

A Second Look at the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*

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ABSTRACT: The *Hongluo baojuan* 紅羅寶卷 is one of the earliest narrative precious scrolls. The text is not only mentioned in the sixteenth-century novel *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅, but also has been preserved in a late Ming printed edition. It tells the story of a filial son who is abused by his stepmother but with perseverance brings about the reunion of his father and mother. In various versions this *baojuan* has remained popular throughout the Qing. Upon the discovery of a late Ming edition, the text was hailed as the earliest precious scroll because it claims to be based on thirteenth-century editions. In this edition, the text has clearly been adapted to the late-Ming conventions of the genre, but there is no reason to deny the derivation of this edition from earlier versions that may have been written in praise of the miraculous powers of a deity that is only designated as the Third Lad (Sanlang 三郎). The reference to this *baojuan* in the *Jinpingmei* is a function of that novel's narrative; this implies that realistic descriptions of *baojuan* performances in the novel cannot be taken at face value as representative of contemporary practice.

Keywords: *Hongluo baojuan*, *Jinpingmei*, Sanlang, *Wusheng laomu*, filial piety

While Ximen Qing 西門慶, the wealthy male protagonist of the famous sixteenth-century novel *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅), often seeks his pleasures outside his home, his many wives lack that freedom of movement and have to invite performers to the private apartments of the mansion for their amusement. Ximen Qing's principal wife, Wu Yueniang 吳月娘, repeatedly invites nuns to recite "precious scrolls" (*baojuan* 寶卷). The genre of precious scrolls had developed in the fourteenth century, if not earlier, and can be considered a continuation of the earlier traditions of Buddhist storytelling that are best known from the "transformation texts" (*bianwen* 變文) of the eighth to tenth centuries discovered at Dunhuang. While we have one or two instances of Song-dynasty prohibition of *bianwen* performances, there is no reason to assume that this tradition came to a halt

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with the closing of the Dunhuang library cave shortly after the year 1000, as male and female Buddhist clerics always depended on the donations of the lay believers who had to be wooed by entertaining sermons. When we again have manuscripts of such proselytizing prosimetric narratives from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they show a remarkable thematic continuity with the *bianwen* tradition, as these again are devoted to the legend of the pious monk Mulian 目連 who saved his mother from hell, a topic that was also treated repeatedly in *bianwen*. By the sixteenth century, precious scrolls had developed a highly distinctive format that set the genre apart from other forms of prosimetric storytelling that were practiced in the Ming.^①

The descriptions of precious scroll recitations in *Plum in the Golden Vase* belong to the earliest known descriptions of performances of the genre, and as such have been frequently studied.^② The shortest of such descriptions appears in Ch. 82. We only learn of this performance through the words of Chen Jingji 陳經濟, the son-in-law of the by-now deceased Ximen Qing and an inveterate philanderer like him. Chen Jingji has to explain to Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮, one of Ximen Qing's concubines with whom he is having an affair, why he was so late in getting up that day:

“We didn't get to sleep until the third watch last night. The First Lady dragged us back there to listen to a recitation of the *Hongluo baojuan*, or *The Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*, and I had to sit up listening to it so late that I very nearly:

Came down with a crick in my back.

It was all I could do to crawl out of bed this morning.”^③

① For general introductions to the genre see Rostislav Berezkin, *Many Faces of Mulian: The Precious Scrolls of Late Imperial China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017); Che Xilun 車錫倫, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu* 中國寶卷研究 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2009); Daniel L. Overmeyer, *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999).

② See, for instance, Sawada Mizuho 澤田瑞穂, *Sōbo Hōkan no kenkyū* 增補寶卷の研究 (Tokyo: Kokusho kankokai, 1975), 285–99; Katherine Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin p'ing mei* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 59–66; Che Xilun, “*Jin Ping Mei cihua zhongde xuanjuan—jianlun Jin Ping Mei cihua de chengshu*” 金瓶梅詞話中的宣卷—兼論金瓶梅詞話的成書, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究 1990, 360–74; Yang Zihua 楊子華, “*Jin Ping Mei suo miaoxie de fojiao wenyi: xuanjuan*” 金瓶梅所描寫的佛教文藝：宣卷, *Yunyang shifan gaodeng zhuanke xuexiao xuebao* 雲陽師範高等專科學校學報 26.2 (2006.4): 34–39; Dong Zaiqin 董再琴 and Li Yu 李豫, “*Jin Ping Mei cihua zhong nigu xuanjuan huodong benshi laiyuandi kaosuo*” 金瓶梅詞話中尼姑宣卷活動本事來源地考察, *Beijing huagong daxue xuebao* 北京化工大學學報 64 (2008.4): 45–50; Xue Runmei 薛閔梅, “*Lun Jin Ping Mei zhongde xuanjuan shuxie*” 論金瓶梅中的宣卷書寫, *Taiyuan shifan xueyuan xuebao* 太原師範學院學報 17.4 (July 2018): 17–22. See also David Johnson, “*Mu-lien in Pao-chüan: The Performance Context and Religious Meaning of the Yu-ming Pao-chüan*,” in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley, CA: East Asian Studies Publications, 1995), 60–65.

③ David Tod Roy, trans. *The Plum in the Golden Vase, Volume Five: The Dissolution* (Princeton: Princeton University

Nowhere does the anonymous author of *Plum in the Golden Vase* provide any information on this particular *baojuan*, nor does he quote at length from the text as he does elsewhere in the novel. The author apparently could expect his readers to be acquainted with the content of this precious scroll and so to be able to grasp the meaning of the reference to this particular text at this specific moment of the novel's narrative. That in itself would be a sufficient reason to take a closer look at *the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*.

Yet another reason is the fact that, upon the discovery of its oldest preserved printed edition, the text was hailed as the earliest *baojuan*, dated back to the early decades of the thirteenth century. That date, if accepted, would have important implications for the reconstruction of the development of Chinese popular religion, especially the cult of the Unborn Mother (*Wusheng laomu* 無生老母). While the text in its present shape is very much a product of the sixteenth century, a close reading suggests that it may well be the culmination of a development that covers several centuries, during which the central deity in the narrative at one moment ceded the pride of place to the Unborn Mother.

Pious Mother, Evil Stepmother, and Filial Son

The *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*, also known as the *Precious Scroll on the Stepmother* (*Wanniang baojuan* 晚娘寶卷), was quite popular in the late Qing dynasty and the first half of the twentieth century. In his *Zhongguo baojuan zonglu* 中國寶卷總錄, Che Xilun 車錫倫 lists not only over thirty manuscripts (starting with one from 1829), but also no less than six different lithographic editions from the 1910s and 1920s.^① That list, as we know, is far from complete. When precious scroll recital was allowed once again after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* turned out to be quite popular in western Gansu (in northwestern China), where the text was known as *Precious Scroll of the Embroidered Red Gauze* (*Xiu hongluo baojuan* 繡紅羅寶卷).

Press, 2013), 25. Reflecting the long gestation of this translation, Roy bases his annotation to this passage on the information provided by Sawada Mizuho, 澤田瑞穂, *Sōbo Hōkan no kenkyū* 增補寶卷の研究 (Tokyo: Kokusho kankokai, 1975), 296–97.

① Che Xilun, comp. *Zhongguo baojuan xongmu* 中國寶卷總錄 (Taipei: Zhongguo wenzhesuo choubeichu, 1998), 38; 107–109. The five manuscripts formerly in the collection of Fu Xihua 傅惜華 (1907–1970) are described in considerable detail in Wu Ruiqing 吳瑞卿, *Fu Xihua cang baojuan shouchaoben yanjiu* 傅惜華藏寶卷手抄本研究 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2018), 127–30. The collection of the Suzhou Theater Museum includes thirteen manuscript versions and one lithographic edition of the precious scroll. See Guo Lamei 郭臘梅, *Suzhou xiqu bowuguan cang baojuan tiyao* 蘇州戲曲博物館藏寶卷提要 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2018), 50–52. The earliest manuscript in this collection dates from 1855.

Most of the recent local collections of precious scrolls from this region include this text.^① But as far as I know, none of the recently published rather comprehensive local collections from the Wu-dialect area (in south China) that reflect the current local *baojuan* repertoires does so, despite the fact that the represented localities are close to Shanghai, the center for the production of lithographic editions.^②

The *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* can also claim to be one of the earliest precious scrolls. Not only is the text mentioned in *Plum in the Golden Vase*, but we also have a printed version that may date from about the time when the novel was composed. This edition, fully titled *The Precious Scroll, as Preached by the Buddha, of Little Huaxian: How Woman Yang as a Ghost Embroidered Red Gauze* (*Foshuo Yangshi guixiu hongluo Huaxiange baojuan* 佛說楊氏鬼繡紅羅化仙哥寶卷; hereafter *Little Huaxian*) and kept in the Shanxi Provincial Museum, has been reproduced by Ma Xisha 馬西沙 in his *Zhonghua zhenben baojuan* 中華珍本寶卷.^③ The original copy is preserved in the so-called “butterfly binding,”^④ and as a result many lines are barely legible in this reprint. Fortunately, Shang Lixin 尚麗新 in her recent *Baojuan congchao* 寶卷叢抄 has provided a typeset edition, in which the text of the Ming edition as reproduced by Ma Xisha has been collated with two later manuscripts of this text.^⑤

① Shang Lixin 尚麗新 and Che Xilun, *Beifang minjian baojuan yanjiu* 北方民間寶卷研究 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2015), 506–11 describe a manuscript of 1832 in the possession of the authors, an undated manuscript in the library of the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and various versions of this precious scroll recorded in recent years in western Gansu.

② For an updated list of known editions, see Ji Qiuyue 紀秋悅, “Lun *Hongluo baojuan* de wenben yu xinyang zhi bian” 論紅羅寶卷的文本與信仰之變, MA Thesis, Fudan University, 2019, 12–20. The known manuscripts of *Hongluo baojuan* from the period 1800–1949 overwhelmingly originated from the Wu-dialect area of Zhejiang and Jiangsu. The lithographic editions of *Hongluo baojuan* were produced in Shanghai and Hangzhou. These Wu-dialect area versions represent two closely related but distinct families of the tale (Ji Qiuyue, “Lun *Hongluo baojuan*,” 20–25; 41–46). Ji Qiuyue also provides a critical edition of a manuscript of 1897, now in the Shanghai Library, that was produced by one Yin Shouqing 殷綏卿. Ji, “Lun *Hongluo baojuan*,” 67–81.

③ Ma Xisha 馬西沙, ed. *Zhonghua zhenben baojuan* 中華珍本寶卷 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2012), Vol. 7, 191–244.

④ The “butterfly binding” is very rare for precious scrolls. In butterfly binding the sheet carrying two pages is folded with the pages facing each other. These folded pages are then glued together at the fold. If the pages cannot be separated for reproduction (as is easily done in stitch bindings), then the lines close to the fold may not show up in the reproduction. Almost all early precious scrolls are produced in the so-called “sutra binding” (harmonica binding).

⑤ Shang Lixin, ed. *Baojuan congchao* 寶卷叢抄 (Taiyuan: San Jin chubanshe, 2018), 75–102. On pp. 100–102 she explains that she has used the manuscript of 1832 (now identified as originating from Jiexiu 介休) and the manuscript in the collection of the library of the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in her collation. I used this edition as the base of my English translation as “The Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze” in Wilt L. Idema, *The Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women: Two Precious Scrolls of the Ming Dynasty* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 30–99. An earlier edition of the *Foshuo Yangshi guixiu hongluo Huaxiange baojuan*, prepared by Pu Wenqi 濮文起 and Pu Lei 濮蕾, is included in Jiang Kun 姜昆 and Dong Yaopeng 董耀鵬, eds. *Zhongguo lidai quyi zuopin xuan* 中國曆代曲藝作品選 (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 2014), Vol. 2, 198–223.

In the Ming edition of *Little Huaxian*, the text is made up of a liturgical introduction and twenty-two chapters; the final chapter includes a liturgical conclusion. The text itself is preceded by a table of contents. The chapter titles often seem to refer more to the preceding chapter than the chapter they are heading. Each chapter opens with a song to a specific tune.^① This is followed by a short section in prose,^② which is concluded by a couplet of seven-syllable lines. The chapter then proceeds with a relative long section in ballad verse. In two chapters, this ballad verse is made up of lines of seven syllables, but in all other chapters this verse section is made up of ten-syllable lines (typographically divided in sections of three, three, and four syllables). The verse section is followed by a section (a so-called “hymn” [*zan* 贊]^③) of nine lines of four-syllable verse (with the exception of the third and final lines, and occasionally also the seventh line, that are made up of five syllables—or, in the case of the final line, seven syllables). Each chapter is concluded by a quatrain made up of four lines of five-syllable verse.^④ While opening songs and the sections in ballad verse allow extended expression of emotion, in principle all parts of a chapter can serve the functions of narration, dialogue, and commentary. In performance, the alternation of different forms of deliverance must have greatly contributed to the lively character of the event. The audience, or at least part of the audience, would join in the performance at regular intervals by reciting the names of a Buddha or bodhisattva, or by echoing the final syllables of rhyming lines of verse (this is explicitly indicated once in the text).

In the Ming edition of the *Little Huaxian*, the story is set at some time during the Tang dynasty at an unidentified locality. A Rich Man Zhang 張員外 is humiliated at a party by some younger men because he lacks a son.

Now let me tell you that during the Tang dynasty there lived a certain Rich Man Zhang. He had no sons or grandsons. One day, when he went with some other men to a dinner party, he saw as they were walking along some students greeting them. When the students greeted the other rich men, they respectfully made a deep bow, but when they greeted Rich Man Zhang, they only did so perfunctorily and insolently. Rich Man Zhang was upset, and grasping the students he asked them, “We are all equally rich. But when you greet the others, you make a deep bow; why do you only perform half a bow when greeting me?” Those students said with one voice, “These other rich men have sons who are our fellow students and our devoted friends. You don’t have children, and that’s why we ignore you.” When Zhang heard this, he silently bowed his head and went back

① Each song is preceded by the name of the tune. The name of tune of the opening song in each chapter is also listed in the table of contents.

② The prose section is preceded by the words *baiwen* 白文 (plain prose).

③ The term only refers to the form, not to the content.

④ Ma Xisha, “Zuizao yibu baojuan de yanjiu” 最早一部寶卷的研究, *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 1986.01: 56–72.

home.^①

He and his wife, woman Yang 楊氏, thereupon visit the local temple of the Third Lad (Sanlang miao 三郎廟), and, making a vow, pray for a child. The Third Lad arranges that a golden lad^② condemned to be reborn on earth for some minor sin will be born as the son of this couple. The couple is overjoyed, but forget to fulfill their vow, so when the infant named Huaxian 化仙 turns three years old, the Third Lad takes his soul away. The disconsolate mother now promises the god to embroider a precious curtain of red gauze to protect the god's image, and the boy recovers.^③ It takes her three years to complete this curtain, which shows all the phenomena of heaven and earth.

When the two elder brothers and two younger brothers of the Third Lad are shown the curtain, they become jealous and decide to fetch the soul of woman Yang and take her to the City of Those who have Unjustly Died (Wangsicheng 枉死城) in the underworld, so her soul will embroider the same kind of curtain for each of them; after she will have completed her assignment in twelve years, her soul will be released again. Before her death woman Yang implores her husband not to remarry, but Rich Man Zhang is soon persuaded by the wily matchmaker Kang 康氏 to remarry a woman surnamed You 尤氏, who brings a son of her own into the marriage. Huaxian longs for his birth mother, gets into frequent fights with his elder stepbrother, and stirs the animosity of his evil stepmother, who takes advantage of the frequent absence of the father to abuse the boy.

Woman You thought,

“Little boy Huaxian,
You truly, truly are detestable!

Time and again

You throw a tantrum
And don't listen to what I say.

When I today

① Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 77.

② In conventional iconography deities are often accompanied by two young servants, a golden boy (*jintong* 金童), and a jade maiden (*yunü* 玉女). The infraction for which they are condemned to be reborn on earth often is often an inkling of passion.

③ On embroidery as a devotional practice of elite women in late-imperial China, see Grace S. Fong, “Female Hands: Embroidery as Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China,” *Late Imperial China* 25.1 (2004): 19–20; and Li Yuhang, “Embroidering Guanyin: Construction of the Divine through Hair,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine* 36 (2012): 131–66. See also Zhang Tianyou 張天佑 and Zhang Xipin 張曦萍, “Lun Hexi baojuan zhongde cixiu yishu” 論河西寶卷中的刺繡藝術, *Lanzhou wenli xueyuan xuebao* 蘭州文理學院學報 35.6 (November 2019): 15–20.

Call you over
 To listen to maternal advice,
 You curse me out
 As an evil stepmother,
 Infuriating my motherly heart!"
 When Rich Man Zhang
 As it happened one day
 Had left home to collect loans,
 Woman You called
 For that damned bastard,
 Wanting to give him a beating.
 Lifting the cudgel
 She gave him some strokes,
 But he did not show any fear,
 So she gathered thorns
 And threw a handful,
 Threw them all over his body.^①

After she has nearly beaten the boy to death and sprinkled his skin with thorns, Rich Man Zhang administers his wife a beating, but the next time he leaves home, she tries to kill the boy by throwing him into a wok of boiling water, and the boy is only saved in the nick of time by the intervention of the Third Lad. The same deity also intervenes when she tries to poison her stepson.

Later, Rich Man Zhang leaves home to take up a position as commandant at Jiujiang; he is defeated by a pirate, condemned to death, and locked up in prison in the capital. Woman You now makes up her mind to kill Huaxian and has a special steel knife made for that very purpose. But when at midnight she approaches the bed in which Huaxian and his stepbrother are sleeping, the Third Lad changes their places, and in the dark woman You ends up murdering her own son. She takes revenge by going to court and accusing Huaxian of murder; she convinces the judge of her version of affairs by offering him a substantial bribe. Huaxian is condemned to death, but when he is about to be executed, he is saved again by the Third Lad:

Now tell that when little Huaxian wept for quite a while, the criminals were all taken to the execution ground. His Lordship the Third Lad had learned about this in time, and in a moment he arrived at the execution ground,

^① Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 86.

had a huge whirlwind lift up little Huaxian, and gently put him down in the abandoned wilds outside the city. His Lordship the Third Lad rose into the air and loudly proclaimed, “My child, don’t go back home. Go directly to the Eastern Capital^① to find your father there in the southern prison.”^②

After a long trip Little Huaxian comes to the capital and meets with his father. He and his father survive through Huaxian’s begging for eleven years. Then, one day, a princess chooses a groom by throwing an embroidered ball into a crowd. As the ball falls into Huaxian’s begging bowl, he becomes the princess’s husband. When the princess notes his sadness, he tells her his story, whereupon she informs her father the emperor. The emperor frees Rich Man Zhang and gives Huaxian three thousand troops to go and take revenge on his enemies. The moment his stepmother You is arrested and begs for mercy, his birth mother Yang has finished her embroidery job in the underworld and calls out from her coffin. When Yang is reunited with her husband and son (and her daughter-in-law), she begs her son to pardon You and her accomplices, and he eventually agrees to her request.

The tale told in *the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* is rather complicated, but it is made up of a hodgepodge of conventional motifs. Many tales start with a description of a childless rich couple praying for a son; when a banished celestial is born to them, he is bound to encounter many trials and tribulations and suffer great emotional distress before he can return to heaven. Embroidery (and weaving) skills are often praised at length in other prosimetric texts too. The mother who before her untimely death begs her husband to take good care of their child or children and not to remarry is a stock character, as are venal go-betweens as well as widows who are eager to remarry and prove to be evil stepmothers. The evil stepmother who trying to kill her stepchild ends up murdering her own son is also encountered in other stories, and if the stepmother in this story stands out in any way, it is not for her evil nature per se, but for the numerous attempts it takes her to get rid of Huaxian. The idea that money can buy the cooperation of initially well-intentioned men is of course also not original. The filial piety of Huaxian, displayed in his devotion to his mother and his support to his father, must be rewarded, and the sudden reversal of fortune by marrying a princess or some other noble young lady seeking a groom is one of the most common ways to bestow the reward. And once the young man marries into the imperial family, all problems are solved.^③

① The Eastern Capital in vernacular literature usually refers to Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty. As the story is set in the Tang dynasty, it here must refer to the capital Chang’an (modern Xi’an).

② Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 92.

③ Sawada Mizuho, *Sōbo Hōkan no kenkyū*, 296–97 goes so far as to characterize this precious scroll as “an inept and primitive work.” His summary of the contents is based on a manuscript in his possession in which the action of the story has been moved to the reign of Song Emperor Renzong, and in which the place of the action has been specified. He also notes that in one of the lithographic editions, the time of the action is specified as the reign of Tang Emperor Xuanzong. The temple where the husband and wife pray for a son in Sawada’s manuscript is the Wusheng shenmiao 五

The Enigmatic Third Lad

The most enigmatic character the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* may well be the Third Lad. Despite his prominent role in the story, which makes the text read very much as a work of hagiography, the *baojuan* makes no attempt to identify this deity and only stresses his efficaciousness. When Rich Man Zhang returns home all upset because he has no son and heir, his wife says to him:

“My husband, please set your worries aside!
 Now in front of the drum tower,
 Right at the central crossing,
 Is the temple of the Third Lad,
 A sage deity that has great numinous power.
 The two of us should go there,
 And pray for a son, seeking a clear answer!”^①

A quick search in the local gazetteers included in the first and second collections of local gazetteers in the Erudition Database reveals that temples dedicated to deities named the Third Lad are recorded in gazetteers from all over China beginning from the sixteenth century. Such temples are, however, much rarer in earlier periods. A temple dedicated to an otherwise unidentified Third Lad in Dong Village twenty-seven kilometers outside Yongji (in modern Shanxi included a stage that was constructed in 1322 and is still standing nowadays, even though the temple itself has disappeared.^② This would suggest that the cult of the Third Lad there may be traced back to the early fourteenth century, if not earlier.

The same Third Lad may have had more temples in his honor in southern Shanxi and northern He'nan. One modern oral story claims that a temple of the Third Lad in Yangcheng of Shanxi had been established by Liu Xiu 劉秀, the founder of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). As the story goes, Liu

聖神廟。For a description of the stock elements in this *baojuan*, see also Ji Qiuyue, “Lun *Hongluo baojuan* de wenben yu xinyang zhi bian,” 37–41.

① Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 78.

② Yang Taikang 楊太康 and Cao Zhanmei 曹占梅, comps. *San Jin xiqu wenwu kao* 三晉戲曲文物考 (Taipei: Shi He Zheng jijinhui, 2006), 1091–92. The compilers of this collection have no information on the identity of the Third Lad (三郎為何神待考). A local legend recorded in Anonymous, “Jingqiao de Yuandai xilou” 精巧的元代戲樓, *Shanxi wenshi ziliao* 山西文史資料 1999, 67–69 credits the foundation of the temple to Emperor Wuzong's (r. 1308–1311) fondness for a local filial son who cured his mother's blindness by licking her eyes. That filial son is described as an eldest son with only one younger brother, so it is not clear what the link to the Third Lad might be.

Xiu's army was once blocked by a raging Yellow River, and Liu Xiu dreamed that Liu Bang 劉邦, the founder of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–25 CE), informed him that the Yellow River would become solidly frozen—even though this was in the sixth month. Liu Xiu dispatched the eldest of three brothers to check out the situation, and when he reported back that the river was flowing freely, he was immediately beheaded by Liu Xiu; the same fate befell the second brother when he reported the true situation. The youngest brother, once again ordered to go and check on the river, decided to lie and report that the river was solidly frozen. The delighted Liu Xiu called him a deity, and when he led the army to the Yellow River, he found that it was indeed solidly frozen. But when he was going to reward the youngest brother, it transpired that the man had already committed suicide out of fear that Liu Xiu would find out he had lied. After Liu Xiu became emperor, he wanted to honor the man with a temple, but the eunuch in charge of its construction built it mistakenly in Yangcheng of Shanxi; later on, local farmers built a temple at the spot of the man's suicide in the Yangcheng village in He'nan, closer to the Yellow River.^①

In the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*, the Third Lad is, however, given four brothers instead of two. Modern scholars such as Ma Xisha and Che Xilun have suggested that as a pentad these gods may be comparable to other divine pentads revered in the south, such as the Wusheng 五聖 (Five Sages), Wutong 五通 (Five Powers), or Wuxian 五顯 (Five Manifestations). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century editions of the text originating from the Jiangnan area may have Rich Man Zhang and Woman Yang visit a temple of the Five Sages (Wusheng shenmiao) to pray for a son, and this may well be the reason why Ma Xisha and Che Xilun arrived at their identification. That identification, however, may well be too rash.^② The Jiangnan pentads of divinities grant riches to their devotees, but they are also very jealous, and they would visit on their devotees the same kind of disasters that their devotees visit on others if they feel slighted by their devotees.^③ There is no indication of such characteristics in the Third Lad and his brothers. The Third Lad and his four brothers also show no sign of the strong sexual

① Meng Dan 孟丹 and Wang Guangxian 王光先, ed. *Zhongguo minjian gushi quanshu Henan xianjuanben Wuzhi minjian gushi quanji 2* 中國民間故事全書河南縣卷本武陟民間故事全集2 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2011), 535–36.

② Ji Qiuyue, “Lun Hongluo baojuan,” 53–55 rejects the suggestion that Sanlang and his four brothers may be identified in origin with the Wutong. She notes that in the texts originating from Western Gansu Sanlang has maintained his original name.

③ On these gods, see for instance Ursula-Angelika Cedzich, “The Cult of the Wu-t'ung/Wu-hsien in History and Fiction: The Religious Roots of the *Journey to the South*,” in David Johnson, ed. *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion, Five Studies* (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 137–218; Richard von Glahn, “The Enchantment of Wealth: The God Wutong in the Social History of Jiangnan,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51 (1991): 651–714; André Lévy, “Le motif d'Anphitryon en Chine: ‘Les cinq rats jouent de mauvais tours à la capitale orientale’,” in *Études sur le conte et le roman chinois* (Paris: École française d'Extrême Orient, 1971), 128–29.

appetite characterizing the southern pentads. Moreover, in these southern pentads all gods would appear to be of equal rank, but the Third Lad clearly stands out as pre-eminent among his brothers. The versions of the precious scrolls that were current in the late twentieth century in western Gansu, not surprisingly, stick to the Five Lads (Wulang 五郎). Wulangmiao 五郎廟 can be found, but the best known of these is found on Mount Wutai and is devoted to Yang Wulang 楊五郎 (Yang the Fifth Lad), one of the generals of the Yang family 楊家將 who became a monk on Mount Wutai.

If the Third Lad is not connected in his origin to the divine pentads from the south, he may have another southern origin. Near the Jade Mountain Monastery on Jade Mountain in Jingzhou (in modern Hubei), the place where Guan Yu 關羽 (d. 220) died, there was a shrine dedicated to the veneration of the Third Lad. This shrine already existed in the Tang dynasty. Scholars have discussed the identity of the deity, and while some believe it must be Guan Yu in person,^① others believe it must have been his third (adopted) son, Guan Ping 關平 (d. 220). During no later than the early years of the eleventh century, there were two shrines on Jade Mountain, one dedicated to the worship of Guan Yu and the other to the worship of the Third Lad, now explicitly identified as Guan Ping, who in late imperial times would grow into a major deity, still revered nowadays as Crown Prince Guan Ping (Guan Ping taizi 關平太子).^② We are accustomed to paintings and statues of Guan Yu accompanied by Zhou Cang 周倉 and Guan Ping, but in an early print recovered from the ruins of Karakhoto and printed in Pingyang (often dated to the Jin 金 dynasty but more likely coming from the Yuan), Guan Yu is surrounded by five attendants, including Guan Ping.^③ Could it be that at one moment this group of five was venerated as such? That would also explain the special position of the Third Lad among this pentad. In the absence of any supporting evidence, this can only be a hypothesis.

In view, however, of the connection of the Third Lad's brothers to the underworld (they use the City of Those Who Unjustly Died as their private prison), the Third Lad most likely can be identified with the Third Lad of Mt. Tai (Taishan Sanlang 泰山三郎), better known as Bingling gong 炳靈公 (Duke of Blazing Numinosity), the favorite third son of the Great Thearch of the Eastern Marchmount (Dongyue dadi 東嶽大帝). In Tang times, this young man appears as a wastrel who takes possession of other men's wives, but during the Five Dynasties period, in 933 CE, he was awarded the rank of Generalissimo of Might and Valor (Weixiong dajiangjun 威雄大將軍), after the second emperor of the Later Tang was cured of a disease by a monk who told him that the Great Thearch had ordered him to request a title for his third son. The Third Lad's title was raised to that of Bingling gong in 1014.

① Barend J. ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 29.

② Wang Jianchuan 王見川, "Tang Song Guan Yu xinyang chutan—jian tan qi yu fojiao zhi yinyuan" 唐宋關羽信仰初探—兼談其與佛教之因緣, *Yuanguang foxue xuebao* 圓光佛學學報 6 (1999), 112–14.

③ Wang Shucun 王樹村, Li Fuqing 李福清 (Boris L. Riftin), and Liu Yushan 劉玉山, ed. *Sulian cang Zhongguo minjian nianhua zhenpin ji* 蘇聯藏中國民間年畫珍品集 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin meishu chubanshe, 1989), pl. 2.

The Third Lad had four brothers who only received titles in 1099, but of a much lower rank.^① In the *Newly Compiled and Fully Illustrated: The Expanded Record in Search of the Gods (Xinbian lianxiang soushen guangji 新編連相搜神廣記)* of the Yuan dynasty and its later versions from the Ming, the title of the Third Lad is even given as *Zhisheng Bingling wang 至聖炳靈王* (Most Holy Prince of Blazing Numinosity).^② Popular religious tracts would provide him with even more grandiose titles. Bingling gong was widely venerated in late imperial times, both as his father's attendant and in his own right. It is also significant to note that in the Beijing temple dedicated to the Great Thearch of the Eastern Marchmount (Dongyuemiao 東嶽廟), his third son in the early 1930s was venerated as one of the deities "who delivered babies to their destined homes."^③

The Third Lad and the Unborn Mother

Che Xilun has stressed that the textual features of *Little Huaxian* correspond closely to the formal features of the precious scrolls, especially the so-called sectarian ones, which were produced in great numbers in Northern China in the sixteenth century.^④ These texts tend to be divided into chapters (marked as *pin* 品 or *fen* 分) made up of a song, a section in prose, a couplet, a section in ballad verse, a section in four-line verse, and a concluding quatrain. This pattern is also already encountered in the incompletely preserved *Precious Scroll on How Mulian Saved his Mother from Hell So she Could Be Reborn in Heaven (Mulian jiumu chu diyu sheng tian baojuan 目連救母出地獄生天寶卷)*, which has been partially preserved in a fine illustrated manuscript of 1372 but most likely was composed at some earlier date—Che Xilun has even argued in favor of an early thirteenth-century date of origin.^⑤ The

① For a summary of the various sources on Bingling gong, under "Taishan Sanlang" 泰山三郎, see Zong Li 宗力和 Liu Qun 劉群 ed. *Zhongguo minjian zhushen 中國民間諸神* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1986), 291–94.

② *Huitu sanjiao yuanliu soushen daquan (wai erzong) 繪圖三教源流搜神大全* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 483.

③ Ann Swann Goodrich, *The Peking Temple of the Eastern Peak: The Tung-yüeh Miao in Peking and Its Lore* (Nagoya: Monumenta Serica, 1964), 75. In her 1927 description of the same temple, Janet R. Ten Broeck notes that the rooms dedicated to the four brothers of Bingling gong "are kept close and there is no sign of recent worship" (*ibidem* 256).

④ Che Xilun, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu*, 515–16.

⑤ This copy, originally in the possession of Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), is now housed in the National Library of China. A more completely preserved and lavishly illustrated copy of the same text produced in 1440 is preserved in Russia in the State Hermitage Museum. See Rostislav Berezkin, "A Rare Early Manuscript of the Mulian Story in the *Baojuan* (Precious Scroll) Genre Preserved in Russia, and its Place in the History of the Genre," *Chinoperl: Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* 32.2 (2013): 109–31. For color reproductions of some of the illustrations in the 1440 manuscript, see Kira F. Samosyuk, "Chinese Illustrated Manuscript about the Descent of Mulian into Hell," *Reports of the State Hermitage Museum* 64 (2011), 175–82. For Che Xilun's arguments in favor of a thirteenth-century date of the composition of this text, see Che Xilun, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu*, 73.

only differences are that this precious scroll is not yet formally divided into chapters, that the chapters do not start with a song, and that the passages in ballad verse are all made up of eight lines (whereas these can be of any length in later precious scrolls).^① Hagiographies of local deities also could adopt the fully developed sixteenth-century format of precious scrolls as is shown by the *Precious Scroll of the Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven* (*Pingtian Xiangu baojuan* 平天仙姑寶卷) from Gansu, which is preserved in a printed edition of 1698 that is an expanded version of an earlier edition.^②

Considering the many miracles performed by the Third Lad on behalf of Huaxian, one might feel enticed to read our *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* as written in praise of this deity, but this is apparently not the intention of the editor of the present *Little Huaxian*. After the Third Lad has saved Huaxian from execution, he disappears from the story, and in the final chapter Huaxian and his family cannot even be bothered to visit his temple to express their thanks for the happy ending. As both Ma Xisha and Che Xilun have noted, this text posits the Unborn Old Mother (Wusheng laomu 無生老母, also known as Venerable Mother and the Eternal Mother) as the highest divinity, and presents a clear summary of the main tenets of her cult.^③ When Woman Yang embroiders the precious curtain for the

① In the eighteenth-century Vietnamese reprint of a late Ming edition of the *Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷, each chapter opens with a quotation from the *Pumenpin* 普門品 chapter from the *Lotus sutra*. In each chapter the sections in ballad verse are all of the same length. See Rostislav Berezkin and Boris L. Riftin, “The Earliest Known Edition of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* and the Connections Between Precious Scrolls and Buddhist Preaching,” *T’oung Pao* 99 (2013), 452–455.

② Wilt L. Idema, *The Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven and Other Precious Scrolls from Western Gansu* (Amherst NY: Cambria, 2015), 23–28. Che Xilun treats this text as a product of a *Xuhuangdao* 虛皇道 (Way of the Sovereign of Emptiness), which is otherwise unknown. Che Xilun does not treat hagiographic *baojuan* dedicated to local deities as a subgenre of precious scrolls. Rostislav Berezkin does so in his “The Connection between the Cults of Local Deities and *Baojuan* Texts in Changshu County of Jiangsu: With *Baojuan* performed in the Gangkou Area of Zhangjiagang City as Example,” *Monumenta Serica* 61 (2013), 73–111; but he sees such precious scrolls as products of the final stage in the development of the genre in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Although his dating may apply to the texts discussed in his article, it would appear not to apply to the subgenre as a whole. While Berezkin mentions the *Mengjiang baojuan* 猛將寶卷 (also known as *Tiancao baojuan* 天曹寶卷) as a hagiographical precious scroll from the Jiangnan region, he seems to have overlooked the fact that Che Xilun lists a 1663 manuscript of this *baojuan* in his *Zhongguo baojuan conglu*, 23–24 (this precious scroll is devoted to the mortal life of a General Liu 劉猛將軍, who as a deity protects crops against locusts). The precious scrolls discussed in Rostislav Berezkin and Vincent Goossaert’s article, “The Three Mao Lords in Modern Jiangnan: Cult and Pilgrimage between Daoism and *baojuan* recitation,” indeed date from the second half of the nineteenth century or later. See “The Three Mao Lords,” *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême Orient* 99 (2012–2013), 295–326.

③ Ma Xisha, “Zuizao yibu *baojuan* de yanjiu,” 70–71; Che Xilun, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu*, 517–18. On the cult of the Unborn Old Mother in precious scrolls about the new religions of the Ming, see Daniel L. Overmyer, *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, passim; and Richard Shek, “Challenge to Orthodoxy: Beliefs and Values of the Eternal Mother Sects in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China,” *Early Modern History* 3.3 (1999), 355–93. The Unborn Old Mother has given birth to mankind and is greatly distressed by their sinful behavior leading to their destruction, so over the centuries she has sent down

Third Lad, the pictorial program includes the Unborn Old Mother:

She embroidered the Buddha's grandmother at the gathering at Spirit Mountain. Ever since the Unborn Old Mother had seen her children disperse, she had been unable to see them again; at all times she hoped that the men and women throughout the world would come home, and she feared that when the three disasters struck, they would lose their spiritual light and would for eighty-one kalpas remain unable to meet with their mother again.^①

In the liturgical conclusion we read detailed instructions for the believers:

Ask an enlightened teacher,

Seek out friends in the Way,

To know what are the Four Phenomena:

All is vacuous emptiness;

The Dharma world spreads throughout,

Permeating the cosmos of Qian and Kun.

The Mother carried you

And she gave birth to you,

All nine hundred and ninety thousand,

And after eighty kalpas

We have arrived at the coming

Congregation of the Dragon Flower.

Having arrived at this point

You must let go

And make yet another step forward:

Cross the Dark gate,

Surpass the three realms,

And return to your fate and your roots.

I urge this assembly

Not to miss the opportunity

Of the great meaning from the West:

innumerable teachers to convert them so they may return to their original home (her womb). Only a limited number of people will be saved at the end of the present (eightieth) kalpa to join the Dragon Flower Assembly of Maitreya at the beginning of the eighty-first kalpa.

① Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 81.

At Maitreya's

Dragon-Flower Assembly

You'll achieve a second body of gold.^①

And we learn that the devotees of the Unborn Old Mother will not only be reunited with her, but even reenter her womb:

Board the floating boat of the Unborn to reach the shore, and the little infants will be reunited with their own mother. Once inside the mother's womb you don't have to fear the three disasters, you will join the Dragon Flower for the eighty-first kalpa, and for all eternity enjoy peace and prosperity.^②

But strangely enough, immediately following this passage, we learn that Huaxian, his parents, and his wife as former inhabitants of heaven rise up and return to their original celestial home. A close reading of the text suggests that the few passages related to the Unborn Old Mother are isolated insertions that have no relation to the following or preceding text.^③ Could it be that the tale of Huaxian's separation from his parents and his efforts to be reunited with them had originally been composed in praise of the miraculous powers of the Third Lad, but that some later editor had seen in this tale a suitable allegorical vehicle for the propagation of the belief in the Unborn Old Mother and had edited the text accordingly?^④ Works of vernacular literature such as novels, short stories, and plays in various genres were often extensively revised with each new edition up to the seventeenth century. This applied also to precious scrolls, as is shown by Rostislav Berezkin in his comparison of the three versions of the early precious scroll on Mulian: while the 1372 and 1440 manuscripts are basically similar, another partially preserved manuscript of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century has been fully adapted to the format of precious scrolls of the sixteenth century. In the case of the third version, the text is formally divided into chapters, each chapter includes a song, and the ballad-verse sections in each chapter are composed in ten-syllable lines instead of the seven-syllable lines used in the earlier manuscripts. In the process, this third version also acquired a clearly sectarian coloring.^⑤

① Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 99.

② Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 99.

③ Richard Shek states that Ma Xisha in a private conversation agreed that these passages were later interpolations. See Shek, "Challenge to Orthodoxy," 361.

④ Che Xilun points out that in versions of the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* from the Daoguang period and later, the references to the Unborn Old Mother are lacking. Che, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu*, 518. This is most likely due to the ever increasing persecution of the "sectarian" religions during the Qing dynasty.

⑤ Rostislav Berezkin, "A Rare Early Manuscript of the Mulian Story," 125–26. The songs in this case are found not at the opening but at the end of each chapter.

The earliest preserved edition of *Little Huaxian* contains a number of indications that, like the *Mulian baojuan*, it too is only a third, or even fourth, edition of the tale.

Earlier Versions of the Tale of the Red Gauze

When *Little Huaxian* was first introduced to the scholarly world in an article by Ma Xisha of 1986, he quoted the line following the full title to hail this work as a publication of the late thirteenth century and therefore our earliest known precious scroll.^① This line may be translated as:

Newly cut in the *gengyin* year of the Zhiyuan reign (1290). The monk Jiren of the Yuanjue Monastery outside the Jubao Gate of Jinling initiated the carving as a gift to the multitude.

至元庚寅新刻。金陵聚寶門外圓覺庵比丘集仁捐衆開雕。

The expression “newly cut” implies of course that the present edition was not the first printing. An earlier edition would seem to be implied by a few lines found following the table of contents:

Compiled at imperial behest 依旨修纂

For distribution throughout the world 頒行天下

On the longest day of the year, in the first year of the Chongqing reign, a *renshen* year (1212) 崇慶元年歲次壬申長至日

This date moves the original composition of the text forward to the early thirteenth century, if not earlier.

If the text of the preserved sixteenth-century print edition could indeed be identified with the text of any of these thirteenth century editions, such a dating would of course have major implications for the study of Chinese religion and the study of Chinese literature, as Ma Xisha emphatically pointed out: both the origin of the *baojuan* genre and the development of the cult of the Unborn Old Mother would have to be dated back to the early thirteenth, if not late twelfth, century.^② Che Xilun, however, who stresses the similarities of the present text of *Little Huaxian* to the precious scrolls of the sixteenth century, rejects the dates of 1212 and 1290 as fake (*weituo* 僞托), presumably inserted to enhance the

① Ma Xisha, “Zuizao yibu baojuan de yanjiu,” 57–61.

② Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang 韓秉方, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi* 中國民間宗教史 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004), vol. 2, 793, quoting the *Hongluo baojuan*, claim that the cult of the Unborn Old Mother was already known in the Yuan dynasty, but admit that it only became more widespread in the sixteenth century.

status of the text.^① Che Xilun reads the statement concerning Jiren as explaining the circumstances of the origin of the edition of 1290, and pointing out that the south gate of Nanjing (known as Zhonghuamen 中華門 since 1933) was only known as Jubaomen 聚寶門 (Cornucopia Gate) since the early Ming dynasty, concludes that it is an obvious fraud.^② However, the current gate was built on the same spot as the southern gate during the Song and Yuan dynasties, and is said to have received its name from the fact that it was facing Jubaoshan 聚寶山 (Mt. Cornucopia, nowadays known as Yuhuatai 雨花台).^③ If that is so, then the southern gate may well have conventionally been known as Jubaomen even before the Ming. Even if the name only became common after the founding of the Ming, that does not automatically imply that the edition financed by Jiren was the 1290 edition. If one reads that statement as two independent sentences, then the 1290 edition may have been the edition on which Jiren based his edition when he initiated the carving of new blocks.^④ Moreover, the present edition may not be the edition financed by Jiren, but represent a fourth printing (or the third, depending on how we parse the Jiren statement), because “the gentleman in charge of books, Wu Yangquan 管理書籍舍人吳仰泉” (elsewhere known as “the bookseller [*shulin* 書林] Wu Yangquan”) informs us at the end of the table of contents that he “further ordered fine craftsmen to create two picture sheets and carefully carve fine plates” 再命良工治圖二副謹鏤佳板。^⑤ This opens up the possibility that the currently available *Little Huaxian* was a commercial venture, one to be differentiated from the printing sponsored by Jiren.^⑥

① Che Xilun, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu lunji* 中國寶卷研究論集 (Taipei: Xuehai chubanshe, 1997), 60–62; Che Xilun, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu*, 513–18. Daniel L. Overmyer agrees with Che Xilun because he is convinced that the cult of the Unborn Old Mother only was fully formed in the sixteenth century. See Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 287–89.

② Che Xilun, *Zhongguo baojuan yanjiu*, 515. As further proof that that name Jubaomen only started to circulate in the Ming he refers to the legend of the financial contribution to the building of the present gate by the richissime Shen Xiu 沈秀.

③ Ji Shijia 季士家, “Nanjing Zhonghuamen jianzhu shulüe” 南京中華門建築疏略, *Wenwu ziliao congkan* 5 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981), 154–57; Wu Qingzhou 吳慶州, “Ming Nanjing chengchi de junshi fangyu tixi yanjiu” 明南京城池的軍事防禦體系研究, *Jianzhushi* 2005.4: 114.

④ Jiren may have lived in the second part of the sixteenth century. Feng Ye 封野 states that the Yuanjue Monastery dates from the Wanli period (1573–1619). See *Nanjing fosi xulu* 南京佛寺敘錄 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2019), 272.

⑤ The text indeed includes two pages of illustration. The first is very finely produced and shows a lady leaning on the balustrade outside a second floor window and listlessly gazing into the distance. Its relevance to the story is not immediately clear. The second page is divided into four spaces showing (1) Rich Man Zhang and Woman Yang praying to the Third Lad; (2) Woman Yang at the loom in the underworld; (3) Woman You giving a beating to Huaxian; and (4) Woman Yang urging Huaxian to show mercy.

⑥ In a personal communication Lucille Chia informed me that Wu Yangquan was most likely a Huizhou bookseller who was active in Nanjing. The surname Wu is quite common among those active in publishing in Huizhou during the

Other precious scrolls that claim a much earlier date of origin than the actual date of composition usually combine such a statement with a claim of divine revelation. For instance, the *Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷 (*Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*) on the life of Princess Miaoshan 妙善, who eventually became the bodhisattva Guanyin, claims in its preface to have been authored by the monk Puming 普明 in 1103 after the bodhisattva appeared to him in a dream.^① A later *baojuan* version of the legend of Miaoshan as *Guanyin jidu benyuan zhenjing* 觀音濟渡本願真經 (*True Sutra of the Original Vow of Guanyin to Aid and Ferry Across [All Living Beings]*) is accompanied by a 1467 preface credited to Guanyin herself.^② No comparable claim to a supernatural origin is made in any of the dispersed lines on the printing history of *Little Huaxian*, which stand out with their atypical factuality. In the preface to the first series of his *Zhonghua zhenben baojuan*, Ma Xisha accepts that the present text is a Ming dynasty revision, but strongly rejects Che Xilun's suggestion that the dates of 1212 and 1290 are pure inventions of the Ming publisher.^③

Like Ma, I see no reason to doubt that earlier versions of the story may have been printed in the thirteenth century. Works of prosimetric literature were printed during the Jin dynasty, as proven by the preserved fragments of the *Liu Zhiyuan zhugongdiao* 劉知遠諸宮調 (*All Keys and Modes on Liu Zhiyuan*), and the example of Dong Jieyuan's 董解元 *Xixiang ji zhugongdiao* 西廂記諸宮調 (*All Keys and Modes on the Story of the Western Wing*) demonstrates that such works could be quite sophisticated in plotting and characterization. With each new edition, the text of the so-called *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* may have been revised like in the case of the various versions of the precious scroll on Mulian, and if Jiren lived during the late Ming rather than the Yuan, he would appear to be the most likely candidate for the revision of the text, which resulted in its present shape. It seems less likely to assume such a role for the publisher Wu Yangquan, even if he may have tried to increase the attractiveness of his product by the addition of illustrations. If Jiren can indeed be identified with the “monk” (*nazi* 衲子) who presents himself in the text as its compiler, who “exhausted [his] mind in its collection and completion,”^④ he might have turned an earlier version of the text (a prosimetric text in a simpler format?) into a typical sixteenth-century precious scroll by adapting it where needed (for instance, a formal division into chapters, and the inclusion of songs at the opening of each chapter); at the same time, he may have added the passages on the Unborn Old Mother. This editor may also have been responsible for the extensive use of the ten-syllable line in the ballad-verse section of this precious scroll, even though we also find passages in ten-syllable lines in the *shuochang cihua* 說唱詞話 of the

Ming. Some of these persons also opened shop in Nanjing, advertising themselves as *shulin* 書林.

① Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49–50.

② Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan*, 83–84.

③ Ma Xisha, *Zhonghua zhenben baojuan*, 3–4.

④ Shang Lixin, *Baojuan congchao*, 77.

period of 1250–1450.

From a modern perspective it may seem an outrageously exaggerated claim that the imperial court of the Jin dynasty sponsored the publication of the first version of the tale of Huaxian and the Third Lad. But if the courts of tenth-century China could sponsor performances of *bianwen*, it is not intrinsically unbelievable that the Jin court employed the flourishing printing industry of the times to publish a moral tale that it appreciated or to thank a god who had spread his blessings widely. The Jin court may also have been responsible for a Jürchen translation of an early version of the legend of Woman Huang 黃氏女, an extremely popular topic in precious scroll literature of later times and excerpted at length in *Plum in the Golden Vase*.^① The genre would continue to be patronized by royalty in later times too. The 1372 copy of the early precious scroll on Mulian was associated with the surviving Yuan court, and the 1440 copy of the same text was donated by an imperial consort of the Ming. We know that in the sixteenth century palace eunuchs and princesses as well officials in some cases sponsored the publication of precious scrolls. In the final years of the seventeenth century, the *Precious Scroll of the Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven* was published with the support of the military governor of Gansu, and in the eighteenth century the royal court in Vietnam sponsored the printing of an edition of the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. While the language of precious scrolls is rather simple, it does not necessarily reflect a limited literacy in their authors, or necessarily mean that these authors only targeted the lower orders of society. Rather it reflects the awareness of the authors and editors that the texts were not only intended for reading but also for recital, and so had to be understandable by ear. Clerics (and other performers) rarely disliked the patronage of those who were highly placed in society, and sometimes they were successful in gaining their attention.

Conclusion

Informative as the detailed description of precious scroll performances in the rear apartments of Ximen Qing's mansion in *Plum in the Golden Vase* may be, they have to be approached with caution, not because the descriptions themselves may not be “realistic,” but because we cannot be sure how representative they are. *Plum in the Golden Vase* may be an “encyclopedic novel,” but it is not an encyclopedia of social life in Ming China, because it describes the life of one single highly atypical (one hopes) family. Moreover, the descriptions of precious scroll performances and their participants are part of the novel's artistic design. As we have seen, the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* is very

^① See Shang Lixin and Che Xilun, *Beifang minjian baojuan yanjiu*, 280. On the popularity of the story of Woman Huang in *baojuan*, see Beata Grant, “The Spiritual Saga of Woman Huang: From Pollution to Purification,” in David Johnson, ed. *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: “Mu-lien Rescues his Mother” in Chinese Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: The Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989), 224–304.

much the tale of a filial son who, devoted to his parents, with divine assistance brings about the reunion of the family. The choice of this title by Wu Yueniang and her insistence that Chen Jingji attends its performance to the end may not be “inappropriate” as has been argued,^① but it is clearly ineffective as it has no impact on him.^② If the story of Huaxian is not summarized in the body of the novel, it may not only be because the author of the novel expected his readers to be acquainted with its contents but also because the one male person in the audience who should have taken it to heart paid no attention to its message. In the same way in which the stepmother in the Huaxian story shows herself to be no replacement of the actual but absent mother, the live-in son-in-law Chen Jingji, in a cruel travesty of Huaxian’s love for his mother, proves himself to be no filial son as he incestuously commits adultery with his father-in-law’s widowed concubine, thus hastening the dissolution of the family.

We have to extend the same caution to most pre-modern descriptions of performative literature in its social context. The description of the various forms of professional story-telling in Southern Song Hangzhou, for instance, cannot be taken as representative of general developments in the field of story-telling during the twelfth and thirteenth century, because Hangzhou with its high concentration of troops was highly atypical for Southern Song cities of the time, and likewise those other cities were of course not representative of the countryside where over eighty percent of the population may have lived. When we try to construct a larger historical picture, we are of course easily seduced to draw a single line of development and growth between the few but often highly atypical titbits of information we have because they are all we have, but by doing so, we may well ignore far more common developments which nobody recorded precisely because they were too every-day to notice. In short, unrepresentative, atypical performances stand a much better chance of being recorded than common performances, precisely because they are atypical and unrepresentative. Of course our contemporary performances are also extremely helpful for us in reimagining the past, but they too have to be used with caution, because the massive political, cultural, and social changes of the last century and beyond have had an enormous impact on the frequency and meaning of performances. When people are self-consciously “practicing superstition” whether as performer or audience, something very important has changed.

Checking the information on individual genres of prosimetric storytelling and the rich volumes

① Katherine Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin P’ing Mei*, 65. Carlitz may well overemphasize the Ming condemnation of the precious scrolls. Relying on the information in Sawada Mizuho’s *Sōbo Hōkan no kenkyū* (296–97), she also misidentifies the deity Rich Man Zhang and Woman Yang pray to as the Fifth Lord of Hades, and sees a numerological parallel between this deity and the “fifth wife” Pan Jinlian.

② Descriptions of *baojuan* performances in modern Western Gansu often mention that in case of family conflicts certain selected titles might be performed to make uncooperative family members, such as unfilial sons and unruly daughters-in-law, improve their behavior. This was trusted to be a very effective way of solving problems. See Wilt L. Idema, *The Immortal Maiden Equal to Heaven*, 8–9.

of the *Zhongguo quyi zhi* 中國曲藝志, I am time and again struck by two phenomena. The first is how shallow the historical information is on each of the tens of genres covered in each of the provincial volumes—there are plenty of legends, but it is rare to have reliable information from before the second part of the nineteenth century. The second is the continuous, if not to say hectic, pace of change exhibited by nearly all genres even within the short historical timeline. Precious scrolls may well be the genre with the longest uninterrupted timeline of all prosimetric genres that are still practiced in the PRC, but we have to assume that the genre was subjected to continuous change, not only in modern times, but also in premodern times. Moreover, that process will not have been the same in each region, and regional developments may well have gone off in different directions. Tradition is not a noun but a verb: it does not designate a stable condition but refers to a continuous process of refashioning and revitalizing. The lived past was not a museum but rather resembled a madhouse in which everything was in constant change. In the case of prosimetric literature, this change not only affected form and content of the texts, but also the manner of their performance, and their meaning to all participants—and of course the composition of the body of participants was changing too.

《紅羅寶卷》再探

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摘要:《紅羅寶卷》是最早的敘事寶卷之一。十六世紀小說《金瓶梅》提及這部寶卷, 且存一部明末刊本。寶卷講述被後母虐待的孝子促成父母團圓的故事, 明清時期甚為流行, 版本衆多。因明末刊本《紅羅寶卷》題識稱其源自十三世紀元刊本, 故被譽為最早的一部寶卷。該寶卷的這一版本顯示了晚明寶卷文體的特征, 但也不能排除這一版本源自更早的贊頌神道“三郎”靈應的寶卷。《金瓶梅》提及這部寶卷出於小說敘事功能的需要, 不能簡單將小說中宣卷場面的描寫代表現實中宣卷的實踐。

關鍵詞: 《紅羅寶卷》 《金瓶梅》 三郎 無生老母 孝道