



Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema (trans. and intro.), *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 368 pages. Notes, glossary, bibliog., index. Hardcover, \$70.00; paperback, \$35.00. ISBN 780295991191 (hardcover); 9780295991207 (paperback).

THIS COAUTHORED book by Grant and Idema contains English translations of two narrative texts that deal with the afterlife salvation of women's souls: *The Precious Scroll of the Three Lives of Mulian* (Mulian san shi baojuan) and *Woman Huang Recites the Diamond Sutra* (Huang shi nü nian Jingangjing). The first text is a Nanjing woodblock edition dated to 1885, while the second one is an undated Shanghai edition probably dating back to the early twentieth century (16).

These translations of both texts are the first complete ones ever published in a Western language. Both texts are extremely important for our understanding of the traditional culture of China: they are related to the religious beliefs of the late imperial pe-

riod, and those dealing with female sexuality and salvation in particular. The gender problematic of the book is well pronounced in the term “Blood Pond Hell” that appears in its title. Blood Pond Hell is the place in the Chinese Buddhist conception of hell (or purgatory) where female souls are confined as the consequence of their inescapable sin caused by gender impurity: during their lifetime they have polluted soil and water by their menstrual and parturition blood. Usually special rituals are needed for the salvation of these souls. Beliefs concerning Blood Pond appear in both translated texts, and the authors analyze the related passages and their place in the history of the Blood Pond beliefs in the introduction (23–34). There are several Western works that discuss the origin and meaning of Blood Pond Hell, but they have not analyzed in depth the two texts translated here. The conclusion about the female ritual competence and power that can be demonstrated only in the Underworld in the Woman Huang’s tale (33) is quite significant for our understanding of this controversial issue.

At the same time, one should note that, as the authors of the book have (26; 233, n.24), the ritual of “breaking Blood Pond Hell” (or “Blood Bowl”) has been performed in different areas of China and South-East Asia, and, according to the sources available to me, the texts recited as accompaniment to this ritual are usually different from those translated in this volume. For example, *The Precious Scroll of Blood Pond* (Xuehu baojuan) performed in conjunction with the “breaking the Blood Pond [Hell]” in Jingjiang (Jiangsu province, China), which is mentioned in the endnote (233, n.24),¹ is a different version if compared with the editions of Mulian precious scrolls printed in the cities at the end of the nineteenth/early twentieth century. For example, the Jingjiang version contains the long penitence aimed at redemption of one’s mother’s sins, not to be found in the printed versions. In Taiwan, the local Buddhist priests also perform this ritual during funerary services for women—and for mothers in particular—but the textual components of it include the self-introduction by the priest enacting Mulian and the lengthy dialogues between Mulian and the guardians of Blood Pond [Hell]. Significantly, the introduction in the book demonstrates some textual affinity between the part of *Woman Huang Recites the Diamond Sutra* and the ritual texts used in Taiwan (26–27). However, one should also note that there seems to be no evidence of the recitation of any version of the Woman Huang’s legend in connection with the Blood Pond ritual, or at least there is none discussed in this book. In this regard the title of the book seems to be somewhat misleading. However, this fact in no way undermines the historical, cultural, and literary significance of the texts translated and discussed by Idema and Grant and their important place in the literature on female salvation.

For both of the translated texts the dates of composition and the names of authors (editors) are unknown, but it is quite safe to assume that the versions available now date to approximately the same time as they were published (see above).² At the same time the stories of Mulian and Woman Huang date back to a much earlier time. The translators discuss the origin of the two stories at length in the Introduction (5–17). The story of Buddha’s disciple Mulian rescuing the soul of his sinful mother from punishment in the afterlife appears in China around the fourth century and may have originated in Indian or Central Asian Buddhist texts,

while the story of pious Woman Huang who memorized and then recited in hell the *Diamond Sutra* appears around the time of the Song dynasty (960–1279) and seems to be peculiar to China.³ As for the generic affiliation of these two texts, the translated Mulian narrative is a “precious scroll,” a prosimetric form that is used for recitation during the religious meetings. The affiliation of the second text is not very clear. It refers to itself as a “morality book” (*shanshu*; 16), and its form is quite different from the usual form of *baojuan*: with the exception of a passage in prose, it is composed in rhymed verse. At the same time one should note that “morality books,” a category of didactic texts in the nineteenth century, was closely related to the “precious scrolls” genre. The authors argue that the text about Huang “was probably designed not to be recited or performed in a ritual context but simply to be read for personal enjoyment and edification” (16); however, they do not provide any evidence for this. At any rate, the two translated texts vary in regard with their forms.

The literary merits of both precious scrolls are recognizable in the high scholarly translations. The translators have also provided detailed commentaries for both texts that will prove very helpful for a nonspecialist reader. However, there are still points that need more clarification, both in the introduction and translations. For example, the authors write that *The Precious Scroll of the Three Lives of Mulian* “was popular in Zhejiang” (9), while the edition translated comes from Nanjing in Jiangsu.⁴ The authors also do not point to the textual links between *The Precious Scroll of the Three Lives of Mulian* and the sixteenth century Mulian drama by Zheng Zhizhen in the episodes dealing with Bodhisattva Guanyin and her acolytes which appear in both texts (10–11). Furthermore, *Woman Huang Recites the Diamond Sutra* says that there are “fifty-four hundred and eight scrolls” in the *Diamond Sutra* (192), while the usually known version of this sutra is quite short. The translator has left this passage without a note, and one can only wonder how to interpret this. These problems are still quite minor and do not diminish the general value of this work. One can recommend Grant and Idema’s book to students of Chinese religion, literature, anthropology, and social history, as well as of those of the whole East Asian region.

NOTES

1. The correct name of this text is *The Precious Scroll of Blood Pond*, not *The Precious Scroll of the Blood Bowl* (*Xuepen baojuan*), as given in the endnote.

2. In the case of the first text, the earliest available edition dates to 1876.

3. Since the sixteenth century this story has been amplified in the form of “precious scrolls” (*baojuan*).

4. As far as I know, most of the available printed versions come from modern Jiangsu province and Shanghai.

Rostislav Berezkin
Fudan University, China