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The Myth of the Incorruptible Official: Analyzing Judge Bao's Role in *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*

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In her introduction to the play *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*, which is included in the *Columbia Anthology of Yuan Drama* (hereafter the *Columbia Anthology*), Wai-yee Li explains that the concept of the "incorruptible official" is traditionally viewed with either skepticism or awe. On one hand, it is thought that an individual's self-righteousness could lead to "misjudgments and vindictiveness," Li writes. Yet, she is quick to dismiss these concerns by stating that the more popular and prevalent belief is one that celebrates those who are "unerring and dauntless in (their) judgment" (Li 1). It is this second view of an official's incorruptibility that is championed by Judge Bao, a recurring character in more than one hundred Chinese plays, chantefables and stories (West and Idema 39). Based on a real-life figure named Bao Zheng, who served as a judge during the Song dynasty, the Bao that appears in fiction personifies the infallible interpretation of the law (Idema ix). However, the judge's unpredictable and extreme actions in plays such as *Selling Rice in Chenzhou* suggest that this simplistic image of a perfect official is too good to be true. Although Judge Bao displays characteristics that are far nobler than those of the other officials in the play, he also exposes weaknesses that prove he, too, can make mistakes.

Judge Bao's superior status is evident from a young age, as described in *The Tale of the Early Career of Rescriptor Bao*, which is published in Wilt Idema's book, *Judge Bao and the Rule of Law: Eight Ballad-Stories from the Period 1250-1450.* In this fictional account of the judge's childhood, Bao is the third son born into a rich family. But the joyous arrival of Mr. Bao's youngest child quickly takes a tumultuous turn when the father lays eyes on his son and is repulsed by his revolting ugliness. In anger, Mr. Bao orders for the child to be killed, but retracts his decision at his daughter-in-law's behest. Unperterbed by the physical appearance of her newest sibling, Bao Zheng's sister-in-law asserts, "Even though your third boy might have been

born very ugly indeed, … his face shows the lines of bringing law and order to the nation" (Idema 3). Having escaped the threat of infanticide, Bao is raised by his eldest brother's wife, who becomes his personal benefactor. Bao's luck continues to improve when he meets "the god of the Great White Star of the southern regions" while working on his family's farm as a buffalo plowboy (Idema 5-7). With this deity's blessing, Bao goes on to be Top-of-the-List in the civil service examinations and eventually is named "prefect of the capital prefecture of Kaifeng" (Idema 8).

As he matures, Bao's outstanding moral values and crime-solving capabilities come to dominate the genre of courtroom dramas, and the popularity of stories featuring Judge Bao as a character grows and spreads to an assortment of mediums. According to Li's introduction in the *Columbia Anthology*, Bao Zheng was featured in plays, ballad stories and novels throughout a period of "seven or eight centuries," and continues to be reinvented for a modern audience in movies and television dramas produced today (Li 2). Furthermore, the literature itself alludes to increased interest in Judge Bao. For example, earlier, shorter tales credit Bao with solving thirty-six "difficult cases," while lengthier ballad-stories that are thought to have been written in later years say that Bao solved 108 "problematical cases" (Idema xxiv). The diversification of Bao-centric narratives results in a collection of captivating capers with sensational titles, such as *Rescriptor Bao Decides the Case of the Weird Black Pot* and *Dragon-Design Bao Sentences the White Weretiger*. Indeed, Judge Bao's ability to crack seemingly unsolvable cases through his ingenuity and dogged pursuit of justice transform him into a character with mass appeal. These qualities also earn him a long-lasting reputation that is surprisingly similar to those of other literary legends, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

In *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*, Judge Bao is depicted as possessing many of the characteristics for which he is well known. In his investigation into the corrupt rice-selling practices in Chenzhou, which are overseen by the incompetent and greedy sons of Master Liu, Judge Bao displays strictness in his rule, fairness in his decisions and modesty in his self-restraint. When compared to the play's antagonists — the aforementioned Master Liu, his son, Liu Dezhong, and his son-in-law, Yang Jinwu — Judge Bao's success as a model government official is further emphasized, especially in contrast to these foil characters. In the book *Monks, Bandits, Lovers and Immortals: Eleven Early Chinese Plays*, the introduction to another Judge Bao story describes Bao as having a no-nonsense approach to dealing with the matters of state. "People compared a smile from Judge Bao to the Yellow River running clear," states a passage from the official *Song History*'s biography of Bao Zheng (West and Idema 37). Indeed, both appear to be rare, if not impossible, events. The sentences Judge Bao hands down to the apprehended criminals in Act Four of *Selling Rice in Chenzhou* are harsh, yet fitting for the crimes committed. In retribution for the murder of Zhang Piegu, Liu Dezhong is beaten to death, and his accomplice, Yang Jinwu, is beheaded in the marketplace. Master Liu, who devised the scheme that cheated the locals in Chenzhou of properly priced rice, is arrested.

Although the egregious wrongdoings of Liu and his sons warrant the merciless decisions Judge Bao makes in the play's satisfying denouement, a fourth punishment dealt by Bao in the final courtroom scene shows the severity of his moral code. In the play, Bao meets the prostitute Wang Fenlian while traveling through Chenzhou in disguise, assisting her when she falls off her donkey. A short conversation on the side of the road reveals that Wang Fenlian possesses the purple-gold mallet originally given to Liu Dezhong and Yang Jinwu by Minister Fan. Seeing this as an opportunity to more closely observe the unlawful actions of Liu's sons, Bao accompanies

Wang Fenlian to her house. On the way, he seems surprised and perhaps slightly miffed that the young woman does not recognize him as a man of importance, and he comments on the irony of the situation in an aside to the audience. “Everyone in the world knows that I occupy the post of prefect of South Kaifeng,” Bao says while helping Wang Fenlian remount the donkey. “How could I, occupant of the eminent Longtu post, keep company and get mixed up with this vixen?” (Hisa et al 30). Later, in Act Three, after experiencing abhorrent hospitality by the First Granary Hand and Liu Dezhong, Bao explains to his servant, Zhang Qian, what he has resolved to do next. “Do not blame me for not showing mercy,” he cautions. “Just ask that harlot named Wang, who had no call to make me catch her donkey and walk such a long way” (Hsia et al 34).

Wang Fenlian’s crimes are not nearly as treacherous as those committed by the men who are brought in front of Judge Bao at the end of the play. Yet, Bao still punishes her with thirty strokes. While it appears that the beating was ordered because Wang, who is not just a civilian, but also a woman of ill repute, had accepted a mallet marked with the imperial insignia, Judge Bao’s interrogation alludes to a possible personal motivation for revenge as well. “Can it be that you, Prostitute Wang, are so daft?” Bao taunts. “Are you so perversely ignorant of Judge Bao’s wide-ranging craft? You said that there is big money in entertaining granary officials — How come you spare your charms with the judge?” (Hsia et al 35). Considering the fact that Wang Fenlian took Bao to her home, fed him dinner and offered him a place to stay, Bao’s sentence seems a bit harsh. This exchange proves Judge Bao’s unwavering devotion to an uncompromising legal system, but does so at the expense of his overall relatability.

Another trait often attributed to Judge Bao is his tendency to inflict penalties on a guilty individual “irrespective of his or her position and connections” (Idema ix). His refusal to grant special treatment to criminals because of their social status or wealth transcends earthly concerns

that are seen to corrupt weaker-willed officials, such as Clerk Xiao in *The Moheluo Doll* and the prefect of Chu Prefecture in *The Injustice to Dou E.* Bao's inability to be swayed by bribery or flashy displays of power might explain why he is sometimes said to be a deity with supernatural talents pertaining to law and order. As explained in Idema's book, "Judge Bao is often said to be an incarnation of the Astral God of Civil Arts, sent down to earth … to assist Renzhong …" (Idema xxx). Li's introduction also references an immortal iteration of Bao Zheng, this time associated with the afterlife. "Ghosts and spirits of the wronged dead appeal to him for redress of grievance, and he sometimes quells demons that turn out to be the true criminals," she writes. "In many accounts, he is said to preside as Yama judging the dead in the underworld at night while dispensing justice in the human world by day" (Li 2).

In *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*, Judge Bao's notability is related to his success in the mortal realm, as described in the list of past accomplishments he recites to Zhang Qian in Act Two. "I have tangled with powerful men and provoked resentment as great as mountains and seas," he says. "I once executed that Lu Zhailang in the marketplace and put Commissioner Ge in prison for his case" (Hsai et al 19). Bao's specialty — dispensing justice to those who believe they are above the law — makes him a dangerous opponent for Master Liu, who haughtily brags about the privileges associated with his family's lofty status in the social hierarchy. "I am from a family with great power and influence, being a descendant of several generations of officials," Liu brags in his first lines of dialogue in the Wedge. "If I kill someone, I need not pay with my life; it would mean nothing more than ripping a tile off the roof of a house" (Hsai et al 5). The flippant pomposity of Master Liu is paralleled by the steadfast judgment of Bao Zheng throughout the entire play. This juxtaposition of polar opposite characters adds intensity and drama to an already scandalous story full of political intrigue and murderous misdeeds.

In his book, Idema describes Bao as "pure, orthodox and incorruptible in his own behavior" (Idema ix), which is a characterization that is supported by several examples from the script. A gifted scholar in both myth and historical record, Bao Zheng has a strong work ethic, as the judge himself admits: "From five in the morning when the clouds billow until five in the evening when the sun should set, I bury my head in case documents, no rest do I get" (Hsai et al 19). In *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*, Bao attempts to instill in others this same sense of honesty and humility, as observed in the scene when Judge Bao and Zhang Qian first arrive in Chengzhou. Walking ahead of his traveling companion, Zhang is under the erroneous impression that the judge cannot hear his lamentations as the two complete their inspection tour of the southern provinces. "It would be nice if he would eat some," Zhang says. "However, whenever Judge Bao goes to a provincial, country, or circuit seat, he would dismount, enter the offices and pay no attention to the food that the officials or elders have prepared for him." Continuing his monologue, Zhang criticizes Judge Bao's daily meals of rice gruel before developing a plan. "When I get to those households, I'll say, 'I am with the great Judge Bao, now on his way to Chenzhou to sell rice … You had better hurry up and prepare some food for me,'" he muses (Hsai et al 26). Unfortunately, Zhang's rant is cut short by an unexpected voice from behind. "Zhang Qian, I must be getting old and hard of hearing," Judge Bao says. "I am an old man who can't eat all that much, so whatever is prepared ahead is all yours to enjoy, and I will give you something that will satisfy you." When a curious Zhang Qian asks what specifically he means by this promise, Bao gestures to the weapon his servant carries on his back. "I'll give you a taste of that sword," he replies. Frightened by this thinly veiled threat, Zhang instantly sobers and responds, saying, "On second thought, I would rather eat a little rice gruel." And thus, with that ethical matter resolved, Bao urges Zhang Qian onwards.

Other characters do not learn their lesson as quickly as Zhang. Like their father, Liu Dezhong and Yang Jinwu also demonstrate values that are antithetical to those upheld by Judge Bao. Whereas Master Liu orchestrates the corrupt rice-selling operation in Chenzhou from afar, Liu Dezhong and Yang are the lackeys he employs to carry out the plan in the village. It is quickly made evident that Master Liu's biological son takes after his father in many ways, as he is observed to have a penchant for leveraging his family's influence in order to subvert local laws. "Taking full advantage of our father's power and influence, we forcibly extort what we can," the younger Liu says by way of introduction. "I am truly my father's son. If the goods aren't handed over, then I kick and beat and I pull out their hair, knock them over, and give them a few more stomps for good measure" (Hsai et al 6). Both Liu Dezhong and Yang are depicted in the play as having sensitive egos and a predilection for violence, as seen in Act One when Liu beats Zhang Piegu to death after a verbal argument about rice prices. This blatant abuse of power is exactly what Judge Bao seeks to eradicate, especially after he experiences the brothers' brutality firsthand. Disguised as an old man accompanying the prostitute Wang Fenlian, Judge Bao refuses to consume the wine and meat offered to him, which angers Liu Dezhong. Ignorant to the irony of his statement, Liu demands that the unappreciative guest be strung from a locust tree. "After I have received old Bao, we'll take our sweet time beating him," he promises to the granary hand. Such a violent reaction to one's wounded pride exposes Liu as an individual lacking in maturity and self-control. The playwright's emphasis on this character's failures serves to reinforce the view of Judge Bao as an excellent model of rectitude and measured composure.

Because many, including the anonymous author of *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*, are quick to praise Judge Bao's positive attributes, it is easy to assume that Bao is the epitome of incorruptibility. But Bao Zheng is not perfect. In his book, which analyzes Judge Bao's patterns of behavior in a variety of texts, Idema writes, "… (Bao is) both an exemplar of moral rectitude and a low-born trickster, who at times seems vindictive enough to enjoy the opportunity to inflict pain" (Idema xxxiv). Li observes a similar theme, which she labels as Judge Bao's particular brand of "compensatory justice that goes beyond due process" (Li 3). She supports her argument with an example from *Selling Rice in Chenzhou*. "The fact that the male lead plays both Judge Bao and Zhang Piegu … implies a vision of justice that is based on the empowerment of the victim," Li writes. "Judge Bao allows Zhang Piegu's son to personally kill the commissioner and receive a convenient pardon."

Bao's decision to rule by the law of retaliation in this case is unusual, as the concept of "an eye for an eye" is not particularly prevalent in many of the other Judge Bao legends. While stories such as *Rescriptor-in-Waiting Bao's Clever Trick: The Record of the Chalk Circle* and Rescriptor *Bao Decides the Case of the Weird Black Pot* end with the execution or imprisonment of criminals, it is normally up to Judge Bao to send the condemned to their deaths. By writing an ending in which the commoner executes his father's murderer with his own hands, the author symbolically imbues members of the lower classes with the power to enact change. Adding this emblematic scene to the plot, however, breaks from tradition and allows Judge Bao to show preferential treatment for an individual in his courtroom — something that is mostly unheard of in other works about Bao Zheng.

West and Idema raise a similar criticism in their introduction to another Judge Bao story, *Rescriptor-in-Waiting Bao Thrice Investigates the Butterfly Dream.* Describing the creative way

through which Judge Bao pardons three brothers accused of killing a man after he beats their father to death, West and Idema note that this play shows Bao circumventing traditional legal precedents by "conniving to spare the (third son of the Wang family and) offering up another victim instead" (West and Idema 41). This uncharacteristic intervention conflicts with Judge Bao's reputation for possessing an "iron face of impartiality" (West and Idema 37) and "being blind to status" (West and Idema 41). Perhaps Judge Bao is only willing to ignore an individual's social standing when it benefits his personal view of justice, or, more specifically, when the opportunity arises to inflict painful punishment on members of the privileged classes.

Another troubling trait belonging to Judge Bao is his partiality to distressingly violent sentences. The graphic nature of the scenes in Bao's courtroom might be influenced by the tastes of the audiences for which these plays were performed, as Li suggests in her introduction, writing, " … Indeed the pleasure of 'Judge Bao literature' often lies in the downfall of the powerful" (Li 2). But the thematic reoccurrence of brutal discipline could also be interpreted as Judge Bao's vice. Stories such as *Selling Rice in* Chenzhou, commend Bao Zheng for his self-restraint and dedication to a modest lifestyle. Yet, in his judicial capacity, Judge Bao does not seem to operate within these same constraints. Known for his rigid austerity, Bao's reputation precedes him, as evidenced in a conversation between Liu Dezhong and Yang Jinwu. "Brother, this old man (Judge Bao) is not one to be triflied with," Liu cautions. "Every so often, he 'executes first and reports to the throne later'" (West and Idema 26). This inclination to act and then seek the emperor's approval once the deed is done shows Bao's ability to singularly wield his power and restore order throughout the land. However, such autonomy is dangerous in any man's hands, no matter how pure they might initially seem.

Furthermore, Judge Bao sometimes behaves in a manner similar to the unscrupulous officials in other courtroom dramas. In the play *Rescriptor-in-Waiting Bao's Clever Trick: The Record of the Chalk Circle*, the heroine, Zhang Haitang, is savagely beaten until she reluctantly confesses to a crime she did not commit. According to West and Idema, situations like this are Judge Bao's specialty, as he uses his "integrity and incorruptibility" to overturn decisions in cases that "were badly handled or were tainted by outright corruption" (West and Idema 38). In practice, however, Bao is not much better than his dishonorable counterparts. He also uses torture — or the threat of torture, such as when he says he will beat Zhang Haitang if she doesn't attempt to forcibly pull her child from the chalk circle — to extract confessions from witnesses and defendants. It is difficult to view Judge Bao as having the moral high ground when his strategies mirror the techniques of unprincipled characters.

The success achieved by the real-life Bao Zheng is immortalized and catalogued in centuries' worth of literature. Capitalizing on the popularity of courtroom and crime dramas, authors and playwrights crafted the engaging character of Judge Bao, on whom audiences could rely to restore order. Persistent in his quest for justice and devoted to reforming a government rife with corruption, Bao is considered a hero for the common man. His refusal to allow high-status criminals to skirt the law places him in the upper echelon of Chinese officials and introduces a new standard of incorruptibility. However, the desire to use Bao Zheng as an allegorical representation of sweeping political and social change disregards the disappointing truth behind Bao's characterizations. Although Judge Bao is a much more respectable figure than the deeply flawed clerks, magistrates and judges who populate China's dramatic classics, he is not without fault. Alas, the fact that even the honorable Judge Bao falls victim to the powers of

human emotion from time to time proves that the idea of a truly “incorruptible official” is as much of a myth as the stories in which it appears.

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