal more about the artist's identity than the naive viewer (I was willing to notice. It is time to look more closely.

Let us start with details from the first card in the punishment series, “In the Cells” (9 in Figure 8.2). Look at the fingers: long, willowy, splayed, in the case of the upper figure delicately entwined around the bars of the cell. Now look at the toes of the lower figure. The big toe is prominently separated from the rest, turned ninety degrees to the others, which are also carefully delineated. The execution of the toes has been done to show that the foot is straining. Indeed, the entire left foot is arched for the same effect, conveying the impression of someone standing on tip-toe. Now look at the shape of the heads. Both are turned three-quarters away from the viewer, relieving the artist of the burden of having to paint facial features, something this artist regularly avoids. Seen from behind, the artist has only to model the overall shape of the head. This he does by overlapping two ovals at ninety degrees to each other, a horizontal oval for the cranium and a vertical oval for the face and jaw. The curvature of the facial oval, even though we can't see the face, is emphasized by the prominent curving of the ears and the cheeks.

Now turn to “Pilloried” (10 in Figure 8.2). Here we see the same method for drawing a head as two overlaid ovals, with the cheeks of both faces prominently rounded. We see as well the extended articulation of fingers and toes, particularly the toes of the man in the stocks. What is even more striking about the figure sitting in the stocks is how the soles of his feet have been drawn. The entire bottom of each foot is carefully edged in ink. In addition, the toes have been splayed to fully expose the bottoms of the feet, which are contoured with curves to suggest the balls and heel of the left foot and the instep of the right. The precise outlining of soles is conspicuous in other paintings in these series. In “Oil Cauldron,” for example, the artist has visibly outlined the bottom of the victim’s left foot, even though half the foot is obscured by the demon’s right forearm.

On to the next picture in the series: “Stake, Prisoner Kneeling on Chains” (14 in Figure 8.2). Here two of the figures show their faces to the viewer. The curved structure of their heads is prominent, as is the rotundity of their cheeks, and the convexity of their ears. The breasts of the man undergoing the torment also show the artist's habit of suggesting volume by exaggerating curves. Now consider the eyes. They are nothing but slits. With only four exceptions in all the series, the artist has avoided painting eyes. He turns faces away whenever possible to get around the problem. When he does show eyes, he reduces them to slits. The four exceptions are not really exceptions, for all of them belong to the faces of the non-human tormentors in hell (2, 5, 6, and 7 in Figure 8.1). The demon with the most prominent eyes is the demented midwife. Here again, the artist repeats his or her stylistic signature, for they are drawn as a series of curves mounded one on top of the other.

The problem with all these modes of representing eyes, cheeks, ears, hands, toes, soles, and heads is that they are not part of the repertoire of a Chinese painter. They are the eyes, cheeks, ears, hands, toes, soles, and heads of an artist trained in the European tradition. Each of these devices comes from the standard curriculum of how to depict a person that anyone who studied art in the West would have used without a second thought. If the painter of the postcards were Chinese, he would have to have been so thoroughly trained in Western technique as to have taken all these mechanical quirks on board, and to have done so as consistently as he has. He would have had to abandon his Chinese brush habits: not impossible, but even the best trained artist must sometimes let earlier habits leak through. This does not happen in these paintings. The stylistic ticks of a conventional Western training resurface at every turn.

There are other telltale signs that the painter was not Chinese. Consider the water pipe in “Pilloried” (10 in Figure 8.2). Chinese paintings rarely depict smoking, and never does a water pipe appear. Western observers regarded this sort of pipe as quintessentially Chinese, yet its use was restricted to women, whose female/cool (yin) nature tobacco would have harmed unless the smoke had first been cooled. Not only has the painter put a woman’s water pipe in a man’s hand, but he has inserted it in a scene in which it has no intrinsic place nor part to play in the drama. It is mere decoration, a curious addition, something to engage the eye—more bluntly, an artificial signifier of cultural location and nothing more.

If these paintings do have a “Chinese” look about them, it is because the overt stylistic posing goes the other way. These are watercolors by someone who has studied Chinese painting techniques and who must have spent some time in China exposing him- or herself to the visual references of Chinese pictorialism. Two examples will suffice, one appropriate to the subject matter and one not. The first is the pattern of the flagstones on the courtroom floor in “The Cold Stool.” The edges of the stones are depicted axonometrically, as lines running parallel to each other uniformly from front to back, rather than converging toward a vanishing point. This is a characteristic type of rendering in Chinese art, intended here to give the painting a visually “Chinese” quality. Yet the execution—wash lines that fade away toward the back of the hall—is not what a Chinese painter would have done. The lines would be thinly drawn, and once introduced, would be continued uniformly to the back of the hall.
The second instance of employing a "Chinese" visual device is more jarring to a practiced eye. In "Oil Cauldron" (7 in Figure 8.1), we are shown a demon plunging a sinful soul into a wok of oil set to boil on top of a stone stove. To convey an impression of stonework, the painter has used the "Chinese" visual device of angled lines running into each other, imitating the crackle glaze on Chinese celadon. Crackle glaze was used in paintings, but to portray ice, not stone. The result is visual incoherence. It conveys a "Chinese" impression, but is not something a Chinese painter would have done.

The artist may have slipped on these details, but he or she clearly was familiar with Chinese iconography, especially in the purgatory paintings. The painter was not merely making these scenes up, but was drawing from Chinese exemplars in illustrated religious tracts. The long hinged blade in "The Chopping Knife" in Figure 8.2 was standard equipment in this literature, as was the heated copper pillar in "The Heated Copper Stake." These were imaginary executions, and one would have to know about them to paint them. The scenes in the Punishments series are less easy to derive from Chinese precedents. Possibly their closest antecedent, curiously, are the illustrations of Chinese punishments that the English illustrator Percy Cruikshank produced as propaganda for Lord Palmerston's electoral campaign in 1857. Cruikshank concocted these images to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment preparatory to launching the second round of the Opium War. Of the corporal penalties he depicts, all but "disjointing" appear among the images in the postcards. ("Disemboweling" and "cutting the body in two," which feature among Cruikshank's drawings, do not appear among the Punishments postcards but are featured instead in the Hell series.) Cruikshank seems to have derived his images from export watercolors, and perhaps our watercolorist has done the same. That acknowledged, the "originals" from which either these or Cruikshank's images derived were contrived for the export market, rather than "originally" depicting anything that anyone actually did. They all belong within a tight hermeneutic circle into which nothing genuinely historical intrudes.

The only element of these postcards that unambiguously comes from a Chinese hand is the calligraphy. Written in a style known as clerical script, it has been done with a precision and confidence almost impossible for a non-native calligrapher to achieve. Just as the hand that held the painting brush betrays its European training, so the hand that held the writing brush reveals its thorough training in Chinese calligraphy. A Chinese must have colluded in this counterfeiting. For their part, the English labels have a native feel. The script is looser, more casual, and from a different hand entirely: possibly the artist's.

So what at first glance looks like a gallery of Chinese images of torture and the afterlife that a visitor to China could send home to friends in Canada turns out to be a masquerade, a gallery of Western fantasies got up in "Chinese" guise and graced with genuine Chinese calligraphy. The foreigner is not just the putative producer of these scenes by virtue of being their consumer, then; he is their actual producer who is not just imagining the Oriental but creating him. As a result, an unsuspecting museum a century later has been induced to display the works as "Chinese," and in so doing innocently perpetuating the Orientalism that informed not just the viewer's gaze but the artist's hand. Stripped of their real history by the passage of time and the ignorance of the donor, these sets of postcards—from eviscerated bodies to winter magpies—have ended up standing in for Chinese culture, the various visual ticks of "Chineseness" being no more than mechanical details spicing an essentially Western impersonation of what China was and is about. These are not Chinese postcards from hell: they are our very own mementos of the Western excursion into the enchanted territory of the East.

NOTES

1. The cards are catalogued in the Museum of Anthropology as N1.584a-h (Chinese Legal Punishments), N1.584i-l (Farming Scenes), N1.584m-o (Seasons), and N1.584p-w (Buddhist Hell Series). They were accessed through the kind assistance of Elizabeth Johnson.

2. This is the order in which they appear in the 1863 edition of Yuli chaobao jingshi (The precious currency of the jade register to warn the age), a popular religious tract. On the Jade Register and its iconography, see Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, Death by a Thousand Cuts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 122–151.


4. Officers of the law in North America in 1910 could be quite as vicious in their handling of suspects as those in China, though what they did had to be done off the record and out of sight. In the "East," the space represented in these postcards, occlusion was denied.


6. I attach the notion of primitivity to this predisposition because by the turn of the twentieth century, most Protestants had abandoned the ghoulish visions of hell that still animated most Christian imaginations as late as the nineteenth century. At this late date, the plea for similarity thus contained within it a degree of condensation toward Chinese popular beliefs. On the political context of the domestic production and consumption of afterlife suffering, see Brook, Bourgon, and Blue, Death by a Thousand Cuts, 143–145.

7. Examples from Percy Cruikshank's The Criminal Punishments of the Chinese (London, 1858) are reproduced in Brook, Bourgon, and Blue, Death by a Thousand Cuts, 188–189.