The literary theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen defines “the monster” as “an unassimilated hybrid.”[1] In this sense, the Zhuangzi is the most monstrous of early Chinese texts. Named after its alleged author—a sage said to have lived during the fourth century BCE—it was compiled from material of uncertain date sometime during the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE), as Esther Klein has shown, and in its present form, it appears to be the work of the redactor Guo Xiang (252-312 CE).[2] Indeed, the Zhuangzi is a veritable Frankenstein’s monster, a crazy, patchwork quilt of disparate, fantastical texts stitched together over centuries. Given its monstrous heritage, perhaps it is not surprising that one of the most striking monstrosities found in the text—the eighteenth chapter’s anecdote of Zhuangzi conversing with a skull—has enjoyed a remarkable series of reappearances over the past two thousand years. While the original tale entails only a skull—used by Zhuangzi as a roadside pillow, whereupon it spoke to him in a dream, praising carefree death above careworn life—by the Ming (1368-1644 CE) and Qing (1644-1912 CE) dynasties, it had metamorphosed into a complete skeleton, which Zhuangzi—by then acclaimed as a Daoist saint whose eponymous work had become a canonical scripture, the Nanhua zhenjing (True Classic of the Southern Florescence)—miraculously restores to its full, fleshy appearance, at which point it recoils in horrified ingratitude at the prospect of reliving human suffering.

Culturally speaking, one may interpret the skull-skeleton’s various resurrections in terms of Cohen’s dictum that “the monster is … an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place.”[3] Religiously speaking, one may interpret the many reappearances of Zhuangzi’s zombie-like apparition in terms of Russell Kirkland’s definition of Daoism as a set of traditions that encourage their practitioners to “refine and transform themselves to attain full integration with life’s deepest realities.” In other words, these recurring monstrous visions of reanimated remains that speak to “life’s deepest realities” each embody “a certain cultural moment” in
which Chinese writers, readers, and audiences have articulated a horrified response to the human condition.\[4\] While that feeling has remained constant over time, its time and place have shifted again and again. Idema, however, mostly is focused on feeling, rather than place or time. Like Idema’s *The White Snake and Her Son: A Translation of the Precious Scroll of Thunder Peak, With Related Text* (2009), this set of translations presents multiple versions of one story (as well as other texts connected with it) that has had a long and prolific afterlife in Chinese literary and religious culture. In these translations of narrative poetry, song, drama, and prose that range in date from the third century CE to the twentieth, Idema acknowledges but sidesteps questions of the *Zhuangzi’s* textual history, instead focusing on the refinements and transformations of its narrative imagery over time. Idema notes that the tale of the resurrected skeleton not only forms part of the literature of the Daoist Master Zhuang, but also appears “in the context of stories that in origin had little to do with either Zhuangzi or Daoism” (p. 39). However, despite its introduction of just over forty pages, the volume leaves largely unexplored the many connections between this textual motif and phenomena as various and diverse as the political and social upheavals of the “period of disunity” between the Han (202 BCE-220 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) dynasties, Quanzhen (Complete Perfection) Daoism, elite dissatisfaction with official careers in late imperial China, competition and convergence between Ming-Qing Buddhism and Daoism, and dissenting views of current Chinese president Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream.”

For example, Idema includes two *daoqing* (sentiments of the Way) or didactic Daoist narrative songs in his collection. Idema calls these works, which mix expository prose with dramatic soliloquies sung to popular tunes, “the culmination in the development of this legend” (p. 61). In the first and longer of these, *Master Zhuang Sighs over the Skeleton* by an otherwise unknown Du Hui, Zhuangzi declaims: “How I regret that I once passed the examinations!... I came to despise profits and emoluments, I lost my zeal for waiting on princes and lords.... I have swept away all delusions of the dust and have parted with the world.... [U]ndisturbed behind my door, I nourish nature and emotion” (p. 68).

Although Idema notes that this reference to the imperial examination system is anachronistic with regard to a fourth-century BCE figure such as Zhuangzi, he does not pause to reflect on the synchronous resonance of this passage with the concerns of its early seventeenth-century CE audience. As Martin W. Huang has documented, late imperial Chinese officials often viewed their careers with a distaste, even despair, similar to Zhuangzi’s in this *daoqing*, even comparing their plight to that of a woman subjected to coerced marriage or abusive in-laws.\[5\] A contemporary play quoted by Idema in his introduction, *The Skin Sack (Pinang ji)* (1611), concludes its retelling of the skeleton story by noting that “once Magistrate Liang [an official who has observed the skeleton’s miraculous transformation and subsequent ingratitude for its resurrection] sees this, he bows down, / Since he wants to abandon his job and practice religion!” (p. 27). In the context of late Ming dynasty religious culture, the neo-Confucian orthodoxy of elite circles found its powerful counterweight in *daoqing* as well as the *bao-juan* (precious scrolls) of popular Buddhist preaching (examples of which also appear in Idema’s collection), both of which encouraged their audiences to question the value of this-worldly success and careerist self-sacrifice. It is as if late imperial Chinese elites were thrilling to the fantasy of shedding their socially approved skins and reducing themselves to carefree bones, even as the conventional expectations of society tightened like a straitjacket around them.

Moreover, the era in which most of these adaptations of the Zhuangzi/skeleton narrative were produced and circulated was one in which
Buddhist and Daoist traditions had become so intertwined, at least in the popular imagination, that they sometimes were virtually indistinguishable from one another, even in sectarian sources such as the anonymous “folk novel” *Beiqizhen (Seven Perfected of the North).*[6] In the aforementioned dramatic excerpt quoted by Idema, the episode of Daoist transformation (“With one immortal pill I will deliver you / So you can be reborn as a human being”) is capped by a Buddhist apothegm that echoes the *Diamond Sutra*: “Human life is like a dream … / one day Impermanence arrives, all business is finished” (p. 27). The *baojuan* entitled *Zhuangzi diemeng kulou baojuan (The Precious Scroll of Master Zhuang’s Butterfly Dream and Skeleton)* describes how a bodhisattva (the human personification of Buddhist altruism) “[d]onated her hands and eyes / to save her father … / Because of this, / She moved / The Jade Emperor, the [Daoist] god of heaven” (pp. 250-251). The epilogue admonishes the audience: “If only [you] / Can practice [the Confucian virtue of] filial piety … / You will be able / To walk into the gate of the Buddha” (p. 251). While the story of Zhuangzi and the ungrateful dead is fodder for Quanzhen Daoist evangelism in the *daoqing* translated by Idema, here it is a set piece for late imperial syncretism that, while ultimately championing Buddhist salvation, nonetheless incorporates Confucian as well as Daoist elements in a style that is typical of the period’s popular religiosity.

In the end, therein lies both the monstrosity and the miraculousness of these texts. The core image of a Daoist sage interrogating human remains seems amenable to endless resurrections. Like a zombie, the skull (or skeleton, as in later renditions) is reanimated to act out agendas not its own, ranging from Daoist proselytization to Buddhist morality plays. Like an immortal, the story only seems to die, reappearing in transfigured form over and over again to testify to the power of its transformational and ever-transforming narrative. Idema even alludes to contemporary *xiangsheng* (face and voice, or crosstalk) comedian Guo Degang, who performs a routine entitled “Kulou tan” (Skeleton Lament) that is based on the Zhuangzi-skeleton motif. In Guo’s act, Zhuangzi laments, “As soon as some petty fellow comes alive, he wants cash!” (p. 41). Idema wryly observes that “the changed conditions of contemporary Chinese society have made an old-fashioned jab at financial greed highly topical once again!” This is true enough, but there is even more to the story, such as the ongoing revival of Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist traditions to answer the needs of a contemporary China that increasingly is disaffected by both socialist ideology and capitalist development. Idema leaves that story untold, but after all, his volume is neither an in-depth literary study nor an examination of these narratives’ larger context, but rather a masterful set of translations of the texts themselves. In *The Resurrected Skeleton*, Idema has presented future researchers, not only in Chinese and Daoist studies but also in comparative literature, religious studies, and cultural studies generally, with a wonderful collection of resources for investigation and interpretation.

Notes


[5]. Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006), 50.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia

Citation: Jeffrey L. Richey. Review of Idema, W. L. The Resurrected Skeleton: From Zhuangzi to Lu Xun.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42436

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.