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Manuscripts of Precious Scrolls in the Performative Tradition of Changshu, Jiangsu Province, China*

ABSTRACT. “Telling scriptures” is a type of ritualized storytelling in the areas of former Changshu County, Jiangsu Province. Precious scrolls, mainly represented in handwritten manuscripts by masters of telling scriptures, act as scripts in this recitation practice. The main question addressed here is why masters of telling scriptures in Changshu still use traditional manuscripts of precious scrolls, even in this age of developed printing technology. There are several factors for the continuation of manuscript copying, one of the most important of them being the cultural tradition of precious scrolls transmission in the adjacent areas that can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when their recitation became especially popular around the city of Suzhou. Copying manuscripts of precious scrolls is still related to moralistic and devotional considerations. In this article, I mainly use materials obtained during my fieldwork in Changshu and adjacent areas between 2011 and 2015, but also approach the phenomenon of Changshu precious scrolls from the cultural and historical perspectives, putting it in the context of the development of precious scrolls in China since the late imperial period. I also discuss the exchange between printed materials and manuscript culture in the modern telling scriptures practice.

KEY WORDS: precious scrolls, baojuan, popular storytelling literature, folklore, Chinese popular religion, vernacular Buddhist ritual

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Рукописи драгоценных свитков в сказительской традиции района Чаншу провинции Цзянсу, Китай

АННОТАЦИЯ. «Рассказы из канона» — форма ритуализированной песенно-повествовательной литературы, сохранившейся на территории бывшего уезда Чаншу в провинции Цзянсу. Эта сказительская традиция использует рукописные копии драгоценных свитков (баоцзюань), сделанные местными профессиональными исполнителями «рассказов из канона». Несмотря на то что сказительская традиция в Чаншу уже привлекла внимание китайских и зарубежных исследователей, еще не существует специальных работ, посвященных особенностям рукописей драгоценных свитков в Чаншу. Главный вопрос, обсуждаемый здесь: почему исполнители драгоценных свитков в Чаншу до сих пор, в век развитых технологий информации и печати, используют рукописи? Существует несколько факторов сохранения традиции копирования рукописей в этом районе, истоки ее можно проследить в XIX в., когда исполнение драгоценных свитков распространилось в районах вокруг города Сучжоу. Создание рукописей драгоценных свитков до сих пор связано с дидактическими и религиозными аспектами этих произведений. Я использую в основном материалы полевых наблюдений 2011–2015 г. в Чаншу и соседних районах, но также рассматриваю феномен переписки драгоценных свитков в Чаншу в культурной и исторической перспективе — в контексте истории этого жанра простонародной литературы в периоды Мин (1368–1644) и Цин (1644–1911). Я также анализирую особенности взаимодействия традиций рукописной и печатной книги в современной практике «рассказов из канона» в Чаншу.

К Л Ю Ч Е В Ы Е С Л О В А : драгоценные свитки (баоцзюань), простонародная песенно-повествовательная литература, фольклор, китайская народная религия, народные буддийские ритуалы

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This paper discusses the use of manuscripts in the local tradition of precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷) recitation in the Changshu 常熟 area of Jiangsu Province, locally known as “telling scriptures” (*jiangjing* 講經) or “scroll recitation” (*xuanjuan* 宣卷). Telling scriptures uses written texts of precious scrolls, written in prosimetric style (with alternation of prosaic and poetic passages) and mainly narrating the stories of the popular deities and local heroes. Telling scriptures in Changshu has been closely related to folk rituals, and both are performed by professionals, i. e., masters of telling scriptures (*jiangjing xiansheng* 講經先生), during religious assemblies. The masters mostly use handwritten manuscripts, which they copy during their study period.

The origins of telling scriptures in this area are unclear, but it is certain that it existed there since the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. Telling scriptures experienced a revival in the 1980s–1990s, and is still popular today. Though neglected for a long time as a part of folk religious activities, telling scriptures has recently attracted attention of scholars of Chinese literature and folklore. As telling scriptures has been recognized as a part of “intangible cultural heritage” (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 常熟非物質文化遺產) by the Chinese government, manuscripts of precious scrolls have been collected and published (mainly in the edited form) by local scholars. This project resulted in the publication of a major collection of *baojuan* texts from Changshu, i. e., ZCB (see the List of Abbreviations). Previously, many texts from this collection appeared in the collections of *baojuan* texts gathered in modern Zhangjiagang 張家港 (north-western districts of the former Changshu County): ZHBJ and ZSBJ.

Although Chinese and foreign scholars have already studied different aspects of telling scriptures in Changshu, they have paid little attention to the manuscripts used in this type of performance literature.¹ At the same time, these are very important. Not only they contain precious information about the history of this art in Changshu and adjacent areas, but they also constitute an interesting phenomenon of using the traditional handwritten manuscript form in the modern performance settings.

Although Chinese scholars of popular literature started to collect manuscripts of precious scrolls in ca. 1920s, and foreign scholars have been paying attention to this form of their transmission since the 1980s, few scholars have so far addressed the material aspect of precious scrolls on the whole.² Detailed studies of old manuscripts of precious scrolls (nineteenth–early twentieth centuries) are mainly based on their collections in research institutions.³ This study represents an attempt to discuss the special features

¹ See, e. g., (Qiu Huiying 2010; Yu Dingjun 2015; Berezkin 2013, 2015a).

² See, e. g., (Mair 1988: 10–12).

³ See, e. g., (Xu 2010; Lu Yongfeng 2012; Qiu Zhaoyuan 2018).

of manuscripts used in a living tradition of precious scrolls performances in order to explain their cultural significance.

The main question addressed here is why masters of telling scriptures in Changshu still use traditional manuscripts of precious scrolls, even in this age of developed printing technology. I attempt to answer it using materials obtained during my fieldwork in Changshu and adjacent areas (including observations of live telling scriptures and interviews with the performers) during my numerous trips there between 2011 and 2015.

TELLING SCRIPTURES AND PRECIOUS SCROLLS MANUSCRIPTS IN CHANGSHU

For a proper understanding of the Changshu tradition of *baojuan*, a brief note on the origins and evolution of this literary form is necessary. *Baojuan*, while they were also transmitted in written form (manuscripts and printed editions), were primarily intended for oral presentation for the broad lay audiences.⁴ The literary form of *baojuan* appeared approximately in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, but these texts are still performed in several regions of China today. Modern scholars divide the history of *baojuan* into three periods. In the first period (ca. thirteenth–fifteenth centuries), they propagated Buddhist doctrines. In the middle period (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries), *baojuan* were usually used as the scriptures of syncretic religious movements. At the same time, narrative precious scrolls re-telling popular Buddhist tales also remained popular. This second type of texts developed significantly in the third (late) period (nineteenth–early twentieth centuries). At that time many *baojuan* that were not connected with specific religious teachings were written. Narrative texts, which often adapted secular subjects from other types of vernacular literature, predominated.⁵ In the third period *baojuan* performances became especially widespread in the Jiangnan region (southern Jiangsu and modern Zhejiang Provinces, the Wu dialects speaking areas) (Li Shiyu 2007: 20–37; Che Xilun 2009: 207–233). Most *baojuan* used in Changshu nowadays belong to the third (late) period.

The appearance of professional performers, such as the “masters of telling scriptures” in modern Changshu, can also be traced back to that third period.⁶ Telling scriptures occurs during special religious meetings, which usually take place in private houses in connection with various life cycle rituals, as well as on public venues during communal celebrations and temple festivals.⁷ There are around 250 texts recited in Changshu, their topics corresponding to

⁴ For an introduction to *baojuan*, see, e. g., (Overmyer 1999; Li Shiyu 2007; Che Xilun 2009).

⁵ On the periodization of the precious scrolls history, see (Berezkin 2017: 3–5).

⁶ According to the survey undertaken by the local authorities in 2013, there were 163 masters of telling scriptures in the Changshu area; but in fact there must be much more, as many are not registered.

⁷ On the types of telling scriptures occasions, see (Yu Dingjun 2015, 3: 2556–2593).

the performance occasions. Most texts are narratives, as is common for the precious scrolls of the late period; they are dedicated to the deities of the vast local pantheon, and are classified into “vegetarian” (*su juan* 素卷) and “meat scrolls” (*hun juan* 葷卷), according to the types of offerings used for them.⁸ There is also a special category of “funerary scrolls” (*min juan* 冥卷) that are recited along the funerary and memorial rituals; they are mainly dedicated to the deities of the underworld.⁹ The large group of “entertaining scrolls” (*xian juan* 閒卷, or *baixiang juan* 白相卷 in the local dialect), which are still common in possession of the local masters of telling scriptures, is usually not used in recitation today, which presumably has to do with the weakening of the entertaining function of precious scrolls in the modern period.¹⁰

Manuscripts of precious scrolls invariably appear during telling scriptures in Changshu: performers place them on a table and constantly consult them during recitation (see figure 1). This follows the general mode of traditional precious scrolls performances since the Ming dynasty. The presence of a script in the performance has been a distinguishing feature of the “scroll recitation”, which makes it different from the other genres of traditional Chinese storytelling, such as *pinghua* 評話 in Yangzhou and *tanci* 彈詞 (Suzhou chantefable), where promptbooks do not appear during live performances. This special feature of the “scroll recitation” as a “scripted performance” was noted by scholars of Chinese popular literature long ago (Johnson 1995: 77).¹¹ This definition still applies to the majority of precious scrolls recitation traditions existing in China. Scripts are also used by the performers of *baojuan* in other areas around Suzhou 蘇州 and Wuxi 無錫 cities, as well as in the northern provinces of Gansu, Hebei, and Shanxi.

This traditional style of precious scrolls recitation is called “recitation following the script” (*zhao ben xuan ke* 照本宣科). The masters of telling scriptures recite prosaic passages, sometimes also enacting the voices of various characters in direct speech; and sing poetic passages, using several folk melodies.¹² Telling scriptures usually uses only simple accompaniment of percussion instruments, mainly the so-called “wooden fish” (*myu* 木魚), which is also typical of monastic traditions of sūtra recitation. Singing of poetic passages in telling scriptures is also accompanied with a short refrain of a chorus chanting the name of Buddha Amitabha and joining the lead performer in singing the last syllable in each even (rhymed) line of a verse, which is called “chiming in with the Buddha’s name” (*he Fo* 和佛). This performative manner also constitutes a special feature of the precious scrolls recitation,

⁸ This classification is used by the masters of telling scriptures themselves.

⁹ On the funerary recitations, see (Berezkin 2016).

¹⁰ There are also numerous ritual texts (*keyi* 科儀), such as litanies and spells, that are used in the related rituals. I do not discuss them here.

¹¹ See also (Berezkin 2017: 11–15).

¹² On the musical accompaniment, see (Berezkin 2013: 198–199).



Fig. 1. “Telling scriptures” in a private home in Fushan town, Changshu, 2013. Picture by the author

reminding of similar ritual invocations of Buddha’s name in chanting of Buddhist scriptures and penitence texts.¹³

Still, one should not assume that the precious scrolls in the Changshu tradition are fixed scripts similar to Buddhist and Daoist scriptures and ritual texts (*keyi* 科儀). The masters of telling scriptures, especially the experienced and renowned ones, can modify the traditional texts of precious scrolls in the course of recitation, either adding new details and explanations, or omitting some elements — usually in response to the audience’s reaction. The individual features of performers also find expression in the manuscripts of precious scrolls that they copy and keep in their houses.

The transmission of telling scriptures takes form of copying manuscripts that have been handed down from a master to his disciples. Manuscripts predating 1950 are extremely rare now, though some have been discovered during the recent surveys (ZCB 3: 1477–1479). Most manuscripts in use nowadays were copied in the 1990s–2000s.¹⁴ These manuscripts usually have a form of rectangular stitched booklets that are similar to the woodblock printed books of the late imperial period, the so-called *fangce ben* 方冊本 form. While most manuscripts of the older performers use traditional forms of characters (*fantizi* 繁體字) and are distinguished for their nice calligraphy,

¹³ See also (Berezkin 2017: 54–55).

¹⁴ Photocopies of old manuscripts are also becoming increasingly frequent now.

the younger generation of performers, now in their fifties and sixties, mainly uses simplified characters (which they studied at school).¹⁵ As the general educational level of the older generations of performers was not high (many of them studied in the private way), mistakes in characters were common and were transmitted into the new manuscripts of their disciples.¹⁶ Despite the increasing use of photocopying, I still have not seen computer typed texts of precious scrolls in Changshu; most masters still rely on traditional manuscripts.

Many materials that I use here were kindly provided by the hereditary master of telling scriptures Yu Dingjun 余鼎君 (b. 1942), whose original job was a primary school teacher. His father Yu Junyu 余浚渔 (1901–1968) and elder brother Yu Baojun 余寶均 also recited precious scrolls. Although most of Yu Junyu's manuscripts disappeared during the Cultural Revolution, many texts were re-collected from his disciples by Yu Baojun when he resumed the family tradition in the 1980s. After he had retired, Yu Dingjun dedicated himself to telling scriptures; he continued to collect texts of precious scrolls, which he often exchanged with other performers. He now possesses one of the largest and most representative collections of texts in Changshu.¹⁷ Most of the texts he uses now are his own manuscripts.

Another important center of survival of traditional telling scriptures is the Gangkou 港口 town area of Zhangjiagang city. There the transmission of this art was not interrupted, despite the destruction of texts during the Cultural Revolution. Many masters of telling scriptures whom I met in the Gangkou area also possessed numerous manuscripts, mostly their own copies. For example, Di Jianxin 狄建新 (b. 1928), an old performer from the Qingshui village 清水村 of Fenghuang township 鳳凰鎮, had a collection of 326 texts, altogether 208 different titles, at the time when I visited him in 2008 (see figure 2).¹⁸ Di Jianxin also can trace his teachers' lineage to the late nineteenth century. He studied for only two years at a private school (*sishu* 私塾), as was common in rural areas at that time, but was able to read and write well. He started to study telling scriptures at the age of sixteen, even before 1949, and in 1948 he organized his own performance team. In the 1980s, he resumed his performance activities, becoming a famous local master of telling scriptures.

The masters of telling scriptures of the younger generation also continue the tradition of copying manuscripts, among them Zhou Yongcai 周永財 (b. 1951) from Qingshui village 清水村 of Gangkou township. Originally a concrete construction worker (with secondary school education), he had been studying telling scriptures since 1997 with Lu Yueqin 陸月琴 (1943–2006), one of the famous female performers from Guangbu village 廣步村 of

¹⁵ In old manuscripts, the mixture of traditional and simplified forms is common.

¹⁶ Phonetic loan characters reflecting local pronunciation are common, which is typical of other types of storytelling texts in China as well.

¹⁷ On Yu Dingjun, see also (Berezkin 2013: 173–176; Berezkin 2015b: 101–140).

¹⁸ See (ZCB 2: 1492–1494).



Fig. 2. Baojuan manuscripts of Di Jianxin from the Qingshui village of Fenghuang township, Zhangjiagang. Picture by the author taken in 2008

Fenghuang township. By 2006, he had copied around eighty manuscripts of precious scrolls (ZHBJ 2: 1473).

Other performers from the Gangkou area have considerable collections of precious scrolls. For example, Yu Guanbao 虞關保 (b. in 1930), an old master from the Xiaoshan village 小山村 of Gangkou township, has 124 precious scrolls. Most items in these collections are manuscripts, though there also are printed copies of precious scrolls, which have to do with the evolution of this type of literature in the southern Jiangsu areas against its complex cultural and historical background.

THE HISTORY OF PRECIOUS SCROLLS MANUSCRIPTS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Throughout their long history, precious scrolls have been transmitted in several forms: manuscripts, woodblock printed copies, and, since the early twentieth century, lithographic and typeset editions. Among them, manuscripts are the most numerous. The manuscript form also appears to be the oldest one.

For example, the earliest known specimen of the genre — the *Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescuing His Mother [so that she] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven* (*Mulian jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan* 目連救母出離地獄生天寶卷; hereafter *Precious Scroll of Mulian*) — is represented by the incomplete manuscript from 1373, which was originally collected by the

Chinese scholar Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), but is now kept in the National Library of China.¹⁹ Another manuscript of virtually the same text is dated 1440; it is also an incomplete manuscript, kept in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia.²⁰ Both manuscripts are noteworthy for numerous color illustrations that are interspersed in the main text of the precious scroll. The fine quality of these illustrations as well as information in the colophons of both manuscripts make it possible to confirm that they were commissioned by the members of the imperial court, which constitutes an interesting aspect of the social background of early precious scrolls in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The popular syncretic religions of the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, which used the prosimetric form of precious scrolls for proselytizing, also adopted the woodblock printing technology for multiplication of their texts. Still, manuscripts of precious scrolls continued to be created in this period as well, which had to do with the intensification of the government persecution of such religions during the Qing dynasty as well as their tendency to secrecy in transmission of their teachings and practices.²¹

The number of precious scrolls manuscripts increased significantly during the third period of development of this genre. In the first half of the nineteenth century, as scroll recitation spread in the areas to the south of Yangtze River, manuscripts of precious scrolls were mainly copied and used by the performers there. The earliest surviving manuscripts from this area, dating back to the period before the Taiping War (1850–1864), mostly represent narrative texts dedicated to the stories of popular deities and other widespread literary subjects.²² By the middle of the twentieth century, professional performers of scroll recitation in the Suzhou area possessed numerous manuscripts of precious scrolls. They were collected during the surveys of the late 1950s–1960s, and more than a thousand of such scrolls are now preserved in the Suzhou Museum of Drama.²³

The flourishing of the scroll recitation art in the Jiangnan region in the period following the end of the Taiping War led not only to the proliferation of folk manuscripts, but also to the beginning of printing of narrative precious scrolls in the urban centers of Jiangnan — first in the traditional woodblock form, and starting from the early twentieth century, in the lithographic form. There are historical materials indicating that these woodblock and lithographic

¹⁹ For the transcription of the extant portion of this text, see (Yoshikawa 2003: 124–133).

²⁰ An alternative title appears at the beginning of this manuscript: *Precious Scroll of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [so that she] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven (Mujianglian 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 manuscript, see (Berezkin 2017: 48–71).

²¹ See, e. g., (Li Shiyu 2007: 45–46; Che Xilun 2009: 33–34).

²² Che Xilun collected around forty manuscripts copied in the period between 1817 and 1850 (2009: 208–212).

²³ In the recently compiled catalogue of precious scrolls in this museum, there are 1119 copies of texts with 237 titles, see (Guo Lamei 2018: 1).

editions were based on folk manuscripts that were collected and edited by literate people.²⁴ Different types of precious scrolls were printed, among them didactic texts that were included in the corpus of “morality books” (*shanshu* 善書) gaining popularity among the philanthropists of that period, as well as texts retelling popular literary subjects. The latter, printed with nice calligraphy and pictures, entered the burgeoning market of popular reading materials.

At the same time, precious scrolls in the printed lithographic form could also serve as scripts for folk storytelling. While most professional performers of scroll recitation in the Wu-speaking areas continued to use traditional manuscripts even in the first half of the twentieth century, woodblock and lithographic printed copies of precious scrolls from the late nineteenth — early twentieth centuries were found among folk performers during the recent expeditions of local scholars, including those in the Changshu area. Thus, we have an interesting phenomenon when several texts returned to their original folk milieu in the edited form. This reflected the interchange between written culture and oral literature, printing and manuscripts, which was on the whole characteristic of the popular culture in the late imperial and even modern China.

BEYOND MANUSCRIPTS: PRINTED PRECIOUS SCROLLS AND TELLING SCRIPTURES

The most notable example of the exchange between manuscript and printed versions of precious scrolls in the modern tradition of telling scriptures in Changshu are numerous printed copies of the *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain* (*Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷), a very popular text in this recitation tradition. This text, narrating the story of the earthly reincarnation of Bodhisattva Guanyin, Princess Miaoshan, which can be traced back to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries (although nowadays a later recension from the late nineteenth century is used in Changshu), is closely related to the widespread beliefs in this Buddhist deity. The *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain* is performed during all the religious meetings in Changshu dedicated to the welfare of living people, so it can be said to be the most frequently used one on various occasions (see Berezkin 2015a).

The *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain* is represented as both printed copies and manuscripts in the collections of masters of telling scriptures (ZHBJ 2: 1485–1503). The earliest edition that I have seen in the vicinity of Changshu is the one printed by the Wansong 萬松 Publishers in Wuxi in 1886, found in the collection of Di Jianxin. Still, Di Jianxin used a manuscript copy of this text for his recitations (see figure 3). According to Yu Dingjun, the manuscript of this text in his collection was copied from the woodblock edition of the Huikong Sutra Publishers (慧空經方) in Hangzhou, dated 1931. At the

²⁴ For details, see (Berezkin 2014: 145–146).

same time, today most performers in Changshu use manuscript copies of this text.

Another case of influence of printed editions on the practice of telling scriptures is the *Precious Scroll of Miaoying* (*Miaoying baojuan* 妙英寶卷) narrating the story of another form of Bodhisattva Guanyin. This is also a very popular text in Changshu telling scriptures that can substitute for the *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain* on various occasions.²⁵ Although a printed copy of this precious scroll still has not been discovered in the collections of local performers, one of the manuscripts of this text, copied by Chen Zhengming 陳正明 in 1993 (found in the collection of Li Yuzhen 李玉珍 from Honglian 紅聯 village near Leyu 樂余 town, Zhangjiagang), is labelled as a copy from the woodblock printed edition. The colophon of Chen Zhengming's manuscript, as well as the concluding verse (apparently added by the local masters of telling scriptures), claims that the original text appeared during the Song dynasty and was printed in *jiazi* 甲子 year, which appears to correspond to 1144. The local scholars accepted the authenticity of this date, which is absolutely spurious (ZHBJ 1: 4). It is improbable that the Miaoying story appeared as early as the twelfth century. Apparently the local performers and believers dated the *Precious Scroll of Miaoying* by the time of the events narrated in this text.

However, this colophon of the *Precious Scroll of Miaoying* is still valuable as it testifies that the original manuscript used by the masters of telling scriptures in Changshu was copied from the woodblock edition. The colophon also tells about successive copying of this text in 1883, 1910, 1922, and 1953. This note about the history of copying of the *Precious Scroll of Miaoying*, rarely seen in this type of folk manuscripts, testifies for the old practice of the local people which has contributed to the preservation of traditional precious scrolls in this area.

Still, the process of exchange between printed and manuscript variants was not linear and simple, as one can imagine. We can take as an example the *Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor* (*Liang huang baojuan* 梁皇寶卷), which is one of frequently performed texts in the modern Changshu telling scriptures.²⁶ The earliest manuscript of a precious scroll with this title discovered in Changshu is dated 1872, being the earliest specimen of precious scrolls discovered in this area so far.²⁷ This manuscript predates the earliest available printed edition of the *Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor* printed

²⁵ It is alternatively known as the *Precious Scroll of Guanyin in White Clothes* (*Baiyi Guanyin baojuan* 白衣觀音寶卷).

²⁶ It is based on the apocryphal legend recounted in the preface of the *Merciful Penitence of the Ritual Area* (*Cibei daochang chanfa* 慈悲道場懺法, TSD 1909). The precious scroll of this topic (several variants are known) has been traditionally recited during funerary rites for the dead women in the Changshu area.

²⁷ According to the local scholars, the earliest manuscript related to telling scriptures, recently discovered in Changshu, is a piece called "The Unfilial son of Huduiling" (*Huduiling ni zi* 虎堆嶺逆子), dated 1819: (ZCB 1: 1470–1476); but it does not look like a precious scroll.

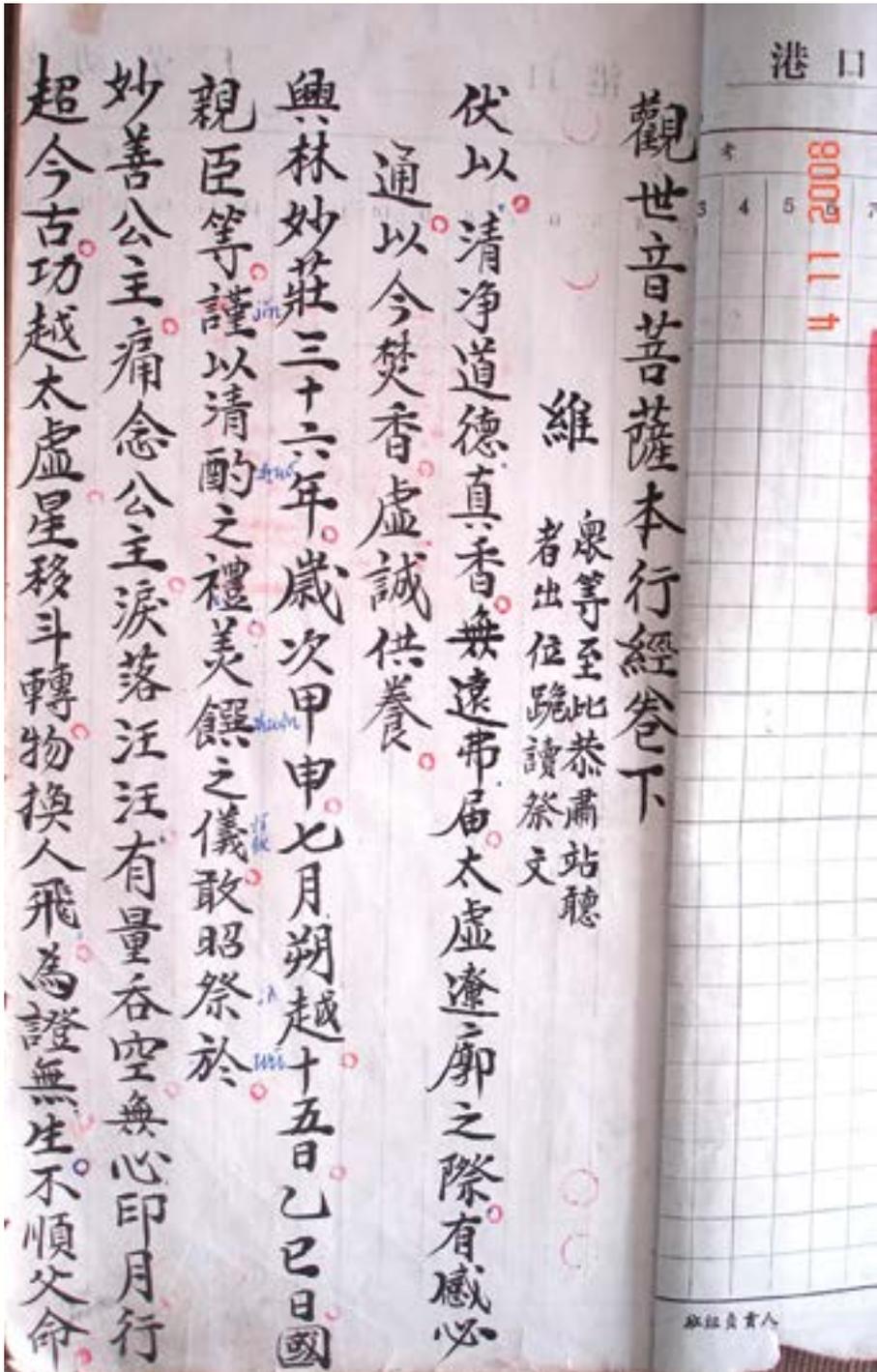


Fig. 3. Manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* in the collection of Di Jianxin

by Manao Publishers (瑪瑙經方) in Hangzhou in 1876. There is a difference in the contents of the Changshu manuscript and Hangzhou edition, demonstrating there is no direct link between them.²⁸ At the same time, the storyline in the modern manuscript of precious scroll on this subject, still used by storytellers in Changshu,²⁹ shows more affinity with the printed edition of the *Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor* (it was reprinted by several publishers in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries) than the manuscript from 1872.

This example demonstrates the complex relations between the manuscripts of precious scrolls used by the modern performers and traditional printed texts. Most precious scrolls recited in Changshu today, especially those devoted to local deities, were composed locally and exist only as manuscripts. Folk manuscripts of precious scrolls with the widespread stories are also unique, as they contain modifications made by several generations of folk performers.

WHY MANUSCRIPTS: THE REASONS FOR MANUSCRIPT TRANSMISSION IN THE MODERN PERIOD

Here we come to the central question of this article, i. e., what are the reasons for the survival of the tradition of manuscript copying related to telling scriptures in Changshu. One should note that this is a complex cultural phenomenon that should be regarded from the perspective of precious scrolls development in the whole Wu-speaking region, which I have briefly outlined in section two above. There are multiple reasons for maintaining the traditional way of manuscript transmission in the early twenty-first century.

First, manuscripts were the main accessible form of precious scrolls in the second half of the twentieth century. Printing of precious scrolls in the urban centers basically stopped after 1949, and villagers obviously could not put their manuscripts in printed form when telling scriptures revived in Changshu in the 1980s and 1990s.

Still, besides this obvious reason, there are also other ones to consider. The manuscript form allowed local performers to record and transmit their own versions of popular narratives that were adapted to their performances. The individuality of a written version of a precious scroll constituted an important advantage for the professional performers, who had to fight for the audiences in quite competitive market of vernacularized ritual services.

Historically, the written texts of precious scrolls were considered to be family (or the performers' lineage) property that could not be lent or even shown to outsiders, especially performers from competing schools and lineages.

²⁸ For a comparison of these two texts, see Berezkin 2019.

²⁹ I use the manuscript titled the *Ritual Scroll of the Liang King* (*Liang wang fa juan* 梁王法卷) that was copied by Yu Baojun in 1993.

Often manuscripts of precious scrolls were transmitted from teachers to their disciples (especially if children inherited their father's profession). Therefore, there was a notion of a "secret script" (*miben* 秘本) that was applied to many precious scrolls, especially texts used in the frequently performed life cycle rituals. For example, the *Precious Scroll of Hells* (*Diyu baojuan* 地獄寶卷), an undated manuscript reprinted as a photocopy in the collection of "Folk Precious Scrolls" (*Minjian baojuan* 民間寶卷), has a note at the end saying that "this scroll cannot be lent [to anyone]" (此卷不借) (Pu Wenqi 2005: 11, 64).³⁰ Although the place of origins of this manuscript is not indicated, its contents are similar to those of the *Precious Scroll of Hells* used in Changshu, so that we can deduce that it also comes from this region.

It is generally assumed that such "secret scripts" constituted a special feature of scroll recitation of the Wu-speaking region, and were not characteristic of northern traditions of recitation, especially the one of Hexi Corridor in Gansu (Lu Yongfeng 2012: 147–148). This had to do with the difference in the status of performers: while in the south they were mainly professionals, as are the masters of telling scriptures in Changshu today, in the north precious scrolls were mainly recited by local pious people, not for profit but as a form of religious devotion.³¹ In Hexi, performers often did not ask for any reward except for religious merit (Fang Buhe 1992: 314–315). Therefore, in Hexi, manuscripts of precious scrolls were also intentionally multiplied and circulated by the local believers.

Many modern manuscripts of precious scrolls from Changshu represent revised and amplified recensions of traditional narratives. One can take as an example the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* (*Xigua baojuan* 西瓜寶卷, the alternative name is the *Precious Scroll of Guanyin Testing One's Heart* [*Guanyin shi xin baojuan* 觀音試心寶卷]) that was copied by Di Jianxin in 1989. It is also a popular narrative text related to the Guanyin beliefs, the earliest manuscripts of which in Jiangsu can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Di Jianxin's manuscript starts with a long introductory verse that cannot be found in the older recensions of this precious scroll. While preserving the traditional moralistic style of precious scrolls, this verse refers to the new commodities of modern life that became available in the 1980s, such as color TV, motorcycle, private car, etc. (ZHBJ 1: 243). Still, although the life has changed, the didactic message of the text remains the same: it calls for moral propriety and kindness. Prosperity and well-being in this world are explained by the good karma of the previous rebirth. The pleasures of modern life just offer another explanation for the old religious concept. Only after this moralistic exhortation, the usual narrative of the evil landlord Li Heixin 李黑心, punished by Bodhisattva Guanyin, starts.

³⁰ This copy presumably dates back to the late twentieth century.

³¹ For the more detailed study of local recitation traditions in the North-West, see (Liu Yonghong 2013).

The colophon of this manuscript is also noteworthy, as it provides a glimpse of the historical circumstances of the manuscript copying:

It is very hard to copy books in July, insects bit one terribly.

The weather is so unbearably hot that the sweat is pouring down.

If you turn on an electric fan, it is even worse, as the paper flies in the air.

As you copy one precious scroll, you waste a couple of boxes of mosquito-repellent incense.

If someone does not believe it, how can one endure this toil [of copying books]?

It is really hard to copy books in a hot weather, even your eyes get tired [from it].

七月抄書真為難，蚊蟲叮得要命哉。

天氣熱得交交關，汗水常常滴下來。

電扇一動勿來三，紙頭全部飛起采。

一本寶卷來抄好，蚊香燻落二三盒。

若要啥人勿相信，只怕苦頭吃勿來。

抄書天熱真正難，眼睛又要好困哉。

This colophon gives a vivid sense of immediacy, which can be compared to the similar notes at the end of the manuscripts of “sūtra-explanation texts” (*jiangjingwen* 講經文) and other popular narratives in vernacular language discovered in the sealed cave in Dunhuang in 1900.³² Early precious scrolls with the Buddhist thematic may have been genetically related to these texts; at least their functions were similar (Che Xilun 2009: 50–64). Describing the hardships related to copying manuscripts, Di Jianxin also keeps in mind the usefulness of this precious scroll as a didactic book — the function usually praised by the masters of telling scriptures.

Another special feature to be noted in this colophon is the use of dialectal words, which gives a sense of the local nature of this text. Needless to say, telling scriptures in Changshu is performed in the local dialect belonging to the group of Wu dialects, which also finds expression in the manuscripts of precious scrolls.³³ Precious scrolls edited or re-written by Yu Dingjun (see below) are also distinguished for their use of numerous dialectal words, which convey the sense of the live storytelling practices.

³² See, e. g., (Mair 1989: 132–133).

³³ See, for example, an edited version of the *Precious Scroll of Third Han* (*San Han baojuan* 三漢寶卷), published in (ZHB 1: 517–533).

ADDITIONAL AND NEW TEXTS IN THE TRADITION
OF “TELLING SCRIPTURES”

As we have seen, manuscripts have served the ideal means of recording and preservation of amplified versions of the texts of telling scriptures; they are closely related to the development of this art in Changshu. Even printed copies of the *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain* are augmented with manuscripts of additional episodes, which develop some details in the printed version. These are the so-called “small scrolls” (*xiaojuan* 小卷) dedicated to the crucial episodes in the Miaoshan narrative embodied in this precious scroll, such as the “Entering the Convent of White Sparrows” (*Jin Baique* 進白雀), “The Execution of the Third Princess” (*Zhan san gongzhu* 斬三公主), “A Tour of the Underworld” (*You difu* 遊地府), etc. (see Berezkin 2015a). They are represented only in manuscripts, differing between the lineages of performers (see figure 4). There are also abridged and expanded versions of these “small scrolls” that can be used on different occasions, according to the time allowance and demands of the audience (Yu Dingjun 2015: 2561). Manuscripts of the “small scrolls” are usually placed above the main text of the *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain* during recitation (see figure 5).

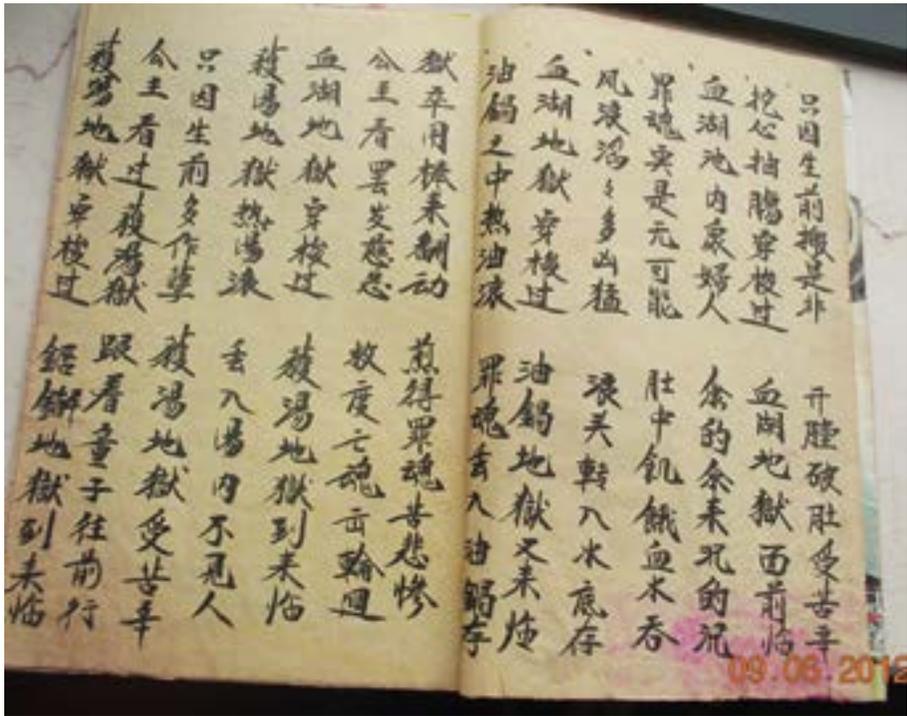


Fig. 4. Manuscript of the small scroll of the “Tour of the Underworld” (*You difu*) in the Di Jianxin’s collection. Picture by the author



Fig. 5. Di Qiuyan (Di Jianxin's) daughter recites the Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain at the private religious assembly in Tangqiao, Zhangjiagang, 2012. Picture by the author

Thus, the manuscripts are used to expand and embellish the standard printed text of the *Precious Scroll of the Fragrant Mountain*, which is an interesting combination of printed materials from the urban centers and local texts related to beliefs and ritual practices in the folk performance.

Manuscripts are also the most suitable form for the creation of new texts used in scripture telling that constantly appeared in performative traditions of southern Jiangsu. For example, Prof. Che Xilun discovered in Changshu a manuscript of the “small satirical” (*huaqi xiao ji* 滑稽小偈)³⁴ devoted to the Japanese aggression in 1931–1932, the so-called battle of January 28, 1932 (*yi-erba* —二八) in Shanghai.³⁵ It is a rare piece for singing within the context of traditional storytelling, dealing with the contemporary events and demonstrating the creativity of local performers, who even created texts of entertaining nature at that time. Until now, this form of “small scrolls”, “small tunes” (*xiao qu* 小曲), and *gāthās* remains an important field for creativity of new generations of performers. Reflecting new trends and changes in social life, they can enrich and variegate monotonous recitations (Yu Dingjun 2015: 2571).

Many new texts of precious scrolls have appeared in the local performative traditions since the 1980s, as there was a demand for them in

³⁴ *Gāthā* (Ch. *jituo* 偈陀) is a form of verse used in the Buddhist scriptures, which reminds of original Buddhist connections of “telling scriptures”.

³⁵ See (Che Xilun 2009: 234–239). The manuscript is undated, but may have been written ca. 1930s–1940s.

the changing social environment. Yu Dingjun is especially noteworthy for his deliberate changes in the traditional texts of precious scrolls. As I have published a special article on his activities in this direction, here I limit myself to a short mention of his work. Yu Dingjun has modified many texts that he inherited from his predecessors and also composed new texts, such as the *Precious Scroll of the Primordial Princess of the Azure Clouds* (*Bixia yuanjun baojuan* 碧霞元君寶卷), *Precious Scroll of the Great Accomplished One* (i. e., Confucius, *Dacheng baojuan* 大成寶卷), and *Precious Scroll of Hehe Twins* (*Hehe baojuan* 和合寶卷). The necessity for the new texts is explained by the new performative occasions, though Yu Dingjun also tries to improve the style and cleanse the contents of the traditional texts. Although many of his texts have been printed, the original new versions first appeared in the form of manuscripts.

PRECIOUS SCROLLS AS SACRED TEXTS IN THE TELLING SCRIPTURES TRADITIONS

While discussing the phenomenon of manuscripts in the modern tradition of telling scriptures, one should also contextualize it in the manuscript culture of the late imperial period, when precious scrolls spread and thrived in southern Jiangsu. Despite the developed print technology, handwritten manuscripts of various texts still were copied on a large scale in the fifteenth — early twentieth centuries, even in the scholarly elite circles.³⁶ Putting aside this complex issue of the traditional manuscript culture, here I would like to concentrate on its particular aspect, i. e., the devotional attitude towards manuscripts of precious scrolls. In Changshu, precious scrolls are still venerated by the local performers and believers as “scriptures”, which is reflected in the local name of their recitation. In this respect they are similar to the Buddhist and Daoist scriptures.

Copying manuscripts of precious scrolls also constitutes a meritorious act in the eyes of local believers. This has caused appearance of such phenomenon as the copying of manuscripts by common believers, which is different from that by professional storytellers. According to the classification of Lu Yongfeng, these are two categories of precious scrolls manuscripts (Lu Yongfeng 2012: 147–148). This division is especially relevant to the Hexi precious scrolls, which are often copied not by performers, but by common believers from the audience (Fang Buhe 1992: 313). However, it is also applicable to the situation with the manuscripts in the Changshu area. There are also people there who do not recite precious scrolls themselves, but copy manuscripts for the masters of telling scriptures.

Their motivations can be different. For example, Lu Wengen 陸文淦 (1913–2002) from Yonglian village 永聯村 of Nanfeng 南豐 township,

³⁶ See, e. g., (Gu Yanwu 1983: juan 2, pp. 29–30); on Chinese manuscript culture in general, see (Tian 2013).

Zhangjiagang, had been copying precious scrolls for his whole lifetime. He learned to read and write in a private school, and was fond of reading novels and Buddhist scriptures. In the 1950s he promoted education among the families of new settlers on the Sandbank (Shashang 沙上), where they organized a folk primary school. Lu Wengen copied altogether more than 1000 manuscripts of precious scrolls (ZHBJ 2: 1474). He was still copying manuscripts at the age of eighty-nine, as indicated in his manuscript copied in 2001, the *Story of Li Rongchun and the Monk's Shoes* (Li Rongchun seng xie ji 李榮春僧鞋記).³⁷ The colophon indicating an old age of the copyist can be compared to the similar notes in the manuscripts of the Buddhist scriptures from the tenth century that were discovered in Dunhuang.³⁸ At this old age, Lu Wengen copied precious scrolls for other performers. Many of them still own Lu Wengen's manuscripts (Huang Miaogen 黃妙根, Qu Guolong 瞿國龍, Yang Meilan 楊美蘭, Xu Xiuqin 許秀芹, et al.) (ZHBJ 2: 1474).

In the northern traditions of precious scrolls recitation (Hexi and Shanxi), manuscripts are often copied for the religious merit. For example, many precious scrolls from the Jiexiu 介休 area in Shanxi end with the words: “As you copy a manuscript, [it will bring you] a measureless merit” (手抄一卷, 功德無量) (Che Xilun 2009: 426). Local believers, mainly from the audience of precious scrolls recitations in these areas, also exchange and distribute manuscripts they have copied (Fang Buhe 1992: 158). A similar situation when manuscripts of precious scrolls were copied by lay believers and amateurs of scroll recitation also existed in southern Jiangsu in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, as testified by the numerous manuscripts preserved from that time (Lu Yongfeng 2012: 148–149). Several of them were copied even by women and children,³⁹ which indicates that precious scrolls served significant materials for home education.

In some modern manuscripts copied by the masters of telling scriptures from Changshu one can also find evidence of the exchange of manuscripts between performers and amateurs. For example, a verse in the colophon of the *Precious Scroll on the Day of Nine Wards* (*Jiu geng tian baojuan* 九更天寶卷, date unknown), copied by the master of telling scriptures Zhao Yuanbao 趙元寶 (b. in 1949) from Shajiabang 沙家浜 town in Changshu,⁴⁰ says:

To copy a precious scroll is really hard,
 Even exceeding [the labor] of carrying a stone to a high mountain.
 If a relative or friend comes to borrow it,
 After finishing reading, should immediately return it!
 抄本寶卷真正難，賽過搬石上高山。

³⁷ He also copied several other texts at the same age.

³⁸ See, e. g., (Teiser 1994: 122–124).

³⁹ In that period, it was not common for women to be professional performers of scroll recitation.

⁴⁰ This is a narrative text of entertaining nature, rarely used in telling scriptures nowadays.

尚有親友來借去，看過一遍就來還。⁴¹

This verse demonstrates that several open-minded masters of new generations (those who studied telling scriptures in the 1980s–1990s) were willing to exchange their scripts with the fellow performers and friends.⁴² The general mood of this verse can also be compared to the colophon of the Di Jianxin's manuscript cited above.

Interpretation of copying precious scrolls as a meritorious act that assists propagation of the traditional morality and beliefs, observable in Changshu telling scriptures as well as in the northern traditions of recitations, can be traced back to the very beginning of the development of precious scrolls as a literary genre. The similar information can be found in the concluding passage of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, represented in the manuscripts of 1373 and 1440: “We broadly admonish all of you to study [the paragon] of Reverend Mulian, be assiduous in your perfection on the Way, repay the deep mercies of your parents on your raising. If someone makes a copy of this precious scroll, and leaves it to the posterity to keep and recite, nine generations of your ancestors will be like [in the case of Mulian]: when one son [of a family] becomes a monk, nine generations of your ancestors all are born in heaven” (普勸後人都要學目連尊者，堅心修道，……報答父母養育深恩。若人寫一本，留傳後世持誦，過去九祖，照依目連一子出家，九祖盡生天。) (Yoshikawa 2003: 132).⁴³ Thus, this text encourages the audience to reproduce the manuscript in exchange for the afterlife salvation—the core element of the didactic Mulian story which could attract lay believers.⁴⁴

This interpretation of making a manuscript as a meritorious act on the part of believers was rooted in the Buddhist culture, where sutras representing the words of the Buddha were regarded as the greatest treasures. They were also believed to have miraculous qualities that could improve one's karma.⁴⁵ In this regard, the early manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* could be compared to the beautiful illustrated manuscripts of the Buddhist scriptures, which were common not only in China but also in other countries of East Asia.

⁴¹ Cited from (Lu Yongfeng 2012: 152).

⁴² Zhao Yuanbao is also known for collecting precious scrolls, which he exchanged with fellow performers, same as Yu Dingjun.

⁴³ Punctuation is my own.

⁴⁴ On the development of the Mulian story in China, see (Berezkin 2017: 35–47).

⁴⁵ See for example, the following passage from the seventeenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra of Wonderful Dharma* (*Miao fa lian hua jing* 妙法蓮華經), one of the most popular and influential Buddhist scriptures in China: “How much more so, then, if far and wide a person listens to this sutra or causes others to listen to it, embraces it himself or causes others to embrace it, copies it himself or causes others to copy it, or presents flowers, incense, necklaces, streamers, banners, silken canopies, fragrant oil or lamps of butter oil as offerings to the sutra rolls. The benefits of such a person will be immeasurable, boundless, able to inspire in him the wisdom that embraces all species.” 何況廣聞是經、若教人聞、若自持、若教人持、若自書、若教人書、若以華、香、瓔珞、幢幡、繒蓋、香油、酥燈，供養經卷，是人功德無量無邊，能生一切種智。(TSD09n0262, p. 45b11; Engl. transl. by Burton Watson). Numerous similar passages can be found in other Buddhist texts.



Fig. 6. Mulian looks for his mother reborn as a white dog. Illustrated manuscript of the Precious Scroll of Mulian (Mulian baojuan), copied in 2001 by Cai Wenxuan from a village of the Jinzhong township of Zhang County in Gansu. Picture courtesy of Zhang Runping 張潤平

Illustrated manuscripts of the apocryphal *Sutra of the Ten Kings* (*Shi wang jing* 十王經) were also discovered in Dunhuang in 1900 (Teiser 1994: 239–241).

The belief in the sacred nature of precious scrolls led to the continuation of creation of beautiful illustrated manuscripts in the northern traditions of their recitations even in the modern period, especially in Gansu and Shanxi Provinces. This is exemplified by the manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* 目蓮寶卷 copied in 2001 by Cai Wenxuan 蔡文選 (style: Nanfeng 南峰) from a village of the Jinzhong township 金鐘鎮 of Zhang County 漳縣 in Gansu.⁴⁶ Illustrated in a continuous mode, it forms an interesting counterpart of the early manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* (see figure 6). However, the contents of this manuscript are different, being based on the later recension of this precious scroll.

One can also compare the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* from Zhang County with the manuscripts used in the Changshu tradition of telling scriptures. One can hardly find such illustrated manuscripts in the collections of modern masters of telling scriptures, although the situation must have been different in the past. For example, I have seen a manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of the Ancestor* (*Zushi baojuan* 祖師寶卷) with a color illustration on the frontispiece

⁴⁶ The complete title of this text is: *Scripture on Filial Piety of Mulian, Appointed as Bodhisattva Dizang, Who Rescued His Mother from Hell to be Born in Heaven* 敕封目蓮地藏王菩薩地獄救母生天孝經. Pictures of this manuscript were kindly provided to the author by Zhang Ruiping 張潤平.



Fig. 7. Frontispiece illustration in the manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of the Ancestor* (*Zushi baojuan*). Ca. late nineteenth century. Picture by the author

in the Nanjing Library (see figure 7). It is dedicated to Zhenwu 真武, the guardian of the North; and its contents are very similar to those of the precious scroll of the same name still commonly recited in Changshu.⁴⁷ Although I do not have precise information about the place where the manuscript from the Nanjing Library was copied, one can suggest that it originated in Changshu or a place nearby. It is possible to speculate that such illustrated manuscripts were more common in southern Jiangsu in the past, especially in the period when scroll recitation flourished there in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries.

⁴⁷ Zhenwu is still a very popular deity in Changshu, appearing in telling scriptures as well as the Daoist tradition.

Thus, manuscripts of precious scrolls in Changshu and adjacent areas constitute rare cultural relics related to popular beliefs that could eventually be traced to the earlier periods of transmission of the Buddhist teaching and related literature in China. Related to the spread of literacy and vernacular literature in the late imperial period, they have been playing an important role in the transmission of lore and knowledge in the rural areas of Jiangsu since the early times. Their place in the local manuscript culture of the late Qing and Republican periods still awaits further research.

CONCLUSION

Telling scriptures in Changshu and its vicinity continues an old tradition of transmission of precious scrolls by means of handwritten manuscripts. There have been various ways of use of such manuscripts during the long history of precious scrolls as a form of vernacular literature written for oral performance. There are certain differences between the modes of copying and circulating of these texts in the Wu-speaking areas (including Changshu) and in the northern traditions of precious scrolls recitation, such as those of Hexi Corridor (Gansu). Manuscripts of precious scrolls in Changshu basically continue the transmission of performative scripts of professional performers of the late period in the genre's history, when scroll recitation spread in Jiangnan (Wu-speaking areas).

Most manuscripts of the masters of telling scriptures in Changshu represent various recensions of the traditional texts (some of them several centuries old), which have been modified and polished by generations of performers. At the same time, they often carry signs of a performer's individuality, thus being unique materials of popular literature and culture.

Despite the spread of printed copies of precious scrolls since the late nineteenth century, in the twentieth century manuscripts remained the main form of transmission of precious scrolls in southern Jiangsu. Today telling scriptures still makes use of traditional manuscripts, notwithstanding the spread of photocopying and computer input. This conservatism has been caused by several factors, one of them being the traditional concept of precious scrolls as sacred texts (scriptures), and copying of a precious scroll constituting a meritorious act in the eyes of local believers. In this way, precious scrolls are equated to Buddhist and Daoist scriptures. Some characteristics of copying of precious scrolls in the modern period can be traced back to the imperial period and betray the original connections of the genre with the earlier Buddhist literature.

ABBREVIATIONS

TSD: *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (Newly compiled Tripitaka of the Taishō reign). Rpt. as *Da zangjing* 大藏經. Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1983 (originally published Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932).

ZCB: *Zhongguo Changshu baojuan* 中國常熟寶卷 (Precious scrolls from Changshu, China). Ed. by Wu Wei 吳偉. Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2015.

ZHBJ: *Zhongguo Heyang baojuan ji* 中國河陽寶卷集 (Collection of precious scrolls from Heyang, China). Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 2007.

ZSBJ: *Zhongguo Shashang baojuan ji* 中國沙上寶卷集 (Collection of precious scrolls from the Sandbank, China). Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2011.

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