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Karmic Ideology in *Zi Bu Yu*

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ABSTRACT

Zi Bu Yu 'What the Master Would not Discuss' or 'Censored by Confucius' is a zhiguai 'strange writing' anthology compiled during the Qing (1644-1912) era, which concerns supernatural and divine phenomena, occurrences as well as flora and fauna. Zi Bu Yu also pertains to a karmic construct from an ethical-religious perspective by virtue of interconnection to Confucianism and Taoism. Although narratives collected in Zi Bu Yu defy Confucian atheism, they depict well-deserved nemeses manifesting Confucian symmetrical reciprocity. In terms of Taoism, it is embodied by recompenses recounted in Zi Bu Yu, as well as its similitude to the Confucian precept of benevolence. Furthermore, tales cumulated in Zi Bu Yu expound the rationale behind cause and effect as well as reward and punishment, by means of illuminating justifiable and ostensibly unjustifiable karma in a philosophical manner.

Keywords: Confucianism, Karma, Taoism, Philosophy, Zhiguai

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1. INTRODUCTION

子不语 Zi Bu Yu 'What the Master Would not Discuss' or 'Censored by Confucius' is a 1788 anthology of literary sketches complied by an unorthodox sceptic-iconoclast and gastronomist named 袁枚 Yuan Mei (1716-1798) (Chan 1991, Clart 1996, Louie and Edwards 1996: xxiii, Tucker 1997, Santangelo and Yan 2013: vii-viii). Being denoted as 笔记小说 *biji xiaoshuo* 'note-form literature', Zi Bu Yu (henceforward Zi) is constituted of 747 narratives written in Classical Chinese (Clart 1996, Tucker 1997), kaleidoscopically illustrating a veritable cornucopia of religious practices, ethical systems, collective imagery as well as themes of purity and sexuality in 18th-century Chinese society (Santangelo and Yan 2013: vii-viii).

Zi is composed in the form of succinct and delightful prose void of stylistic conceits, complicated structures or obscure literary allusions (Chen 2013, Chiang 2014): as stated by the compiler Yuan, the eccentricity of his writing is to 'delight the heart and shock the ear' (*游心骇耳 youxin haier*) (Francis 2002: 135), rather than promulgating supernaturalism among his readership (Zhao 2006). Nonetheless, this thought-provoking collection was censored by the Qing court, in that Zi was regarded as an exposé unravelling 'ghosts, sex, betrayal, revenge, litigation, transvestism, homosexuality, and corruption' and castigating the hypercritical prudery, moralism and puritanism prescribed by Confucian 'fundamentalist' zeitgeist (Chan 1991, Louie and Edwards 1996: xxiii). Additionally, Zi conveys Yuan's castigation of court orthodoxy and dogma (Chow 1994: 236-237, Louie and Edwards 1996: xxiii).

Zi abounds in narratives concerning supernatural and paranormal forces and creatures. For instance, *飞星入南斗 Feixing Ru Nandou* 'Feixing Approaching Nandou' (Trans. Mine) depicts an astrological augury presaging premature decease, *钟孝廉 Zhong Xiaolian* 'Zhong Xiaolian' recounts a person's explicit dream portending his own death, *鬼神欺人以应劫数 Guishen Qiren Yiying Jieshu*

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'Gods and Ghosts Deceiving Mortals for Calamities' describes a gigantic iron knife floating on the water, etc. Additionally, Zi is replete with anecdotes featuring mythical figures, exemplified by *两神相殴 Liangshen Xiangou* 'Fighting Between Two Divinities', *陈清恪公吹气退鬼 Chen Qingke Gong Chuiqi Tuigui*, 'Mr Chen Qingke Expelling a Ghost with a Puff of Breath', *治鬼二妙 Zhigui Ermiao* 'Two Intelligent Techniques for Expelling Ghosts', etc. Moreover, Zi is also characterised by tales highlighting predestination, such as *火焚人不当水死 Huofenren Budang Shuisi*, the title of which literally means one doomed to burn in a blaze will not be drowned. Furthermore, Zi is comprised of a profusion of narratives appertaining to efficacious occult powers and exorcism. For instance, in a story titled *虾蟆蛊 Hama Gu* 'Toad Sorcery', a toad controlled by insect-based sorcery grows from beneath a human scalp, yet such black magic can be annihilated by a gold hairpin; analogously, an anecdote *捉鬼 Zhuo Gui* 'Ghost Catching', as indicated by its title, features a valorous deed catching and killing a ghost.

In this article, I investigate the preponderant, thought-provoking masterpiece Zi that has not attained a prodigious amount of critical attention. In particular, I scrutinise the karmic construct manifested in Zi.

2. METHOD

The genre of Zi is the illustrious *志怪 zhiguai*, viz. 'accounts of miraculous paranormality and abnormality', or simply 'strange writing' (DeWoskin 1977, Campany 1991, Chiang 2005: 12-13, Shang 2018), with its extant prototype being a circa 350 CE assemblage entitled *搜神记 Sou Shen Ji* 'In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record' (DeWoskin and Crump 1996: xxv, Xie 2014). Zhiguai narratives are featured by supernatural storylines and depictions, exemplified by anecdotes appertaining to mythological events, mythical sites, deities, practitioners of esoteric arts (Campany 1996: 99, Chen 2002), and sources of zhiguai writing encompass historiographical treatises, religious texts, official archives, shrine inscriptions, folk legends, etc (Kao 1985: 28, Zeitlin 1993: 4-5, Campany 1996: 151, Zhang 2014: 1). The unanimously acknowledged pinnacle of zhiguai writing during the Qing (1644-1912) dynasty is *聊斋志异 Liaozhai Zhiyi* 'Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio' or 'Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio', which is a posthumously published chef-d'oeuvre of a celebrated luminary of classical Chinese literature, viz. *蒲松龄 Pu Songling* (1640-1715) (Chang and Chang 1998: 1, 42, Teo 2006, Cook 2014, Hughes et al 2016: 47). Liaozhai Zhiyi is profoundly impinged upon by Sou Shen Ji in terms of themes, plots and styles (Yuan 1999, Yuan and Xu 2000: 177, Teo 2006, Nienhauser 2010: 118, Cook 2014). Another zhiguai compilation of literary prominence and critical adulation is *阅微草堂笔记 Yuewei Caotang Biji* 'Jottings from the Grass Hut for Examining Minutiae' by a Qing intellectual 纪昀 Ji Yun (1724-1805), which is frequently compared and contrasted with Zi (Chan 1998: 8, Riegel 2010).

Karma encapsulates the ethical aspect of rebirth, and the ideation denotes the universal causal law, according to which future modes of an individual's existence are impinged upon by accumulated effects of moral or amoral acts performed during one's present life (Mahony 1987, Mitomo 1991, Olivelle 2021). Albeit being a preponderant Buddhist doctrine of Indian origin (Kohn 2009: 45, McGuire 2014: 1), karma is integrated with the indigenous Taoism (aka Daoism). For instance, a 5th century Taoist classic *西升经 Xisheng Jing* 'Scripture of Western Ascension' attributes fate to karma (Kohn 1992: 4, 1994), and similarly, according to *福寿论 Fushou Lun* composed by the celebrated physician *孙思邈 Sun Simiao* (581-682 CE) (Li and Liang 2016, Sivin 2017), Taoist aspiration for wellbeing and longevity is directly interconnected to one's karma (Kohn 2009: 6). Sinicised karma in a Chinese context is correlated with indigenous divination that has been existing as a pervasive phenomenon throughout Chinese history, i.e. since the use of oracle bones during the Shang (16th-

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11thc BCE) dynasty (McGuire 2013); in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing era, divinatory practices flourished substantially, encompassing astrology, physiognomy, dream interpretation, spirit writing, as well as fate prediction via 易经 Yi Jing 'I Ching; Book of Changes' (Smith 1991: 44-45, Elman 2000: 311).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Confucianism and retribution

Zi is inextricably intertwined with Confucianism, as illustrated by its title extracted from the 论语 Lun Yu 'The Analects', the most preeminent sacred scripture of the Confucian zeitgeist and pivotal source of the thinking possessed by Confucius as the iconic figure in East Asian tradition (Baldick 2015, Hunter 2017: 1-2, Csikszentmihalyi 2020). To be more specific, the title of Zi is derived from a famed axiom regarding Confucius, i.e. *子不语怪力乱神 Zi bu yu guai li luan shen* that has been rendered into a range of versions in the past decades, represented by 'The Master never talked of wonders, feats of strength, disorders of nature, or spirits' (Waley 1956/2005: 120), 'The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings' (Legge 1960/1970: 201) and 'The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods' (Louden 2002: 80). As can be inferred from the implied teachings, Confucius is indisposed to surmise topics concerning anomalies, monstrosities, prodigies and deities, complying with his practical, rather than speculative or metaphysical, orientation and adherence to salient aspects of human life and the 'Way of man' (*人道 rendao*) (Morton 1971, Francis 2002, Louden 2002: 80).

Nonetheless, notwithstanding Confucian atheism, Zi exhibits a karmic creed. Albeit being a figure of the Confucian gentry, Yuan is deviant from Confucian precepts by virtue of his zhiguai writing (Francis 2002). To be more specific, narratives cumulated in Zi defy Confucian atheist credos, but accord with constructs advocating propitious and menacing auguries as well as rationale inextricably intertwined with previous incarnations. In a narrative entitled *掘冢奇报 Juezhong Qibao* 'Outlandish Retribution for Tomb Robbery' (Trans. Mine), a ringleader is proscribed from tomb raiding by a baleful caveat during a sciomantic clairvoyance, whereas enticed by valuable grave goods, he resumes the abhorrent deed, triggering an accomplice's excruciating decease; at the ending, the tomb robber is prosecuted and commits suicide in jail (Example (1)). As can be seen from this tale, Zi promulgates that repugnant misdeeds beget aberrant, egregious punishments mandated by retributive justice.

(1) *杭州朱某, 以发冢起家, 聚其徒六七人, 每深夜昏黑, 便持锄四出。嫌所掘者多枯骨, 少金银, 乃设乩盘, 预卜其藏。一日, 岳王降坛曰: "汝发冢取死人财, 罪浮于盗贼, 再不悛改, 吾将斩汝。" 朱大骇, 自此歇业。年余, 其党无所归, 乃诱其再祷于乩神以试之。如其言, 又一神降曰: "我西湖水仙也。保俶塔下有石井, 井西有富人坟, 可掘得千金。" 朱大喜, 与其徒持锄往…徒众控官, 朱以讼事破家, 自缢于狱。*

In Hangzhou, there was a tomb robber named Zhu. Every night, he led six or seven apprentices to dig graves for commodities. They usually uncovered skeletons but seldom gold or silver, so he resorted to sciomantic practice to foresee mausoleums with valuables. One day, Yue Fei made manifestation and warned him: 'Your tomb robbery and exploitation of the deceased are crimes. If you refuse to repent of your sins, I will decapitate you.' Zhu was terrorised and ceased tomb raiding. A year later, his impoverished accomplices tempted him to try sciomantic divination again. This time, another deity made manifestation and told him: 'I am the God of the West Lake. Beneath Baochu Pagoda, there is a stone well, and to the west of the well, there is an affluent man's grave. If you

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uncover it, you can find a myriad of gold.' In ecstasy, Zhu summoned his accomplices and brought pickaxes there. Disciples of the deceased reported to the yamen. Zhu's family was ruined by the case, and he hung himself in the prison.

(Zi Bu Yu. Vol. 9. Juezhong Qibao. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, I propound that the karmic belief in Zi epitomises the Confucian symmetrical reciprocity that 'If, when someone does something to you you wish he did not do it, then you should likewise not do this to another person' (*施诸己而不愿, 亦勿施于人 Shizhu ji er buyuan, yi wu shiyu ren*) (Trans. Harbsmeier 2015: 532), or the more renowned injunction 'What you yourself do not desire, do not do to others' (*己所不欲, 勿施於人 Ji suo buyu, wu shiyu ren*) (Trans. Goldin 2015: 15).

In a spine-chilling and nauseating ghost story entitled *骷髅报仇 Kulou Baochou* 'A Skull's Revenge', an odious man expresses no veneration for divine or spiritual beings, so he eventually receives a well-deserved nemesis dictated by poetic justice. As can be seen from Example (2), the wrongdoer's derisive misdeed and remark are imposed on himself in an analogous manner, which implies the ineluctable and implacable divine punishment.

(2) *常熟孙君寿, 性狞恶, 好慢神虐鬼。与人游山, 胀如厕, 戏取荒冢骷髅, 蹲踞之, 令吞其粪, 曰: "汝食佳乎?" 骷髅张口曰: "佳。" 君寿大骇, 急走, 骷髅随之滚地, 如车轮然。君寿至桥, 骷髅不得上。君寿登高望之, 骷髅仍滚归原处。君寿至家, 面如死灰。遂病, 日遗矢, 辄手取吞之, 自呼曰: "汝食佳乎?" 食毕更遗, 遗毕更食, 三日而死。*

There was a detestable man residing in Changshu named Sun Junshou, who often disrespected gods and insulted ghosts. During a visit to a mountain, he needed to excrete, so he uncovered a skull from an abandoned grave, defecated into the skull's mouth and asked it: 'Is it delicious?' The skull replied: 'Yes.' Junshou was terrified and fled, but the skull was rolling after him like a wheel. Junshou mounted a bridge but the skull failed to do so, so it rolled back to the grave. After arriving home, Junshou was as pale as a ghost and taken ill immediately. He grasped his own excrement by hand and swallowed it, asking himself: 'Is it delicious?' He kept repeating the process and died in three days.'

(Zi Bu Yu. Vol. 1. Kulou Baochou. Trans. Mine)

I postulate that Yuan is not intent on preaching the existence of karma, but to admonish readers for conducting abhorrent deeds, so as to avoid nemeses.

3.2 Taoism and Reward

It is noteworthy that in addition to the well-established title, What the Master Would not Discuss, Zi also has two less renowned titles that are correlated with its counterpart Liaozhai Zhiyi, namely, *续夷坚志 Xu Yijian Zhi* and *新齐谐 Xin Qixie* (Chan 1998: 159-160, Yuan 1999: 331). Both culturally enriched titles embody Taoism, in that they allude to Taoist treatises *庄子 Zhuangzi* and *列子 Liezi* (Yuan 1999: 383-384, Li 2017).

Taoist credence promotes moral comportment according to ethical norms. For instance, in a canonical classic *道德经 Dao De Jing 'Tao Te Ching*; Book of the Way and Virtue' (Kirkland 2004: 42, Waley 2005: 20-21), the legendary thinker *老子 Laozi* (aka Lao Tzu, circa 6thc BCE) emphasises not only spiritual discipline (Puett 2004, 2010), but also accumulation of moral merit so as to avoid calamitous consequences (Bokenkamp 1993, Chan 2018), as in *天道无亲, 常与善人 Tiandao wuchang, changyu shanren* 'It is Heaven's way, without distinction of person, to keep the good

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perpetually supplied' (Chapter 79. Trans. Waley 1997: 167). Analogously, in the divination and philosophy classic I Ching composed during the 11th century BCE (Redmond and Hon 2014: 128-139, Hon 2019), it is stated that individuals' conduct is directly correlated with their fate, and a household functions as an integrated unit receiving divine blessings and retribution: *积善之家, 必有余庆; 积不善之家, 必有余殃 Ji shan zhi jia, bi you yu qing; ji bu shan zhi jia, bi you yu yang* 'The family that accumulates goodness is sure to have superabundant happiness. The family that accumulates evil is sure to have superabundant misery' (Trans. Legge 1969: 20). Additionally, according to the prominent philosopher 庄子 Zhuangzi of the Warring States (475-221 BCE) period (Coutinho 2016: 24-26), *为善无近名, 为恶无近刑 Wei shan wu jin ming, wei e wu jin xing* 'There should not be the practice of what is good with any thought of the fame (which it will bring), nor of what is evil with any approximation to the punishment (which it will incur)' (Trans. Legge 1962: 198).

I posit that Zi abounds with stories alluding to the Taoist precept of reward. A paradigm is *洗紫河车 Xi Ziheche* 'Washing Human Placentae', which, in stark contrast to its macabre title, concerns virtue and kindness by recounting an encounter between a living man and the Ox-Head, a guardian of the Yama. In the tale, a warm-hearted yamen runner accidently enters the underworld and dusts a dilapidated statue of the Ox-Head, who, being appreciative of his avuncular act, escorts him back to safety and recompenses him via serendipity (Example (3)).

(3) *至一古庙, 神像剥落, 其旁牛头鬼蒙灰丝蛛网而立。丁怜庙中之无僧也, 以袖拂去其尘网…牛头曰:"是人非独为妻故将救之, 是实于我有德。我在庙中蒙灰满面, 此人为我拭净, 是一长者。但未知阳数何如, 我明日往判官处偷查其簿, 便当了然。"命丁坐, 三人共饮。有肴馔至, 丁将举箸, 牛头与妻急夺之, 曰:"鬼酒无妨, 鬼肉不可食，食则常留此间矣。"次日, 牛头出, 及暮, 归, 欣欣然贺曰:"昨查阴司簿册, 汝阳数未终, 且喜我有出关之差, 正可送汝出界。"手持肉一块, 红色臭腐, 曰:"以赠汝, 可发大财。"*

Ding arrived an ancient temple and saw a dilapidated god statue guarded by a statue of the Ox-Head covered by spider webs. Since there were not any monks, Ding felt sympathy for the statue and removed the spider webs…The Ox-Head said: 'The reason why I save this man is not only because of his relationship with you, but also his kindness to me. He is a nice man, because he dusted my dusty statue in the temple. I will sneak in the judge's and find out his accurate lifespan.' The Ox-Head seated Ding and they started drinking together. When dishes were served, Ding was about to consume, but the Ox-Head and his wife prevented him anxiously: 'It is fine to enjoy the wine in the underworld, but not the meat, otherwise you will not be able to go back.' On the following day, the Ox-Head did not return home until evening, and he happily congratulated Ding: 'I have checked the record of the underworld, and your lifespan is not finished yet. It is good news that I have a business trip to make, so I can see you off to the border.' He handed a chunk of fetid red flesh to Ding and said: 'This gift can make you very rich.'

(Zi Bu Yu. Vol. 5. Xi Ziheche. Trans. Mine)

In addition to the underworld, karma is also embodied among the immortals, as exemplified by a narrative entitled *苏耽老饮疫神 Su Danlao Yin Yishen* 'Su Danlao Treating the God of Plague with Wine'. As can be seen from Example (4), the protagonist Su regards the God of Plague with etiquette and veneration, so his courteous hospitality attains reciprocity that his household is immune to a plague and the God of Plague renders him replete with feasts.

(4) *杭州苏耽老, 性滑稽, 善嘲人。人恶之, 元旦, 画疫神一纸压其门。耽老晨出开门, 见而大笑, 迎疫神归, 延之上座, 与共饮酒而烧化之。是年大疫, 四邻病者为祀疫神。其病人辄作神语*

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曰:"我元旦受苏耽老礼敬, 愧无以报。欲禳我者, 必请苏君陪我, 我方去。"于是祀疫神者争先请苏, 苏逐日奔忙, 困于酒食。其家大小十馀口, 无一病者。

A hilarious man in Hangzhou called Su Danlao was good at mocking people. On New Year's Day, someone who despised him attached a portrait of the God of Plague to his gate. Upon opening the gate, Danlao saw the portrait, but he burst into laughter and ushered the God of Plague in to the seat of honour in his house. After treating the god with wine, Danlao bade him farewell by burning his portrait. In the following year, there was a widespread plague, so infected people in the neighbourhood offered sacrifice to the God of Plague. Frequently, patients were spiritually possessed and commanded in the intonation of the god: 'On New Year's Day, I was treated with reverence and politeness by Su Danlao, but I feel ashamed that I have not been able to recompense him. If you wish to pray to me, you must treat him first." Therefore, worshippers all eagerly invited Su to myriads of feasts every day. There were more than ten people in his family, but none of them fell prey to the plague.'

(Zi Bu Yu. Vol. 2. Su Danlao Yin Yishen. Trans. Mine)

I postulate that apart from Taoism, Examples (3-4) also manifest Confucian benevolence. Confucianism prescribes *五常 wu chang* 'five constants/relationships' constituted of *仁 ren* 'benevolence', *义 yi* 'righteousness', *礼 li* 'propriety', *智 zhi* 'wisdom' and *信 xin* 'faithfulness' (Wilkinson 1996, Huang 2013, Chen 2018, Tan 2018), among which the quintessential credo is benevolence (Ames 1991, 2011, Neville 2011). Benevolence possesses a supreme status in Confucian ethical thinking and moral comportment, serving as the primordial source of virtues and social harmony (Slingerland 2011, Chen 2013, Terjesen 2013) as well as an indispensable attribute of 君子 junzi 'gentleman; superior/exemplary person' (Van Norden 2002, Hourdequin 2013, Walsh 2013).

I propound that Yuan's purpose to compile anecdotes highlighting reward, parallel to those entailing retribution, is to entice his readership into moral fibre encapsulated by Taoist and Confucian benevolence, instead of spreading a karmic perception per se.

3.3 Philosophy

In addition to ethical-religious construal, Yuan also conveys his philosophical reflection in Zi. For instance, *旁观因果 Pangguan Yingguo* 'Witnessing Cause and Effect' depicts a witness for manslaughter between a chrysanthemum grower and a gong farmer in two incarnations. The onlooker first witnesses his neighbour, the chrysanthemum grower, kills the gong farmer by accident during a conflict, yet owing to his disposal of the corpse, the grower has immunity from prosecution; nine years later, the onlooker sees the spirit of the gong farmer incarnated as a newborn of another moneyed neighbour, and seven years later, the onlooker witnesses the young gong farmer tossing a stone to summon his pigeons, which coincidentally triggers the grower's fall while immunity from prosecution as well. After narration, Yuan quotes a stance that universal cause and effect prevail all episodes in the world, whereas due to lack of witnesses, its prevalence and justification are abstruse.

(5) *一担粪人, 一叟, 报复之巧如此, 公平如此, 而在局中者彼此不知, 赖马姓人冷观历历。然则天下事吉凶祸福, 各有来因, 当无丝毫舛错, 而惜乎从旁冷观者之无人也!*

The revenge between a gong farmer and an old man was so coincidental and fair, but neither of them had a clue. The whole process would not be unravelled without Ma's witness. There was justifiable rationale behind all blessings and misfortunes in the world, but it was a shame that nobody had witnessed.

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(Zi Bu Yu. Vol. 5. Pangguan Yingguo. Trans. Mine)

More significantly, Yuan endeavours to expound the rationale behind cause and effect as well as reward and punishment that are not always realised. In *奉行初次盘古成案 Fengxing Chuci Pangu Chengan* 'Prototypical Formation of Pangu', the universe is surmised to resume to its original status after a perpetual yet finite period of time has elapsed, i.e. 120,000 years. According to the conjecture, the iterative processes have initiated since time immemorial, so even the primordial immortal 盘古 Pangu has recurred for billions of times. Nevertheless, as indicated in Example (6), all following circles of 120,000 years are proscribed to defy the prototype, despite numerous evolutions since then. As a consequence, the operation of the universe is ineluctable and predestined, whereas reward and punishment in the current world accords with the prototypical chronicle, and hence ostensibly unwarranted karma.

(6) *世间福善祸淫, 何以有报有不报耶? 天地鬼神, 何以有灵有不灵耶? 修仙学佛, 何以有成有不成耶? 红颜薄命, 而何以不薄者亦有耶? 才子命穷, 而何以不穷者亦多耶? 一饮一啄, 何以有前定耶? 日食山崩, 何以有劫数耶? 彼善推算者, 何以能知而不能免耶? 彼怨天尤天者, 天胡不降之罚耶?...今世上所行, 皆成案也。当第一次世界开辟十二万年之中, 所有人物事宜, 亦非造物者之有心造作, 偶然随气化之推迁, 半明半暗, 忽是忽非, 如泻水落地, 偶成方圆; 如孩童著棋, 随手下子。既定之后, 竟成一本板板帐簿, 生铁铸成矣。乾坤将毁时, 天帝将此册交代与第二次开辟之天帝, 命其依样奉行, 丝毫不许变动, 以故人意与天心往往参差不齐。世上人终日忙忙急急, 正如木偶傀儡, 暗中为之牵丝者。成败巧拙, 久已前定, 人自不知耳。*

For blessings, virtues, misfortunes and lasciviousness in the world, why were there ones with deserved treatment and those without? For deities and ghosts, why were there efficacious and inefficacious ones? For Taoist and Buddhist practitioners, why were there competent and incompetent ones? It was said that femme fatales had miserable lives, but why were there lucky ones? Talents were doomed to impoverishment, but why were there affluent ones? Why was one's life predetermined? Why were solar ellipses and landslides predestined? Why could those clairvoyants never circumnavigate cataclysms? Why were those who gave vent to destiny never punished by destiny? All events in the current world were predestined. During the initial 120,000 years, all human beings and incidents were not intentionally created, but evolved gradually, vaguely and coincidentally, like water splashed on the ground or a chess piece randomly placed by a child. However, a fixed chronicle was hence formulated in a solid manner. Towards the end of the first circle, the primordial deity handed the chronicle over to its successor and commanded him to observe the record without alterations. Therefore, mindsets of mortals and immortals frequently diverged. There was hustle and bustle in the world, but all human beings were puppets muted by controllers. Success and failure had been determined since time immemorial, but human beings were unaware of it.

(Zi Bu Yu. Vol. 5. Fengxing Chuci Pangu Chengan. Trans. Mine)

4. CONCLUSION

Being a zhiguai anthology featuring supernatural and paranormal forces, Zi entails a karmic construal. From a Confucian perspective, Zi complies with the doctrine of symmetrical reciprocity and promulgates that odious misdeeds beget aberrant, egregious punishments prescribed by retributive justice. From a Taoist perspective, Zi exhibits the credence advocating morality, which accords with the Confucian creed of benevolence. The aspirations of Yuan are to admonish his readership for

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conducting abhorrent deeds in order to circumnavigate nemeses, and to nurture virtues encapsulated in both Confucian and Taoist teachings, instead of spreading a karmic ideation per se. Moreover, Yuan endeavours to account for the arcane rationale behind karma, exemplified by predestined fate and seemingly unwarranted reward and punishment, via narratives containing an omniscient witness and a philosophical surmise.

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