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## “Di Weiqian” 狄惟謙

*Records of Unfettered Conversations (Jutan lu 劇談錄)*,  
compiled by Kang Ping 康駢 (*jinshi* 878)

### Introduction

The plot of this tale is structured around the protagonist Di Weiqian's attempts to end the drought afflicting his district. Mitigating inclement weather such as drought or flood was a matter of great importance throughout the Tang dynasty. This issue was especially prominent during the latter half of the Tang, for good reason; scientists studying historical climate have found that from around 750 through the middle of the tenth century there was a shift toward a drier climate in China.<sup>20</sup> Then, as now, government officials and the educated public had access to a comprehensive body of accumulated information describing causal factors for different meteorological conditions and detailing various strategies for responding to them. Ritual manuals, such as the *Rites of the Kaiyuan Reign Period of the Great Tang (Da Tang Kaiyuan li 大唐開元禮)*; compiled in 732), and institutional compendia, such as the *Compendium of Institutions (Tongdian 通典)*; compiled in 801), defined detailed procedures to be followed in responding to all manners of weather-related contingencies. In the case of drought, officials

20. Gergana Yancheva et al., “Influence of the Intertropical Convergence Zone on the East Asian Monsoon,” *Nature* 445 (January 2007): 74–77.

would first pray to local deities—gods of soil and grains, for example, or deities of mountains, seas, rivers, hills, and streams. Depending on the outcome of these prayers, officials might also make use of alternative methods for manipulating the weather: reexamining criminal trials that might have resulted in unjust condemnations, succoring the poor and relieving the needy, prohibiting butchery and burying the bones and remains of slaughtered animals, moving the marketplaces, breaking umbrellas, and building earthen dragons. In addition, as this tale illustrates, officials might also seek expert intervention by religious specialists such as monks, priests, and shamans.

The approaches taken to resolve the drought in this tale also illustrate different conceptions of weather during the Tang. In one sense, weather was understood as being under the control of gods, seen as operating on both the local and heavenly level. Initial appeals at local shrines attempted to communicate to deities the harm caused by inclement weather and to placate, bribe, or, in some rare cases, threaten them to respond to pleas for normal weather patterns to resume. Ultimately, however, final authority for the weather rested with Heaven. The reason the expertise of the shaman was sought in this tale, for example, was in part due to her ability to employ her magical arts to communicate directly with Heaven and divine how to end the drought. In another sense, weather was conceived of in terms of what some scholars have called a “moral meteorology,” namely the idea that “rainfall and sunshine were thought to be seasonal or unseasonal, appropriate or excessive, according to whether human behavior was moral or immoral.”<sup>21</sup> The behavior of those in positions of power was particularly significant; authorities, up to and including the emperor, could be expected to apologize for possible offences and demonstrate their sincere contriteness. Acceptance of an apology would ideally either lead to the disaster being mitigated or Heaven's displeasure being refocused on the individual at fault rather than the broader population.

The identification of the protagonist as the descendent of Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700) communicates a subtle critique of non-canonical practices. Di Renjie, likely more familiar to readers today as “Judge Dee,” a Sherlock Holmes-type character who solves local mysteries in later representations, was famed in part during his own lifetime for

21. Mark Elvin, “Who Was Responsible for the Weather? Moral Meteorology in Late Imperial China,” *Osirias* 13 (1998): 213.

having razed several hundred "licentious shrines" (*yin ci* 淫祠) while posted in the south in 688. That the tale concludes with Di's execution of an "evil shaman" shows him following in the footsteps of his illustrious ancestor.<sup>22</sup>

### Translation

During the Huichang 會昌 reign period (841–847), the magistrate of Jinyang 晉陽 District of the northern capital (Chang'an 長安) was Di Weiqian, a descendant of Di Renjie (630–700). He served in office with integrity and reverence, unintimidated by powerful people. His district suffered from extreme drought. This had continued from spring through summer and had ruined several hundred *li* of farmland. Although prayers had been offered at the Jinyang shrine, there had not been the slightest response.

At that time there was a Celestial Mistress Guo who was a female shaman of Bingzhou 并州. When young she had studied the art of writing talismans, and often performed hexes on others. An Army-Supervising Commissioner had had her brought to the imperial capital where, due to her close ties with some palace eunuchs, she was able to come and go as she pleased in the palace. She subsequently was granted the title "Celestial Mistress" (*tianshi* 天師). Not long after, she had returned to her native land. Everyone said, "If you can get the Celestial Mistress to make just one trip to the Jinyang shrine, then there will be nothing to worry about." Weiqian made this request of the military commander, who at first strenuously resisted the idea, but soon after issued a respectful invitation. The military commander went personally to meet her and the shaman courteously accepted his invitation. A canopied carriage with arrayed banners was prepared, and Weiqian led her horse personally.

When they arrived at the shrine, Weiqian set up splendid canopies and a lavish feast in the courtyard and fawned over her. The next day she said to Weiqian, "I submitted flying talismans to the upper realm on

22. The tale's critical attitude likely reflects, at least in part, a more general skepticism toward the efficacy of the esoteric practices of "licentious cults" and spirit mediums during the latter half of the Tang dynasty.

your behalf asking for rain and have already received the command of the Emperor of Heaven. You must be absolutely sincere; only then will you, in three days' time, receive enough rain to alleviate the drought." Because of this, the people, elite and common, came from all over and gathered in large crowds. The appointed time she had stated passed but there was no sign of rain.

She then said, "That natural disasters have arisen is definitely due to the district magistrate's lack of virtue. I have again appealed to Heaven on your behalf. There should be rain in seven days." Weiqian acknowledged that the fault was his and served her with even greater reverence. In the end it failed to produce the desired result.

Guo subsequently expressed an urgent desire to return to Bing prefecture. Weiqian bowed repeatedly and detained her, saying, "Since the Celestial Mistress has already come here for the people, I once more beg you to pray and beseech with all your heart."

She grew angry and scolded him saying, "You incompetent bureaucrat! You do not understand the Way of Heaven. Heaven at this time is unwilling to send down rain. What more can be accomplished by keeping me here?"

Weiqian apologized and said, "I don't dare to trouble the Celestial Mistress further. Please wait until tomorrow morning before departing so that I may send you off with a feast."

During the night Weiqian then instructed his subordinates, "I have been humiliated by this shaman. How can I continue to call myself an official? Tomorrow morning, whatever instructions I give, you must comply with them all. Right or wrong, good or evil, I will be fully responsible."

At daybreak, before the gate had even opened, Guo was already fully dressed in her finery and mounted to return home. However, not even a single bit of the food and drink that Di had promised would be laid out had been set up. Guo thereupon sat in the main hall and berated Weiqian loudly and unrestrainedly.

Weiqian then said, "Sacrilegious shaman! You've misled people with your sorcery long enough. You must be executed here today. How dare you talk about going home?" He shouted for his subordinates to give her twenty lashes on the back in front of the god of the shrine and then throw her into the Piao River 漂水.

Behind the shrine there was a mountain that was dozens of *zhang* tall.<sup>23</sup> Weiqian quickly ordered his subordinates to set up an altar to burn incense. He dismissed all of his subordinates and in full official regalia stood on top of it. The populace of the entire district was shocked by this, saying that the magistrate had beaten the Celestial Mistress to death. People rushed about in turmoil and onlookers crowded like water behind a dam.

At that moment, as heat shimmered over sands and rocks, a wisp of cloud the size of a carriage canopy suddenly appeared, first covering the place where Weiqian was standing. Clouds from all four corners of the region then converged upon it, and after several peals of thunder, nurturing rains fell in abundance. There were no fields or lands that were not drenched by the downpour.

Elite and common people by the thousands thronged around Weiqian and descended from the mountain. The military commander of the prefecture was at first furious with Weiqian for killing the shaman; when Weiqian's pure sincerity instead moved Heaven to respond, he was that much more amazed. He memorialized the throne, laying out what had happened.

An imperial edict praised his exceptional service stating: "Weiqian is an exceptionally talented administrator of a demanding district and is the descendant of an illustrious loyal minister. Seeing that this Heaven-sent calamity was greatly afflicting the people, he, as was correct, pleaded and prayed for rain at the Jinyang shrine and, in like manner, 'drowned the shaman in Ye District 鄴縣.'<sup>24</sup> He exposed himself to the scorching summer sun on the mountain peak, his deed on par with 'the burning of one's body as sacrifice.'<sup>25</sup> He caused thick blankets of clouds to arise

23. This is likely a copyist error that rendered "a thousand *zhang*" (千丈) into "ten *zhang*" (十丈).

24. This line alludes to an anecdote about an upright official named Ximen Bao 西門豹 who lived during the Warring States period. Appointed as magistrate of the city of Ye 鄴, he put an end to the practice of annually sacrificing a young maiden to the river god in order to prevent floods. He instead drowned the three female shamans responsible for the previous maidens' deaths.

25. This line alludes to an anecdote about King Tang 湯 of the Shang 商 dynasty (c. 2700–1600 BCE) who during a period of extended drought, stood on a burning pyre in order to demonstrate his sincerity and willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of his people. Heaven immediately responded with a heavy rain that extinguished the fire and ended the drought. The latter reference to King Tang's fingernails alludes to this same anecdote.

to the sky's very edges, his sincere feelings commensurate with 'King Tang's cutting his fingernails.' He succeeded in causing the winds of drought to disperse and the nourishing rains to immediately flow. Since even August Heaven monitors such overwhelming sincerity, it is Our intention to ensure that such virtuous deeds are surely not forgotten. We specially award him the scarlet sash to embellish the copper seal of magisterial office. In no way will this stand in for his good reputation, but rather it will further illuminate his outstanding achievement." The emperor thereupon bestowed upon him five hundred thousand cash.

—A. K. Ditter

#### Further Readings

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