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A Passage from the Novel

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The Social Setting of Chinese Religious Storytelling
in the Late Sixteenth – Early Seventeenth Centuries:
A Passage from the Novel *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* (1620)¹

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While the literary form called precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷) has long been recognized by scholars as a significant part of Chinese vernacular literature during the Ming and Qing dynasties and as an important source on Chinese popular beliefs, little is known about the origin of this genre and its performative and social context in the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries. Generally characterized by their religious contents and ritualized manner of performance, precious scrolls are prosimetric narratives that served as the basis of oral performances.² During the early period of their development (ca. fourteenth–fifteenth centuries), precious scrolls mainly propagated Buddhist ideas among the laity; in the middle period (sixteenth–seventeenth centuries) they became associated with the teachings of popular religious movements (or “sects” in Western terminology).³ While the scrolls of this “sectarian”

¹ Acknowledgments: this research was assisted by a grant from the Chinese government for research in social studies: “Survey and research on Chinese precious scrolls preserved abroad” 海外藏中國寶卷整理與研究 (17ZDA266) and a grant from the Ministry of Education of China: “Multi-focal study of scroll recitation art in China” 教育部人文社科規劃基金項目“中國宣卷藝術的多角度研究” (no. 18YJAZH077). The author also expresses his gratitude to Professor Victor H. Mair for his suggestions on the initial manuscripts and to Paula Roberts for the editorial work.

² For a general introduction to precious scrolls, see. e.g., Sawada 1975a; Overmyer 1999, 4–5; Che Xilun 2009.

³ For my periodization of precious scrolls, see Berezkin 2017a, 3–5.

type became widely known, especially outside China;⁴ the original texts concerned with popular Buddhist subjects also remained popular in the later period.

Still, we have little historical evidence regarding the early performances of precious scrolls. Until now, most scholarship concerning this evidence has centered on the descriptions in the novel *Plum in the Golden Vase with Lyrics* (*Jin Ping Mei cihua* 金瓶梅詞話) by the Scoffer of Lanling (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生), dating back to ca. late sixteenth century (hereafter abbreviated as the *Plum in the Golden Vase*), as well as its sequel *Xu Jin Ping Mei* (續金瓶梅, ca. 1660; hereafter, the *Sequel*), ascribed to Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (1599–1669) (Sawada 1975a, 285–297; Sawada 1975b, 59–62; Che Xilun 1990; Johnson 1995; et al.). The first contains a description of the recitation of a ritual prosimetric text—the *Ritual Amplification of the Diamond Sutra* (*Jingang jing keyi* 金剛經科儀)—and five narrative precious scrolls by the Buddhist nuns in the domestic setting of the household of the rich merchant Ximen Qing, in Shandong. *Xu Jin Ping Mei* in the thirty-eighth chapter contains a scene of reciting another narrative text, called a “Case of the Lotus Woman Attaining Buddhahood in the Palanquin with the Flower Lanterns” (*Hua deng jiao Liannü cheng fo gong'an* 花燈轎蓮女成佛公案), in the monastic setting of the Buddhist convent by the Buddhist nun called “Lotus Flower Monk” (Lianhuaseng 蓮花僧) (*Xu Jin Ping Mei* 1990, 1005–1035).⁵

A further place in which various aspects of these performances are represented is another famous novel of the late Ming, called the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* (*Ping yao zhuan* 平妖傳. The complete title is *The Three Sui of the Northern Song Quash the Demons' Revolt* 北宋三遂平妖傳; the title is also translated as *The Three Sui Quash the Demon's Revolt*, or *The Sorcerers' Revolt*) edited by the famous literatus Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) around 1620.⁶ This novel takes as its subject historical events of the millenarian rebellion led by Wang Ze 王則, a garrison soldier, who proclaimed the arrival of the era of Buddha Maitreya and took the city of Beizhou 貝州 in modern Hebei province

4 See e.g., Overmyer 1976, 135–137; Stulova 1979; Porshneva 1991; Overmyer 1999; Seiwert and Ma Xisha 2003. Recently this imbalance has been partially eliminated, as several studies and translations of narrative precious scrolls of non-sectarian problematics have appeared; on the history of Western studies of precious scrolls, see Idema 2012.

5 On the connection of this passage with precious scrolls recitation, see also Berezkin 2020.

6 Its original variant is ascribed to another famous writer of the earlier period, Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 (ca. 1330–ca. 1400). However, this variant does not contain the description of “telling scriptures” performances.

for a short time (1047–1048); these are presented however in a fantastical way. The original version of the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt*, in twenty chapters, was ascribed to the famous writer Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 (ca. 1330–ca. 1400), though that claim for authorship is spurious. In modern scholarship, the initial version is dated ca. late sixteenth century (*The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt* 2010, XIV). The translator of this early version of the novel, Lois Fusek, has described it as a “mix of fact and fiction” and has characterized it as a curious compilation of smaller stories that engage the reader through the “ironic, witty tone of the narrator and the comic buffooneries in the action” (*The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt* 2010, XI). Feng Menglong greatly expanded the original text, adding twenty chapters that almost doubled its volume.

In the eleventh chapter of Feng Menglong's version, “The Egg-monk Obtains the Secret Charms and Finds His Teacher; Holy Auntie Receives the Celestial Book and Meets Her Brother” (得道法蛋僧訪師，遇天書聖姑認弟), there is a comparatively detailed description of the recitation of religious narratives by the old nun called Holy Auntie (Sheng gugu 聖姑姑), who is in fact a transformed fox (Feng Menglong 1980, 70–74). Few scholars in China and abroad so far have paid attention to this description,⁷ though it is a precious piece of evidence concerning the public performance of narratives dealing with Princess Miaoshan 妙善 (manifestation of Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音)⁸ and Luobo 羅卜 (monk Mulian 目連), which also constituted the subjects of two precious scrolls of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries, namely the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* (*Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷) and *Precious Scroll of Mulian* (*Mulian baojuan* 目連寶卷).⁹ The present essay is my endeavor to explain the significance of this passage in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* for the history of religious storytelling in China. Although it contains many fantastic details, this text nevertheless reflects the socio-cultural situation of the time, showing what was typical in Chinese “fiction” of that period.¹⁰

7 Wan Qingchuan and Cao Lina 2007; Berezkin 2015, 339–340; Sun 2017, 180–181.

8 Sansk. name Avalokiteśvara. While originally presented as a male deity, Guanyin took female forms in China, Miaoshan being one of these; see Yü 2001, 495–504.

9 On them, see e.g., Dudbridge 2004, 47–56; Idema 2008a, 5–21, Che Xilun 2009, 72–76, 109–116; Berezkin 2017a, 48–71.

10 I refrain from the discussion of any problem historicity of such texts as the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt*, and just would like to note that they cannot be considered pure “fiction” in the modern sense. People of that time, even literati,

Existing studies of the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* mainly deal with problems of the text's authorship and dating, focusing on the twenty-chapter version (e.g. Hanan 1971). This early recension of the novel has twice been translated into English (*The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt* 2010 and *Quelling the Demons' Revolt* 2017), while Feng Menglong's expanded recension has received less attention. At the same time, Feng Menglong's recension provides more ethnographic and cultural information than does the earlier one. Neither have scholars studying Chinese popular religion, especially beliefs in fox spirits, paid much attention to this novel,¹¹ though significant studies of fox spirits in the late imperial period have been published in the West (e.g., Huntington 2003; Kang 2006). The *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* offers valuable material on the development of fox lore in the Ming dynasty. Feng Menglong portrayed foxes as magical beings, very capable of sorcery. Both Holy Auntie and her daughter Mei'er 媚兒 are typical examples of bewitching fox spirits in Chinese vernacular literature. Here I hope to draw more attention to this side of the novel as well.

There is already an English translation of Feng Menglong's recension of the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt*, by Nathan Sturman (Feng Menglong 2008); however, here I include my own translation of the whole relevant passage, as I cannot be satisfied with his translation. Though it is comparatively complete and comprehensive, there are still many mistakes and some omissions in the passage that I am interested in. For example, he has interpreted the main event as the “Daoist healing prayer meeting,” which ignores the Buddhist meaning of “*daochang*” (道場), the word used in this passage. This word is widely used in Chinese Buddhist texts and cannot be associated specifically with Daoism. As I will demonstrate, the name of this event is derived from the monastic Buddhist tradition, though the status of the presiding performer is ambiguous.¹² Another case is the misinterpretation of the assembly's secondary purpose: “the Puxian Bodhisattva herself will send down her own son, Crown Prince Wenchang,” while the original text tells about a prayer for a son.¹³ In addition, Sturman has

usually believed in spirits and magic—note for example the case of Tang Sai'er 唐賽兒, a female rebellious leader of the early fifteenth century; see note 27 below.

¹¹ For the recent Chinese research, see e.g. Liu Yanyan 2015.

¹² Sturman also wrote that during this assembly Buddhist monks were served wine, which was impossible in monastic traditions, and most importantly is missing from the original text.

¹³ The explanation of the situation in the Yang family is missing from the Sturman's translation.

misinterpreted the Miaoshan and Luobo stories, mentioned in this passage. This inspired me to make my own translation, which I include in the appendix.¹⁴

1. ON TERMINOLOGY AND RECITATION SETTING

At the beginning, I would like to clarify three points in this source—the name of storytelling performance, its dating, and its localization—before proceeding with the more detailed analysis of the historical and cultural significance of this passage.

First, in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* we do not find the label “scroll recitation” (*xuanjuan* 宣卷), which has been a common appellation of this type of storytelling in China from the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries until now. It also appears in the *Plum in the Golden Vase*. The *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* instead uses the terms “telling scriptures” (*jiangjing* 講經) and “talks on karmic causation” (*shuoyinguo* 說因果), performed during the Buddhist Great Assembly of No Obstacles (*Wuzhe da hui* 無遮大會).

As the term “precious scrolls” does not appear in this text, one can doubt that its author referred to *baojuan* recitations. However, we should note that both terms can be used as alternatives for the “scroll recitation” in various historical contexts. For example, “telling scriptures” is an alternative name for “scroll recitation” in the Changshu 常熟 and Jingjiang 靖江 city areas in the southern part of Jiangsu province, where traditions of ritualized precious scrolls recitations survive till now (see e.g. Berezkin 2011; Berezkin 2013). The term “talks on karmic causation” (also in the form of *jiangyinguo* 講因果) also appears in the *Plum in the Golden Vase* (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 1980, 430–431).

Still, in the similar storytelling practices of the modern period, mentioned in the sources of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, local performers usually differentiated between “talks on karmic causation” and “scroll recitation.” For example, the first Chinese folklorist, Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980), noted that there was a difference between these two forms of performance in the Suzhou area, of which he was a native. The “talks on karmic causation,” rarely performed in Suzhou in his time,

¹⁴ I have also consulted the Russian translation of this novel (Feng Menglong's expanded recension) by V. A. Panasiuk and I. S. Smirnov, which is incomplete (it excludes many verses and other details), but still more precise than Sturman's version; see Lo Guan'-chzhun, Fen Men-lun 1983, 84–86.

mainly denoted the Pearl Pagoda (*Zhen zhu ta* 珍珠塔) story performed by two storytellers in the public venue of the Daoist temple Xuanmiaoguan 玄妙觀 in the center of Suzhou.¹⁵ The difference between the two seems to lie in the fact that “talks on karmic causation” were performed by two people, while scroll recitation was conducted by one storyteller, responsible both for prosaic and poetic parts. On the other hand, Qian Zhaoji 錢肇基, in response to whose note Gu Jiegang wrote his comment, considered “talks on karmic causation” to be a type of precious scrolls recitation (*Beijing Daxue geyao zhoukan*, vol. 2, no. 90 [May 21, 1925], p. 6).

Nevertheless, differentiation between two forms also can be found in the earlier source on Shanghai courtesans’ culture called *A Complete Overview of Pleasant Journeys in Shanghai* (*Haishang yeyou beilan* 海上冶游備覽, composed ca. 1883 by an author using the pseudonym of the Corrector of Delusions (Zhimisheng 指迷生) (Zhimisheng 1883, 4a-5b). It contains short descriptions of both forms, but here the main difference lies in the use of script in performance.¹⁶ Scroll recitation in Shanghai mainly used precious scrolls as scripts at that time, but “talks on karmic causation” seems to have been performed without promptbooks, as was characteristic of other storytelling genres of Jiangnan at that period, such as the very popular “Suzhou chantefable” (*tanci* 彈詞, literally “plucking lyrics”).¹⁷

On the other hand, the term “talks on karmic causation” also was used in application to the didactic lectures based on the “morality books” (*shanshu* 善書) and explications of the “Sacred Edict” (Shengyu 聖諭) in central China at the end of the nineteenth century (see e.g., Yao Chi’on 2008, 50).¹⁸ These lectures often took the form of entertaining storytelling. Modern storytellers of precious scrolls in Wuxi also differentiate between “scroll recitation” and “talks on karmic causation,” though the latter term seems to have already fallen out of use. Still, we can note the similarity between the contents and setting of both forms attested in historical evidence of the early twentieth century. For example, both

¹⁵ Rpt. in *Beijing Daxue geyao zhoukan*, vol. 2, no. 90 (May 21, 1925), p. 8. On this subject in Suzhou storytelling, see Bender 2003, 88–97, 207–209.

¹⁶ For the English trans. of the “scroll recitation” entry, see Berezkin 2019, 135.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Bender 2003, 34–43. In addition, the story of the Pearl Pagoda was shared between Suzhou chantefable and scroll recitation, both very popular in Shanghai at that time.

¹⁸ On them, see also Mair 1985.

forms as recorded in the *Geyao* journal used the subjects of the Meng Jiangnü 孟姜女 (bringing down the Great Wall) and the Pearl Pagoda; and there are popular precious scrolls dealing with both of them at that time.¹⁹

Significantly for our research, according to the Qian Zhaoji’s report there were also itinerant beggar-performers, called vagabonds (*zoujianghu* 走江湖), who were disguised as Buddhist priests, and also performed the contents of precious scrolls. These people “made a living by begging for alms from door to door while beating a wooden fish (*myu* 木魚) and singing contents of precious scrolls; [this form] differs from “talks about karmic links” in terms of time and venue.”²⁰ According to information from another folklorist of that period, Chen Zhiliang 陳志良, such beggar-performers of “scroll recitation” also roamed around Shanghai (Chen Zhiliang 1936). According to his note, another type of “scroll recitation” performers was organized in teams and, besides reciting precious scrolls, also chanted Buddhist and Daoist scriptures and performed rituals aimed at the sponsors’ personal welfare. These took on the roles of religious specialists.²¹

At the end of the nineteenth century in Shanghai we also find performers of “scroll recitation” disguised not as Buddhist monks, but as Daoist priests, which is not surprising when we consider the pervading Chinese religious syncretism, especially on the local grass-roots level.²² Thus, we can find performers of precious scrolls disguised as clerics at the end of the nineteenth–beginning of the twentieth century, thus continuing the traditions of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. This type of itinerant performers, dressing as clerics, was common in the early modern period not only in China, but also in other countries of East Asia. They survived by alms paid in exchange for their performances (see e.g., Mair 1988, 8–9; Mair 1989, 144–146).

We therefore must carefully consider local variations in storytelling style in matters of categorization and appellation, and also varying historical perspectives. The distinction between “scroll recitation” and “talks on karmic causation” drawn by Gu Jiegang cannot be applied to the description of

¹⁹ On the first, see also Idema 2008b.

²⁰ See *Beijing Daxue geyao zhoukan*, vol. 2, no. 90 (May 21, 1925), p. 6.

²¹ See also Berezkin 2014.

²² See Berezkin 2019.

performances in the novels of the seventeenth century. For example, recitation of the *Precious Scroll of the Fifth Patriarch Huangmei* (*Wuzu Huangmei Baojuan* 五祖黃梅寶卷) in the *Plum in the Golden Vase* uses a duet, while other precious scrolls, also called “talking about karmic links” are performed solo (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 1980, 430–431). The performance of Holy Auntie in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* also seems to be solo. Basing on these descriptions in the novels, we cannot say if there was any differentiation between the two forms in the late sixteenth–early seventeenth centuries, as we simply lack sufficient historical evidence.

Still, as already mentioned, the contents of the storytelling performed by Holy Auntie is very close to that of the precious scrolls that existed at that time. Even if the performative manner and contents of “telling scriptures” as described in this novel were a little different from those of “scroll recitation,” one still can see close affinity between these two types of storytelling, especially if we take into account evidence of “telling scriptures” performances in Jiangsu from the later period.

Two other important points to be clarified are the date and place of recitation described in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*. While the story in this novel is set during the Song dynasty, in the second year of Tianxi 天禧 (1018), in reality the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* describes the situation with religious assemblies of the Ming dynasty, when this novel was composed (the same as in the cases of the *Plum in the Golden Vase* and its sequel). One should note that the sense of historical realism was not common for the literature of this period, so all of these Ming-dynasty novels are deliberately anachronistic in their descriptions of Chinese life.

As for the geographic characteristics of the recitation, according to the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, it takes place in Huayin 華陰 county in Shaanxi Province. However, we can suppose that the description reflects the situation in the Jiangnan region (modern southern Jiangsu and Zhejiang), and even specifically the Suzhou area, of which Feng Menglong was a native. He is known for his promotion of the popular culture of the Suzhou area in his literary works.²³

It is possible that Feng Menglong referred to the ritual assemblies in Jiangnan, especially as we know that the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* was popular there at the end of the Ming dynasty (see Berezkin and Riftin 2013, 450–459). The earliest version of this precious scroll, which survived as a

²³ See Oki 2018; Oki and Santangelo 2011.

reprint made in Hanoi in 1772, was printed in Nanjing (a major urban center to the south of Yangtze at that time), as indicated in the original colophon of the reprint edition, made around the end of the Ming dynasty.²⁴ Thus, the original Nanjing edition of the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is almost contemporary with the Feng Menglong’s recension of the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, and proves that the Miaoshan story in this rendition spread in the Jiangnan region in that period.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *PACIFICATION OF THE DEMONS’ REVOLT* DESCRIPTION

What makes the description from the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* so valuable, especially in comparison with the passages from the *Plum in the Golden Vase*? First, it talks about public performances that are quite different from those in the domestic setting, as described in the latter. Although the assembly was convened in a private space—the West Garden (Xiyuan 西園) of the county official, Inspector Yang 楊巡檢 (originally used as a place of retreat of Holy Auntie), it was a public occasion. Many spectators came, including Buddhist and Daoist monastics, some praying to the Buddha (this assembly was believed to bring blessings for both organizers and participants), some just availing themselves of the chance to eat vegetarian food for free, or “to watch the spectacle.” Not only was it public, it was also official. Inspector Yang even reported it to his superior, the county magistrate.

Inspector Yang himself participated in this assembly in the role of a patron; it was held mainly for securing the health of his wife and providing the couple a son. Organizing such an assembly was believed to bring a great merit to the hosts. On the first day, Inspector Yang arrived at the West garden, greeted Holy Auntie and venerated the Buddha, following her. In this way he expressed his gratitude to Holy Auntie and showed his respect. However, he did not stay to listen to the nun’s sermon: “Inspector Yang, seeing this noisy crowd, retreated to the nearest study, sat there for a while and then returned to

²⁴ See Berezkin and Rifting 2013, 445–450. Preceding studies have used another recension of this text, with the complete title of the *Scripture of the Previous Life of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of Great Compassion* (*Guanshiyin pusa benxing jing* 觀世音菩薩本行經), represented in a reprint edition of the Zhaoqing Monastery sūtra store (昭慶大字經房) in Hangzhou dated 1773; for a photocopy of this text, collected and studied by the Japanese scholar Yoshioka Yoshitoyo, see Yoshioka 1990, vol. 4, pp. 245–405.

his chambers.” We can assume that he was not much interested in the contents of the sermon, which was about the life of Miaoshan, the female manifestation of Guanyin.

One can also compare the recitation described in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* with that in the *Sequel to Plum in the Golden Vase*, which took place in the Buddhist nunnery, also a public venue. However, it was not an ordinary Buddhist establishment, but a place for the worship of a deviant nun. This episode is not fantastical at all, as we find a similar historical situation in the worship of the Unborn Venerable Mother (Wusheng lao mu 無生老母), the central cult in many sectarian groups of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. In one case, it was propagated through published precious scrolls originating from the prominent Buddhist nunnery in the capital, which enjoyed the support of the aristocracy and even the imperial court.²⁵ Sectarian teachings of this period can be characterized as often seeking support (even in a non-material form) from the monastic establishment (Berezkin 2017a, 114–116), which is also reflected in the novels. While emphasizing the deviant characteristics of the performers, the *Plum in the Golden Vase* and its sequel, as well as the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, generally present the contents of scroll recitation as a type of Buddhist proselytizing, not reflecting the deviant side of their contents (for example, the central cult of the Unborn Venerable Mother).²⁶

At the same time, while the *Plum in the Golden Vase* and its sequel emphasize the gender characteristics of the audience of the nuns’ recitations both in a private setting and in the nunnery (only women were present in these scenes), according to the description of the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, both men and women participated in that assembly: “After they finished bowing, the nun ordered the believers to divide into two groups, male and female, and [had them] sit down on the left and on the right of her respectively.” Monks, nuns, male hermits and female believers (some calling themselves “Buddhist monastics,” which may mean they were non-ordained nuns) appear in this scene. Mixing believers of both sexes was one of the points of criticism made by the author of the novel, who stood on the Confucian point of view, which demanded strict segregation of the sexes in public life.

The second important point in this description concerns the Buddhist tinge of the religious service, including its storytelling part. The Holy Auntie’s sermon takes place during the big ritual

²⁵ See e.g. Sawada 1975a, 71–73; Li and Naquin 1988; Li Shiyu 2007, 81–112.

²⁶ See also Sawada 1975a, 285–297.

assembly, called the Great Assembly of No Obstacles. This term comes from orthodox Buddhist tradition and can be traced to the early times of the Buddhism’s spread in China. The assemblies of this name were organized at the court of the Wudi 武帝 Emperor of the Liang dynasty (r. 502–549).²⁷ The alternative name of this meeting, *daochang*, also is common in Chinese Buddhist tradition. Literally translated as “place of the Dao” (from Sanskrit *Bodhimaṇḍa*, the site of the Buddha’s awakening), in the Buddhist context it means “the altar spaces or ritual sites, where the principal ritual action takes place” (Stevenson 2015, 384). Significantly, it also appears in the precious scrolls of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries, here meaning the ritual space in which these texts were recited (Che Xilun 2009, 65–89; Berezkin and Riftin 2013, 450–451, 485–486).

Still, though the Great Assembly of No Obstacles in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* is attended by Buddhist clergy, it is presided over by Holy Auntie, a religious figure of spurious origins. This Holy Auntie was a fox spirit that mastered magic skills and that could take human form. Finding herself alone and in need of resources while she waited for the prophecy of the Queen of Demons (Nü Mowang 女魔王, in fact a transformed Empress Wu Zetian 武則天)²⁸ to unfold so that she might learn Heaven’s secrets, the fox transformed herself into a Daoist nun (*daogu* 道姑) and obtained support from a wealthy aged couple, called the Yangs, who were famous for their generous patronage of religious figures. The husband, Inspector Yang, was known as Yang Old Buddha 楊老佛, and his wife also welcomed Buddhist and Daoist clerics. In order to convince the Yangs of her spiritual powers, Holy Auntie performed miracles, for example, translating the Golden Sutra written in a foreign script and manifesting herself as Bodhisattva Puxian.²⁹ Then she demanded that the Yangs keep her in the retreat in their West Garden for three years. According to the novel, she later played an important role in the Wang Ze’s rebellion, as she taught his subordinates all kinds of transformation magic.

The image of the Holy Auntie, a sorcerer disguised as a Daoist nun, must have been inspired by historical events of the religiously colored rebellious movements of the Ming period. Especially

²⁷ See Chen 2006.

²⁸ Wu Zetian (624–705, also known as Wu Hou 武后) is a real historical figure, the only female monarch in the history of China; she is also featured in the fiction of the late imperial period.

²⁹ Puxian 普賢 (Skt. Samantabhadra) is one of major deities in Chinese Buddhism.

conspicuous is a parallel with the rebellion led by the sorcerer (*yao fu* 妖婦) Tang Sai'er 唐賽兒 in Shandong in 1420, in the period closely preceding the composition of the original variant of the novel.³⁰ According to the records of a Ming author Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642) and other sources, she also possessed a book of martial arts and a precious sword and could perform magic. Significantly, after the rebellion had been defeated, and Tang Sai'er escaped, she disguised herself as a Daoist nun, or she may have shaved off her hair to appear to be a Buddhist nun. This reportedly led to the inspection of nunneries in Shandong and the capital district in search of her.³¹ Therefore, the appearance of the Holy Auntie in the novel is partially based on historical reality.³² At the same time, the image of a Daoist nun as an immoral seductress also can be traced to the much earlier period,³³ which may to a certain degree explain why the fox took the form of a Daoist in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt*.

The role of Holy Auntie as the head of a Buddhist prayer assembly may seem to contradict her status as a Daoist nun.³⁴ On the occasion she even wears the “Daoist cap” (*Dao dou* 道兜) and “Daoist shoes with the cloud toes” (*yuntou Dao xie* 雲頭道鞋), made specially for this event by the inspector's wife, whom she had cured. However, it does not appear to be a contradiction in the syncretic religious landscape of the late Ming. In fact, this syncretism (especially characteristic for the sectarian teachings

30 On her activities, see Yamane Yukio 1974; ter Haar 1999, 138–139.

31 See, e.g., a note by the Ming literatus: Shen Defu 1997, vol. 3, juan 29, p. 749.

32 Tang Sai'er is also featured in the fiction of the later period; see Chen Huanhua 2019.

33 The licentious nature of a Daoist priestess here applied to the Holy Auntie can be traced back to Tang-dynasty literature (eighth–ninth centuries). One can note the poem “The Girl from Mount Hua” (*Huashan nü* 華山女) by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), as well as pieces by other Tang poets. Han Yu hints that a Daoist priestess from Mount Hua was engaged not only in ritual services, but also in love affairs, in Chang'an, the capital of the Tang state; for the Engl. trans. by Burton Watson, see Mair 1994, 222–223; see also Li Shangyin's 李商隱 (ca. 813–858) poetry on encounters with Daoist priestesses, in Liu 1969, 66–67, 94–95. One can also recall that Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756), the femme fatale of the Tang dynasty, originally was introduced to the palace of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–756) as a Daoist nun (after she had been taken away from his son's harem). There is also historical evidence that some courtesans in Chang'an were disguised as Daoist nuns; see Benn 2002, 64, 67.

34 She was also known as the “incarnated Buddha” (*huo fo* 活佛) and as a disciple of Bodhisattva Puxian. Wenchang, an indigenous Chinese deity, appears along with Puxian in her prophesy.

of that period) is propagated by Holy Auntie. In the same chapter she says: "All myriad teachings originally come from the single truth, the Three teachings originally are one and the same, I preach the Daoist teaching as well as the Buddhist one." (萬法初無二理，三教本是一宗，就是老身佛法也講，道法也講; Feng Menglong 1980, 74). Such syncretism was common in the late imperial period, especially on the popular level of lay believers; it finds expression not only in the teachings of new religious movements, but also in the fiction of this period.

One can also ask the question, why was Holy Auntie found creditable by a county official? The answer also lies in the socio-cultural setting of this period, characterized by the proliferation of religious specialists of different kinds, many not officially ordained. Though the founder of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (r. 1368-1398) set strict restrictions on the number of Buddhist monks, the number of clergy who were not properly ordained was great, as noted in the historical sources of this period.³⁵ Various religious specialists were active in different places, including the capital, where sectarian leaders could propagate their deviant teachings at the end of the sixteenth century (Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang 2004, 1. 370-382). Cheaters of various sorts could pretend to be Buddhist monks and nuns.³⁶ The *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* also criticized people's belief in "fake" monks, for example in chapter 7, where it says that the Yangs were robbed by bandits who pretended to be monks (*heshang* 和尚) and asked for alms in their house. Here fiction apparently was truthful to the real historical situation.

Holy Auntie, the leader of this Buddhist assembly aka storytelling performer in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt*, is called *fotou* 佛頭 (literally, the Buddha's head)—the same term used to denote performers of precious scrolls in Wuxi and Jingjiang in the present day, often characterized as "neither Buddhist monks nor Daoist priests," but folk ritual masters.³⁷ There are different theories about the origin of this term in modern performative traditions, but the evidence of the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* serves as a testimony to the early origins of this term. This is further corroborated by the mention of *fotou*, which has a similar meaning in other sources of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, for

³⁵ See He Xiaorong 2004; also ter Haar 2014, 30-31; Wu 2016, 39-56.

³⁶ Compare with the characteristics of Buddhist nuns in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.

³⁷ In Changshu this term is used not for performers of precious scrolls, but for organizers of ritual assemblies (mostly mediums and temple-keepers), which seems more closely related to its original meaning.

example the *Words to Model the World* (*Xing shi yan* 型世言) by Lu Renlong 陸人龍 (ca. 1632) and *Leisure Talks of Doupeng* (*Doupeng xian hua* 豆棚閒話) by the author with the pseudonym of the Hermit in the Artemisia Cassock (Aina jushi 艾衲居士, second half of the seventeenth century).³⁸ Apparently, this term was already widespread in the Jiangnan region in that period. The sponsors of this event, the Yang family, are also called by the Buddhist term used for “patrons”—*shizhu* 施主 (also *tanyue* 檀越), meaning “an almsgiver” in the Buddhist context (Skt. *dānapati*). Almsgiving to the Buddhist clerics is a basic requirement for the lay believers in the Buddhist countries.

At the same time, the contents of the Great Assembly of No Obstacles in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* are different from the usual perception of Buddhist rituals. Instead of recitation of canonical scriptures and performance of rituals, which are not comprehensible to the commoners in the audience, Holy Auntie narrates the stories of popular Buddhist saints in vernacular language. She says: “I, a poor nun, will not explain any scripture and preach any Law today; I will just tell everybody about the origins of several buddhas and bodhisattvas.” This is an expression of the popular and democratic nature of her assembly. In the words of Holy Auntie, “Talking about the natural abilities of people in this world, there are many narrow-minded ones, but there are few smart. This time I would better talk about the karmic causation in order to teach the people of the world to recite the Buddha’s name. No matter whether they are male or female, lay or monastic, everyone who wishes can come to listen.” These words emphasize the narrative nature of the texts recited and the broad target audience of the sermon.

Both stories narrated by Holy Auntie are related to the topic of female piety, self-perfection, and salvation, which are common but controversial themes in mainstream Buddhism. The story of Miaoshan, as recounted in the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, confirms the right of a princess to practice self-perfection, which eventually leads to the enlightenment and salvation of the whole royal family. According to a verse sung by Holy Auntie in the novel, Guanyin especially took a female form in order to convert the women of the Underheaven. This offers a native explanation of the transformation of this Bodhisattva from male to predominantly female form in Chinese Buddhist culture.³⁹

³⁸ See Lu Yongfeng and Che Xilun 2008, 120–122.

³⁹ On this process, see Yü 2001.

The story of Mulian deals with the salvation by a pious monk, a disciple of Buddha Shakyamuni, of his mother’s soul which was reborn in hell. The *Precious Scroll of Mulian* contains a detailed description of the torments of sinners in hell that could serve didactic purposes. Both stories thus could be especially suitable for the female audience; they also had an entertaining aspect, which appealed to lay believers. The sermon presented in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* thus combined indoctrination with entertainment. The mention of the strong emotional response on the part of the audience demonstrates that Holy Auntie’s proselytizing was very successful.

Though the Miaoshan and Mulian stories must have been very popular at that time, we can hardly find any mention of precious scrolls performances with these topics in the historical descriptions of the Ming dynasty, including the *Plum in the Golden Vase*. To my knowledge, the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* contains the earliest external textual evidence of the precious scroll performances dealing with Miaoshan and Mulian.

Thus, the Great Assembly of No Obstacles is presented as the proselytizing of Buddhist doctrine to the lay audience, centered in religious practices of self-perfection and chanting the name of Amitābha with the aim of receiving rebirth in the Pure Land. These practices, rooted in the Chan and Pure Land forms of Buddhism, constituted the basis of popular religiosity during the Ming dynasty.⁴⁰ They attracted lay believers from all walks of life and demonstrated the broad social background of such religious narratives in China.

3. COMPARISON WITH THE MODERN ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE OF “TELLING SCRIPTURES”

Here, I also would like to make a comparison of religious storytelling in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* with the modern practice of “telling scriptures” in the Changshu area, which also takes place during ritual assemblies often termed the “Buddhist service” (*fo shi* 佛事) by the locals. Many details are similar to Holy Auntie’s recitation in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*.

For example, I witnessed a similar assembly with “telling scriptures” in Xingshi village 杏市村,

⁴⁰ See e.g., Yü 1981.

now under the jurisdiction of Zhangjiagang 張家港 city (originally belonging to Changshu county),⁴¹ which was called the “Assembly of Great Peace” (Taiping hui 太平會), on April 29, 2013. Though aimed at securing the peace and fortune of the whole village community, it was held in a traditional peasant house, the owners of which acted as the sponsors of the assembly, traditionally called the “vegetarian feast”—*zhai zhu* 齋主. This appellation means that the sponsors provide the fee for performers, ritual goods, and food for the participants (not only vegetarian in the modern practice, as local “meat-eating” deities are also worshipped) in exchange for the blessings and divine protection brought by the ritual performance.⁴² Thus, they played a role, similar to that of the Yang family in the episode of the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*.

The special “scripture hall” (*jing tang* 經堂) was arranged in the central hall of a peasant two-story house, typical in this area; with the temporary altar (*fo tai* 佛臺) arranged in the middle of the room. It was comprised of several tables, around which the storyteller and his assistants (chorus) sat. This altar was decorated with the images of deities: a large hanging scroll and small printed icons (*zhima* 紙馬, literally “paper horses”). Candles and incense were burning in front of them, and numerous offerings for the deities were displayed. This ritualized atmosphere of recitation was close to that described in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*.

Three “masters of telling scriptures” (*jiangjing xiansheng* 講經先生) recited texts of precious scrolls at this assembly. Just as Holy Auntie did, they used only simple percussion instruments for musical accompaniment of their recitation. In this case, the main instrument producing rhythm was a “wooden fish” (*myu* 木魚). Old women, comprising the chorus, were chanting the name of Buddha Amitābha in unison with the leading performer. Thus, the performance style of “telling scriptures” was also similar to the one described in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*.

Significantly, the central text of this assembly, typical of such occasions in this area, was the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. In Changshu and Zhangjiagang, these assemblies are known as

41 In 1962, northern areas of former Changshu county were transformed into the new Shazhou 沙洲 county (also including a part of Jiangyin 江陰 county and the sandbank lands reclaimed from the Yangzi river). In 1986, Shazhou was transformed into Zhangjiagang city. Both Changshu and Zhangjiagang cities are now under the jurisdiction of Suzhou city.

42 Here I do not provide ethnographic description of this occasion. For the relevant descriptions, see Qiu Huiying 2010; Berezkin 2013, et al.

“fulfilling the vow of Incense Mountain” (*Xiangshan wan yuan* 香山完願), and often have the meaning of praying for the cure of illness or offering gratitude for recovery (see Berezkin 2015a), the same as in the case of the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*. Other texts, devoted to the deities of the Daoist and folk origins (including local tutelary deities), also were performed at this occasion (see Berezkin 2015a, Berezkin 2015b). Such assemblies also take place in the Wuxi and Suzhou suburbs, though the contents of recitations (range of precious scrolls) may be different.

The *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, narrating another story mentioned in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, usually is reserved especially for occasions of praying for the salvation of the dead (see Berezkin 2017a), the function of assemblies not mentioned in the novel under question.

Even association between precious scroll recitation and fox spirits can be found in the modern practice of “telling scriptures” in Changshu. Mediums, usually called *xianren* 仙人 or *shiniang* 師娘, are very active in Changshu, and often “prescribe” organization of a “telling scriptures” session when local believers turn to them with their problems.⁴³ Mediums usually do not recite precious scrolls themselves, but cooperate with the masters of telling scriptures, for whom they serve as intermediaries (Qiu Huiying 2010, 189–192).⁴⁴ Significantly, one of the old female mediums whom I met in a suburb of Changshu represented a fox spirit. One of her younger relatives is engaged in telling scriptures. Therefore, the connection between a fox and “telling scriptures” in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* may be not infrequent. Popular beliefs may also be reflected in this seemingly fantastic detail of the novel.

Still, unlike the circumstances of the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, no monks participate in such assemblies as the one in Xingshi village, which makes this a case of the appropriation of the traditional religious practice on a grass-roots level in a modern rural community. Nevertheless, we can observe amazing cultural continuity in such ritual assemblies centered on precious scrolls recitations.

Similarity with the modern situation of “telling scriptures” in Changshu and Zhangjiagang further speaks for the connections between the description in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* and

⁴³ Telling scriptures locally is believed to bring fortune and avert disasters.

⁴⁴ Association between precious scroll recitation and the folk mediums also can be traced to the historical documents of the nineteenth century; see e.g. Che Xilun 2009, 216–217.

precious scroll recitation traditions of the Jiangnan region. Apparently, Feng Menglong, the author of this piece, used his knowledge of real-life activities in order to create this vivid picture of a nun's sermon.

4. PROSELYTIZING THROUGH STORYTELLING

The proselytizing use of the Great Assembly of No Obstacles is emphasized by Holy Auntie in her explanatory words, addressed to the sponsor of the event: “This assembly is called the Great Assembly of No Obstacles, or “telling scriptures,” making one clarify one’s mind and realize [the true] nature.⁴⁵ It is also [called] the chanting of the Buddha’s name in preparation [for rebirth] in the Western Land [of Amitābha].” An invocation of the Buddha’s name appears in the passages describing actual storytelling performance. The Buddha Amitābha’s name is added to each line of the poems that were chanted by the nun at the Assembly. According to the remark in the novel, whenever Holy Auntie chanted the Buddha’s name, everybody in the audience repeated it in chorus.

The recitation of the Buddha’s name is an old Buddhist practice, but its mention here brings this sermon closer to the usual practice of precious scrolls recitation.⁴⁶ The chanting of the Buddha’s names in unison by the participants of the religious assembly is the characteristic feature of the precious scrolls performances from the time of the first known specimens of the genre (fourteenth century) until the modern period (see section 3 above; also Berezkin 2013; Berezkin 2017a, 54–55). It is usually called “chiming in with the Buddha’s name” (*he Fo* 和佛), and it has survived in major modern traditions of precious scrolls recitations in China, including the areas around Suzhou and Wuxi cities, Jingjiang, Shaoxing 紹興, several areas in Gansu province, especially the Hexi 河西 corridor, and Qinghai.⁴⁷ This practice is also described in the *Plum in the Golden Vase* and its sequel, which further makes descriptions in both novels similar (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 1980, 728; *Xu Jin Ping Mei* 1990, 1006).

On the other hand, the term “chanting the Buddha’s name” (*nian Fo* 念佛), which denotes rituals of deity worship and storytelling at religious assemblies, is common in modern traditions of

45 On the notion of “the true nature”, see note 64.

46 I do not explore the origin and meaning of this Buddhist practice here.

47 On them see, e.g. Satō et al., 2011; Li Ping 2012; Lu Yongfeng and Che Xilun 2008; Zhong Xiaolan 2014; Fang Buhe 1992; Liu Yonghong 2014.

precious scrolls recitations in southern Jiangsu, especially in the Wuxi area.⁴⁸ There, the Buddhist associations of scroll recitation are especially strong, which makes the Wuxi assemblies particularly close to the event described in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*. Significantly, the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is also one of the major texts performed at the ritual assemblies in Wuxi nowadays.

The expression “talks on karmic causation,” with which the storytelling is designated in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, also has a Buddhist background. In addition, this term (also with the alternative *shuo yinyuan* 說因緣) is often associated with the origins of the precious scrolls form of vernacular narrative literature. The appearance of such Buddhist-associated storytelling can be traced back to the Buddhist proselytizing practices of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (317–589) as well as the Tang (618–907) and Five Dynasties (907–960), which used concrete examples to guide and admonish people in their audiences (see e.g. Mair and Berezkin 2015). Especially close to religious storytelling of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries both in form and contents are the texts of *yuanyi* 緣起 and *yinyuan* 因緣 (accounts of karmic circumstances) dating back to approximately the tenth century, which were discovered in the Dunhuang cave library in 1900. The generic term *yuanyi* is derived from the doctrine of dependent origination (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*); the stories describe the karmic consequences of actions, and thus develop the Indian Buddhist literary forms of *jātaka*, *avadāna*, and *nidāna* (Mair 1989, 29–30; Schmid 2002, 103–110). There is also evidence that *yuanyi*, which survived in Dunhuang, were performed as a means of Buddhist proselytizing together with *jiangjingwen* 講經文 (“sūtra-explanation texts” or “sūtra lectures”).⁴⁹

While the texts of *jiangjingwen* and other accompanying forms fell out of use at the beginning of the Song dynasty (eleventh century) and would not be known if not for the discovery of the Dunhuang library at the beginning of the twentieth century, Buddhist proselytizing in the form of “talks on karmic causation” continued in the later period, namely during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties. There is evidence in the sources of the eleventh–twelfth centuries that the “talks on karmic causation” (*shuo yinyuan* 說因緣) were performed by monks invited to the houses of the wealthy families (Che Xilun 2009, 62–63). Significantly, the expression “talks on karmic causation” appears in *Plum in the*

48 See e.g., Li Ping 2012.

49 On this form, see, e.g. Mair 1989, 29, 150.

Golden Vase, which says that the nun Xue “could explicate the *Jingang keyi*, or *Liturgical Exposition of the Diamond Sūtra*, as well as every kind of ‘precious scroll’ relating tales of karmic cause and effect” (Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 1980, 451-452).⁵⁰ Thus, these tales are juxtaposed with the ritual text of the expanded explication of the popular Diamond Sutra.⁵¹

According to Che Xilun, the leading Chinese specialist on precious scrolls, this classification of works in the nun Xue’s repertoire follows the division of forms of Buddhist prosimetric narratives discovered in Dunhuang: *jiangjingwen* on the one hand and *yuanqi* or *yinyuan* on the other (Che Xilun 1990). Some characteristics of form and performative manner of the tenth-century *yuanqi* and precious scrolls of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries also are similar.⁵²

The term *yinyuan* is also found in the texts of precious scrolls that date to approximately the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries. For example, the recension of the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* that was reprinted in Hangzhou in 1773 refers to itself as a “*yinyuan*” on several occasions. This led Idema to the conclusion that originally this text was labelled a “tale of karmic causation” and not a “precious scroll” (Idema 2008a, 11).⁵³ The text of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, represented in a manuscript dated 1440, one of the earliest surviving examples of precious scrolls, also mentions the term “karmic causation”: “All of them put their palms together in prayer and listened to the Buddha, who narrated the karmic causation of the past” (並皆合掌聽佛說往昔過去因緣之事).⁵⁴

Thus, the material of the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* novel further testifies for probable

⁵⁰ Engl. trans. by David T. Roy in Xiaoxiaosheng, 1993–2013, vol. 2, ch. 40, p. 439.

⁵¹ On this text, see, e.g. Sawada 1975a, 101–102; Overmyer 1999, 30–31; Che Xilun 2009, 66–67.

⁵² I do not go into a detailed comparison between these forms here.

⁵³ The term *yinyuan* also appears in the preface of another recension of this precious scroll, reprinted in Hanoi in 1772, using the earlier Nanjing woodblock edition, which apparently represents the earlier variant of this text. However, this text bears the complete title of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin of Great Compassion* (*Da bei Guanshiyin pusa Xiangshan baojuan* 大悲觀世音菩薩香山寶卷), which testifies for its genre affiliation; see also Berezkin and Riffin 2013.

⁵⁴ The complete title is *Baojuan of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [So That She] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven* (*Mujianlian zunzhe jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan* 目犍連尊者救母出離地獄生天寶卷). On this text, see Berezkin 2017a, 48–52.

connections between “talks of karmic causation” of the earlier epochs and precious scrolls of the Ming dynasty. One should note that both appeared at Buddhist-tinged ritual assemblies that constituted a special setting for the performance of these stories of “karmic cause and effect.”

As mentioned in the previous sections, the simple musical accompaniment of recitation described in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* is similar to modern practices of “telling scriptures” in Changshu and Jingjiang. Holy Auntie merely struck a clap block (*jiefang* 界方), when she recited prosaic passages and sang the following verses; this type of clap block is often used in various types of storytelling in China, including recitation of precious scrolls. It is reminiscent of the recitations in the *Plum in the Golden Vase*, also accompanied only with percussion instruments. However, unlike that for the *Plum in the Golden Vase*, the scripts of precious scrolls are not mentioned in the scene the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, which leads us to the supposition that Holy Auntie recited the stories that she knew by heart.⁵⁵ This would make the performance different from the “scroll recitation” in the *Plum in the Golden Vase* and modern “telling scriptures” in Changshu, but similar to other genres of entertaining storytelling, such as *tanci* (“Suzhou chantefable”).⁵⁶

In addition, in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, the beginning of the assembly was accompanied by a musical introduction. The text says that Inspector Yang brought the troupe of family musicians to the assembly. Musicians with trumpets accompanied Holy Auntie to the front hall, where she started her sermon. This arrangement is similar to that with “scroll recitation” in the *Sequel to Plum in the Golden Vase*, where a musical introduction had been performed by the nuns and novices, before the elder nun pronounced her sermon (*Xu Jin Ping Mei* 1990, 1010–1011). It used not only large drums and *muyu*, but also various gongs, cymbals, and wind instruments, including *shengguan* (pipe-wind instrument) and flutes. This music accompanied the chanting of the buddhas’ names (*he fo* 和佛).⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *The Plum in the Golden Vase* mentions texts of precious scrolls: “Then nun Xue opened the *Scroll of Lady Huang* (*Huang shi nüjuan* 黃氏女卷) and recited in a loud voice”, see Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 1980, 728.

⁵⁶ In several areas around Suzhou now performers of scroll recitation often do not use scripts on a performance spot; see, e.g. Satō et al., 2011, 23–25. A number of reasons for this change should be considered, one of them being exchange with *tanci* and local drama. Masters of telling scriptures in Changshu and Zhangjiagang still adhere to the traditional manner of recitation, when precious scrolls are used as scripts; see Berezkin 2011, 30–33.

⁵⁷ “All nuns together beat dharma drums – rub–a–dub, the sounds of golden gongs [were heard], all ritual instruments

This type of musical accompaniment also has an equivalent in modern ritual practice relating old texts of Buddhist-tinged precious scrolls. I have witnessed a similar arrangement with the performance of the *Ritual Amplification of the Diamond Sutra* at the traditional funerals in Banqiao 板橋 in the suburbs of Taipei (now a part of Xinbei city 新北市) on December 31, 2011, carried out by folk Buddhist priests (*shijiao fashi* 釋教法師), who are in fact lay ritual professionals.⁵⁸ They recite Buddhist scriptures and other ritual texts, including several precious scrolls.⁵⁹ Recitation of the *Ritual Amplification of the Diamond Sutra* in Banqiao started with the sounds of a small orchestra, consisting of drums and trumpets. Recitation of the text itself, done by four priests taking turns, was reminiscent of its recitation by nuns as described in the *Plum in the Golden Vase*. Similar elements of performances mentioned in the novels of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries therefore can be found in the modern traditions of ritualized recitations in several areas of China.

Finally, we should note the condescending attitude of the author of the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* toward this religious assembly with storytelling. The author criticizes Holy Auntie, repeatedly disclosing her deviant and arrogant behavior, as well as the hosts and participants of the assembly. Organization of this assembly is characterized as a waste of time, money, and effort on the part of Inspector Yang and his whole family: “It is a pity that one vegetarian feast in a wealthy house takes as many resources as would be enough for a poor family to survive a whole year.” The conclusion of this chapter in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* also reads: “A cloistered sorceress will at once turn into a mighty demonic spirit; the cost paid by Inspector Yang [for organization of the Buddhist assembly] caused anxiety for his housekeeper Zhao.” (坐關的妖嫗頓成地煞神通。破楊巡檢幾分的家私，費趙管家一番的心計; Feng Menglong 1980, 74).

Such an attitude is characteristic of Chinese literati of this period on the whole; they often

sounded together: “cloud gongs” and cymbals, pipes of *sheng* and flutes; some were beating *muyu*, some were striking *hezi* (unidentified instrument—RB), the whole audience in the lecture hall chanted together...” 眾女僧把法鼓「咚咚」，一齊打起，金磬一聲，法器齊動，雲鑼鑊鈸，笙管橫笛，也有敲木魚的，擊合子的，滿講堂同聲齊念..... Here “cloud gongs” (*yun luo* 雲鑼) mean a stand with ten gongs of different size and tone.

⁵⁸ This tradition originated in the Hokkien areas of Fujian.

⁵⁹ See Berezkin 2017b, 5–6. On these folk Buddhist priests and their rituals, see also Yang Shixian 2011.

regarded Buddhist rituals as deceitful and wasteful (e.g. Wu 2020).⁶⁰ One can compare it with the criticism of the nuns reciting precious scrolls in the *Plum in the Golden Vase* and its sequel. This fact partly explains why there is so little mention or description of precious scrolls performances in the literati’s writings of the Ming and Qing periods.

CONCLUSIONS

The description of the ritual assembly with the Holy Auntie’s sermon in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* provides rare evidence on the performance of popular religious narratives in Ming-dynasty China. While there are many fantastic elements in this novel, the scene of this assembly is very realistic, as many details correspond to what we know from historical sources about the socio-cultural situation in China in that period.

The sermon in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* used the material of precious scrolls—vernacular popular narratives—and this recitation took place at a popular type of Buddhist service aimed at preaching the teaching (Law) for the laity. The main purpose of this assembly is rebirth in the Western Land, and the stories are about Buddhist figures; specific sectarian ideas and deities of the Ming dynasty are not mentioned. Thus, it demonstrates that the Buddhist topics constituted a considerable part of precious scrolls’ contents in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, when new popular syncretic religions were flourishing in China. At the same time, the ambiguous status of the preacher Holy Auntie, related as it was to black magic and messianic rebellion, emphasizes the possible subversive nature of her teaching.

The sermon in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt* was a public performance, testifying for the fact that such assemblies and the transmission of precious scrolls were not only tolerated, but even sponsored and supported by officials, who are usually presented in historical texts as proponents of the Confucian ideology. At the same time, this ritual assembly attracted people of varying social standing, including Buddhist and Daoist clergy (as well as people disguised as monks and nuns), lay believers

⁶⁰ One should note that the situation during the Ming dynasty was not that simple. A lot of literati supported Buddhist establishments and sponsored rituals, see, e.g. Brook 1993. Thus, the attitude of Inspector Yang, criticized in the *Pacification of the Demons’ Revolt*, was not so uncommon.

among the commoners, and vagabonds. The participation of women should be especially noted, also in connection with the content of the storytelling, e.g., the Miaoshan and Luobo (Mulian) narratives. The narrative nature of this sermon testifies that it combined proselytizing with entertainment. The strong emotional response on the part of the audience attests to its effect.

Thus, the description of storytelling in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* supplements information about precious scrolls recitations that one finds in other vernacular novels of the same period, notably *Plum in the Golden Vase* and its sequel ascribed to Ding Yaokang. One can also compare it with the evidence in the precious scrolls of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries.⁶¹ Comparison of the telling scriptures scene in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* with other historical materials of that period, as well as the evidence on precious scrolls recitation from modern times, demonstrates the variety in styles and socio-cultural settings of such ritualized storytelling.

One should also note the similarity between the assembly described in the *Pacification of the Demons' Revolt* and the public occasions of precious scrolls recitation (telling scriptures) in the southern part of Jiangsu in the modern period, revealed in the contents of narratives, performance manner, religious and cultural background of the meetings, and even the special terms designating their participants. This demonstrates the survival and continuation of old cultural practices in modern China.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Berezkin 2017a, 114–117.

APPENDIX: ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE PASSAGE FROM THE NOVEL *THE PACIFICATION OF THE DEMONS' REVOLT*, SECOND PART OF CHAPTER 11

再提那聖姑姑在楊巡檢西園住起，是去年五月中。今年又是七月，一載有餘了。他猛然想起：「媚兒不知下落，天后說道自有人來尋你，也不知該在何年何日，在此內外不通，便有呂純陽張道陵出世，那個半夜敲門三更打戶，把這仙機妙法特地尋你則甚。還是與外人相接，庶幾便於尋訪。聞楊奶奶患了風寒有十分沉重，諸醫不效。楊巡檢正在著急，乘此機會，勸他起個無遮大會保禳奶奶安康，那時僧道畢集，必有所聞矣。」

Here we shall tell about Holy Auntie. Last year in the fifth moon she settled in the West Garden of Inspector Yang, now it was the seventh moon; more than a year has passed. She suddenly thought: "I do not know the Mei'er's whereabouts; the other day the Celestial Empress said that someone would come to look for me, but I do not know when this will happen. Now I am locked up in here without any connections to the outside world. If only Zhang Daoling or Lü Dongbin⁶² appears in this world and knocks at your door at midnight to look for you in the third watch,⁶³ then someone will be able to find you with wondrous charms of immortals!⁶⁴ It is still better to connect with the people outside, then I expect it will be easier to find me. I have heard that the wife of Inspector Yang has caught cold, and her illness is pretty serious, as all medicines are of no use. Inspector Yang worries about it a lot, so I can use this opportunity to persuade him to organize the Great Assembly of No Obstacles to pray for his wife's recovery. At

62 These are popular Daoist figures, known for their magical abilities. Zhang Daoling (or Zhang Ling, ca. 34–156 CE) is considered to be the founder of the influential tradition of Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師). Lü Dongbin is worshipped as a famous Daoist immortal.

63 I.e., ca. 4 a.m. Night-watches are double hours extending from around 7 p.m. to 5 a.m.

64 Meaning the prophecy of the Celestial Empress will be realized.

this time Buddhist monks and Daoists will gather; among them there certainly will be someone who knows something [about it].”

當晚送供給的家童來，便將建會保禳的話對他說了。又道：「若是老爺肯發心時，貧道只今晚便求普賢菩薩的聖水，來救取奶奶，管情沒事。」家童回去述與楊巡檢聽了，楊巡檢頓足道：「正忘了聖姑姑，有這個良醫何不去求他。」便教掌房的老嫗嫗，快到西園求他聖水，所言保禳道場，但憑開規起建。老嫗嫗到西園見了聖姑姑，把楊巡檢吩咐的話一一說了。那老狐精那裏有甚麼聖水，魘地裏到臥室中把個磁碗撒一潑尿，做張做智的擎出房來，交與老嫗嫗。老嫗嫗接在手中，分明捧了玉杯甘露，戰兢兢只怕損了一滴，討個盒兒盛了拿回，獻與楊巡檢。楊春平信奉到此，豈疑其詐。真個認做仙丹妙藥，叫丫頭扶起奶奶的頭，親手把這碗狐尿灌在他口裏去。原來《藥性本草》上有一款狐尿，主治寒熱瘟疫，偶然暗合了。楊奶奶到半夜來頓覺清爽，討湯水吃。楊春喜從天降，稱贊聖姑姑不絕。那時就有個親知灼見的，對他說是老牝狐撒的臊溺，他家如何肯信。這也是狐精的法緣將到，自然有這般造化，世間萬事皆如此也。有詩為證：

運未至時真成假，時若通時假亦真。

莫向人前誇本事，還愁造化不如人。

That evening, when a servant delivered her food, donated by the inspector's family, Holy Auntie informed him about her suggestion to organize the religious assembly to pray for the hostess's recovery. She said: "If the master agrees to do this, I, poor nun, can ask Bodhisattva Puxian to bestow sacred water in order to save the life of mistress, and I can guarantee she will recover at once." When the servant returned and transmitted this to Inspector Yang, the latter stamped his feet [in anxiety] and exclaimed: "How could I forget about the Holy Auntie? As she has such a wonderful medicine, we should go to ask her for it!" Inspector Yang immediately ordered an old lady-housekeeper to go to the

West Garden and ask Holy Auntie for the sacred water; as for the sacred assembly to secure the mistress's health, it must be organized according to ritual regulations.

When the old woman arrived in the West Garden, she transmitted all the inspector's words to Holy Auntie. This old fox spirit of course did not have any sacred water, so she secretly retired to her bedroom, where she peed in a porcelain bowl, took it out with great pretence and presented it to the housekeeper. The housekeeper took it with caution as if it was sweet dew in a jade cup, trembling in fear to lose even a single drop of it; she put it in a box and brought it back to Inspector Yang. The inspector always believed Auntie, and this time he did not suspect he had been cheated. He honestly regarded it as an elixir of immortality and a miraculous medicine, so he asked a servant girl to raise his wife's head, and he himself poured the fox's urine into the woman's mouth. In the *Pharmacopeia Study* (藥性本草),⁶⁵ originally there had been such an item as the fox's urine, which could cure chill and fever, and [the false treatment] in this case simply coincided [with that recipe].

At midnight the lady of the Yang family suddenly felt relief and asked for a bowl of soup. Inspector Yang was delighted, and endlessly praised the skill of Holy Auntie. At that time, if anybody who knew or guessed, had declared that this "medicine" was the urine of an old fox, nobody in the Yang family would have believed him. The fox spirit had met a happy chance, for she indeed was very lucky; myriad things in this world are like this. There is a poem attesting this:

When there is no good luck, real becomes unreal.
 But when it appears in the right time, unreal looks real.
 Never boast about your abilities in front of others,
 You should remember that destiny is stronger than people.

⁶⁵ This is the title of an old medical book.

次早楊春巡檢親到西園，從後邊私路進去見了聖姑姑，再三稱謝，就問他保禳道場如何規則。婆子道：“這個道場名為無遮大會，或是講經，明心見性。或是念佛，專修西方。世人根器，鈍多利少。如今還是說些因果，以勸化世人念佛。不論善男信女，在家出家，願來者聽。本宅施主，備齋款待。別個有頭髮的吃去不算，只光光和尚要齋滿一萬之數。數滿之日，做個回向功德，其福無量。不但老檀越夫妻長壽，還要觀音菩薩送子，文昌帝君填祿，世世富貴，才表貧道的一點報效之意。”

On the next morning Inspector Yang Chun himself went to the West Garden to meet with Holy Auntie, taking the rear private path. He thanked her many times, and asked about the rules of holding the ritual assembly for protection [of the family]. The old woman answered:

This assembly is called the Great Assembly of No Obstacles, or “telling scriptures,” making one to clarify one’s mind and realize [the true] nature.⁶⁶ It is also [called] the chanting the Buddha’s name in preparation [for rebirth] in the Western Land [of Amitābha]. Talking about the natural abilities of people in this world, there are many narrow-minded ones, but there are few smart. This time I would better talk about the karmic causation in order to teach the people of the world to chant the Buddha’s name. No matter whether they are male or female, lay or monastic, everyone who wishes can come to listen. You as a patron, [a host] of this house, should treat them with the vegetarian feast. Only the number of clerics treated with the feast should reach ten thousand, not including those with hair (i.e. the laity) who will

66 This expression means beholding one’s originally inherent Buddha-nature, a basic notion of the Chan form of Buddhism in China; compare with “seeing one’s nature, becoming Buddha” (見性成佛) in the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liu zu tan jing* 六祖壇經, *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō*, no. 2008, 48.337a23).

participate. On the day when this number is reached, we will perform the ritual of merit transfer,⁶⁷ and your fortune will be boundless. Not only will the respected sponsors—*Danapati*, the husband and wife—enjoy longevity, but Bodhisattva Guanyin will award you a son, the Lord Wenchang will add fortune, and you will possess fortune and ranks in multiple rebirths. In this way, I, the poor nun, will be able to pay off a bit of the debt of gratitude for your help.

原來楊巡檢夫妻兩口，極過得好，真個是如魚似水，百從千隨，雖然偏房有子卻不喜歡。只要奶奶有個親生，方才心滿意足。聞了此言，如何不喜。當下取曆日看了，擇於八月初三啟請聖姑出關，十一日道場起首。先去稟過了縣尹，自己寫個告示，張掛西園門首，寫道：

本宅因家眷不安，發心啟建無遮大會。以八月十一日為始，一連七日。四方善男信女、僧尼道眾真心願來念佛者，本宅例有齋襯，如有棍徒乘機囉啤，擾亂佛場，定行送官懲治不恕。特示
天禧二年七月 日⁶⁸

In fact, Inspector Yang and his wife got along with each other very well; they lived in harmony as a fish in the water, and consulted each other on every matter. Although Yang's concubine had a son, he was not happy. He would be completely satisfied only if his main wife gave birth to a son herself. Upon hearing these words, how could Yang not rejoice? He immediately took the calendar and chose the third day of the eighth moon as a date to request the Holy Auntie to end her retreat, and the eleventh day as the beginning of the ritual assembly.

67 迴向功德, transferring the virtues of holding this assembly to other human beings; a common notion in the Buddhist practice (Skt. *pariṇāmanā*, *pariṇāmayati*).

68 The punctuation follows the modern punctuated edition of the text (Feng Menglong 1980, 69–74).

Yang went at first to report this thing to the county magistrate (*xianyin* 縣尹), then he himself wrote the announcement and hung it on the gates of the West Garden. It said: “Because one of the family members of this house was not well, we have decided to hold the Great Assembly of No Obstacles. It will begin on the eleventh day of the eighth lunar [month] and will last for seven days. Good men and pious women in the four directions, monks and nuns, both Buddhist and Daoist, who sincerely wish to come to chant the Buddha’s name will be welcomed in this house, the hosts providing vegetarian food and clothing. However, if any vagabonds will enter with this excuse to make noise and disturb the Buddhist service, they will be immediately sent to the authorities and punished without mercy. I specially announce this on the XX day of the seventh lunar [month] of the second year of the Celestial Joy (Tianxi 天禧).”⁶⁹

卻說楊奶奶自服過聖水之後，病勢漸退，雖然精神未復，且喜沒事了。感聖姑姑活命之恩，做下青紵絲道兜一個、紫花細布道衣一件將白綾做了夾裡、梅綠暗花錦裙一條、雲頭道鞋一雙，至初二差兩個丫鬟跟著老嬤嬤從西園後邊私路進去，送與聖姑姑說：“奶奶多多上覆，感謝聖姑姑救命之恩。明日出關恐不得自來參見，特具拜佛新衣一套，幸勿棄嫌。”聖姑姑道：“逐日擾宅上，如何又要奶奶費心。”就辭不過，只得收了。便道：“回去時致意奶奶，耐心保重。十一日道場起手，奶奶那時也康健了，請早過拈香。功德滿日，還保扶奶奶添個公子哩。”老嬤嬤道：“奶奶諸般稱意了，只少一件兒，男男女女也生過五胎，只是不育。”聖姑姑道：“奶奶今年幾歲了？”丫鬟道：“老爺四十一歲，奶奶小二歲，今年三十九歲了。”聖姑姑道：“這場病症也是明九年分的晦氣，應過便沒事了。看奶奶不是孤相，命中定有好子，只是招得遲些。”說了好一會，你謝我我謝你的辭別去了。

Let us tell now that after Lady Yang took the sacred water from the Auntie, her illness gradually receded, and, although her spirit has not yet completely regained, she was

69 I.e., the year 1018.

happy to feel healthy again. In order to express gratitude to Holy Auntie, who had saved her life, she made a Daoist cap of blue silk, a monastic robe of fine purple cloth with a flower design, padded with white satin, a brocade skirt of plum-green color with a dark flower pattern, and Daoist shoes with "cloud toes." On the second day of the eighth lunar [month] she sent two girl-servants together with an old woman, who entered the West Garden through the rear private path and presented all these to Holy Auntie, with the words: "Our mistress sent her regards: she would like to express her gratitude to Holy Auntie, who saved her life. Tomorrow, when you come out from your retreat, she will not be able to come to see you in person, so she especially made this set of clothes for the Buddhist ritual. Please do us the favor of accepting them." Holy Auntie answered: "The following days will be hard for the whole household. How can I possibly trouble your lady with this?" She was not able to refuse and just had to accept the gift. Then she said: "When you return back, please thank the lady in my name, and ask her to take care of herself! On the eleventh day, when I start the ritual assembly, if your mistress recovers completely, I will invite her to come early to burn incense. On the day when the merit is completed, it will also help your mistress to give birth to an heir!" The old woman replied: "Our mistress is happy with everything—she just lacks a son. She gave birth to five children, both boys and girls, but they did not live for long." The Holy Auntie asked: "How old is your mistress?" The servant answered: "Our lord is forty-one years old, his wife is two years younger than he, she is thirty-nine." Holy Auntie said: "This disease obviously is the bad luck of the ninth year; she should be well after she has passed it. I see that the lady does not have a solitary destiny; she has the sign of a good son in her destiny; it is only that she will receive him a bit late." After that they talked for a while and exchanged civilities, and the servants left.

到初三日，楊巡檢自去西園揭封皮，開鎖。一面著人打掃飯僧堂，便叫修理鍋灶。一面請出聖姑姑到佛堂中，商量安排道場，合用家伙。除卻菜蔬、茶水臨期每日備辦，其他米麥、豆粉、油、鹽、醬、醋，及桌凳、碗碟件件預先運到。此時哄動了華陰縣裡，那個不傳說楊老佛家齋僧。有等無籍的化子、

串街的婆娘，平昔不曾吃一日素念一聲佛的，也學裹頂唐巾，戴個道兜，整備起齋之日來道場中趁口和哄。

On the third day of the eighth moon Inspector Yang went to the West Garden, took off the paper wrapping from the gate and opened the lock. He ordered servants to sweep the monks' dining hall and to repair the stove in the kitchen. At the same time he also asked Holy Auntie to go to the Buddha's hall, and he discussed with her the organization of the ritual meeting and necessary utensils. Except for vegetables and tea, which should be prepared every day after the assembly started, other things, such as rice, bean flour, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, as well as the tables and benches, bowls and plates, all were brought to the garden in advance. By that time news of this event had caused a sensation in Huayin county, and everybody talked about the monks' assembly at the Yang Old Buddha's house. All the homeless beggars, old women roaming in the streets, who had never fasted for even a day or recited the Buddha's name even once, also studied to wrap their heads with the Tang headscarves⁷⁰ or to wear the Daoist caps, and they prepared to go to the ritual assembly on its day, to enjoy some impromptu fun.

到了十一日，天色方明，便有人一出一進的觀看。但見：

園門洞啟，佛堂弘開。琉璃燈下，燭臺上油燭成行。獅子爐前，香案間牙香滿盒。念佛台，高裝法座起號，專待供佛陀，飯僧堂，雜擺春台放鉢，只延僧侶。劈柴煮飯，火夫亂叫斧頭來。洗菜熬油，廚子只嫌幫手少。可惜富家齋一日，堪充貧戶費終年。

On the eleventh day, as soon as the sky turned light, there were multiple observers sneaking around. This was what they saw:

The garden gates were open wide, and the Buddha's interior hall could be observed. In the light of glass lanterns, rows of candles were shining on their stands. On

⁷⁰ Headscarf that was popular during the Tang dynasty; usually used by scholars.

an incense table, boxes full of incense sticks were placed in front of an incense burner in the form of a lion. The platform for praying to the Buddha, where an elevated seat for the preacher of Dharma was arranged, especially awaited offerings for the Buddha. In the dining hall for monks, *patras*⁷¹ were placed on tables in disorder, just waiting for the monks. The stove-tender was about to cut brushwood to boil rice, shouting for somebody to bring him an axe. While servants were washing vegetables and heating oil, a cook worried that there were not enough hands to do all the kitchen work. It is a pity that one vegetarian feast in a wealthy house takes as many resources as would be enough for a poor family to survive a whole year.

少停，楊巡檢帶了一班家樂，到西園前後左右點檢了一回。這些僧徒道友，男男女女，源源而來。又有一等閒漢兒童，雖不念佛投齋，都來趁鬧觀看。此等最多，越顯得人山人海。只聽得淨室中，共是三遍鐘鳴。第一遍：聖姑姑起身梳洗。第二遍：聖姑姑早齋更衣。第三遍：樂人一齊吹出。但見堂中畫燭齊明，香煙繚繞。好幾個丫鬟養娘簇擁著聖姑姑，齊齊整整，穿著一身新衣搖擺出來，向佛前拈香膜拜。楊巡檢隨後也拜了。一班吹手迎出前堂，那婆子全不謙讓，逕往高座上坐了。楊巡檢口稱師父，倒身下拜。眾人中也有去年拜過他的，也有新來的，不分男女，但是佛會中，一齊隨著磕頭，那婆子端然不動。原來這念佛會中，為首的謂之佛頭，他若開談，眾都靜聽，他若念佛，眾都齊和。其人妄自尊大，旁若無人，從來有這個規矩，這婆子也只蹈襲而已。拜罷，聖姑姑吩咐男左女右分班而坐。楊巡檢看見人眾嘈雜，避在旁邊一個書房中，坐了一會先回去了。這夥老少婆娘，張姨李媽，你扯我拽的，各尋伴侶向右首坐下。但是僧流居士俱在左邊。也有說是女僧，捱向右邊坐的，急忙裡辨不出真假。亦有捱擠不下，只在兩旁站立的。其他投齋行腳都在外邊四散，或坐或立。

After a while Inspector Yang entered the West Garden, bringing a troupe of family

⁷¹ Monks' bowls.

musicians, and made an inspection tour of the assembly site. By that time crowds of monks with their followers and Daoist friends, male and female, arrived at the site. There were also spongers and children, who, although they did not chant the Buddha's name or keep any fast, still came to take advantage of this chance for food and to watch the spectacle. Those were in the majority, in fact, so the crowd of onlookers appeared enormous. At that time in the "pure room" [of Holy Auntie], someone struck a bell three times. With the first stroke Holy Auntie got up, brushed her hair and washed. With the second stroke she took her light breakfast and changed her clothes. After the third stroke the musicians started to play in unison. At that time the decorative candles in the [ritual] hall were lit up and the incense smoke rose in curls. Holy Auntie, accompanied by numerous female servants and nurses, waddled out of her room wearing a nice outfit of all-new clothes. She burned incense and knelt in front of the Buddha. Inspector Yang also bowed [to the Buddha], following her.

Musicians with trumpets came out of the front hall, where this old woman without any modesty sat directly on the elevated seat. Inspector Yang called her "teacher" and prostrated himself in front of her. Among the people in the crowd there were those who already had venerated Holy Auntie in the last year, and there were also new followers of hers. At this Buddhist assembly, believers, regardless whether male or female, kowtowed in front of her in unison, but that old woman just sat solidly and did not move even a little. During such Buddhist assemblies, the leader is called *fotou*. When she or he speaks, everybody listens silently. When she chants the Buddha's name, everybody repeats it in chorus. This nun thought highly of herself, and, quite supercilious, she just did as usual [at these assemblies].

After they finished bowing, the nun ordered the believers to divide into two groups, male and female, and [had them] sit down on the left and on the right of her respectively. Inspector Yang, seeing this noisy crowd, retreated to the nearest study, sat there for a while and then returned to his chambers.

All those young and old women, aunts Zhang and moms Li, pulling each other, sat down on the right side. Monks and hermits sat on the left. There were also those who

called themselves female monastics, who sat down on the right after a while: [if you took] a hurried [look], it was impossible to find out the truth. There were also those who did not have a place to sit, so they stood on both sides. Pilgrims and those who came just to eat for free were assembled in the four directions outside, either sitting or standing.

聖姑姑將界方在案上猛擊三下，吩咐眾善友不許揚聲，各宜靜聽：

無常迅速，時至不留，要免輪回，作速念佛，偈曰：

西方有路好修行，阿彌陀佛。勸你登程不肯登，南無阿彌陀佛。

你若登程吾助你，阿彌陀佛。只須念佛百千聲，南無阿彌陀佛。

[Then] Holy Auntie struck the table with the clap block three times and ordered all believers in the audience ⁷² not to talk, but to keep silent and listen: “The impermanence⁷³ is quick, and, as soon as it arrives, it will not leave you; in order to escape the cycle of rebirths, one should immediately chant the Buddha’s name. The *gāthā*⁷⁴ says:

There is a road to the Western Land; one just must rectify oneself
properly, Buddha Amitābha!

I advise you to hit the road, but you do not agree, Namo Buddha
Amitābha!

If you hit the road, I will assist you, Buddha Amitābha!

72 Literally “friends of goodness.”

73 I.e., death.

74 *Gāthā* (Ch. *jītuō* 偈陀) is a form of verse used in the Buddhist scriptures. This term is also often applied to the verses in precious scrolls; see Berezkin 2017a, 56.

One just needs to chant the Buddha's name a hundred and a thousand
times, Namo Buddha Amitābha!

每稱揚佛號，眾人齊聲附和畢，聖姑姑道：“貧道從西川到此，感承本宅官府相留，一年有餘。今日出關啟請這個道場，一來要保國治年豐，民安道泰；二來要保本宅官府人口平安，福祿綿遠；三來要保十方大眾道心開發，早辨前程。貧道今日也不講甚經說甚法，且把諸佛菩薩的出身，敘與大眾聽著。”
你道觀音菩薩是甚樣出身？偈曰：

觀音古佛本男人，阿彌陀佛。要度天下裙釵化女身，南無阿彌陀佛。做了妙莊皇帝三公子，阿彌陀佛。不享榮華受辛苦，南無阿彌陀佛。

那婆子將觀音菩薩九苦八難，棄家修行的事蹟，敷演說來。說一回，頌一回，弄得這些愚夫愚婦眼紅鼻塞，不住的拭淚。

Every time the nun invoked the Buddha's name, everyone repeated it in chorus. Then the nun said: "I, poor nun, arrived here from Xichuan 西川 and have enjoyed the patronage of this official's family for more than a year. Today I came out from my retreat to start this ritual assembly. First, I pray for the security of the state and for a good harvest; the peace of the people and the prosperity of the Teaching; secondly, I pray for the peace of all family members of this official's residence; so that their happiness and fortune will continue forever; thirdly, I pray that the participants from the ten directions raise their pious thoughts; and that they will embark on their path [to salvation] as soon as possible. I, poor nun, will not explain any scripture and preach any Law⁷⁵ today; I will just tell everybody about the origins of several buddhas and bodhisattvas. Can you tell me how Bodhisattva Guanyin was born? The *gāthā* says:

75 Skt. Dharma, the Buddha's teaching.

Ancient Buddha Guanyin originally was a man, Buddha Amitābha!

However, to convert the women of the Underheaven, he turned into a
woman, Namo Buddha Amitābha!

He became the Third princess of the Emperor Miaozihuang, Buddha
Amitābha!

She did not agree to enjoy prosperity, but endured suffering, Namo
Buddha Amitābha!

Then this old woman narrated the story of how Bodhisattva Guanyin endured nine sufferings and eight hardships, how she left home and perfected herself. Whenever she had spoken for a while, she chanted a poem, and all these unsophisticated men and women in the audience were so touched that their eyes turned red, and their noses were stopped up, they all could not help crying.

到午齋時分，聖姑姑收了科下坐赴齋。眾人也有住下吃齋的，也有竟自回去的。只飯僧堂僧眾，齊齊的坐下，每人一大碗飯，碗上頂著一簇乾菜、兩片大豆腐、兩個大饅饅、一索長壽綿線，線上穿三十文褸錢，做七八路的隨頭派去。這是第一日，來的還少，只有二百余眾，管家登記明白了。剩下的飯，大籬裝著憑這起黃胖道人、癩皮化子隨意大碗價吃飽，到明日又是如此。來的人一日多似一日，供給的支持不來了，稟過楊巡檢，又出個曉示：但是游方僧眾，俱於各處庵堂寺院支領齋褸，本宅預先派開錢糧，差人分頭主管登記。其飯僧堂，專待四方道友。又吩咐各庵院主細心察訪，僧道中果有德行超群，法術驚眾者，即時稟知本宅，另行優待。這是聖姑姑的主意。

When the time for lunch arrived, Holy Auntie finished the story, descended from her seat and proceeded to the dining hall. Some participants in the assembly stayed for the vegetarian lunch, some just departed. Monks and nuns sat in rows in the dining hall for clerics, each taking a bowl of rice with a handful of dried vegetable on top of it, two big

slices of tofu,⁷⁶ two big buns, and a long silk thread with thirty coins of alms. There were seven or eight people who distributed these things among the monks. This was the first day and still not many people came; there were only two-hundred-something participants who were registered by the house attendant. The rest of the food was put in baskets and eaten in big bowls by those anaemic “pious people” and scabby beggars.

On the next day this scene was repeated. Every day more and more people arrived, and the provisions were not enough; the servants reported this to Inspector Yang, and he issued the new order. All those itinerant monks were asked to collect their alms in different monasteries, the Yang family distributed money and grain there in advance, and several clerks were in charge of their registration. The vegetarian hall for the monks was reserved specially for the reception of “pious people” of four directions. Inspector Yang also ordered abbots of all monasteries to observe attentively, and if there were extraordinary monks who surpassed others in virtuous deeds or amazed everybody with their magic powers, they should report them to the sponsor, so that he could treat them with special privileges. This was also the Holy Auntie’s wish. <...>

這一日，聖姑姑正說的是羅卜救母的因果，說了又念佛，念了佛又說。到午牌時分完了，老嬤嬤將送來茶果放在淨室中，無非是白糕、油餅、蒸酥麻團及榛、松、棗、栗之類。等候聖姑姑進來，女陪堂迎著相見，便道：「連日辛苦，奶奶十分掛欠。特地備下些粗點心，請老菩薩用些。」聖姑姑稱謝過了。女陪堂推聖姑姑坐了客席，自家坐了主席，也去扯老嬤嬤同坐。

On that day Holy Auntie talked on the karmic causation of Luobo’s rescuing his mother [from hell], again she talked and chanted the Buddha’s name in turn. When noon was announced by a plaque,⁷⁷ the old housekeeper brought tea and fruit that the inspector’s wife presented to Holy Auntie in her “clear room.” These were buns made of gluttonous

76 Bean curd, a common Chinese food.

77 This was an old way of announcing the time in China.

rice, cakes fried in oil, steamed rice pastry and sesame cookies, hazelnut, pine nuts, jujubes, and chestnut. When Holy Auntie entered, an assistant servant came out to greet her: "You have worked hard these days; my mistress worries about your health. She specially prepared these coarse cakes to express her gratitude; we invite the Old Bodhisattva to lunch."⁷⁸ Holy Auntie thanked her. The assistant placed Holy Auntie on a guest's seat, while she herself took the place of a host and made the housekeeper sit next to her.

⁷⁸ The Old Bodhisattva is an honorific appellation for a nun or a pious believer.

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