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Abstract

This article examines the Buddhist inspirations underlying the contemporary reinterpretation of the classic, *Zhou Chu Chu Sanhai* (*Zhou Chu Eliminates the Three Scourges*) in the Taiwanese film entitled *The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon*. Beyond the obvious reinterpretation of the “three scourges” in the original tale as the “three poisons” of greed, hatred, and delusion in the film, one also finds a deeper connection with the notion of “skillful means” (*upāya-kauśalya*) and the Parable of the Burning House in the *Lotus Sūtra* as well as the tension between established religious beliefs and new religious movements.

Keywords

Buddhism, three poisons, skillful means, Zhou Chu, Lotus Sūtra

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Author Notes

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Introduction

The 2023 Taiwanese film, *The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon*, was titled *Zhou Chu Chu Sanhai* 周處除三害 (*Zhou Chu Eliminates the Three Scourges*) in Chinese. The selection of this Chinese title is intriguing, given that the narrative of the film does not concern any character named Zhou Chu 周處 (circa 238–297).¹ This discrepancy clearly implies that the film is intended to be a contemporary reinterpretation of the classic tale.

The story of Zhou Chu was initially recorded in *Shishuo Xinyu* 世說新語 (*A New Account of the Tales of the World*), compiled by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), in the chapter “Self-Reformation” (Zixin 自新).² This relatively brief story reads as given below:

Zhou Chu, in his youth, was known for his fierce and valiant chivalric spirit, becoming a source of distress for his village neighborhood. Additionally, in the waters of Yixing, there was a dragon, and in the mountains, a white-forehead tiger, both of which violently attacked the villagers. The people in Yixing referred to them as the “Three Scourges,” with Chu considered the most formidable among them. Some hoped that by persuading Chu to kill the tiger and slay the dragon, only one of these scourges would remain.

Chu stabbed the tiger to death and then fought the dragon in the water. The dragon floated and submerged for several tens of miles, with Chu pursuing it relentlessly. After three days and nights, the villagers were convinced both [the dragon and Chu] had died and began to celebrate among themselves. However, Chu eventually killed the dragon and emerged victorious. Hearing the villagers congratulating one another made him realize the distress he had caused them, prompting a desire to reform himself.

He then went to Wu Prefecture to seek out the two Lu brothers [for advice], but [Lu] Pingyuan was not home and he only encountered [Lu] Qinghe. Chu shared his intentions, lamenting that “I have a desire to reform myself, but since much time has already been wasted, I fear that I might not accomplish anything significant.” Qinghe responded, “The ancients valued that upon hearing the Way in the morning, one can die content in the evening; moreover, your future still holds potential. The real worry should be the failure to establish a firm resolve, not whether your name will be honored.” Encouraged by these words, Chu dedicated himself to reformation, ultimately becoming a loyal official and a filial son.³

This story reflects a journey of moral transformation, depicting the progression of an individual known for being a “scourge,” whose calamitous impact on the villagers was comparable to that of a tiger and a dragon, to transforming into someone known for being “a loyal official and a filial son.” Such a story was given extensive treatment in the *Jinshu* 晉書 (*The Book of Jin*), published in 648, where the writing was five times the original in length. However, the historicity of this tale has been the subject of ongoing debate among scholars.⁴ Despite this contention, the story has remained a household classic for centuries and has become a celebrated play in Beijing opera. It is known by various titles, such as *Chu Sanhai* 除三害 (*Eliminates the Three Scourges*), *Hun Tianqiu* 混天球 (*Armillary Heavenly Sphere*), *Ying Tianqiu* 應天球 (*Responsive Heavenly Sphere*), and *Dahu Zhanjiao* 打虎斬蛟 (*Killing Tiger and Slaying Dragon*), and continues to be performed today.⁵

Using a classic title for a film that tells a whole new story is a risky decision for the filmmaker, as it can immediately spoil the plot. The director, Ching-po Wong 黃精甫, explained in a Facebook post that the film is not so focused on its plot development; rather, it represents a vehicle for his exploration into the dichotomy of “good and evil” through a reimagined story of Zhou Chu. He articulated that “the narrative structure, character configuration, the extensive purging and elimination of evil, and, most importantly, the ‘religious’ dimension in *Zhou Chu Eliminates the Three Scourges*, are fundamental elements that underpin the construction of this film.”⁶ The exploration of the themes of “good and evil,” “humanity,” and “religion” has been a more than a decade-long journey for the director through his earlier films, including *Revenge: A Love Story* 復仇者之死 (2010) and *Once Upon a Time in Shanghai* 惡戰 (2014).

The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon follows a similar narrative of Zhou Chu, wherein the three scourges are reimagined as a hitman, a gangster, and a cult leader, all entwined in the criminal

underworld of Taiwan. It captivates the audience through the journey of the hitman, who is featured as the protagonist. He eliminates the other two criminals, which leads him to recognize the damage he has inflicted on society, thereby culminating in his redemptive act of voluntarily surrendering to the police. He “re-emerged” to surrender to the police when he arrived in a Taiwan city from a ferry sailing from Penghu County, subtly reflecting Zhou Chu’s victorious emergence from slaying the dragon in the water.

According to an interview with the director, the protagonist’s character is based on Liu Huan-jong 劉煥榮, a real-life hitman for Taiwan’s criminal triad, United Bamboo Gang (Zhulianbang 竹聯幫), who was listed as one of the ten most wanted gunmen during the 1980s.⁷ Although the film is set against the background of the criminal world in Taiwan and was nominated for seven awards at the 60th Golden Horse Awards, winning the Best Action Choreography category, it only achieved modest success at Taiwan’s box office. In contrast, the film made a surprise hit in China, grossing over RMB 600 million. It also ranked fourth in the non-English films category of the Global Top 10 during its initial week on Netflix.⁸ However, the film did not attract significant attention from North American film critics and received only two reviews on the Rotten Tomatoes website.⁹ In an interview with the BBC, Xianzi 弦子, a film critic in Beijing, suggests that the popularity of this film in China, where scenes of violence and eroticism often face censorship, reflects the audience’s desire for violence and entertainment and indicates their longing for diverse cinematic selections.¹⁰ Additionally, the film attracts political allegories; some contend that its approval by Chinese censors is owed to the portrayal of crimes occurring in Taiwan, with the perpetrators being Taiwanese and Hong Kongers.

However, these are mere speculations. In another interview, the director describes the film as “a crime movie about ‘martyrs’,” where he attempts to explore martyrdom through the lenses

of justice, morality, and spiritual journey (the Dao).¹¹ Therefore, this article does not comment on any speculated political allegories, but focuses on the religious and spiritual themes that forms the backbone of the re-imagination of Zhou Chu's narrative.

Three Poisons: The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon

The reinterpretation of the tale is significantly enriched with religious motifs, notably those stemming from Buddhism. The film's English title, *The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon*, explicitly aligns with the Buddhist concept of the “three poisons” (*triviṣa*¹²) through its association of “the Pig” to delusion (*moha*), “the Snake” to hatred (*dveṣa*), and “the Pigeon” to greed (*rāga*). An Indo-Tibetan Buddhist painting called the “Wheel of Life” (Tibetan: *srid pa'i 'khor lo*) depicts a comprehensive illustration of the Buddha's teachings on suffering, impermanence, karma, the six realms of rebirth, and the twelve links of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Jackson and Jackson provide an example of the Tibetan “Wheel of Life,”¹³ where the outermost circle displays the twelve links of dependent origination in a clockwise sequence, thereby illustrating the interdependence and conditioning from ignorance (*avijjā*) to mental formation (*saṅkhāra*), followed by consciousness (*viññāṇa*), name and form (*nāmarūpa*), six senses (*saḷāyatana*), contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (*upādāna*), becoming (*bhava*), birth (*jāti*), old age and death (*jarāmaraṇa*), and subsequently returning to ignorance. The next inner circle represents the six realms of rebirth—the upper three realms consist of the celestial realm, the demi-god realm, and the human realm, while the lower three realms comprise the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the hell realm. At the center, the hub of the circle features images of a pig, a snake, and a rooster chasing each other's tails, symbolizing the interconnectedness of greed, hatred, and delusion. The entire wheel is held by the Lord of Death (Yama), which serves as a

reminder to practitioners of impermanence and the inevitability of death. Positioned at the center, the three poisons are depicted as the ground that fuels the perpetuation of suffering and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*).¹⁴



Fig. 1 A Painting of the “Wheel of Life” at the Kopan Monastery, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.¹⁵

The director makes an explicit, perhaps too obvious, association of the Buddhist “three poisons” of greed, hatred, and delusion with the three scourges in the film, who are on the list of most wanted criminals. Occupying the top seat of the list, Lin Lu-ho, also known as “Bullhead,”

has a giant pigeon tattooed on his back, symbolizing the bird of greed. Ben Yuen, nicknamed “Hongkie”—the second most wanted criminal—has a snake tattoo on his right arm, symbolizing hatred. Chen Kui-lin, or “The Kuilin Kid”—a notorious hitman and the third most wanted criminal—wears a watch with a pig face, symbolizing delusion. The alliance of the characters and their respective poisons is unmistakably clear: As a cult leader, Lin Lu-ho embodies insatiable greed for wealth and dominance; Ben Yuen is a hot-tempered, angry, and violent gangster, exacerbated by a bullet lodged in his head; and Chen Kui-lin carries with him an attachment to ego and craving for recognition, unable to accept being placed below Lin Lu-ho and Ben Yuen on the most-wanted list.

Two other characters also play important roles in the film: Detective Chen Hui and the hair salon owner, Cheng Hsiao-mei. Detective Chen embodies determination, perseverance, justice, and the maintenance of law and order in society. In a certain manner, his role mirrors the rules and precepts followed by Buddhist practitioners. On the other hand, Cheng Hsiao-mei was coerced into a sexually abusive relationship by Ben Yuen, driven by her love for her mother, who was imprisoned also because of Yuen. A few scenes in the film feature close-ups of her tattoos of roses and a Mongolian word, “*сэтгэл*.” The roses symbolize her love for her mother. According to the Mongolian-English Dictionary compiled by Charles Bawden, the word “*сэтгэл*” means “thought, mind, feelings.”¹⁶ She was eventually rescued by Chen Kui-lin, and after he voluntarily turned himself in and received the death penalty, she reconnected with him one more time before his execution, thereby suggesting the liberation of the mind (*сэтгэл*) through the elimination of the three poisons.

In the Buddhist context, ignorance (*avijjā*) is understood as the absence of wisdom (*vijjā*) concerning the nature of reality. It does not entail a lack of knowledge regarding worldly affairs

but manifests as delusion, described as an inversion (*vipallāsa*) of reality. In the *Anguttara-Nikāya* 4.49, four inversions of perception, mind, and view are mentioned: 1) perceiving the impermanent as permanent; 2) perceiving the painful as pleasurable; 3) perceiving the non-self as self; and 4) perceiving the unattractive as attractive.¹⁷ Consequently, one's perception of the world is shaped by these distortions or inversions, all of which are rooted in ignorance. The most fundamental inversion is the firm attachment to the view of having an illusory, independent selfhood (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*). As Gethin explains, "Thus for Buddhist thought, to understand the world in terms of self is not only to see it wrongly but to be led by greed, desire, and attachment. One's sense of 'self' springs not only from delusion, but from the desire to identify and claim some part of parts of the universe as one's own, as one's possession, and say of them 'this is mine, I am this, this is myself.'"¹⁸ Chen Kui-lin's attachment to self and fame, demonstrated at the beginning of the film when he insists on being referred to by his full name rather than his nickname "The Kuilin Kid," exemplifies this. Furthermore, his decision to pursue Lin Lu-ho and Ben Yuen, motivated by a desire to be remembered as the foremost criminal, illustrates his quest for recognition. This obsession with fame epitomizes the "poison" of ignorance.

Chen Kui-lin plays a critical role in depicting a contemporary version of Zhou Chu, who is tasked with eliminating the other two scourges and embarking on a journey of inner transformation. The connection of this character to the poison of delusion appears to be a deliberate choice. Buddhist teachings define delusion to be the foundation of greed and hatred as rooted in ignorance. Whereas ignorance is generally understood as the lack of awareness of the true nature of reality, delusion is often described as the attachment to the "unreal imagination" (Sanskrit: *abhūtaparikalpa*) of nonexistent phenomena. An oft-cited example of delusion is the firm belief in the existence of an individual self (*attā*). This Buddhist understanding of the relationship among

delusion, ignorance, and the cycle of transmigration is highlighted in the *Avijjānīvaraṇa Sutta* of the Pali Canon:

Monks, I do not see a single obstruction other than the obstruction of ignorance by which obstructed people run and wander for a long time. Indeed, monks, being obstructed by the obstruction of ignorance, people run and wander for a long time.

The Blessed One said this matter, and it is thus said:

There exists no other single thing,
By which such obstructed people,
Wander day and night,
As they are enveloped by delusion.
Those who have dispelled delusion,
Have shattered the mass of darkness,
They do not roam and wander,
The cause for them no longer exists.¹⁹

When the “mass of darkness” of delusion is shattered, one no longer wanders in *saṃsāra* or the perpetual cycle of suffering. This is illustrated in the final act of the film, when Chen Kui-lin—having abandoned hatred and greed by killing Lin Lu-ho and Ben Yuen—continues with the bloodshed by killing the diehard followers of the cult, representing the final elimination of delusion. Similarly, in the original story of Zhou Chu, after eliminating the scourges of the tiger and dragon, the elimination of the last scourge, which was himself, was symbolic and achieved through a process of moral reformation. In the film, this is indicated by Chen Kui-lin’s voluntarily turning himself in and earning respect from Inspector Chen Hui, who had been hunting down Chen Kui-lin for years and lost one of his eyes during a chase.

Killing Everyone in the Way

While the violence depicted in the film is severe, some viewers may question whether it serves as an appropriate medium to convey Buddhist teachings on spiritual transformation and the themes of abandoning greed, hatred, and delusion. It can be argued that the brutal violence depicted in the

film, which appears to be influenced by South Korean “extreme” cinema,²⁰ is entirely unnecessary and solely intended for commercial gain. The visual portrayal of excessive bloodshed and violence starkly contrasts with the ethical ideal of Buddhism—that is, *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). However, employing violent imagery to symbolize the elimination of mental defilements is not unprecedented in Buddhist scriptures. It is worth noting that Buddhist scriptures occasionally employ graphic language to generate a shock factor, thereby creating a lasting impression on practitioners regarding specific teachings. A notable example is found in the *Dhammapada*, particularly in verse 294, which states, “Having slain one’s mother and father, two warrior kings, and having destroyed a country along with its ministers, the spiritual practitioner proceeds on the path untroubled.”²¹

However, the verse does not advocate for reprehensible actions, such as the murder of one’s parents or the orchestration of massacres involving kings, ministers, and fellow practitioners, who are all held in high esteem within the Indian caste system. According to the *Dhammapada-Atthakathā* (*Commentary on the Dhammapada*), attributed to Buddhaghosa, “mother” symbolizes greed, “father” represents conceit, the “two warrior kings” denote the extremist views of permanence and annihilation, the “country” refers to the twelve sense spheres (comprising six sense organs and their corresponding objects), the “ministers” to the attachment to pleasure derived from these sense spheres, and the “spiritual practitioner” is likened to Arahants (the worthy ones), who are free from ignorance and defilements.²² Thus, the depiction of “slaying” and “killing” serves as a metaphor for the process of elimination or abandonment. The verse is intended to remind practitioners that by overcoming greed, conceit, dualistic views of permanence and annihilation, as well as attachment to the sense spheres and the resultant pleasures, they can achieve liberation from suffering.

Similarly, a discourse from the Chinese Chan (Zen) Buddhist tradition, attributed to the ninth-century monk Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄, conveys the following teaching: “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you meet the patriarchs, kill the patriarchs; if you meet an Arhat, kill the Arhat; if you meet your parents, kill your parents... in this way, you attain liberation.”²³ This celebrated teaching, though expressed through graphic depictions of indiscriminate killing, is not intended to be interpreted literally. Interpreted within the context of the teaching from which it is quoted, the discourse emphasizes the importance of eschewing reliance on revered figures such as Buddhas, patriarchs, Arhats, or one’s parents.²⁴ At the heart of this instruction is the principle that students must seek enlightenment from within, rather than depending on external authorities:

If an individual seeks the Buddha, that individual loses the Buddha. If an individual seeks the Way, that individual loses the Way. If an individual seeks the patriarchs, that individual loses the patriarchs. Great virtues should not be mistaken. I do not adopt your interpretations of the scriptures, nor do I adopt your kings and high ministers. I also do not adopt the eloquence in your great flow of speech. I do not adopt your intelligence and wisdom either. I solely desire your correct view and understanding.²⁵

The reference to “kings and high ministers” in the text is significant because of its allusion to the *Dhammapada*. The portrayal of violence in the film, particularly the contentious scene in the grand hall of the New Soul Society in which dozens of followers are killed, appears to contradict the peaceful aura typically associated with Buddhism. It is questionable whether the film intends to use this scene of mass killing as a nod to the verse from the *Dhammapada* or the teachings of Linji. However, this depiction can be interpreted as a metaphorical device.

A Potential Reflection of Aṅgulimāla’s Narrative?

Within the Buddhist canon, there is the account of a notorious brigand and serial killer who murdered 999 individuals and adorned himself with a necklace of their fingers, thereby earning

the moniker “Aṅgulimāla” (finger necklace). Different versions of Aṅgulimāla’s story are presented in the Pali and Chinese Canons,²⁶ while a Mahāyāna version in Sanskrit offers a much-extended narrative. Certain accounts detail the ill intentions of his teacher, who set Aṅgulimāla on a vicious path, while other versions delve into the stories of their previous lives, explaining that their toxic relationship stemmed from adverse karmic actions. In the Mahāyāna depiction, the concept of innate Buddha nature (Sanskrit: *tathāgatagarbha*) is illustrated, which asserts that even someone as ruthless as Aṅgulimāla possesses an untainted Buddha nature, unaffected by adventitious defilements (Sanskrit: *āgantukakleśa*). The common thread among these versions is the theme of redemption through Buddhist practice and the potential for spiritual transformation, even in the case of a notorious killer like Aṅgulimāla. Notably, Aṅgulimāla was originally named Ahimsaka, which ironically means “non-violent.”

As the story begins, Aṅgulimāla was on the verge of killing his own mother as his thousandth victim, an act that would complete the dark task assigned by his teacher, but he was intercepted by the Buddha. The Buddha tamed Aṅgulimāla and initiated him into the Buddhist monastic practice. After converting to Buddhism, Aṅgulimāla was presented by the Buddha to King Pasenadi, who had previously ordered Aṅgulimāla executed for his crimes and threat to society. Following the Buddha’s skillful elucidation of Aṅgulimāla’s transformation, the king decided not to persecute him. The story concludes with Aṅgulimāla aiding a woman in difficult labor, using the asseveration of the truth of the Buddha’s teachings as a protective charm, which facilitated a safe delivery. This experience caused Aṅgulimāla to think of his new life into the monastic community as a second “noble birth.” Subsequently, while begging for alms, Aṅgulimāla was attacked with sticks and stones, which gave him severe injuries. Despite the heavy bleeding, he managed to return to the monastic community and passed away shortly after. The Buddha

declared that Aṅgulimāla had achieved enlightenment and that the violence he suffered was the result of his past misdeeds. This narrative highlights the importance of redemption, illustrating how one can purify oneself of misdeeds by genuinely recognizing their harmful nature, relinquishing self-attachment, and embracing the potential for enlightenment, despite having committed 999 murders.²⁷

While it may be speculative to suggest that the name “Kui-lin,” of the film’s protagonist, derives from the phonetic rendition of “guli” in Aṅgulimāla, several themes from Aṅgulimāla’s story resonate with the character of Chen Kui-lin:

1) Although the legal system in Taiwan, unlike that of King Pasenadi, does not revoke his death sentence, Chen Kui-lin, known for his serial killings, undergoes a profound process of redemption, just like Aṅgulimāla.

2) Chen Kui-lin first confronted his own crimes of serial killing when his grandmother passed away, at which point Dr. Chang seized the opportunity to encourage him to surrender. Similarly, Aṅgulimāla underwent a transformation when he faced the potential death of his own mother, whom he could have killed to complete his black magic ritual. As Anālayo notes:

Thus, the actual conversion seems to begin with Aṅgulimāla’s astonishment at his inability to catch up with the Buddha, whether in a literal sense by being physically unable to reach him or in a figurative sense by being unable to match the Buddha’s level of complete fearlessness. This is followed by the Buddha’s direct remarks, highlighting the evil Aṅgulimāla had done, a rather direct way of addressing a feared brigand, especially when coming from a potential victim.²⁸

Similarly, Chen Kui-lin was struck by the selfless assistance and fearlessness of Dr. Chang, who demonstrated a moral stature that Chen found unattainable. This encounter challenged him to re-evaluate his actions and their consequences, leading to a divination quest to turn himself in. Just as Aṅgulimāla was moved by the Buddha’s fearless and calm demeanor, Chen Kui-lin’s

transformation was catalyzed by witnessing the integrity of someone who, despite knowing Chen's dangerous past, chose to help him unconditionally.

3) Chen Kui-lin is the only character in the film with a beard, and he is also the sole character portrayed by the actor Ethan Juan who retains a beard. This portrayal appears intentional, setting the stage for the final scene in which his hair and beard are shaved by the salon owner he saved. The *Ratṭhapāla-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* explains the significance of shaving in the following manner:

O Ratṭhapāla, there are these four kinds of decay. Because of these, some individuals shave off their hair and beard, put on ochre robes, and depart from household life into homelessness. What are these four? Decay due to old age, decay due to illness, decay of wealth, and decay of relatives.²⁹

In other words, shaving hair and beard is not only a custom when one becomes a Buddhist monastic but also a symbol of purity and letting go of attachments. To portray Chen Kui-lin's spiritual transformation, his hair and beard are shaved, reflecting the same depiction of the story of Aṅgulimāla.

4) When Chen Kui-lin learns from Dr. Chang that he does not actually have cancer, it is as though he gains a second life, albeit short-lived due to his impending execution, much like the second "noble life" Aṅgulimāla enjoyed having in the Buddha's monastic community.

5) Lastly, Chen Kui-lin's attempt to save the life of a child prompts his final spiritual realization, which also aligns with how Aṅgulimāla was helping a woman who experienced difficulty in labor.

It is possible that the filmmakers created the character of Chen Kui-lin to reflect the narrative of Aṅgulimāla, who is perhaps the most well-known and dramatic example of spiritual transformation from a feared mass murderer to a Buddhist monastic who ultimately attained enlightenment.

Bernard Faure made an insightful observation that Buddhism is not “as exempt from violence as its adherents claim.”³⁰ He suggests that we should pay closer attention to the symbolic violence found in mythological accounts, as well as in iconographic and ritual practices, and consider how the tension between symbolic and physical violence may challenge our understanding of a normative Buddhist tradition. However, there is no reason to believe that the director and screenwriter carefully considered the relationship between ritual and physical violence in Buddhism when designing the violent scenes. Rather, the excessive depiction of physical violence in the film serves more as stylistic visual elements. It is perhaps the lack of a philosophical inquiry into the purpose and nature of such visual violence that weakens the film’s artistic value, relegating it more to the realm of a commercial product.

Deception as a Skillful Means

The journey of Chen Kui-lin to inner transformation unfolds in two critical steps:

In the first step, an underground doctor, Dr. Chang, informs Chen Kui-lin that he has terminal lung cancer and is facing impending death. This revelation forces him to contemplate whether he should redeem his past wrongdoings and surrender to the authorities. Wrestling with his decision, he conducts a Poe divination (擲筊 *zhijiao*) in front of a statue of the Chinese folk deity, Lord Guan 關公 (Guan Gong), a martial deity revered by both police and criminals in Chinese society for embodying loyalty and righteousness. Remarkably, the divination, repeated nine times, unambiguously suggests that Chen Kui-lin should turn himself in. Upon surrendering at a police station, he discovers—much to his dismay—that he is unrecognized and ranked third on the most-wanted list. This revelation reignites his ego and desire for recognition, compelling him to eliminate the top two individuals on the list and secure the top spot.

In the subsequent step, after eliminating Ben Yuen, Chen Kui-lin is deceived by Lin Lu-ho, who has assumed a new identity as a cult leader, into believing that his former identity “Bullhead” was dead. Under Lin Lu-ho’s influence, Chen Kui-lin undergoes an inner transformation, becoming deeply regretful for his past actions and dedicating himself to renouncing worldly possessions in search of a spiritual path. His resolve is further tested upon discovering Lin Lu-ho’s organization scams his followers for financial gain, even at the cost of the life of a young boy. This revelation sharpens his understanding of good versus evil, resulting in the elimination of Lin Lu-ho and his deluded followers.

What is intriguing is that the catalysts for his inner transformation in both steps are deceptions: Dr. Chang’s lie about his terminal cancer and Lin Lu-ho’s lie about a spiritual practice that cured him of cancer. This scenario recalls the “Parable of the Burning House” found in the *Lotus Sūtra*:

A rich man had a very large house. The house had only one entrance, and the timber from which it was made had dried out thoroughly over the years. One day the house caught fire, and the rich man’s many children, heedless of the fire, continued to play in the house. Their father called to them from outside that the house was afire and that they would perish in the flames if they did not come out. The children, not knowing the meaning of “fire” or “perish,” continued to play as before. The man called out once more, “Come out, children, and I will give you ox-drawn carriages, goat-drawn carriages, and deer-drawn carriages!” Tempered by the desire for new playthings, the children left the burning house, only to find a single great ox-drawn carriage awaiting them. (Hurvitz 1976: x)

In the parable, the “father” represents the Buddha and the three children symbolize the three kinds of practitioners: Śrāvakas (Hearers), Pratyekabuddhas (Solitary Realizers), and Bodhisattvas (Enlightened Beings). The parable suggests that the deception of the Buddha was intended to be used as a “skillful means” (Sanskrit: *upāya-kauśalya*) to motivate the followers to let go of their attachment to *saṃsāra*, that is, the burning house, while something even more wonderful than what was promised is waiting for them to discover.

Dr. Chang lied about Chen Kui-lin's cancer; she was also connected to the other two scourges, such that without her guidance, he would not have been able to confront the two scourges. Just like the father in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the deception of Dr. Chang was intended for Chen Kui-lin's benefit, and the information she provided led to the elimination of the two scourges. Such "skillful means" ultimately led to a gift beyond his anticipation: his inner spiritual transformation and the relinquishment of his delusions of ego and fame. The character of Dr. Chang and her deceit introduce another layer of Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings that were not found in the original tale of Zhou Chu. It is no coincidence that the Buddha is also described as a "great physician" in the *Lotus Sūtra*, thereby suggesting the role of spiritual guidance in a transformative journey.

Conversely, the deception by Lin Lu-ho was not intended for a wholesome cause. Nevertheless, once Chen Kui-lin realized that the establishment of the New Soul Society was merely a scam, he was determined to eradicate the sources of greed and ignorance. These two types of deception can be interpreted from a Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective, wherein both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are considered illusory.

Conflicts Between Established Religious Beliefs and New Religious Movements

Apart from focusing on Buddhism, the film also explores the conflict between established religious beliefs and new religious movements. The former includes popular Chinese religious beliefs, represented by the devout worship of Lord Guan, while the latter is illustrated by the cult led under the guise of Lin Lu-ho. The film favors the values of established and long-standing beliefs and practices over new religious organizations. At the climax, Chen Kui-lin confronts Lin Lu-ho with a gun, only to find it has a squib load. Recalling his Poe divination before Lord Guan, which yielded the same result nine times consecutively, he reloads his gun, signaling to Lin Lu-ho that

he would be spared if his firearm malfunctioned for the same nine times. The second shot is also a squib, but Chen Kui-lin fatally shoots Bullhead in the third attempt.

The differences between these two religious orientations are further highlighted through the depiction of Chen Kui-lin's and Lin Lu-ho's relationships with their grandmother and mother, respectively. Since both were in the list of most-wanted criminals, they were unable to maintain contact with their female elders. However, at the beginning of the film, aware of his grandmother's failing health, Chen Kui-lin risks visiting the hospital for her surgery and breaks down upon learning of her death. In contrast, Lin Lu-ho's mother spends her last days in a nursing home and Lin Lu-ho never visits her, even years after her death. Presented with his mother's ashes, Lin Lu-ho shows no emotion. This contrast is established to emphasize the characters' religious leanings, implicitly suggesting that the cult New Soul Society is rootless and insincere, with teachings about love and renunciation being mere empty slogans used to exploit followers for financial gain.

The issues of cults and new religious movements in Taiwan have challenged not only long-standing religious sects but also the "political, social, and even judicial realms" in Taiwan.³¹ This may be interpreted on a broader scale as a "scourge," which often includes greed for adherents' wealth and economic development, violence and religious terrorism, attachment to religious identities, and the influence on Taiwanese culture and politics.

Conclusion

The Pig, the Snake, and the Pigeon is not a direct remake of *Zhou Chu Chu Sanhai*. The basis of the modernization of this classic tale is built upon the Buddhist perspectives of good and evil, purification and defilement, the symbology of "killing" as the elimination of defilements, the notion of "skillful means," as well as the potential for spiritual enlightenment. This is achieved through the association with the "three scourges" as the three poisons in Buddhism, the rewriting

of the original character Lu Qinghe—who inspired Zhou Chu toward reformation—into a new character of Dr. Chang who skillfully led Chen Kui-lin to an inner transformation through her deceptive claims about his cancer, and the shaping of Chen Kui-lin’s character as a reflection of the narrative of *Aṅgulimāla*. Other characters introduced include Detective Chen and the salon owner Cheng. The former character can be considered to represent the adherence to precepts, while the latter character symbolizes the liberation of the mind from hatred, greed, and delusion. It was Cheng who eventually performed the shaving of Chen Kui-lin’s hair and beard as a final confirmation of the purity Chen attained. The film also explores the tensions between established Chinese religious beliefs and new religious movements, on which the filmmaker firmly asserts that traditional values, beliefs, and practices are the proper means of leading to inner transformation.

¹ According to Wu, “The dates used here are based on Cao Daoheng 曹道衡 and Shen Yucheng 沈玉成, *Zhongguo wenxuejia dacidian: Xian Qian Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao juan* 中國文學家大辭典：先秦漢魏晉南北朝卷 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 275.” See Sujane Wu, “The Three Scourges and Zhou Chu,” *Early Medieval China* 23 (2017), 7, footnote 1.

² For a complete English translation of the *Shishuo xinyu* and its commentary by Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標, see Richard B. Mather, trans. *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

³ For the Chinese original text, see Xu Zhen’e 徐震堃, *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 343. My translation follows Xu’s edition, which reads: 周處年少時，兇彊俠氣，為鄉里所患，又義興水中有蛟，山中有獮跡虎，並皆暴犯百姓，義興人謂為「三橫」，而處尤劇。或說處殺虎斬蛟，實冀三橫唯餘其一。處即刺殺虎，又入水擊蛟，蛟或浮或沒，行數十里，處與之俱，經三日三夜，鄉里皆謂已死，更相慶，竟殺蛟而出。聞里人相慶，始知為人情所患，有自改意。乃自吳尋二陸，平原不在，正見清河，具以情告，並云欲自修改而年已蹉跎，終無所成。清河曰：「古人貴朝聞夕死，況君前途尚可。且人患志之不立，亦何憂令名不彰邪？」處遂改勵，終為忠臣孝子。

⁴ Sujane Wu, “The Three Scourges and Zhou Chu,” *Early Medieval China* 23 (2017), 7-21.

⁵ Wang Wenzhang 王文章 and Wu Jiang 吳江, *Zhongguo jingju yishu baike quanshu* 中國京劇藝術百科全書 (Encyclopedia of the Art of Chinese Peking Opera). (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe 中央編譯出版社 (Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2011), pp. 88-89.

⁶ https://m.facebook.com/ThePIGtheSNAKEandthePIGEON/posts/159750463874955/?refsrc=deprecated&_rd=1 (accessed March 14, 2024)

⁷ The interview by Hongyan 紅眼 was published on *Ming Pao* on October 29, 2023.

<https://ol.mingpao.com/ldy/cultureleisure/culture/20231029/1698514304138/什麼人訪問什麼人-殺黑道-殺邪教-殺殺人狂-《周處除三害》黃精甫的帽子戲法> (accessed May 8, 2024)

⁸ See Netflix's Global Top 10 list of the most watched non-English films during the period of March 4 to March 10, 2024: <https://www3.stage.netflix.com/tudum/top10/films-non-english?week=2024-03-10> (accessed May 8, 2024).

⁹ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_pig_the_snake_and_the_pigeon (accessed May 8, 2024)

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-68542277> (accessed May 11, 2024)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The foreign terms included are in Pali unless otherwise specified.

¹³ David P. Jackson and Janice A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (London: Serindia, 1984), p. 39.

¹⁴ Alex Wayman, "The Concept of Poison in Buddhism," *Oriens* 10, no. 1 (1957): 107–109.

¹⁵ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wheel_of_life_Kopan_Monastery.jpg. This image was originally posted to Flickr by zionorbi at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/27855439@N08/3208334601> (accessed May 22, 2024).

¹⁶ Charles R. Bawden, compiled. *Mongolian-English Dictionary* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 321.

¹⁷ *Anicce, bhikkhave, niccanti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso; dukkhe, bhikkhave, sukhanti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso; anattani, bhikkhave, attāti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso; asubhe, bhikkhave, subhanti saññāvipallāso cittavipallāso diṭṭhivipallāso*. See <https://tipitaka.sutta.org/romn/cscd/s0402m3/mul4/>, under the *Rohitassavaggo* (accessed May 9, 2024).

¹⁸ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 146–147.

¹⁹ *Nāhaṃ bhikkhave aññaṃ ekanīvaraṇampi samanupassāmi yena nīvaraṇena nivutā pajā dīgharattaṃ sandhāvanti saṃsaranti yathayidaṃ, bhikkhave, avijjā-nīvaraṇaṃ. Avijjānīvaraṇena hi, bhikkhave, nivutā pajā dīgharattaṃ sandhāvanti saṃsaranti* 'ti. *Etamatthaṃ bhagavā avoca. Tatthetaṃ iti vuccati - Natthañño ekadhammopi, yenevaṃ nivutā pajā; Saṃsaranti ahorattaṃ, yathā mohena āvutā. Ye ca mohaṃ pahatvāna, tamokkhandhaṃ padālayuṃ; Na te puna saṃsaranti, hetu tesam na vijjatī* 'ti // The *Avijjānīvaraṇa Sutta* is found in the *Itivuttakapāli* of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*, see <https://tipitaka.sutta.org/romn/cscd/s0504m/mul0/> (accessed May 9, 2024).

²⁰ See Robert L. Cagle, "The Good, the Bad, and the South Korean: Violence, Morality, and the South Korean Extreme Film," in *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*, Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, eds. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), pp. 123–44.

²¹ *Mātaraṃ pitaraṃ hantvā, rājāno dve ca khattiye; Raṭṭhaṃ sānucaraṃ hantvā, anīgho yāti brāhmaṇo*. See <https://tipitaka.sutta.org/romn/cscd/s0502m/mul20/> (accessed May 9, 2024).

²² John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, trans. *The Dhammapada: A New English Translation with the Pali Text and the First English Translation of the Commentary's Explanation of the Verses with Notes Translated from Sinhala Sources and Critical Textual Comments* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 323–324.

²³ 逢佛殺佛、逢祖殺祖、逢羅漢殺羅漢、逢父母殺父母、逢親眷殺親眷 --- 始得解脫。(CBETA, T47, no. 1985, p. 500, b22-24).

²⁴ Damien Keown, “kill the Buddha,” in *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780198605607.001.0001/acref-9780198605607-e-941>. (accessed May 24, 2024)

²⁵ 若人求佛，是人失佛；若人求道，是人失道；若人求祖，是人失祖；大德莫錯，我且不取爾解經論、我亦不取爾國王大臣、我亦不取爾辯似懸河、我亦不取爾聰明智慧，唯要爾真正見解。(CBETA, T47, no. 1985, p. 502, c11-15).

²⁶ Bhikkhu Anālayo notes on the Pali version of the *Aṅgulimāla-sutta* (MN 86), “This discourse has five Chinese parallels: two parallels in two *Samyukta-āgama* collections, one parallel in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, and two parallels in the form of individual translations.” See Anālayo, *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya, Volume 1* (Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation, 2011), pp. 485-86.

²⁷ Anālayo, “The Conversion of Aṅgulimāla in the *Samyukta-āgama*,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 25, no. 2 (2008): 136–139.

²⁸ Ibid., 145.

²⁹ *Cattārimāni, bho raṭṭhapāla, pārijuṇṇāni yehi pārijuṇṇehi samannāgatā idhekacce kesamassuṃ ohāretvā kāsāyāni vatthāni acchādetvā agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajanti. Katamāni cattāri? Jarāpārijuṇṇaṃ, byādhipārijuṇṇaṃ, bhogapārijuṇṇaṃ, ñātipārijuṇṇaṃ.* See <https://tipitaka.sutta.org/romn/cscd/s0202m/mul3/> (accessed May 10, 2024).

³⁰ Bernard Faure, “Buddhism and Symbolic Violence,” in Andrew R. Murphy, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 224.

³¹ Paul R Katz, “Religion and the State in Post-war Taiwan,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 174 (2003): 412.

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