

NEW RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AND NARRATIVE  
 BAOJUAN IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY: THE  
 EXAMPLE OF THE *COMPLETE RECENSION OF*  
*THE SCROLL OF MULIAN* \*

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ABSTRACT

Most *baojuan* (precious scrolls), predominantly religious-oriented prosimetric texts in the vernacular language, in the late period of their development (late 19th–early 20th centuries) lost connection with heterodox religious teachings. Notwithstanding this several newly emerged religious traditions in the 19th century continued to use the *baojuan* form to propagate their teachings. This paper analyses specific religious ideas in the *Complete Recension of the Scroll of Mulian*, first printed in Hangzhou in 1877. This text still has not been translated into any foreign language and is rarely discussed in research work, although it is considerably different from the more widespread recensions of this *baojuan*. The *Complete Recension* includes many additional entertaining episodes from the voluminous Mulian dramas of southern China. We can also find ideas of syncretic religious teachings, including references to the inner alchemy technique, which is especially characteristic of the Former Heaven Religion (Xiantiandao) groups. I also compare this text with other recensions of the *Mulian Baojuan* still recited in China in order to demonstrate the interplay of various beliefs and practices in the late *baojuan* texts.

KEYWORDS: *baojuan* • vernacular prosimetric literature • syncretic religions • Mulian • Chinese Buddhism

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Research presented in this article is to a great degree inspired by the work of Boris L. Riftin, who made extensive studies of the formation and evolution of famous subjects in Chinese popular literature (written in vernacular language – *baihua*) of the 8th to 19th centuries. His first monograph (based on his candidate of science degree dissertation) was devoted to the development of the story of the heroic woman Meng Jiangnü bringing down the Great Wall with her tears, as well as to the problem of genre in Chinese folklore (Riftin 1961).<sup>1</sup> Later he mainly researched the spread of narrative subjects used in the *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (Luo 1991) and *Journey to the West* (Wu 2012), major novels of the late imperial period (Riftin 1970; 1997a; 1997b; 2003). In the monograph dealing with the Meng Jiangnü legend, Riftin devoted a special section to *baojuan* (precious scrolls) on this subject,<sup>2</sup> representing vernacular prosimetric narratives used in recitation practices and related to popular religious movements of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) periods (Riftin 1961: 144–179). Riftin encouraged my work on the evolution and transformation of the Mulian story in the vernacular literature of the late imperial period.

I have been interested in the various versions of the *Mulian Baojuan* that were related to the syncretic religious movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of them remaining understudied in the world of sinology. Here I would like to analyse one such text, the *Complete Recension of the Scroll of Mulian* (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877; hereafter abbreviated as the *Complete Recension*),<sup>3</sup> which can be characterised as a rare version of the famous Mulian story dating back to the second half of the 19th century. The legend of the monk Mulian (Skt. Maudgalyāyana, one of the first ten of Buddha's disciples) rescuing his mother's soul from hell originated in the Buddhist scriptures, but constituted one of the most popular subjects in Chinese vernacular literature of various forms and genres.<sup>4</sup> While the studies of this 'Mulian literature' have already developed into a special field in research on Chinese popular literature, no special work in any language has focused on this particular text, and neither has the text been translated. The major purpose of this study is to demonstrate special features of this variant of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, especially in connection with its complex religious and cultural background.

The research on this particular text (also in comparison with other versions) can have more far-reaching results. The period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is characterised by proliferation of various religious associations related to a relaxation of state control and severe persecution of 'heterodox teachings'.<sup>5</sup> This period followed the Taiping War (1850–1864) and other rebellions that created turmoil in many central provinces of the Qing Empire, which also contributed to the revival and spread of traditional millenarian beliefs. Since the middle of the 19th century several prominent religious teachings have created prosimetric texts in the form of *baojuan* used for the purposes of indoctrination, thus continuing the tradition of religious movements of the 16th and 17th centuries (see for example Overmyer 1999: 136–271; Li 2007a: 2–19, 38–80; Che 2009: 140–161). Many texts were published and widely disseminated, entering the burgeoning book market of this period. As the history of many religious associations, especially those not related to rebellious activities but oriented toward scripture (*baojuan*) recitation and ritual services,<sup>6</sup> remains largely unknown, these texts constitute important testimony on the religious and cultural landscape of the time.

ON THE TEXT OF THE COMPLETE RECENSION AND ITS PLACE IN  
CHINESE RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

The *Complete Recension* survived in several editions. The earliest are two woodblock editions, both dated 1877 (the third year of the Guangxu reign), printed by Manao Monastery sūtra publishers in Hangzhou and Huikong sūtra publishers on the West Lake, also in Hangzhou. The copies of the first edition are kept in the Shanghai City Library and Fudan University Library (two copies); the second in the Shanghai City Library and Harvard-Yenching Library (originally the collection of Professor Patrick Hanan, see Photo 1). These two editions are almost identical.<sup>7</sup> Another similar text with the same title printed by Manao Monastery in Hangzhou and dated 1898 was preserved in the National Diet Library in Tokyo. It is an abbreviated recension of the earlier text as represented in the 1877 editions (64 vs. 132 pages in the Huikong edition). As it is much later and not as detailed as the 1877 edition, I do not discuss it in this article, although one can note that the *Complete Recension* was a relatively widespread text, as several variants of it circulated.

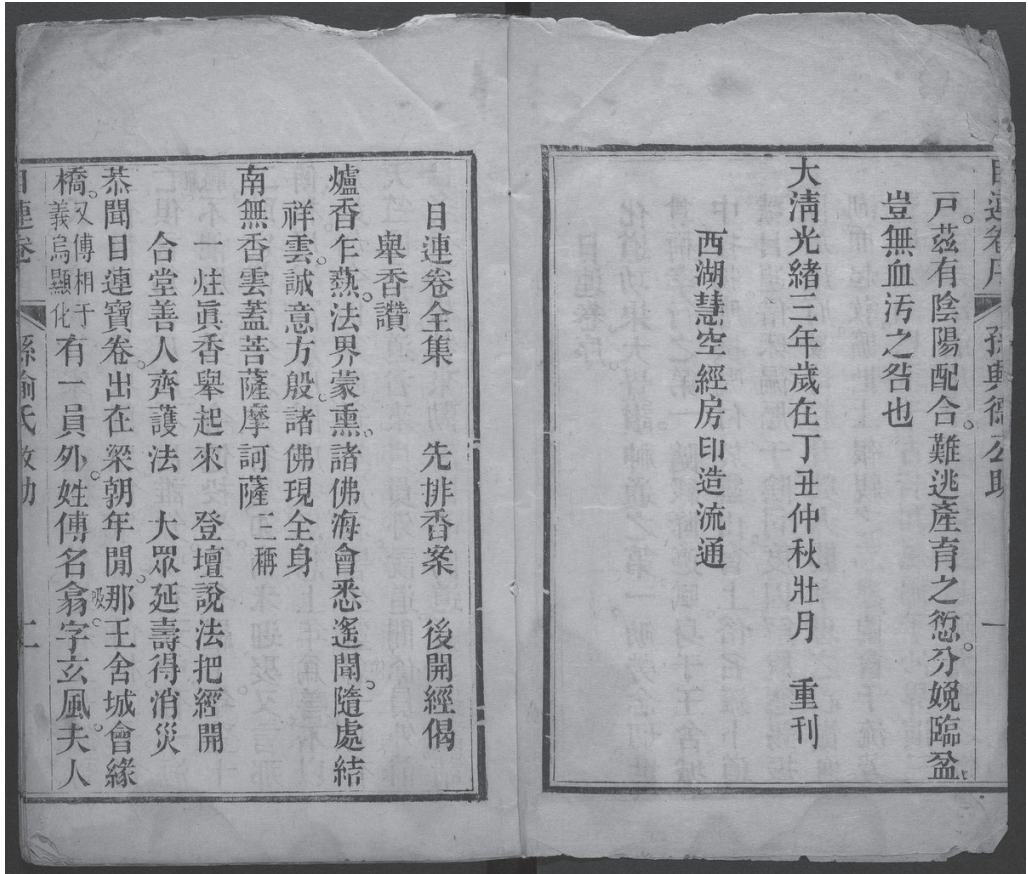


Photo 1. The first page of the *Complete Recension of the Precious Scroll of Mulian* (1877). Hangzhou: Huikong sūtra publishers.

Here I mainly use the edition of the *Complete Recension* by the Manao Monastery sūtra publishers from the Shanghai City Library collection. It is labelled “newly printed”, thus, the text presumably appeared earlier than 1877 (see Photo 2). As seen from several details of its contents, this text certainly originated in the Jiangnan area, somewhere near the cities where it was published.

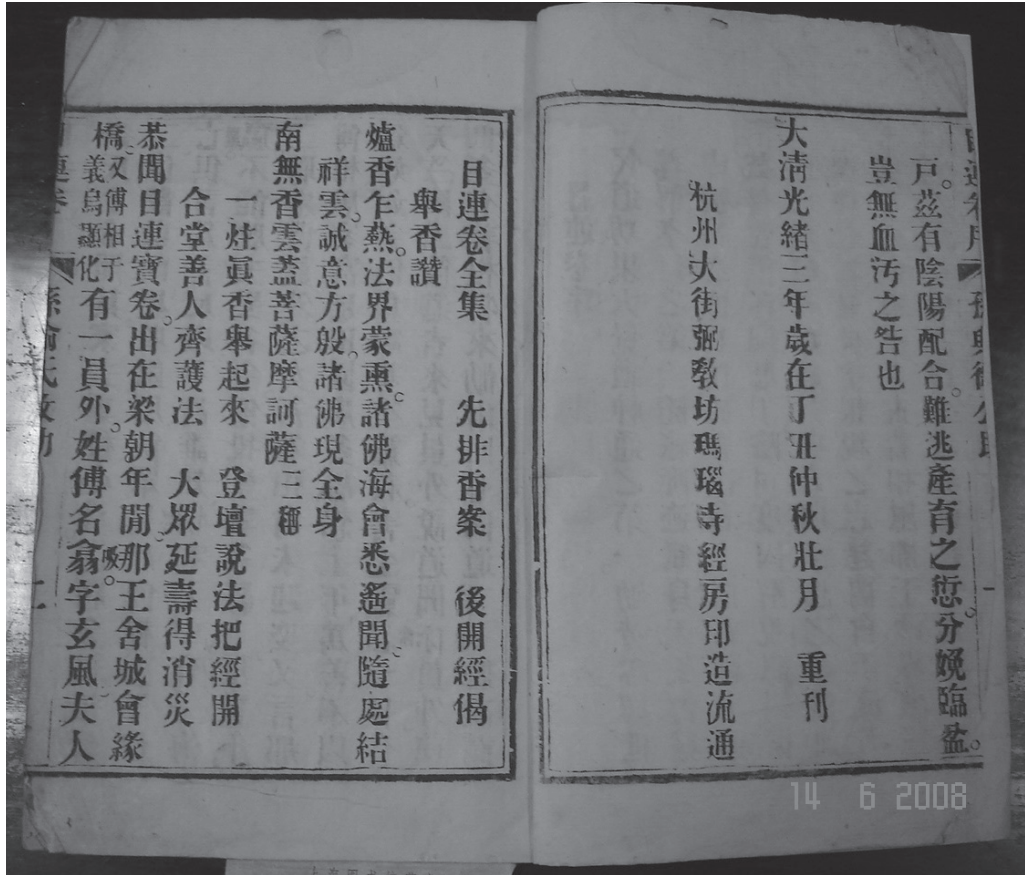


Photo 2. The first page of the *Complete Recension of the Precious Scroll of Mulian* (1877). Hangzhou: Manao monastery publishers.

The new printing was sponsored by Mr Sun Xingde and Mrs Sun-Yu with the pious intention of gaining religious merit in return.<sup>8</sup> Both publishers that printed this text in 1877 were affiliated with Buddhist temples, but are also known for printing a considerable number of religious texts from various traditions (thus being good examples of famous Chinese religious syncretism), including ‘morality books’, a broad category of didactic literature in the late imperial period with which *baojuan* have also been associated since the middle of the 19th century (see Liu 2017).<sup>9</sup> Apparently, because of the clearly proclaimed didactic meaning of this text, the *Complete Recension* was included in the repertoire of these publishers. It opens with an anonymous preface, praising the filial devotion of Mulian for rescuing his mother’s soul from torment in hell and establish-



ing the Ullambana (Yulan-pen) ritual for the salvation of all dead. The preface stresses a symbolic and moralistic meaning of the text.

A number of narrative texts, significantly containing the words “complete recension” in the titles,<sup>10</sup> were printed in the Manao Monastery and Huikong shops in approximately the same period. Many urban publishers of that period collected, edited, and released precious scrolls, so the *Complete Recension* looks like a typical example of this sort of literature,<sup>11</sup> although its religious background is still very rich and complex and needs detailed discussion.

As typical of *baojuan* texts, in the *Complete Recension* the narrative of Mulian is put into a ritual framework starting with the introductory verses. These are represented by the “hymn on burning incense” and “*gāthā* on opening scripture”. The latter reads:

Raise high a stick of the true incense,  
[The preacher] ascends the altar to preach the Law and opens scripture.  
All pious persons in the hall together protect the [Buddhist] Law,  
Longevity will be prolonged and disasters eliminated for people [in the audience].  
(*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 1a)

This passage clearly indicates that the text was designed for oral presentations at religious assemblies, as is usual for *baojuan*. This introductory part is preceded by a note instructing the presenter to arrange a table with an incense burner and to perform the ritual of opening the scripture. There is also a note that requires participants to chant the Buddha Amitabha’s name after each even-numbered line. The text closes with a verse on the transfer of merit: the miraculous effect obtained through scroll recitation is invested in the salvation of living beings, as is also common with sutra recitation in Chinese Buddhism. These details point to the Buddhist associations of the text and rituals related to its recitation.

The *Complete Recension* narrates the extended version of the story of Mulian,<sup>12</sup> starting with the life of his parents Fu Xiang and Liu.<sup>13</sup> While Fu Xiang is said to be a native of the city of Wangshecheng (*Rājagṛiha*, meaning City/House of Kings), the capital of Magadha state in India,<sup>14</sup> following the canonical hagiographies of Mulian (Skt. Maudgalyāyana), he is also said to have manifested in Yiwu county in Zhejiang province,<sup>15</sup> which demonstrates sinicisation of this subject, and even its localisation as the text must have been composed somewhere nearby. Fu Xiang was a pious believer, although his wife did not believe in Buddha and after her husband’s death violated the precepts, including dropping her vegetarian diet. She also deceived her son Fu, who adhered to his father’s injunctions. After death Ms Liu was punished by imprisonment in the deepest of hells Avici (Abi diyu), from where her son Mulian was able to rescue her with the magical powers he had received from his teacher the Buddha. In order to rescue his mother from further torment in the form of a hungry ghost and a dog, Mulian performed the ritual of Ullambana, following the Buddha’s instructions. This story has Buddhist origins and at first glance appears to be completely Buddhist,<sup>16</sup> although we know that it has been associated with heterodox religious teachings since the 16th century (see Berezkin 2017: 72–96).

While the late period of *baojuan* history (19th and early 20th centuries)<sup>17</sup> is usually characterised as that of popular narratives that almost lost connection with the syncretic teachings, many narrative texts composed and transmitted in this period demonstrate

that new religions related to the old heterodox movements still had a notable influence on this type of literature. Significantly, several of these new religions propagated the cult of the Unborn Venerable Mother (Wu sheng lao mu), progenitor and saviour of humankind, that had been central in numerous heterodox teachings since the middle 16th century (Overmyer 1999: 136–215). Several texts in the *baojuan* form were composed by the Teaching of the Green Lotus, a predecessor to the influential Great Way of Former Heaven tradition,<sup>18</sup> around the first half of the 19th century, for example the *True Scripture of the Original Vow of Guanyin Saving Humankind*<sup>19</sup> (see *Guanyin jidu ben yuan zhen jing* 1852) and [*The Precious Scripture*] of *Guanyin and Twelve Completely Enlightened Ones*<sup>20</sup> (see *Guanyin shi'er yuanjue* 1909). Several other texts devoted to stories about popular deities and religious figures, significantly also published by the Manao Monastery and Huikong sūtra publishers, such as *The Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor*, *The Precious Scroll of Miaoying* and *The Precious Scroll of He Xianggu*<sup>21</sup> (see *He Xianggu baojuan* 1880), also demonstrate the effect of sectarian ideology in this period (*Liang huang baojuan quan ji* 1876; *Miaoying baojuan quan ji*; *He Xianggu baojuan* 1880).<sup>22</sup> Although not necessarily directly referring to belief in the supreme female deity and her paradise-like realm, as typical of the sectarian precious scrolls of the 16th and 17th centuries, they still make references to the millenarian expectations, communities of ‘elects’, a strict vegetarian diet and inner alchemical practices.<sup>23</sup> These elements were also integral to the doctrines of the new religions of the 19th century, such as the Teaching of the Green Lotus, the Great Way of Former Heaven, etc.

The Mulian story remained very popular in the precious scrolls of the late period. There were also two variants of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, comparatively widespread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, also related to syncretic religions of this time (Berezkin 2017: 145–155). These were the *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in Three Rebirths*<sup>24</sup> (*Mulian san shi jiu mu baojuan* 1876; hereafter abbreviated as the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths*) and *Precious Account of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in the Underworld*<sup>25</sup> (*Mulian jiu mu youming baozhuan* 1876; hereafter abbreviated as the *Precious Account of Mulian*). They date approximately to the same period as the *Complete Recension*: the earliest extant copy of the first is dated 1876 (though it is also labelled a reprint of the earlier edition) while the second dates back to approximately the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>26</sup> While the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* certainly originated in Jiangnan (modern Jiangsu or Zhejiang province) and was mainly transmitted in the Lower Yangtze Valley, the *Precious Account of Mulian* was circulated in northern China (including Hebei province and the Beijing area).<sup>27</sup>

Both texts have long attracted the attention of scholars of Chinese popular literature and religion (Zheng 1954 (2): 1089–1090; Sawada 1975: 123–124; Chen 1983: 108–122; Stulova 1984: 296–297; Johnson 1995; Che 2009: 497; Grant and Idema 2011: 9–11, 27–28; Zhu 2017 [1993]: 135–136, 138–139). However, their religious background generally remained unexplained. For example, when focusing on the contents of the *Precious Account*, David Johnson (1995) mainly compared it with the Mulian drama, discovering many details that demonstrate its close connections with these dramas. At the same time, it is evident that the *Precious Account* was compiled by followers of the Teaching of Former Heaven, as this name appears frequently in the text. Several characteristic features of this religion, including the central cult of the highest female deity the Unborn Venerable Mother, and the practice of inner alchemy, also figure prominently (Berezkin 2017: 145–155).

The religious affiliation of the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* is less clear, though some details of its religious background are strikingly similar to the major beliefs and practices propagated in the *Precious Account*, for example occasional mention of the supreme female deity (Queen Mother), dwelling in a paradise-like realm, and inner alchemy. Apparently, the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* was related to one of the numerous branches of the Teaching of Non-Activism (Wuweijiao)<sup>28</sup> that spread widely in the Jiangnan region in 19th and early 20th centuries (Berezkin 2017: 153–154). Originally not related to the cult of the Unborn Venerable Mother, several later branches of the Teaching of Non-Activism adopted the cults of the supreme female deity, possibly because of the close interaction with the Teaching of Former Heaven (the Great Way of Former Heaven), as demonstrated by Taiwanese material (Wang J. 1996).<sup>29</sup> The *Complete Recension* represents another sectarian adaptation of this popular religious subject.

#### THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE COMPLETE RECENSION

In terms of religious background, the *Complete Recension* stands closer to the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* than the *Precious Account*, as it does not explicitly mention the name of the religious teaching it propagates, but contains some elements of the beliefs and practices characteristic of the Teaching of Former Heaven and other similar traditions. They are most clearly revealed in the sermon that Mulian gives in the underworld to the Lords of Hell, whom he met while searching for his mother's soul (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 65b–66a). The teaching propagated here is called the True Great Way. Apparently, the major practice it used was inner alchemy. The text says:

As you completely eat the dragon's saliva and the tiger's bone marrow,  
You will produce 'seven' and perfect 'three' and will realise your original nature.  
In the Northern Sea you will meticulously gather *lingzhi* mushrooms,  
You will collect the flowers of enlightenment – the spring inside the cave.  
When the water rises and the fire descends, *kan* and *li* [trigrams] will freeze.  
In the heated lead cauldron, you will give birth to the original spirit! (Ibid.: 65b)

In the next poetic passage there is a detailed description of the nature and goal of the Great Way:

The True Great Way without sound and without colour,  
The Great Way does not leave one's heart of a square inch,  
If you do not obscure your square inch, you will achieve the cinnabar juice.  
As the cinnabar juice arrives, you must divide it clearly.  
The clear division is completely under the enlightened teacher's instruction.  
After you clarify it with the teacher's instruction, you must collect it assiduously.  
When you have assiduously mixed and nourished it, you can seal it.  
As you seal it in the cinnabar field, the Dao embryo appears.  
As the Dao embryo appears, every moment you should silently nourish it.  
After nourishing it for ten lunar months, you can give birth.  
After you give birth to it, you will [need to] diligently nurse it.  
After you nurse it for three years, it can leave your body.

When it leaves the body, you should always take care of it,  
 After you take care of it for six years, you can relax for a while.  
 As you relax, the emptiness can create transformations,  
 As it creates transformations, no living beings [can but] be happy.  
 They are happy, but also afraid of inflicting demonic spirits.  
 Once you [have subdued] the demonic spirits through exercise, there won't be a  
 body either.  
 When one does not have a body, one still needs to work on formlessness.  
 When there are no form and no transformations, then [the embryo] becomes real.  
 When it becomes real, it will return to the native place to meet with all Buddhas.  
 All Buddhas will lead it to meet the Unborn [One].  
 As you meet the Unborn [One], you will rejoice in your heart.  
 Rejoiced, you will travel everywhere in her company! (Ibid.: 66a–67a)

These verses describe the process of nourishing the immortal body<sup>30</sup> (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 67a), which is one of the major ideas of heterodox teachings, borrowed from Daoist practice. Many symbols and terms invoked here, such as dragon and tiger, *kan* and *li* trigrams, original nature and nourishing spirit, “native place” and formlessness, are typical of these teachings, including the Former Heaven (see for example ter Haar 2014: 194–196). For example, *kan* and *li* trigrams refer to the elements water and fire (and thus ‘true’ *yang* and ‘true’ *yin* forces enclosed in them), associated with kidneys and heart in the human body and used for the formation of the ‘immortal embryo’ (the new indestructible body of an adept) (Skar and Pregadio 2000: 483–485). This mysterious way of self-perfection is of course not explained in detail, as is characteristic of *baojuan* texts in general since the period of the 16th and 17th centuries (Overmyer 1999: 48–49; Berezkin 2017: 107–112). However, the reader can get an idea of this technique; probably these terms served as hints for initiated believers. Apparently, the technique of inner alchemy was transmitted secretly in the oral way from a master to disciples. This is why such importance is given in this passage to the instruction from the enlightened teacher. Such teachers also acted in the text of the *Complete Recension* as they arrived at Fu Xiang’s house in order to convert him to their teaching (at the very beginning of the narrative). Unfortunately, the exact procedure of initiation is not described in this text.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, in the *Complete Recension* the preachers of this enigmatic teaching are called “men of the Way” (*dao ren*), a term applied to lay believers rather than the ordained clergy. This term is firmly associated with the development of lay Buddhist associations in China since the 12th century and was continuously used in the context of such movements in the late imperial period (ter Haar 1992: 80–81, 84–86, 204–205). It is possible to interpret the term ‘Unborn’ here as a reference to the Unborn Venerable Mother, as it denotes the host of a paradise-like realm (native place, where believers return after achieving immortality), where all buddhas and immortals dwell, and where the immortal gold body of an adept is manifested.<sup>32</sup> Here the syncretic nature of this teaching is revealed, as it brings together Buddhist and Daoist figures. The words Former Heaven also appear in the text, though they do not stand for the name of the teaching. Thus, this description is still not very clear, possibly in order to conceal the true nature of this religious teaching from the profane people and from state authorities.

Later in the same verse the name of Buddha Maitreya is mentioned (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 68a), which is the major deity associated with millenarian beliefs in the his-



tory of heterodox movements in China. Belief in the advent of Maitreya as an emissary of the Unborn Venerable Mother is often included in the contents of *baojuan* of the 16th and 17th centuries (see Stulova 1979: 94–95, 121–122; Overmyer 1999: 136–137, 170–172, 245–247). The reference to the advent of Maitreya here may hint to the teaching of a religious group associated with the Way of Former Heaven.

#### THE LITERARY VALUE OF THE COMPLETE RECENSION

The major difference between the *Complete Recension* and the other two variants of the precious scroll narrative, the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* and *Precious Account of Mulian*, lies in the fact that it devotes comparatively little space to the journey of Mulian through the netherworld in search of his mother's soul. This episode was central in the precious scrolls about Mulian, which appeared around the 14th century, but continued the tradition of earlier transformation texts<sup>33</sup> of the 8th to 10th centuries, discovered in the Dunhuang cave monastery library, and apocryphal Buddhist scriptures of the 12th and 13th centuries (see Mair 1983: 123–166; Berezkin 2017: 60–67). At the same time, the *Complete Recension* is very traditional in the preservation of details of the establishment of the Ullambana ritual and the rebirth of Liu Qingti as a dog after her escape from the underworld (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 69b–70a). These details can also be traced back to the transformation texts, but are often excluded from the later recensions of precious scrolls, such as the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths*. In the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths*, there are instead two consequent reincarnations of Mulian as Huang Chao and Butcher He Yin, a late detail not to be found in the *Complete Recension*.

At the same time, the *Complete Recension* also presents an expanded version of the Mulian story, which is typical of the late *baojuan* narratives. For example, it includes details of the earlier life of the Mulian's parents, similar to those in the *Precious Account of Mulian*. In this version, Fu Xiang and Ms Liu gave birth to two sons before Mulian: Jin'ge (Golden Brother) and Yin'ge (Silver Brother). They were sent by the deities to be born in the Fu family as punishment for Fu Xiang's unfair and cruel treatment of the poor, and their mission was to waste the father's money. However, when the deities discovered that Fu Xiang had repented and turned to goodness, they recalled these two evil spirits, and Fu Xiang's sons perished. Only then Mulian was given to an old couple as a compensation for this loss. In the *Complete Recension* there are also numerous additional episodes in the early period of Mulian's life (before the death of his mother, after which he left to seek the Buddha's instruction).

Some of these additional episodes in the *Complete Recension* can be interpreted as the influence of the Mulian drama. This influence can also be seen in the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* and *Precious Account of Mulian* (Berezkin 2017: 153–154). However, the interaction with the dramatic versions is especially conspicuous in the *Complete Recension*, as it includes many episodes that are absent from the other two recensions of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, but which can be found in the Mulian dramas. These include, for example, the storyline involving Mulian's bride Cao Caihe, which is absent from the other two recensions. This episode connects the *Complete Recension* with the *Newly Compiled Drama Exhorting Goodness of Mulian Rescuing His Mother*<sup>34</sup> by Zheng Zhizhen (first printed ca. 1582; see Zheng 2005) in the form of the southern-style drama *xiwen*,<sup>35</sup>

composed on the basis of local folk versions of the Huizhou area (on this text see Guo 2005: 103–148). It can be considered the most common variant of the lengthy Mulian drama (consisting of 100 acts), as in the printed form it was widely disseminated across the country (for example, Liu 1997: 65–158; Zhu 2017 [1993]: 110–131). The love story was presumably added to fit conventions of the *xiwen* genre, although it was also borrowed by this expanded *baojuan* recension. Of course, the story of Mulian's bride is given a moralistic religious interpretation in the *Complete Recension*. After Mulian had left home, Cao Caihe refused to be married to another man and escaped to the nunnery, thus maintaining her chastity, an episode that reflects this important social ethical restriction for women in the late imperial period. As a reward, in the drama and the *Complete Recension* she and her parents also obtained salvation, following Mulian's enlightenment and the salvation of his mother. This storyline of Cao Caihe can also be interpreted as a sign of the complete sinicisation of the Mulian story in late texts of the *baojuan* form.

Other details in the *Complete Recension* similar to Zheng Zhizhen's theatrical version include the description of the death of Fu Xiang, the interference of Mulian's maternal uncle Liu Jia, who persuaded Liu Qingti to stop fasting and start killing animals, a scene in which Bodhisattva Guanyin in disguise tries to test Mulian's intentions and other details of Mulian's journey to the Western Heaven in search of the Buddha (whom he would like to ask about the afterlife destiny of his mother), etc. All of these are also shared with the other two variants of the precious scroll – *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* and *Precious Account of Mulian*.

However, in the *Complete Recension* there are also episodes that cannot be found in either the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* or in the *Precious Account of Mulian*. One of the most prominent examples is the “Nun descends from a mountain” scene (also known as “In thoughts of the profane life” (*Si fan*)), which is one of the prominent episodes in the Zheng Zhizhen's drama. This scene, which certainly pre-dates Zheng's edited text, was prominently featured in Chinese theatre, where it was performed separately in many local dramatic genres, including the famous Kunqu drama that originated in modern Jiangsu in the 16th century but then spread widely throughout the country (see Goldman 2001; also Guo 2005: 109, 156, 213; Zhu 2017 [1993]: 246–259). This episode is generally associated with anti-clerical sentiments in Chinese literature, so its appearance in the Mulian drama, and especially *baojuan* on the same topic, seems quite strange. Of course, in the *Complete Recension* it is interpreted in the critical way, as an illustration of the immoral behaviour that leads to the retribution in the afterlife. This nun also is mentioned in the concluding verses of this text, which summarise the main ethical and religious message of *baojuan*. It is said that the nun, together with the monk, whom she met and married after leaving the nunnery, were punished in hell. The verses especially note that this scene with the love story of the fugitive nun and monk cannot be treated as an ‘illicit drama’<sup>36</sup> with their usual romantic and rebellious subjects; thus referring to the official prohibitions against staging folk dramas with frivolous content (along with ‘vulgar novels’, presumably ‘chantefable’ *tanci*) in Jiangnan in the middle of the 19th century (see Wang 1958: 121–128, 130–131, 157–160). Here we can see incorporation of the morally deficient, but implicitly entertaining episode in the religious narrative positioned as a scripture of one of the particular religious associations of this time. It is symptomatic that this text was presumably also composed in Jiangnan.

What is the possible explanation for the inclusion of this famous episode in the religious text? On the one hand, one must note the importance of entertaining elements in the *baojuan* texts of this period that were mainly used as promptbooks for a type of popular storytelling. Entertainment of the audience also constituted a major function of *baojuan* texts in the late period of their development along with the function of religious indoctrination (Li 2007a: 29–36; Che 2009: 23–25). In this aspect they resemble traditional dramatic performances, also closely related to moralisation. On the other hand, we can take into account the criticism of traditional clergy (and ‘empty’ – i.e. formal and meaningless – ritual), typical of the heterodox religious movements of the late imperial period, including the Luo Qing’s Teaching of Non-Activism, as embodied in the *Five Books in Six Volumes* (ter Haar 2014: 33–35).<sup>37</sup> While this critical attitude towards monasticism is not clearly expressed in the *Complete Recension*, its authors/editors were not opposed to including such an episode of criticism as the fugitive nun and monk.

The scene with the nun descending from the mountain must be interpreted as an additional episode, inserted in the major storyline of the *Baojuan of Mulian*, as it does not have connection with the main narrative. There are also other similar additional episodes, such as “Zhang Man beats his father”, “Auntie Wang quarrels over a chicken”, “Ms Chen wants to commit suicide”, etc. (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 24a–31b). They are grouped together as the cases Mulian encountered on his business trip, which he undertook after his father’s death, thus linking them to the main storyline. Not all these episodes can be found in Zheng’s recension, but exist in several local variants of the Mulian drama, most notably in the folk plays of the Shaoxing area in Zhejiang province.<sup>38</sup> These plays usually also contain the episode with the nun descending from the mountain. These additional episodes were included in the extended recension of the Mulian drama that existed primarily in the oral mode.<sup>39</sup> Only at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries were several such variants written down.

In the other two variants of the precious scroll of Mulian interaction with local dramas on the same subject has already been detected. In addition, they are related to the dramas of specific localities, as can be seen through several details in the storyline: while the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* is related to the drama of the Shaoxing city area in Zhejiang, the *Precious Account of Mulian* contains many details most probably originating in the dramas of the Sichuan province (Berezkin 2017: 138–141). There is also a manuscript of the *Baojuan of Mulian* in Yangzhou University Library, dating to ca. late 19th, early 20th century that presents another recension of this narrative, closely following the details of the Shaoxing dramas, as argued by Che Xilun (Che 2009: 497–500).

Therefore, it is probable that the *Complete Recension* is related to the folk dramas of Shaoxing or another area of northern Zhejiang. The most prominent details that connect it with the local drama of Shaoxing are the living Wuchang (or White Spirit) and the soul of a hung woman (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 28b, 36a–38a; Xu 1994: 165–167, 220–222). The first tells about the arrival of the deity of death, including some comical details; the second introduces the spirit of a woman who had committed suicide by hanging because of injustice and was looking for a substitute soul (in accordance with traditional Chinese beliefs). Both are characteristic of this local dramatic recension, and became especially well known as they were praised by famous Chinese writer Lu Xun (real name Zhou Shuren, 1881–1936), a native of Shaoxing, in his short stories and

essays (Xu and Wang 1994: 203–223). They constituted the most impressive characters of the folk Mulian drama, which Lu watched in childhood in his hometown.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the *Complete Recension* stands closer to the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths*, which was probably related to the Shaoxing area dramas. However, the episodes in two recensions of *baojuan* shared with the Shaoxing dramas are not the same. For example, the *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* does not contain the episode with two elder sons of Fu Xiang and Ms Liu: Jin'ge and Yin'ge. On the other side, this text has a scene with the miraculous birth of Fu Luobo, which also appears in several variants of the Shaoxing drama; but the *Complete Recension* does not have it. In addition, while in the surviving scripts of the Shaoxing dramas the episode with Jin'ge and Yin'ge is depicted in detail (for example Xu 1994: 152–174), in the *Complete Recension* it is barely mentioned at the beginning of the narrative (*Mulian juan quan ji* 1877: 2b). This demonstrates the complex nature of interaction between the *baojuan* and dramatic scripts in the local culture.

As for the exact use of the *Complete Recension*, we cannot say much on this part as we lack external evidence on the history of this text. However, we can suppose that this precious scroll was primarily oriented for the lower classes audiences, and mainly used for recitation practices or private reading aloud (vocalisation). There are phonetic hints for the rare and difficult characters typed in the form of small homophonic characters near them. These phonetic correspondences may be useful in defining the exact geographical area of the text's production and initial dissemination. The printed versions of *baojuan*, produced by numerous morality book publishers in the urban centres in this period, such as the *Complete Recension*, also had a significant impact on the development of scroll recitation practices in the Jiangnan region (which in some places survive even today) (see Berezkin 2014: 174–175).

## CONCLUSIONS

The *Complete Recension* combines several important topics in the frame of a late-period syncretic teaching. Didacticism appears here along with entertainment, and religious elements together with the scenes of dramatic performances. Such fusion is typical of the popular literature using religious subjects in late imperial China, and the *baojuan* genre in particular.

As for the religious ideas expressed in this text, the combination of the inner alchemy with the Buddhist precepts (especially strict vegetarianism) and numerous other notions of Buddhist origins suggests affiliation with a group representing the Teaching of Former Heaven (or very close to it), an influential new religion of that time, also related to much older heterodox religious traditions. The story of Buddhist origins, aimed at the propagation of Buddhist morality and practices (including vegetarianism), in a very sinicised form, must have been an appropriate subject for proselytising in such religious communities. Although the exact religious and historical background of this text remains unclear, the *Complete Recension of the Precious Scroll of Mulian* documents the use of heterodox religious ideas and cults in the *baojuan* of the late period and in the Chinese popular storytelling literature of the late 19th century in general.



## NOTES

1 For a collection of English translations of various Chinese versions of this story, see Idema 2008.

2 On the general history of the *baojuan* texts, see Sawada 1975; Overmyer 1999; Li 2007a; Che 2009.

3 Lit. 'complete collection'. This is the title that appears at the beginning of the main text in the 1877 editions from Hangzhou. The title *Complete Recension of the Precious Scroll of Mulian* (目連寶卷全集) appears on the cover of these editions. These texts also use the abbreviated titles of the *Scroll of Mulian* and *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, which make it hard to distinguish from other popular recensions of *Mulian Baojuan*.

4 On the origins and development of this subject in China, see for example Berezkin 2017: 35–47.

5 These movements are generally characterised as separate religions in modern scholarship. In Western research they have generally been termed sects, while in Chinese studies they are most often called secret folk religions (*minjian mimi zongjiao*) (see for example Overmyer 1976; Seiwert 2003; Ma and Han 2004 [1992]; Li 2007b [1948]). Both these definitions are not very accurate, as they reflect the condescending attitude of state authorities. There are several points of similarity between them and sectarian teachings in the Christian traditions of Europe. While originating in broad lay Buddhist movements of the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1260–1368) dynasties, they mainly opposed traditional Buddhist clergy and did not receive state recognition, despite constant efforts on the part of their leaders. State persecution was decisive in them becoming secret, while many such religions were centered on proselytising. Today a distinction is drawn between lay-oriented reinterpretations of the Buddhist teachings and new types of religion developing since the mid-16th century that had specific mythology centred on the supreme female deity the Unborn Venerable Mother (Wu sheng lao mu) and related millenarian prophecies (ter Haar 2014: 121–126). Both types combined elements from the major Three Teachings (*San jiao*) of China (in different proportion) and had popular orientation as well as other factors embodied in composition and dissemination of vernacular prosimetric literature (*baojuan*), often borrowing and reinterpreting popular folk subjects.

6 For the different interpretations of these groups, see Naquin 1988; ter Haar 2014: 219–234.

7 According to the catalog of Che Xilun, later reprinted editions of this text also exist (Che 2000: 165–166).

8 These two people have associations with the sectarian religious groups of that time, as their names appear in another precious scroll representing one of these teachings, in this case a branch of the Way of Yellow Heaven (Huangtiandao) (see Alexander 2021).

9 On 'morality books' (*shanshu*) in Chinese religious discourse, see Goossaert 2012.

10 For example, the *Complete Recension of Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor* (梁皇寶卷全集, see *Liang huang baojuan quan ji* 1876), *Complete Recension of Precious Scroll of Miaoying* (妙英寶卷全集, see *Miaoying baojuan quan ji*), etc.

11 On the printing of *baojuan* in that period, see, for example, Che 2011; Berezkin 2014; Liu 2017.

12 Victor H. Mair (1983: 224) translated Mulian's original lay name Fu Luobo (傅羅卜) as Turnip (this word has a similar pronunciation and is written with similar characters), suggesting it was formed from the Sanskrit (or Prakrit) word for turnip. For the association of Mulian's birth with turnip in several variants of precious scrolls and Shaoxing dramas, see Berezkin 2017: 140–141.

13 Mr Fu Xiang (傅相) is also known under name Fu Xi (傅翕); Ms Liu (劉).

14 At present called Rajgir, located in Bihar.

15 Now a famous center of international commerce, it was a remote rural district at the end of the 19th century. The details of Fu Xiang's manifestation, however, are not clear.

16 The Buddhist meaning of this story also is emphasised in the anonymous preface in this edition, which briefly introduces Mulian as one of the first of Buddha's disciples, praised as the first in spiritual abilities as well as a paragon of filial piety, an image that is based on the scriptural sources of Chinese Buddhism. At the same time, there he is credited not only with the establishment of the ritual assembly of Ullambana for the deliverance of ancestors' souls, but also with rescuing his mother from sufferings in the Blood Pond (Xuehu). The later detail reflects the popular Chinese concept of women's physiological impurity and related rituals (see Grant and Idema 2011: 23–34; Berezkin 2017: XVI–XXIV).

17 As opposed to the *baojuan* of the middle period (16th and 17th centuries), when the texts of new syncretic teachings were dominant (for periodisation, see Berezkin 2017: 3–5).

18 Teaching of Green Lotus – Qinglianjiao (青蓮教). I do not deal here with the complex and still not very clarified history of the Great Way of Former Heaven (Xiantian dadao 先天大道). In different regions, its communities were known under different names. Most authoritative Chinese scholars basically agree that the Great Way of Former Heaven stemmed from the Teaching of Non-Activism and formed around the middle of the 19th century (see for example Ma and Han 2004 [1992] 2: 817–858). On the other hand, it appears to be the predecessor of the more famous Way of Pervasive Unity (Yiguandao), still widespread among Chinese abroad (Lin 1985). The main distinguishing features of this religion included millenarian beliefs, centered on the cult of the supreme female deity and the practice of inner alchemy for initiated believers, which also required strict vegetarianism and adherence to basic Buddhist precepts, thus continuing the discourse of the heterodox religions of the 16th and 17th centuries.

19 觀音濟度本願真經; the earliest printed edition is dated 1850.

20 觀音十二圓覺[寶經]; the earliest printed edition is dated 1854.

21 何仙姑寶卷.

22 For research on these texts, see for example Yü 2001: 461–467; Idema 2002; Berezkin 2019; 2021.

23 An alternative English translation of *nei dan* (內丹) is 'inner elixir'.

24 目蓮三世救母寶卷.

25 目連救母幽冥寶傳.

26 The earliest printed copy available to me also is dated 1876.

27 The *Precious Account of Mulian* is still commonly recited in the Hexi Corridor in Gansu, where the tradition of scroll recitation survives even today.

28 Founded by semi-legendary Patriarch Luo (Luo Qing) ca. the turn of the 16th century in northern China, and spreading through the country by the end of the Ming dynasty (see ter Haar 2014: 23–57).

29 The Teaching of Former Heaven can be understood as combining elements of the lay Buddhist movements, originating in the Teaching of Non-Activism, and the late-Ming congregations focused on the worship of the Unborn Venerable Mother.

30 Also known as the gold body of eight *zhang*, a traditional unit of measure, equivalent to 3.33 metres or 3.65 yards.

31 As we know, the ritual of initiation was very important in the Great Way of Former Heaven and other similar religious traditions (see Topley 1963: 375–376; Li 2007b [1948]: 130–140).

32 One needs to remember that the term 'Not-Born' was also used in the orthodox Buddhist context, which led to ambiguity in the interpretation of early *baojuan* texts (see Li 2007a: 15–16; Che 2009: 524–525).

33 *Bianwen* (變文).

34 新編目連救母勸善戲文.

35 *Xiwen* (also known as the southern drama *nanxi*) was one of the oldest forms of traditional drama in China, which appeared around the 12th century in the south-eastern coastal areas of the country. Known for lengthy scripts and variety of contents, it remained very popular in the south during the 14th and 15th centuries.

36 *Yinxi* (淫戲).

37 *Wu bu liu ce* 五部六冊 was first printed in 1509. For the photocopies of the Ming dynasty woodblock editions of these texts, see Pu 2005 volume 1. For an interesting episode with self-criticism by the clergy (Buddhist nuns in particular), see another scripture from the Teaching of Former Heaven, the *True Scripture of the Original Vow of Guanyin Saving Humankind* (*Guanyin jidu ben yuan zhen jing* 1852: 19–20; see also Yü 2001: 465).

38 See for example Xu 1994: 152–174; see also the dramatic script from the nearby area of Xinchang County in Zhejiang (Xu and Zhang 1994: 95–121).

39 These stories appear not only in the Shaoxing drama, but also in other local variants of the Mulian drama; they constitute a type of folklore associated with this subject. Their similar grouping in the Shaoxing drama and the *Complete Recension* in my view cannot be accidental.

40 There are also essays dedicated to these figures and the Shaoxing Mulian drama by his brother Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967; see Xu and Wang 1994: 226–231).

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