BOOK REVIEWS


This new book by Professor Idema contains translations of two narrative precious scrolls (baojuan), the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze (Hong luo baojuan 紅羅寳卷) and the Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief (Shou jin baojuan 手巾寳卷), both dating back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Both texts deal with the problem of female piety: they tell stories of women whose religious devotion resulted in the disruption of families. Only after many years of suffering could these families be reunited and attain salvation.

The stories concerning female piety and salvation are typical of precious scrolls in this period; however, these narratives have here been translated into English for the first time, thus becoming available for an international audience. Another such deal, concerning Lady Wang reciting the Diamond Sutra in the underworld, also appears in a very early baojuan text (ca. fifteenth to sixteenth century) that did not survive. However, we certainly know it existed, as a substantial passage from it was quoted in the famous novel Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅, dating back to the late sixteenth century. An English translation of this passage is included as an appendix in this volume, along with the older miracle tale from which it was apparently derived—“After Three Lives of Self-Cultivation Woman Wang Ascends to Heaven in Broad Daylight” (San shi xiu xing Wang shi nü bai ri sheng tian baojuan 三世修行王氏女白日升天寳卷) — which was included in the collection Proofs and Results of the Diamond Sutra (Jingangjing zheng guo 金剛經證果), apparently dating to the Song dynasty (960–1279). Significantly, the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze is also mentioned in the 82nd chapter of Jin Ping Mei, which proves these narratives circulated in the same cultural milieu.

The first question that arises in connection with these texts concerns their status and cultural meaning. It is generally accepted that the majority of narrative precious scrolls of the early period (sixteenth to seventeenth century) were mainly designed for female audiences. However, these texts can hardly be characterized as traditional “female literature,” as the majority of authors were probably male (though their exact names are mostly unknown)2 and ex-

1 This research was assisted by the grant from the State Social Sciences Foundation of China: “Survey and research on Chinese precious scrolls preserved abroad” （海外藏中國寶卷整理與研究, 17ZDA266).

2 For example, the earliest available woodblock edition of the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze, apparently dating back to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, with the title of the Precious Scroll, as Preached by the Buddha, of Little Huaxian: How Woman Yang as a Ghost Embroidered Red Gauze (Fo shuo Yang shi gui xiu hong luo Huaxian ge baojuan 佛説楊氏鬼繡紅羅化仙哥寳卷), says that the compiler of the text was a monk who “exhausted his mind in its collection and completion,” and who further can be identified with the monk (bhiksū) Jiren 集仁 of the Yuanjue Hermitage 圓覺庵 outside the Jubi Gate 聚寶門 of Jinling 金陵 (modern Nanjing), mentioned in the colophon of this edition (though the latter information is highly doubtful; see below).
pressed their own point of view of female piety. This is well illustrated by the texts translated by Idema, which generally propagate the idea that it takes a great effort for women to attain enlightenment and achieve salvation (though at the end they are also able to provide salvation for their whole families).

This is also probably related to the notion of the physiological impurity of women, best embodied in the concept of the Blood Pond hell (Xuehu diyu 血湖地獄), appearing in China around the eleventh or twelfth century. This is usually presented in religious texts as a special department of the underworld where the souls of female sinners are punished by floating in a pond of blood lost by them during childbirth and menstruation. Special rituals aimed at the salvation of women from the torments of the Blood Pond hell became widespread in the late imperial period, which is testified by numerous historical sources and literary texts. These beliefs play an important role in several famous precious scrolls, including those dealing with Mulian 目連 rescuing his mother’s soul from hell and pious Lady Liu Xiang 劉香. Such texts have also been translated by Idema and Beata Grant and published in another volume, called *Escape from the Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

This ambiguous attitude towards female piety in traditional China has its foundations in the foreign Buddhist scriptures, which were translated into Chinese. Though such famous Mahayana scriptures as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra* basically negate the assumption that women are, from the start, inferior to men in matters of religious self-perfection and enlightenment, their views could not completely prevent common discrimination against religious women in the Chinese Buddhist discourse, which is also reflected in the precious scrolls of the Ming dynasty. On the other hand, the stories in these two narratives of orphaned children who suffered abuse at the hands of stepmothers (second wives in these texts) but finally succeeded in their careers and family lives also suggest the impact of common folklore motifs. This cultural and religious background should be taken into account in the discussion of precious scrolls like those translated by Idema in this volume.

The translator has given special attention to the structure and language of the original texts. They are the only two precious scrolls of the early period translated into Western languages in their entirety so far apart from the *Precious Scroll of the Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven* (*Ping tian xian gu baojuan* 平天仙姑寶卷) from the Hexi 河西 corridor in Gansu (dating to ca. seventeenth century), that also was translated and published by Idema (and the Russian translation of the *Puming Baojuan*). These texts are noteworthy for their complicated structure: they are divided into sections which consist of a prosaic part preceded and followed by poetic passages in different meters. For example, in the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*, each section (which actually corresponds to a chapter, the titles of which are given at the beginning of the text) consists of an aria with the indicated tune (these sung passages connect baojuan texts with the traditional Chinese drama), a prosaic passage, a two-line seven-syllable meter couplet, a long ten-syllable meter poem, a hymn (*gezan* 歌讚), and four lines of five-syllable meter verse. This structure can appear unusual to the modern Western reader, especially as it involves frequent repetition of content in prose and verse, but these specifics have to do with the primary function of the baojuan texts, which were recited for broad audiences within which many people were certainly illiterate. The vernacular language of the narratives further facilitated comprehension by the listeners. Idema’s translation closely renders the structure and style of the Chinese texts, giving one an excellent impression of the special features of the original.

In the introduction, Idema discusses several significant problems concerning the publishing/transmission history and religious affiliation of both texts. Idema used critical
editions of both texts recently published by Chinese scholars, but referred to the original texts. The date of publication of the earliest surviving woodblock-print edition of the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze (in the collection of the Shanxi Provincial Museum) is given as 1290, with the first printing taking place in 1212, which, if true, makes it the earliest known narrative precious scroll. Besides, the inscription on the front page of this copy says that the original edition of the text was “revised and compiled at imperial behest for distribution throughout the world,” thus relating it to the patronage of the Jin-dynasty court. This date and other publication information caused feverish discussion in Chinese scholarly circles. Many authoritative Chinese scholars of precious scrolls think that this date is fake, and the involvement of the court in the reprinting of the text is highly doubtful. Idema did not express his definite opinion on the question of the authenticity of this text. He has expressed a conciliatory view that the foundations of the text may indeed be very old, though in its present form it obviously dates back to the Ming dynasty. This is well-attested by the fact that it mentions the Unborn Venerable Mother (Wusheng lao mu 无生老母)—a deity that apparently appeared in the sixteenth century (though different views on its date of origin also exist in China).

The earliest known recension of the Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief is an undated manuscript which can also be dated to the end of the Ming dynasty through several special features of its form and content. Idema’s observation on the role of the Unborn Venerable Mother as the savior of humankind appearing mainly in the concluding sections of both texts and not being important for the course of narratives is also very valuable for understanding the religious discourse of these texts. Besides, the enigmatic deity Third Lad (San lang 三郎), who acts in the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze along with his brothers, certainly demands the attention of scholars of Chinese religions.

At the end of his introduction, Idema tries to draw tentative conclusions about the social and historical background of the texts he has translated. This approach has already appeared in a number of studies of Chinese vernacular literature that endeavor to adopt a historical perspective in the study of these texts—for example, the analysis of the Mulian dramas in Anhui by Guo Qitao: Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage: the Confucian Transformation of Popular Culture in Late Imperial Huizhou (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Still, such conclusions are often not very persuasive, as they lack solid historical evidence. It is important to distinguish between literary texts and historical documents. Folkloric texts and those close to them often present a fantastic world of imagination and not historical reality. For example, Idema has noted that one of the common characters in these baojuan texts is yuanwai 员外 (supernumerary official), but is this character a peculiar feature of this literary form? Or do these figures appear in other genres, including written vernacular literature and oral tales? The comparative perspective may bring new insights in our understanding of the cultural context of these texts. With respect to the ambiguous attitude toward female piety in late imperial China, one can also consult other sources and related research, among which the biographies of nuns and female lay believers of this period are especially important. This comparison can demonstrate that female religious devotion was tolerated and praised (though often not directly encouraged) not only in merchant circles but also among other groups within the elite.

Despite the high level of expertise of the translator and editor, the research for the volume still contains several mistakes. For example, Idema writes that in the Precious Scroll of Xiangshan (香山寶卷), each section contains a passage from the Heart Sutra, explained as “the chapter in the Lotus Sutra dedicated to
Guanyin” (p. 12). This is a mistake, since the passages are actually from the “Gates of Universal [Salvation]” (Pu men pin 普門品) chapter from this scripture that had also circulated as the separate Guanyin Sutra since the medieval period. In another paragraph, Idema says that both the Precious Scroll of Xiangshan and the Precious Scroll of Woman Huang are mentioned in the novel Jin Ping Mei (p. 6), but only the second text is mentioned there by title. For the first text, we only have a reference to the Princess Miaoshan story in the introductory verses of another ritual text quoted in the novel without any indication that it is a precious scroll. Another question concerns the completeness of the research bibliography. While discussing the antecedents of baojuan texts in the form of yinyuan 因緣 (tales of causes and conditions) of the ninth and tenth centuries, some of which were discovered among the manuscripts of the Dunhuang library cave, Idema does not mention the detailed research on this literary form in the PhD dissertation by Neil D. Schmid “Yuanqi: Medieval Buddhist Narratives from Dunhuang” (University of Pennsylvania, 2002), which also contains English translations of two such texts. Still, these problems do not diminish the general value of this work.

The volume can be highly recommended not only to students of Chinese literature and religion but also to a more general audience interested in folklore and traditional culture, and will be especially attractive for those interested in problems of gender in traditional societies. The introduction by Idema is a very important piece of research, as it tackles many questions concerning the history of the baojuan literary form which still have not been completely clarified in existing scholarly studies, including its connection with preceding Buddhist texts (such as the miracle stories), the inclusion of beliefs in local deities, and the impact of new sectarian religions of the mid-Ming period on more mainstream narrative precious scrolls with Buddhist topics.

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