



## A Scribe to a King of Hell

繪木地狱王法学家

Height: 86.2 cm. (34 in.)

Width: 32.0 cm. (2 5/8 in.)

Qing dynasty

18th-19th century

The wooden figure is large, bold, compact, enhanced with black, brown, red and white pigments supported on a base of rough cylindrical form and with The massive body is cloaked in a heavy, dark reddish-brown- colored robe cinched at the waist by a wide belt that is also quite thick, its large buckle suspending a banner where two *shou* (“longevity”) characters are decoratively written and a deep rectangular socket carved on the figure’s back above the belt. A short black mantle with narrow white collar covers the shoulders, while the robe descends to the feet clad in heavy black boots. The voluminous sleeves cuffed in white sway subtly outward from the body, adding rhythm and a bit of grace to the staid and imposing figure. The hat is characterized by its high domed crown and upright wings above the sizable ears. Smooth dark skin and strongly carved, highly stylized features characterize the face. The greatly elongated bulging eyes are emphasized with dark pupils against the white, and a long red beard—formalized, geometrized—sweeps low across the chest. A hefty volume with a label reading, *Shan’e fenming*, “The good; the evil...separated clearly” is held firmly by one hand while the other rests on the belt.

The physical characteristics, dress, and demeanor along with the specific book identify the figure as a scribe or assistant to one of the Ten Kings of Hell. In Buddhist belief, ten judges reign over hell, or a multiplicity of hells. Each is empowered to judge over a roster of sins or offenses, meting out punishment to the deceased as deserved in the form of grotesque torture and consignment to a hell. We are quite familiar with this team overseeing hellish matters through numerous paintings and sculptures produced especially in China and Japan since the late Tang period. The Kings of Hell might be depicted as frightening, angry, awesome entities, such as the Kamakura-period wooden sculptures in Ennoji in Kita-Kamakura. However, Chinese paintings, such as a 12th-

century set shared between the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, portray the kings or judges as bureaucratic functionaries, in good Chinese fashion, appearing as elevated officials with their assistants at their sides. In the portrayals of these scribes or literati in the various sets produced over many centuries, they are dressed in heavy long-sleeved robes, with chunky black boots and black scholars’ caps and they normally have in hand the necessary scrolls or books similar to our attendant here. In one scene, for example, from the partial set in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, an attendant to the judge’s right holds a book with a four-character label similar to the scribe here (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Jin Qishi, late 12th century), one scroll from the *Ten Kings of Hell*, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, after [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama\\_%28Buddhism%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama_%28Buddhism%29)