

# Yama and Moral Governance: The Sinicization of Buddhist Judgment in Chinese Religious Culture

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**Abstract:** Yama, originally transmitted to China as a Buddhist deity presiding over postmortem judgment, underwent a profound transformation through sustained engagement with indigenous Chinese ethical, cosmological, and cultural traditions. Rather than a process of passive assimilation, this study conceptualizes the Sinicization of Yama as an active form of cultural translation, through which Buddhist moral authority was selectively reconfigured within familiar frameworks of Confucian ethics, Daoist cosmology, and vernacular religious imagination.

Drawing on historical texts, religious narratives, and popular cultural representations, this article demonstrates how Yama functioned as a symbolic mechanism of moral governance that extended ethical regulation beyond formal legal institutions and into everyday life. The bureaucratization of the underworld, the circulation of moral narratives, and the incorporation of indigenous sacred geographies collectively contributed to the legitimation and internalization of moral norms.

From a contemporary perspective, the continued re-signification of Yama in modern cultural forms complicates linear narratives of secularization. Even when detached from explicit religious belief, Yama persists as a symbolic resource for reflecting on moral responsibility, justice, and human agency. This study thus highlights the enduring social functions of religious symbolism within both historical and modern contexts of moral regulation.

**Keywords:** Yama; Sinicization; Moral Governance; Cultural Translation; Symbolic Power; Chinese Buddhism

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## 1. Introduction

Yama, originating in Indian Buddhist cosmology as the sovereign judge of the underworld, underwent a sustained and complex transformation during the transmission of Buddhism into China. Rather than functioning as a stable doctrinal entity, Yama was gradually reinterpreted through interaction with indigenous ethical systems, cosmological frameworks, and socio-political imaginaries. This process—commonly conceptualized as the Sinicization of Buddhism—involved not only linguistic translation, but also the reconfiguration of symbolic authority, moral meaning, and institutional function (Zhang, 2010; Ren, 2020).

Existing scholarship on Yama culture has primarily focused on textual origins, iconographic evolution, or literary representation (Fan, 2007; Zhang, 2010). While these studies provide valuable descriptive foundations, they often treat Sinicization as a static outcome rather than an ongoing process. As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to how Yama culture actively reshaped moral imagination and ethical regulation within Chinese society.

This article argues that the Sinicization of Yama should be understood as a dynamic reconfiguration of moral imagination, through which Buddhist eschatology was systematically aligned with Confucian ethics, Daoist cosmology, and vernacular conceptions of governance and justice (Bao, 1988; Cui & Shi, 2022). By examining Yama as a figure of moral governance rather than a purely religious icon, this study seeks to illuminate the broader social functions of religious symbolism in the construction and maintenance of moral order.

## **1.1 Research Background and Significance**

### **1.1.1 Research Background**

The transmission of Buddhism into China represents one of the most significant episodes of cultural and religious exchange in East Asian history. From the Han dynasty onward, Buddhist doctrines, practices, and symbolic systems entered a cultural environment already shaped by Confucian ethics, Daoist cosmology, and long-established traditions of ancestral worship. Within this context, the reception of Buddhism was never a matter of simple acceptance or rejection, but rather a continuous process of negotiation, reinterpretation, and localization.

Among the many Buddhist figures introduced into China, Yama occupies a particularly revealing position. Unlike buddhas or bodhisattvas, whose salvific roles could be more readily reconciled with existing religious ideals, Yama embodies judgment, punishment, and postmortem moral reckoning. These themes intersect directly with indigenous Chinese concerns regarding social order, ethical responsibility, and the maintenance of harmony between the human and cosmic realms. Consequently, Yama culture became a critical site at which Buddhist eschatology encountered Chinese moral and political thought.

Chinese society historically developed a strong bureaucratic imagination, in which governance was understood as a moral enterprise sustained through institutional order. This imagination extended beyond the realm of the living to encompass conceptions of the afterlife. Indigenous beliefs surrounding the underworld—such as the authority of Mount Tai and the administrative management of spirits—provided fertile ground for the reinterpretation of Yama as an underworld official rather than a foreign deity (Bao, 1988). The convergence of Buddhist judgment narratives with Chinese bureaucratic models produced a distinctive vision of the afterlife that closely mirrored imperial governance.

Previous studies have examined discrete aspects of this transformation, including changes in iconography, literary representations during the Tang and Song dynasties, and moral didacticism in Ming–Qing texts (Fan, 2007; Li, 2007; Zhang, 2010). However, much of this scholarship remains fragmented, focusing on specific media or historical periods without fully accounting for the broader cultural logic that enabled Yama culture to achieve long-term social resonance. This gap underscores the need for an integrative analysis that situates Yama culture at the intersection of religion, ethics, and governance.

### **1.1.2 Academic and Cultural Significance**

The present study is significant at both academic and cultural levels. Academically, it contributes to the study of Buddhist Sinicization by shifting attention from doctrinal adaptation alone to the transformation of moral and symbolic structures. By conceptualizing Yama as a figure of moral governance, this research demonstrates how religious symbols can function as mechanisms of ethical regulation within society. This perspective enriches existing discussions on religion and governance by highlighting the role of imagined postmortem judgment in shaping moral behavior.

Furthermore, the study advances methodological discussions within the humanities by integrating religious history with cultural analysis and social theory. Rather than treating texts, images, and rituals as isolated objects of study, it examines their combined role in constructing symbolic authority. This integrative approach responds to recent calls in humanistic social theory for analyses that bridge micro-level cultural representations and macro-level social structures.

At the cultural level, examining Yama culture offers insight into enduring Chinese attitudes toward justice, responsibility, and the relationship between morality and authority. The persistence of Yama-related motifs in modern literature, film, and popular media suggests that these symbolic structures continue to shape contemporary moral imagination. Understanding their historical formation provides a deeper context for interpreting modern cultural expressions and social values.

Finally, this study holds comparative significance. By analyzing Yama as a case of successful religious localization, it contributes to broader discussions on cultural translation and religious adaptation in global contexts. The findings underscore

the importance of local moral frameworks in determining how foreign belief systems are reconfigured and sustained over time.

Yama, originating in Indian Buddhist cosmology as the sovereign judge of the underworld, underwent a sustained and complex transformation during the transmission of Buddhism into China. Rather than remaining a fixed doctrinal figure, Yama was gradually reinterpreted through interaction with indigenous ethical systems, cosmological frameworks, and socio-political imaginaries. This process, commonly conceptualized as the Sinicization of Buddhism, involved not only linguistic translation but also the restructuring of symbolic authority, moral meaning, and institutional function (Zhang, 2010; Ren, 2020).

Existing scholarship on Yama culture has largely focused on textual origins, iconographic change, or literary representations (Fan, 2007; Zhang, 2010). While these studies provide valuable descriptive foundations, they often treat Sinicization as a static outcome rather than a dynamic process. This article argues that the Sinicization of Yama culture should be understood as a reconfiguration of moral imagination, whereby Buddhist eschatology was systematically aligned with Confucian ethics, Daoist cosmology, and vernacular conceptions of governance and justice (Bao, 1988; Cui & Shi, 2022).

Methodologically, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining historical textual analysis, cultural interpretation, and comparative religious studies. Canonical Buddhist scriptures, including *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* (Kāśyapa Mātāṅga & Dharmaratna, trans., 1983), are examined alongside vernacular narratives, ritual manuals, visual materials, and Confucian and Daoist sources. By tracing changes in representation and function across historical periods, this article elucidates how belief systems adapt to local moral orders and social structures.

## 1.2 Framework and Methodology

### 1.2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated analytical framework that brings together the concepts of moral governance, cultural translation, and symbolic power. These perspectives are not employed as abstract theoretical embellishments, but as interpretive tools derived from the historical materials and analytical challenges posed by Yama culture in China. Together, they provide a systematic account of how a foreign religious figure was transformed into a culturally authoritative symbol embedded within Chinese moral life.

First, the concept of moral governance is used to elucidate the close relationship between Yama culture and traditional Chinese understandings of social order. In the Chinese historical context, governance was never confined to legal or administrative institutions alone; it was inseparable from moral cultivation and ethical self-regulation. Authority derived not merely from coercive power, but from perceived moral legitimacy. The bureaucratized underworld associated with Yama mirrors this logic. By depicting postmortem judgment as orderly, procedural, and morally grounded, Yama culture symbolically extended moral governance beyond the human realm. This perspective allows the analysis to move beyond doctrinal description and toward an examination of how religious imagination contributed to ethical discipline and social regulation.

Second, the framework of cultural translation is essential for understanding the Sinicization of Yama. In this study, cultural translation refers not simply to linguistic conversion, but to the selective adaptation and recontextualization of meaning within a new cultural environment. When Yama entered China, his doctrinal attributes were neither passively preserved nor arbitrarily altered. Instead, they were rearticulated through familiar cultural codes, including Confucian ethics, Daoist cosmology, and bureaucratic metaphors of governance (Ren, 2020; Pan, 2023). This approach foregrounds the interpretive agency of monks, literati, storytellers, and ritual specialists in reshaping Yama culture to address local moral concerns.

Third, the concept of symbolic power provides a lens for analyzing the authority Yama acquired within Chinese society. Symbolic power operates through the capacity of representations, narratives, and rituals to shape moral perception and behavior without reliance on direct coercion. Visual depictions of Yama as an official judge presiding over an orderly court endowed the figure with moral legitimacy by aligning supernatural judgment with familiar social hierarchies (Zhang, F., 2020). This perspective helps explain why Yama culture maintained cultural efficacy even amid political change and religious diversification.

Taken together, these three perspectives enable an interpretation of Yama culture not as a static belief system, but as a dynamic configuration of moral meaning through which authority, ethics, and imagination were mutually constituted.

### 1.2.2 Rationale for Rejecting Alternative Approaches

This study deliberately avoids adopting a purely religious-historical approach. While religious history offers indispensable insights into textual origins and chronological development, an exclusive focus on doctrinal transmission risks reducing Yama culture to a linear narrative of influence. Such an approach cannot adequately explain why Yama acquired enduring authority in China, nor how his image became embedded in popular ethics and everyday moral imagination.

At the same time, a purely cultural-studies approach is insufficient on its own. Cultural studies often privilege representation, discourse, and identity, sometimes at the expense of historical continuity and institutional context. In the case of Yama culture, isolating representations from their doctrinal and ritual foundations would obscure the ethical logic underpinning underworld judgment narratives.

By rejecting these single-discipline approaches, this study adopts a balanced analytical position that integrates historical depth with cultural interpretation while maintaining a sustained focus on moral regulation and symbolic authority. This integrated framework seeks to overcome the fragmentation that characterizes much existing research on religious localization and to offer a more comprehensive account of how belief systems operate simultaneously at doctrinal, cultural, and social levels.

### 1.2.3 Methodology and Corpus

Methodologically, this research employs qualitative textual and visual analysis supported by comparative interpretation. Four primary categories of sources are examined in order to trace the diachronic transformation of Yama culture across doctrinal, narrative, visual, and modern contexts.

First, canonical Buddhist scriptures provide the doctrinal foundation of the analysis. Texts such as *The Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* establish early Buddhist conceptions of moral causality and postmortem judgment, serving as a baseline against which later reinterpretations can be assessed (Kāśyapa Mātāṅga & Dharmaratna, trans., 1983).

Second, vernacular literature—including anecdotal collections, miracle tales, and Ming–Qing fiction—is examined to trace the popularization of Yama culture. These sources reveal how abstract doctrinal principles were translated into narrative forms accessible to non-elite audiences, thereby facilitating moral instruction and social critique (Fan, 2007; Cui & Shi, 2022).

Third, visual materials such as temple murals, illustrated morality books, and ritual imagery are analyzed to assess the role of iconography in the production of symbolic authority. Visual representation often conveys moral meaning more immediately than textual discourse, making it a crucial medium for the dissemination and normalization of Yama culture (Zhang, F., 2020; Ji, 2023).

Finally, selected examples from modern film and popular media are considered to illustrate the contemporary re-signification of Yama culture. Although these materials differ substantially from premodern sources, they demonstrate the continued adaptability of Yama as a moral symbol within modern cultural contexts (Zhang, K. K., 2019).

By integrating these diverse source types, the methodology enables a diachronic analysis that captures both continuity and transformation, illuminating how Yama culture has been repeatedly reinterpreted to address changing moral and social conditions.

## 2. Yama and Moral Governance

### 2.1 Yama in Indian Buddhist Cosmology

In early Indian religious traditions, Yama was associated broadly with death and the afterlife. Within Buddhist cosmology, however, this figure was redefined not as an autonomous god wielding personal authority, but as a judicial agent operating within the impersonal logic of karmic causality. Canonical Buddhist texts emphasize that Yama does not determine moral outcomes according to divine preference; rather, he presides over the disclosure and execution of karmic consequences already generated by individual actions (Kāśyapa Mātāṅga & Dharmaratna, trans., 1983).

This conception embeds moral judgment within a rationalized ethical system. Accountability is neither arbitrary nor negotiable, and punishment is framed as the necessary outcome of prior conduct. Yama's authority thus derives from his role as an executor of moral law rather than its originator. Such a configuration already contains the potential for institutional

interpretation, as judgment is imagined as procedural, evidentiary, and rule-governed rather than charismatic or personal.

## 2.2 Early Transmission into China

As Buddhism entered China during the Han dynasty, doctrines related to Yama circulated through translated scriptures, oral instruction, and narrative transmission. These ideas encountered a cultural environment already structured by indigenous conceptions of the afterlife, ancestral governance, and bureaucratic administration. Historical sources such as *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Hou Hanshu* document early Chinese understandings of cosmic order that closely linked moral authority with administrative hierarchy (Xie, 2011).

Within this context, Yama was not received as a foreign sovereign of death but was interpreted through familiar political and cosmological frameworks. Early Chinese audiences associated his judicial function with imperial governance, facilitating an interpretive shift in which the underworld was imagined as an extension of bureaucratic order rather than a purely metaphysical realm. This phase of transmission was therefore characterized by selective integration rather than doctrinal replacement.

Crucially, this localization did not dilute Buddhist ethical logic. Instead, it rendered karmic judgment intelligible within existing Chinese moral imaginaries, allowing Buddhist eschatology to resonate with deeply rooted assumptions about authority, responsibility, and social order (Ren, 2020). Yama's figure thus entered Chinese culture already predisposed toward institutional reinterpretation.

## 3. Ethical Reconfiguration through Sinicization

A defining feature of Yama's Sinicization lies in the ethical reconfiguration of his judicial role through Confucian moral principles. In Chinese contexts, Yama increasingly appeared not merely as a cosmic judge, but as a moral administrator whose authority reflected values central to Confucian ethics—particularly righteousness (*yi*), filial piety (*xiao*), loyalty, and social responsibility. Judgment in the afterlife was thus aligned with ethical norms governing everyday social relations.

Literary and religious sources from the Tang and Song dynasties depict the underworld as a fully articulated bureaucratic institution, complete with registers of merit and demerit, formal trials, and ranked officials (Fan, 2007; Li, 2007). These representations mirror the structure of imperial governance, translating moral evaluation into institutional procedure. Through this analogy, ethical behavior was no longer framed solely as personal cultivation, but as compliance with an objective and inescapable moral order.

This bureaucratic imagination served a crucial disciplinary function. By presenting postmortem judgment as orderly, systematic, and procedurally fair, Yama culture reinforced ethical self-regulation among believers. Moral norms were internalized not only through abstract teaching, but through the anticipation of inevitable evaluation beyond the reach of earthly institutions (Bao, 1988; Zhang, 2016).

Importantly, this ethical reconfiguration did not subordinate Buddhism to Confucianism. Rather, it produced a hybrid moral logic in which karmic causality and Confucian relational ethics mutually reinforced one another. Yama thus emerged as a culturally embedded figure whose authority derived simultaneously from Buddhist doctrine and Chinese moral-political tradition. Through this synthesis, the underworld became a moral mirror of the social world, projecting ethical governance into cosmic space.

## 4. Yama as a Normative Figure of Moral Governance

In Buddhist cosmology, Yama is traditionally portrayed as the ruler of the underworld who presides over postmortem judgment. In the Chinese context, however, Yama's significance extends beyond mythological narration and becomes a normative mechanism through which moral order is symbolically institutionalized (Ren, 2020; Zhang, J. D., 2010).

Unlike secular legal systems, Yama's judgment is imagined as absolute, morally comprehensive, and inescapable. Death does not mark the end of accountability; rather, it represents the moment at which moral evaluation becomes unavoidable. This conception transforms Yama into a transcendent moral authority whose jurisdiction surpasses that of earthly governance (Ma, 2014).

Central to this authority is the doctrine of karma, which establishes a causal relationship between moral conduct and

existential consequence. In Chinese religious narratives, karma is frequently rendered through administrative metaphors such as registers, ledgers, and judicial records, translating abstract moral causality into concrete and intelligible forms (Bao, C., 1988; Li, F. M., 2007). Through this translation, moral responsibility becomes systematic rather than discretionary, reinforcing its normative force.

Anticipation of postmortem judgment thus functions as a form of moral discipline. Individuals are encouraged to internalize ethical norms and regulate their own behavior in anticipation of inevitable evaluation. In this sense, Yama operates as a technology of moral governance, extending ethical regulation beyond the limits of formal institutions and the human lifespan (Yang, 2014; Shen, 2019).

## 5. The Bureaucratized Moral Order of the Netherworld

The normative authority of Yama in Chinese culture is inseparable from the bureaucratic imagination of the underworld. Rather than appearing as a solitary divine judge, Yama presides over a complex judicial system populated by ranked officials, clerks, and agents of enforcement. The system of the Ten Kings of Hell exemplifies this rationalized moral order, presenting judgment as a procedural and institutional process rather than an expression of arbitrary divine will (Jiang, X., 2017; Zhang, J. D., 2010).

This bureaucratization represents a symbolic transposition of imperial governance into cosmological space. Hierarchical organization, documentary administration, and procedural justice mirror familiar political institutions, rendering supernatural authority recognizable and socially legitimate (Li, F. M., 2007; Zhang, J. K., 2016).

Documentation occupies a central position within this moral order. Individual actions are imagined as permanently recorded, archived, and retrievable, reinforcing the belief that no moral behavior escapes institutional recognition. Through this administrative logic, moral accountability becomes an inevitable process rather than a matter of divine discretion (Bao, C., 1988; Ji, 2023).

By mirroring the structures of imperial administration, the underworld functions as a symbolic space in which political authority and moral authority mutually reinforce one another. Governance is moralized, while morality is bureaucratized, allowing hierarchical authority to be normalized within a moralized cosmos.

## 6. Sinicization as Cultural Translation

The Sinicization of Yama is often described as a process of cultural blending or religious localization. While such descriptions capture the hybrid outcome of this transformation, they tend to obscure the active interpretive labor through which Yama culture was reconfigured within Chinese society. This study argues that Sinicization should instead be understood as a process of cultural translation, in which religious meanings were selectively rearticulated through indigenous epistemological and moral frameworks (Zhang, J. D., 2010; Ren, 2020).

A pivotal moment in this translational process was the incorporation of Mount Tai into the cosmology of the underworld. As a long-established sacred site associated with life, death, and political legitimacy, Mount Tai provided an indigenous spatial framework through which Yama's authority could be reanchored within Chinese religious geography (Luán, B. Q., 2008; Fan, 1980). This integration did not merely add a local reference point; it redefined the locus of postmortem judgment in a way that resonated with existing beliefs about cosmic order and imperial sovereignty.

Confucian ethics further reshaped Yama's judicial logic by introducing relational moral categories such as filial piety, loyalty, and social responsibility. Within this framework, postmortem judgment became aligned with ethical norms governing everyday social relations, thereby extending Confucian moral priorities into the cosmological domain. Yama's authority was thus reconstituted not as a foreign imposition, but as a reinforcement of familiar moral expectations sanctioned by transcendent judgment (Yang, 2014; Shen, 2019).

Daoist cosmology contributed additional layers of meaning by incorporating principles of yin–yang balance, celestial bureaucracy, and pluralistic cosmological structures. These elements enhanced the flexibility and durability of Yama's authority, allowing it to operate across diverse ritual contexts and religious communities. Rather than producing doctrinal conflict, this pluralism enabled Yama culture to function as a shared symbolic language within a heterogeneous religious

landscape (Zhang, M. R., 2017; Pan, 2023).

The hermeneutical strategy of *geyi* played a crucial mediating role in this process of cultural translation. By articulating Buddhist concepts through indigenous philosophical categories, *geyi* enabled doctrinal continuity while facilitating cultural intelligibility. Through such selective reinterpretation, Yama was transformed from a foreign figure of judgment into a culturally embedded moral authority whose legitimacy derived from its alignment with Chinese ethical and cosmological sensibilities (Xie, X. D., 2011; Zhang, J. D., 2010).

Understood in this way, Sinicization emerges not as a dilution of Buddhist doctrine, but as a productive process through which religious symbolism acquired renewed moral efficacy. Cultural translation allowed Yama culture to maintain doctrinal coherence while simultaneously achieving social resonance, demonstrating how religious authority is sustained through adaptation rather than mere preservation.

## **7. Popular Narratives and Moral Education in Everyday Life**

The social efficacy of Yama's authority depends not on elite doctrinal discourse alone, but on its circulation within everyday cultural practices. Popular narratives—including vernacular novels, theatrical performances, morality books (*shanshu*), and *baojuan* texts—functioned as crucial vehicles through which cosmological judgment was translated into accessible forms of moral instruction (Li, F. M., 2007; Jiang, N. H., 2014). Through these media, abstract notions of karma and postmortem accountability were rendered intelligible, emotionally resonant, and socially persuasive.

Such narratives typically emphasize clear moral contrasts and consequential outcomes. Acts of virtue and transgression are followed by visible reward or punishment, reinforcing intuitive understandings of moral causality. By dramatizing ethical consequence, these stories normalized the expectation that moral behavior would ultimately be subject to evaluation, even beyond the scope of human law (Zhang, F., 2020; Lin, 2021).

Importantly, popular narratives did not function primarily through doctrinal instruction, but through affective engagement. Identification with narrative figures, anticipation of judgment, and emotional responses to reward and punishment facilitated the internalization of moral norms. Rather than enforcing morality through external coercion, these narratives cultivated ethical self-regulation by shaping moral imagination (Liu, 2014; Yang, 2014).

In this sense, popular culture operated as a critical infrastructure of moral governance. By embedding ethical norms within storytelling, performance, and visual representation, Yama culture extended moral regulation into the rhythms of everyday life. Moral discipline was thus reproduced not only through institutions or ritual, but through repeated exposure to narratives that rendered accountability imaginable, inevitable, and socially meaningful.

The effectiveness of these narratives lay in their capacity to bridge cosmological judgment and lived experience. By situating moral evaluation within familiar social contexts—family relations, occupational conduct, and local communities—popular representations of Yama transformed abstract ethical principles into practical moral expectations. This narrative mediation ensured the transmission of moral norms across generations, sustaining Yama's authority as a culturally embedded form of ethical regulation.

## **8. The Modern Reinterpretation of Yama Culture**

Classical theories of secularization have often assumed that modernization entails the decline of religious authority and the erosion of transcendent moral frameworks. The continued presence of Yama in modern cultural forms complicates this assumption. Rather than disappearing under conditions of social modernization, Yama undergoes symbolic transformation, adapting to new cultural, psychological, and narrative contexts (Xiao, 2006; Zhang, K. K., 2019).

In contemporary media, literature, and popular discourse, Yama frequently appears less as a literal judge of the dead than as a moral archetype. Detached from explicit religious belief and ritual practice, the figure nevertheless retains normative force by evoking enduring concerns with accountability, justice, and consequence. In this post-religious context, Yama functions as a symbolic device through which moral evaluation remains imaginable even in the absence of institutionalized belief.

This persistence can be understood through the lens of cultural memory. Religious symbols do not vanish simply because institutional religion weakens; instead, they are reactivated and reinterpreted within new discursive frameworks. Yama's

continued circulation reflects the durability of moral imagination shaped by historical religious narratives, even as their doctrinal foundations recede from everyday consciousness (Xiao, 2006).

Importantly, the modern re-signification of Yama does not reproduce premodern structures of authority. Contemporary representations often emphasize irony, ambiguity, or psychological introspection, reframing judgment as an internalized moral process rather than an externalized cosmic tribunal. Yet this very transformation testifies to the resilience of Yama as a moral symbol capable of mediating ethical reflection under changing social conditions (Zhang, K. K., 2019).

Yama's modern afterlife thus illustrates a broader pattern of continuity through transformation. Moral authority is not eliminated by secularization, but rearticulated through symbolic forms that remain culturally intelligible. The figure of Yama continues to provide a narrative and imaginative resource for negotiating questions of responsibility, justice, and human agency in contemporary society.

## 9. Conclusion

This study has argued that the Sinicization of Yama should be understood not as a process of passive cultural assimilation, but as an active form of cultural translation through which religious symbolism was reconfigured to sustain moral order within Chinese society. By tracing Yama's transformation across doctrinal discourse, bureaucratic imagination, ethical reinterpretation, popular narrative, and modern cultural re-signification, the article has demonstrated how a foreign religious figure acquired enduring normative authority through alignment with indigenous moral frameworks.

Conceptually, the analysis advances three interrelated contributions to critical humanistic social theory. First, it reconceptualizes moral governance as a symbolic process that extends beyond formal institutions of law and administration. The case of Yama illustrates how imagined postmortem judgment functions as a non-coercive mechanism of ethical regulation, encouraging moral self-discipline through anticipation rather than enforcement.

Second, the study reframes Sinicization as cultural translation rather than doctrinal dilution or localization. By foregrounding interpretive agency and selective adaptation, it demonstrates how religious authority is sustained through rearticulation within familiar ethical and cosmological vocabularies. This perspective challenges linear models of cultural transmission and highlights the productive role of translation in the longevity of religious symbols.

Third, the article contributes to debates on symbolic power by showing how religious figures operate as moral infrastructure. Through bureaucratic imagery, narrative circulation, and affective engagement, Yama culture rendered moral accountability visible, intelligible, and socially persuasive. Symbolic authority, in this sense, emerges not as an abstract belief but as a lived and repeated cultural experience.

From a contemporary perspective, the continued re-signification of Yama complicates secularization narratives that predict the decline of religious authority in modern societies. Even when detached from explicit belief and ritual practice, religious symbols persist as resources for moral imagination, providing frameworks through which questions of justice, responsibility, and human agency remain negotiable. Yama's modern afterlife demonstrates continuity through transformation, revealing how moral authority is rearticulated rather than extinguished under conditions of social change.

Beyond its specific historical focus, this study suggests a broader analytical implication: religious symbols should be approached not merely as objects of belief, but as dynamic mechanisms of moral governance embedded within cultural systems. By examining how symbolic authority operates across historical and contemporary contexts, critical humanistic social theory can better account for the enduring social functions of religion in shaping ethical life.

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