

Rel. 310: Death and remembrance in Chinese history

“A tour of the byways of the unseen realm,
so that you will know of the retribution that follows upon sins...”

– From the 5th century *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記

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Office hours: M 8-10, W 11-noon

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Chinese scrolls depicting hell combine image and text to communicate religious ideas to a broad audience; they offer ethics, entertainment and an education on how the cosmos works, warning about the certainties of karmic retribution. Once a widespread genre of which relatively few examples survive, “hell scrolls” (*diyù juànzhóu* 地獄卷軸) portray the bureaucratic courts where sinners are tortured and viewers are treated to a morality play. Yet the vast majority have fallen victim to the Cultural Revolution and to simple disinterest in a religious art form that was never regarded as worthy of conservation. At Reed, we are fortunate to own more than a hundred of these surviving scrolls, and our website devoted to them is the largest in the world. Often consisting of sets of ten because there are ten “earth prisons” where the dead are judged, each decade is done in its own style and focuses on its own collection of messages, but overall there remains considerable consistency throughout this colorful genre. Because they communicate much about cosmos, about religion and about the laity’s daily anxieties in medieval and late imperial China, we will use them to structure our own tour of retributive hell, learning much about laity idea systems in the process.

A long tradition on images and texts about hell

For most of its imperial history, China’s traditional entrance to hell has been at Fengdu, a tourist town that in recent years has boasted dark dungeons filled with life-sized automatons being tortured under the angry gaze of the underworld’s ten kings. Yet Fengdu’s hell has fallen upon hard times, the demons covered in thick dust, their weapons missing from broken hands. A headless corpse rises out of his tomb, but his headless-ness is only because his wooden neck has snapped, his head still lying inside the coffin. These automatons represent only one of the most recent attempts to visualize the retributive hell positioned between death and rebirth, and their earliest predecessors were simply painted hand scrolls as well as elaborate artistic wall scrolls depicting the kings and their hells from the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties respectively. Our own collection of hell scrolls from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries combine image and text to warn and horrify the living, scrolls that were once hung around the coffin during prolonged funeral ceremonies and that portrayed scores of particular tortures for particular sins. Yet as already noted, like Fengdu these scrolls have not fared well, and relatively few now survive.

Hell scrolls range from cartoonish folk art to elaborate, painterly canvases, but most are hand-painted images manufactured at production-line artisan workshops. Amidst the variety of styles and compositions, there are thematic constants. The first scroll depicts a sinner’s entrance into hell where his or her life is reviewed and punishments duly assigned; the last scroll is overseen by the Wheel-turning King as the now-tortured soul is allocated one of six forms of rebirth. In between, these scrolls not only chart the dead’s torturous journey, they reveal what was on the mental radars of people – their anxieties, their ethics and their stories.

Our course will traipse through these hells one by one as we study karma, canon and laity practice, but as it does, it will also consider how these scrolls navigate between image and text as modes of religious communication, between *painture* and *parole* that within the Western discourse have been regarded as the two “portals to the house of memory” ever since the thirteenth century. Today we speak of “imagistic” versus “doctrinal” modes of religiosity, the former characterized by regionally fragmented, multivocal iconic imagery that is encoded via separate, distinct episodes whereas the latter is understood as codified, routinized, textual material reaching out to larger communities.

[1]

What makes the Chinese hell scrolls special – and what first attracted me to this genre – is that they *combine* the two in their educating the laity and enforcing an ethic. Displaying both pictures and texts (the latter in the form of cartouches, couplets and admonishments), they merge the provocative, colorful aesthetics of the grotesque with the grander canonical message of karmic retribution that was well known from narratives and sutras. They force us to rethink our assumptions about how these media separately functioned to communicate a religious doctrine.

Furthermore, our tour of hell cannot ignore how hells worked in other traditions, and indeed pedagogical tours of retributive hell are common even today across the world’s religions. Yet surely we’re not allowed to draw comparisons? Postmodernism justifiably brought down many of the universals that had become the bedrock of “comparative” religions, but now in the post-postmodern age, comparison has taken a more conservative role of

asking new questions about a particular tradition through an awareness of how other traditions developed. “Making the familiar strange and the strange familiar” is the new mantra, and the Chinese pedagogical tour of retributive hell can well use this methodology because it is a relatively specific and detailed religious phenomenon that is also seen in Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the Classical world and all the Abrahamic traditions. On one hand, each hell scroll must be historically nuanced within the context of 19th and 20th century Chinese idea systems, but on the other, the Chinese context can’t claim exclusive rights to interpretation because non-Chinese traditions possess similar components. [3] Although not a focus of our studies, the addition of a comparative methodology will add to our historical exegesis, helping us see just what is “Chinese” and what is “hell” in the Chinese hell scrolls.

Stephen Teiser, author of *The scripture on the ten kings* and other works on Chinese hell, writes, “The Chinese Buddhist understanding of purgatory should also be a part of an unfortunately neglected side of Buddhist studies, the investigation of beliefs and practices distributed widely across a given culture.” Even though belief in the Chinese hells spanned most social classes, regions and Buddhisms, study of them has remained sparse. This course will attempt to address this lacuna in Chinese and religious studies.

I. Requirements

- *Conference participation.* I expect active participation every day, so please be fully prepared for each conference, preparation consisting of both reading *and* thinking about the materials. Appended to this syllabus are some suggestions on conference dynamics. If conference does not seem to be going well in your opinion, please talk to me, and we will endeavor to remedy the situation. I seek your comments and take them very seriously. Because we are a small group, full and thoughtful participation throughout will greatly affect our conference dynamics.
- *Three short papers (4-6 pages).* Evenly spaced across the semester, the papers are intended to give you a chance to explore issues with some degree of independence. In the first, I will ask you to choose any hell scroll on the website (except for the A-series) and fully analyze and contextualize it using the rest of the website. (Needless to say, this exercise is also intended to get you fully familiar with the larger collection.) The second paper will be based on the substantial 1970s Taiwanese account of touring hell. The third topic is entirely up to you, and I can help you hone your question. While short, this third paper will also make use of formal proposals and peer review.



A Niutou demon
at Fengdu

- *One guided tour as Niutou 牛頭.* Niutou or “Ox head” is one of the guards and guides of the underworld, often depicted with a pitchfork or mace in hand and leading the damned to their tortures. When we start a new hell, it is often handy to have a Niutou to get us started. As Niutou, you will become the guide for fifteen to twenty minutes, leading us through the new hell materials, highlighting what you think is important, pointing out significant principles at work and so forth. A good Niutou will do three things:
 1. In brief compass summarize the argument (five minutes);
 2. Contextualize that argument in terms of our syllabus so far (five minutes);
 3. And give your own argument (five+ minutes).
 As your followers (a.k.a. torture victims), we will reverently ask you questions after your tour. (A Niutou is exempt from the next round of exploratories to give you a break.)

- *Six exploratories.* Most of you have had courses with me before and so know what I mean by “exploratory,” but I attach a reminder to the back of this syllabus anyway and urge you to re-read it. Because this is an upper level course, I will allow you as a group to decide whether they will be due a day in advance (so I can read through them and orchestrate our discussion) or due in conference itself. If the latter, there is a price to pay as you will

be called on in conference to introduce your topic and lead us in brief discussion on it. (When introducing your chosen topic, feel free to call on people to read out passages, express opinions, etc.)

- *Group project.* I'm open to suggestions and will give this much thought during the semester.

II. Incompletes, absences and extensions – the draconian stuff so PLEASE READ

As the great Warring States legalist Han Feizi warned, indulgent parents have rowdy kids and overly lenient rulers have inefficient subjects; by extension, a permissive teacher can't maximize his students' learning potential. By laying down the law now, we'll also never need to raise it again in the future, and I can pretend to be a kindly Confucian rather than a draconian legalist.

“An Incomplete [IN] is permitted in a course where the level of work done up to the point of the [IN] is passing, but not all the work of a course has been completed by the time of grade submission, for reasons of health or extreme emergency, and for no other reason,” according to the Reed College Faculty Code (V A). “The decision whether or not to grant an IN in a course is within the purview of the faculty for that course.” Like many of my colleagues, I read this as restricting incompletes to acute, extreme emergencies and health crises that have a clear beginning date and a relatively short duration only, that are outside the control of the student, and that interrupt the work of a student who was previously making good progress in a course. Incompletes will not be granted to students unable to complete coursework on time due to chronic medical conditions or to ongoing situations in their academic or non-academic life. Accommodation requests need to go through established channels and must be brought to my attention right away.

Regular, prepared, and disciplined conferencing is intrinsic to this course, and so at a certain point when too many conferences have been missed – specifically more than five – it would logically be advisable to drop or withdraw and to try again another semester. There's no shame in that. Longer-term emergencies indeed happen, and you ought to make use of Student Services when they do. Yet a notice from Student Services that one is ill or is taking a formal emergency absence never automatically exempts one from course requirements such as regular, informed conference participation. In sum, I'll help you out as much as I can to get you across the finish line, but it's the same finish line for everyone and to be fair to your colleagues I need to have you there in the race. To that end, **I would ask that you please e-mail me whenever you are absent** just to let me know you're okay. (More and more students seem to be doing this without prompting anyway, perhaps because we've all become increasingly dependent upon virtual connectivity.)

I'm happy to give paper extensions for medical problems and emergencies when I get verification from Student Services to that effect. Otherwise late papers will still be considered, but the lateness will be taken into account and no comments given. Ken's Subjectivity Curve: The later it is, the more subjective Ken becomes. It's a gamble.

I'm not a legalist like Han Feizi, but even the Confucians regrettably resorted to hard law when their ritualized conduct and exemplary leadership failed.



Karmic retribution for missing a conference

III. Syllabus

27 Aug	A job requiring relocation in hell	Introduction
29 Aug	History and overview I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teiser, <i>The scripture of the ten kings</i>, 1-84 (Text).
31 Aug Ghost festival	History and overview II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teiser, <i>The scripture of the ten kings</i>, 87-121, 152-79 (Text).
5 Sep	History and overview III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teiser, <i>The scripture of the ten kings</i>, 180-218 (Text); Waley, <i>Ballads and stories from Tun-huang</i>, 164-88 (Moodle).
A1: Heavenly contexts – the Pure Land tradition		
7 Sep	Pure Land primary sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Williams, <i>Mahāyāna Buddhism</i>, 238-54 (Handout); Gomez, <i>Land of bliss</i>, 125-43 (Moodle); Inagaki, <i>The three Pure Land sutras</i>, 75-113 (Moodle).

10 Sep	Pure Land secondary sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pas, <i>Visions of Sukhāvātī</i>, 35-64 (Moodle); • Chappell, “The formation of the Pure Land movement in China,” 146-66 (Moodle); • Stevenson, “Death-bed testimonials of the Pure Land faithful,” 592-602 (Handout).
A2: The “Impermanence demons” – Canonical no-self vs. tortured tangible self		
12 Sep	<i>Diamond sutra</i> in text I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conze, “<i>Diamond sutra</i>, in <i>Buddhist wisdom</i>, 5-38 (Handout).
14 Sep	<i>Diamond sutra</i> in text II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conze, “<i>Diamond sutra</i>, in <i>Buddhist wisdom</i>, 38-73 (Handout).
17 Sep	<i>Diamond sutra</i> in action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant and Idema, “Woman Huang recites the <i>Diamond sutra</i>,” in <i>Escape from blood pond</i>, 31-34, 147-229 (Text).
A3: “Making a list, checking it twice...”: Surveillance and projection theories		
19 Sep	Theory Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guthrie, <i>Faces in the clouds</i>, 62-90 (Handout); • Boyer, <i>Religion explained</i>, 137-67 (Handout); • Norenzayan, “The idea that launched a thousand civilizations,” <i>New Scientist</i> (17 Mar 2012), 42-44 (Handout).
21 Sep	Bureaucratic projection Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yu, <i>The journey to the West</i>, 214-55 (Moodle). <p>NEXT TIME INCLUDE INTRO. AND MAYBE CHAPS 8 & 9 OF TOWER OF MYRIAD MIRRORS</p>
24 Sep	Economic projection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kohn, “Counting good deeds and days of life,” 833-64 (Moodle); • Brokaw, “Spiritual retribution and human destiny,” 425-36 (Moodle); • Cline and Littlejohn, “The bureaucracy of hell: Moral prioritization and quantification in Chinese tradition,” 9-28 (Handout).
26 Sep	Law and order projection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lange, “Hell’s creatures and their punishments,” in <i>Justice, punishment and the medieval Muslim imagination</i>, 139-75 (Moodle); • Brook, Bourgan and Blue, “Tormenting the dead,” in <i>Death by a thousand cuts</i>, 122-51 (Moodle).

A4: Hell scrolls as art and artisan production		
28 Sep	Comparing hell-scroll decades I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ledderose, “The bureaucracy of hell,” in <i>Ten thousand things</i>, 163-85 (Moodle); • Vidor, <i>Ten kings of hades</i>, 27-49 (Handout).
1 Oct	Comparing hell-scroll decades II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donnelly, <i>A journey through Chinese hell</i>, 8-105 (Text provided by Ken).
3 Oct	Paper workshop: Contextualizing a hell scroll	First paper due 6 Oct [11:59 p.m.] electronically, hardcopy 8 Oct in class.

A5: <u>Old</u> Yama: Chinese hell’s antecedents		
5 Oct	Hindu and Indian Buddhism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Mārkaṇḍeya purāna</i>, 62-91 (Moodle); • Merh, <i>Yama: The glorious lord of the other world</i>, 207-233 (Moodle); • <i>Devadūta sutta</i>, in <i>The middle length discourses of the Buddha</i>, 1029-36 (Moodle). <p>COULD ADD JATAKA 541 AND MATSUNAGA 正法 excerpt. MAKE</p>

A6: Human and divine intervention in the karmic machine

8 Oct	Guanyin as savior Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yü, “Miao-shan/Kuan-yin as savior of beings in hell,” in <i>Kuan-yin</i>, 320-33 (Handout); • Idema, “The precious scroll of Incense mountain, Part II,” 99-159 (Text provided by Ken).
10 Oct	Dizang and Mulian as saviors Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zhiru, <i>The making of a savior bodhisattva</i>, 169-96 (Handout); • Mair, “Transformation text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana rescuing his mother from the underworld, with pictures, one scroll, with preface,” 1093-1127 (Handout).

A7: The question of comparing afterlives

12 Oct	Early and recent comparative statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Goff, <i>The birth of purgatory</i>, 1-95 (Text).
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FALL BREAK

22 Oct	Realigning our vocabulary I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Goff, <i>The birth of purgatory</i>, 96-208 (Text).
24 Oct	Realigning our vocabulary II Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Goff, <i>The birth of purgatory</i>, 209-88 (Text).
26 Oct	Realigning our vocabulary III Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Le Goff, <i>The birth of purgatory</i>, 289-368 (Text).

A8: Shanshu or “Goodness books”

29 Oct	The Yuli or “Jade calendar” genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donnelly, <i>A journey through Chinese hell</i>, 107-27 (Text provided by Ken); • Giles, “The Yü li ch’ao chuan,” 467-85 (Handout); • Jordan, “The Jade calendar: A visitor’s guide to hell,” (http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/yuhlih/yuhlih-intro.html).
31 Oct	An extensive 1970s tour of hell from Taiwan I Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pas, “Journey to hell: A new report of shamanistic travel to the courts of hell,” <i>Journal of Chinese religions</i> 18 (1990): 43-60 (ATLA); • Orzech, “Mechanisms of violent retribution in Chinese hell narratives,” <i>Contagion</i> 1 (1994): 111-26 (http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/contagion/summary/v001/1.orzech.html); • Shahr, <i>Crazy Ji: Chinese religion and popular literature</i>, 189-95. • <i>Voyages to hell</i>, through Chap. 4 (pp. 1-41) (http://www.voyagestohell.com/).
2 Nov	An extensive 1970s tour of hell from Taiwan II Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courts 1-3, <i>Voyages to hell</i>, chaps. 5-21 (pp. 42-158) (http://www.voyagestohell.com/).

5 Nov	An extensive 1970s tour of hell from Taiwan III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Courts 4-6, <i>Voyages to hell</i>, chaps. 22-41 (pp. 159-290) (http://www.voyagestohell.com/).
7 Nov	An extensive 1970s tour of hell from Taiwan IV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Courts 7-10, <i>Voyages to hell</i>, chaps. 42-61 (pp. 290-429) (http://www.voyagestohell.com/). <p>Second paper due 10 Nov [11:59 p.m.] electronically, hardcopy 12 Nov in class.</p>

A9: Ethical responses

9 Nov	Behaving with hell in mind I Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zhiru, <i>The making of a savior bodhisattva</i>, 107-17. Hsúan Hua, <i>Sūtra of the past vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva</i>, 17-89 (Text provided by Ken).
12 Nov	Behaving with hell in mind II Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hsúan Hua, <i>Sūtra of the past vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva</i>, 90-166 (Text provided by Ken).
14 Nov	Behaving with hell in mind III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hsúan Hua, <i>Sūtra of the past vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva</i>, 167-227 (Text provided by Ken).

A10: Ritual storytelling

16 Nov	How to tell the story I Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judd, "Ritual opera and the bonds of authority," <i>Harmony and counterpoint: Ritual music in Chinese context</i>, 226-46 (Handout); Berezkin, "Scripture-telling (<i>jiangjing</i>) in the Zhangjiagang area and the history of Chinese storytelling," <i>Asia major</i> 3rd ser 24.1 (2011): 1-42 (Handout).
19 Nov	How to tell the story II Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grant and Idema, "The precious scroll of the three lives of Mulian," in <i>Escape from blood pond</i>, 3-31, 35-76 (Text).
21 Nov	How to tell the story III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grant and Idema, "The precious scroll of the three lives of Mulian," in <i>Escape from blood pond</i>, 76-145 (Text).

An appended hell: Tibet

26 Nov	The Tibetan canonical story I Niutou: _____	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thurman, <i>The Tibetan book of the dead</i>, 17-89 (Text).
28 Nov	The Tibetan canonical story II Exploratories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thurman, <i>The Tibetan book of the dead</i>, 90-166 (Text).
30 Nov	The Tibetan canonical story III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thurman, <i>The Tibetan book of the dead</i>, 167-227 (Text).
3 Dec	The Tibetan popular story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cuevas, <i>Travels in the netherworld</i>, 21-54 (Moodle).
5 Dec		Leaving hell to cross that bridge to the Pure Land
8 Dec		Final paper due at 11.59 p.m.
12 Dec		Group project due at noon.

IV. Consciousness of conference technique

Much of our educational system seems designed to discourage any attempt at finding things out for oneself, but makes learning things others have found out, or think they have, the major goal.

– Anne Roe, 1953.

At times it is useful to step back and discuss conference dynamics, to lay bare the bones of conference communication. Why? Because some Reed conferences succeed; others do not. After each conference, I ask myself how it went and why it progressed in that fashion. If just one conference goes badly or only so-so, a small storm cloud forms over my head for the rest of the day. Many students with whom I have discussed conference strategies tell me that most Reed conferences don't achieve that sensation of educational nirvana, that usually students do not leave the room punching the air in intellectual excitement. I agree. A conference is a much riskier educational tool than a lecture, and this tool requires a sharpness of materials, of the conferees and of the conference leader. It can fail if there is a dullness in any of the three. Yet whereas lectures merely impart information (with a "sage on the stage"), conferences train us how to think about and interact with that information (with a "guide on the side"). So when it *does* work....

The content of what you say in conference obviously counts most of all, so how do you determine in advance whether you've got something worthwhile to say? The answer is simple if you don't just quickly read the assigned materials and leave it unanalyzed. So how do you analyze it? A colleague and friend at Harvard, Michael Puett, writes, "the goal of the analyst should be to reconstruct the debate within which such claims were made and to explicate why the claims were made and what their implications were at the time." A religious or philosophical idea doesn't get written down if everyone already buys it; it's written down because it's news. As new, we can speculate on what was old, on what stimulated this reaction. **Think of these texts as arguments and not descriptions**, and as arguments, your job is to play the detective, looking for contextual clues and speculating on implications. I will give you plenty of historical background, and if you look at these texts as arguments, you will get a truer picture.

In addition to content, there are certain conference dynamics that can serve as a catalyst to fully developed content. I look for the following five features when evaluating a conference:

1. Divide the allotted time by the number of conference participants. That resulting time should equal the leader's ideal speaking limits. (I talk too much in conference. Yet when I say this to some students, they sometimes tell me that instructors should feel free to talk more because the students are here to acquire that expertise in the field. So the amount one speaks is a judgment call, but regardless, verbal monopolies never work.)
2. Watch the non-verbal dynamism. Are the students leaning forward, engaging in eye contact and gesturing to drive home a point such that *understanding* is in fact taking on a physical dimension? Or are they silently sitting back in their chairs staring at anything other than another human being? As a conference leader or participant, it's a physical message you should always keep in mind. Leaning forward and engaging eye contact is not mere appearance; it indeed helps to keep one focused if tired.
3. Determine whether the discourse is being directed through one person (usually the conference leader) or is non-point specific. If you diagram the flow of discussion and it looks like a wagon wheel with the conference leader in the middle, the conference has, in my opinion, failed. If you diagram the flow and it looks like a jumbled, all-inclusive net, the conference is more likely to have succeeded.
4. Determine whether a new idea has been achieved. By the end of the conference, was an idea created that was new to everyone, including the conference leader? Did several people contribute a Lego to build a new thought that the conferees would not have been able to construct on their own? This evaluation is trickier because sometimes a conference may not have gone well on first glance but a new idea evolved nonetheless. The leader must be sure to highlight that evolution at conference end.
5. Watch for simple politeness. "Politeness" means giving each other an opportunity to speak, rescuing a colleague hanging out on a limb, asking useful questions as well as complimenting a new idea, a well-said phrase, a funny joke.

If you ever feel a conference only went so-so, then instead of simply moving on to the next one, I would urge you, too, to evaluate the conference using your own criteria and figuring out how you (and I) can make the next one a more meaningful experience.

Preparation is not just reading the assigned pages; it's reading and then thinking through something in that reading, developing a thought and getting it ready to communicate to someone else.

In the end, as long as you are prepared and feel passionate about your work, you should do well, and if passion ever fails, grim determination counts for something.

V. The exploratory

Sometimes conferences sing. Yet just when I would like them to sing glorious opera, they might merely hum a bit of country-western. After my first year of teaching at Reed, I reflected upon my conference performance and toyed with various ideas as to how to induce more of the ecstatic arias and lively crescendos, and I came up with something I call an "exploratory."

Simply put, an exploratory is a one-page, single-spaced piece in which you highlight one thought-provoking issue that caught your attention in the materials we are considering. This brief analysis must show thorough reading and must show *your own* thoughtful extension –

- Your own informed, *constructive* criticism of the author (and not just a bash-and-trash rant);
- Your own developed, thoughtful question (perhaps even inspired by readings from other classes) that raises interesting issues when seen in the light of the author's text;
- Your own application of theory and method to the primary source;
- Your own personal conjecture as to how this data can be made useful; or (best of all)
- Your own autonomous problem that you devised using the same data under discussion.

I am not here looking for polished prose or copious (or any) footnotes – save all that for our formal papers. (I do not return exploratories with comments unless a special request is made.) Exploratories are not full, open-heart surgeries performed on the text. Instead, exploratories tend to be somewhat informal but focused probes on one particular aspect in which you yourself can interact with the text and can enter into the conversation.

What is *not* an exploratory? It is not merely a topic supported by evidence from the book, nor is it a descriptive piece on someone else's ideas, nor is it a general book report in which you can wander to and fro without direction. Bringing in outside materials is allowed, but the exploratory is not a forum for ideas outside that day's expressed focus. (Such pieces cannot be used in our conference discussions.) Also, don't give into the temptation of just reading the first few pages of a text and then writing your exploratory. (What would *you* conclude if you received a lot of exploratories that all coincidentally tackled an issue in the first five or six pages of the reading?) It is instead a *problematique*, an issue with attitude.

The best advice that I can give here is simply to encourage you to consider *why* I am requesting these exploratories from you: I want to see what ignites your interest in the text *so I can set the conference agenda*. That is why they are due the evening *before* a conference. Thus late exploratories are of no use. (Being handed a late exploratory is like being handed your salad after you've eaten dessert and are already leaving the restaurant.) I base roughly a third to half my conferences on exploratories, and I will use them to draw you in, parry your perspective against that of another, and build up the discussion based on your views. Exploratories help me turn the conference to issues that directly interest you. They often lead us off on important tangents, and they often return us to the core of the problem under discussion. So if you are struggling with finding "something to say," simply recall why I ask for these exploratories in the first place. Is there something in the text you think worthy of conference time? Do you have an idea you want to take this opportunity to explore? Here is your chance to draw our attention to it. Your perspectives are important, and if you have them crystallized on paper in advance, they will be easier to articulate in conference.

Since I began using exploratories, most students have responded very favorably. Students like the fact that it is a different form of writing, a bit more informal and more frequent, somewhat akin to thinking aloud. It forces one not just to read a text but to be looking for something in that text, to engage that text actively. And it increases the likelihood that everyone will leave the conference singing Puccini.

[1] For imagistic versus doctrinal communication within religious studies, see the work of Harvey Whitehouse such as *Arguments and icons* (2000) or *Modes of religiosity* (2004).

[2] See for example the sixteen articles in *A magic still dwells: Comparative religion in the postmodern age* (2000).

[3] Let me give a simple, often overlooked example as to why recognizing universals is vital. Abrahamic scholars explain hell's fiery realm because Gehenna or Gehinnom – an early term for “hell” – was a dump outside ancient Jerusalem where garbage was incinerated, and such a site-specific contextualization at first appears to be a scholarly objective contextualization. Yet it quickly becomes watered down when we also find hellfires raging in Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and even Mayan afterlives. I would instead draw upon Ricoeur's understanding of hermeneutics in which certain symbols are widely selected because they “naturally” embody notions we want to communicate regardless of culture, in this case the notion of painful and complete transformation.