

Precious Scrolls of Chinese Devout Women Buddhist Followers: A Case Study of Wilt Idema's *Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women*

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Deeply-rooted in China's popular culture, precious scrolls (Baojuan) are the golden material to display popular religious belief of the mass. Based on the rare texts sorted and annotated by Shang Lixin, Dutch Sinologist Wilt L. Idema continues his journey of translating precious scrolls. Focused on the theme of devoted women Buddhist followers in Ming dynasty, he explores the ethical choices of married women in facing the betrayal of servants or concubines. His translations not only add important reading material to Western readers in the field of Chinese popular literature, but also set standard for the coming translators in rendering Chinese ballads.

Keywords: Precious Scrolls, Women Buddhist followers, ethical choice, translations

A Song for China's Devout Women Buddhist Followers

For more than 13 years (2008-2021), Wilt L. Idema has piously dedicated himself to rendering Chinese religious verse narratives into English, and introduced a long list of precious scrolls (*baojuan*) into the West in succession, covering various themes and vast areas of China. In this volume, *The Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women: Two Precious Scrolls of the Ming Dynasty* (hereafter: *The Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women*), he extends his translations to the precious scrolls themed on piety of married women in Ming dynasty (1368-1644), which prevails mainly in Northern China (mainly *Hexi corridor, Shanxi, Hebei*), and brings a collection of English translations of two rare narrative precious scrolls, *the Precious Scroll, as Preached by the Buddha, of Little Huaxian: How Woman Yang as a Ghost Embroidered Red Gauze* (*Foshuo yangshi guixiu hongluo huaxiang baojuan*, hereafter: *The Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*), and *the Precious Scroll, as Preached by the Buddha, of the Handkerchief: How Wang Zhongqing Lost Everything* (*Foshuo Wangzhong qinda shisan shoujin baojuan*, hereafter: *The Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief*). Besides these two precious scrolls, two early precious materials of similar themes have also been included into the appendix, namely the earliest record of Woman Huang in *the Demonstrations of Diamond Sutra* (*Jingangjing Zhengguo*), *After Three Lives of Self-Cultivation Woman Wang Ascends to Heaven in Broad Daylight* (*Sanshi xiuxing Wangshin ü bairi shengtian*, hereafter: *Three Lives of Self-Cultivation Woman Wang*) and an extract from *the Precious Scroll of Woman*

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Huang (*Huangshin üjuan*) which was originally included into the 74th chapter of the renowned vernacular novel, *the Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinping mei*). None of these texts has ever been translated into English or other Western languages except *the Precious Scroll of Woman Huang*, which was once incorporated into the late David Tod Roy's series translation of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Considering Roy's translation was actually based on another Japanese version reprinted in 1963, Idema undoubtedly provides a ground-breaking translation of these four texts.

Features of Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women

In the introduction, Idema starts from exploring the relationship of Buddhist preaching and storytelling. With the striking examples of *the Diamond Sutra* (*Jingangjing*) and the popular Buddhist bianwen, Maudgalyayana (*Mulian*) saving his mother from hell, he highlights the fundamental roles of Buddhist sutras and “transformation texts” (*bianwen*) in shaping early precious scrolls. Availed by his rich translation experience of vernacular literature, Idema perspicaciously points out that in precious scrolls, mothers can be saved, not only by her sons (just like Mulian), but also by themselves. He then goes further to compare the plots and heroines' identity of *the Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* (*Xiangshan baojuan*) and the *Precious Scroll of Woman Huang*, drawing the conclusion that the precious scrolls themed on piety are welcomed by both unmarried and married women. Next, Idema turns his eyes to the precious scrolls of the women piety in the 16th century. According to his description, these precious scrolls stand out with their hagiographic, sectarian, formal, and performative features. Of these features, Idema pays much attention to the influence that the new religions exert upon precious scrolls, holding that the popular beliefs of Unborn Mother (*Wusheng laomu*), Buddha Amitabha, Buddha Maitreya, and Dragon-Flower (Longhua), etc. have well found its way into precious scrolls of the 16th century. Idema is sensitive to the format changes of the precious scrolls in the 16th century, stressing the inclusion of ten-syllable lines and songs of popular tune. Controversial as the printing time is, Idema precisely concludes that *The Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* and *The Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief* “not only displays the formal characteristics of the fully developed precious scroll of the sixteenth century but also demonstrates the influence of the new religions of the Ming dynasty” (Idema, 2021, p. 13).

Despite the formal similarities of *the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* and the precious scrolls of the 16th century, Idema still expects an earlier circulation (before Ming dynasty) of *the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* for the reason that the edition discovered by Ma Xisha in the 1980s is a revised version, and the name “Jubaomen” following the full title may be well known even before the Ming dynasty. Actually, controversy began since Ma Xisha brought this “earliest” (compiled in Jin dynasty, and printed in Yuan dynasty) precious scroll into scholarly world in 1986. Scholars like Li Shiyu and Che Xilun have offered much convincing evidence concerning the sectarian descriptions, the appearance time of the song tunes, and the formal features of the precious scroll to prove the printing information following the full title (Geng-yin of the Zhiyuan reign, the first of the Chongqing) is forged. Idema's assumptions are undoubtedly subversive, but he obviously needs more evidence to support it.

Much importance as Idema has placed on the “earliest” edition (1290) found in Shanxi, it is surprising that Idema's translation was based on a newly reproduced version of 1832 compiled and edited by Chinese scholars Shang Lixin in 2018. Although most editors of precious scrolls are accused of tampering with the original text, Shang Lixin's editorial texts stand out in retaining the original form and adding the corrected content in parentheses, leaving readers to judge by themselves. As a translator who values both the original shape and the accuracy, Idema obviously benefits a lot from Shang's editorial edition. For example, there is a puzzling expression “Two mothers are separated” in the *Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*, Shang Lixin proposes to add

“son” behind the mother. Idema accepts her suggestion, and accordingly translates it as “Mother and son were torn apart”.

As mentioned above, Idema’s translations of these three precious scrolls in this volume are all based on Shang Lixin’s editorial texts from *Baojuan congchao*, however, as a senior scholar of Chinese popular literature, he is also alert to Shang’s revision. For example, Shang Lixin proposes a correction of “eighty-one kalpas” to “eight billion kalpas”. Idema refuses to take Shang’s advice, and insists on translating it as “eighty-first kalpas”. His insistence is reasonable. According to the sectarian precious scrolls, such as *the Precious scroll of the golden elixir and nine [-petaled]lotus of the imperial ultimate period[that leads to] rectifying belief, reverting to the real, and returning to [our] true home* (*Huangji jindan jiuilian zhenxin guizhen huanxiang baojuan*) and *the Precious scroll of the Tathāgatha P’u-ching about the key [to salvation]* (*Pujing rulai yaoshifo baojuan*), there are 18 kalpas in the realm of Sakyamuni Buddha, while 81 kalpas in the age of Buddha Maitreya. Furthermore, Idema conducts a model of research-based translation. Some mistakes that are overlooked by Shang Lixin in the process of editing have been keenly detected. For example, Idema finds that the name of the princess is Cuiwei in the 20th chapter while Cuihua in the later chapter, therefore adds annotation to remind readers of the difference.

In translation, Idema greatly values the formal features of these precious scrolls and persistently insists on producing full translations of these precious scrolls, which includes not only the body texts of these precious scrolls, but also the para-texts like the printing information, the ritual message, and the table of contents. For example, instead of the first chapter, his translation of *the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze* starts from the reprinting information, the table of contents, the original printing messages, and concludes with the transfer (*Huixiangwen*), the prostration (*Fayuanwen*), the sectarian style four-repay as well as the additional publishing information. Similarly, *the Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief* also commences with the “Hymn for Raising the Incense” (*Ju xiangzan*), “The Gatha for Opening the Scroll” (*Kai Jingji*), and ends with Transfer, the prostration, and six-repay. Moreover, the formal features of each chapters, such as the opening songs, the passages in prose, the couplets of two seven-syllable lines, the ten-syllable passages in ballads verse, the hymns, and the closing quatrains have also been cautiously retained by Idema. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the formulas (*shuo, buti, qeshuo*), which are conventionally used by the storytellers (*shuoshuren*) since Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) dynasties have also been transferred to the target texts as “tell that”, “no more about that”, and “now tell that”.

Corrections and Recommendations

Idema’s translation is overall accurate and elegant, while some mistakes and typos can still be detected. For some reason, the title of the 13th chapter of *the Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief* has been deprived of the unanimously bolded form and the serial number is also missing. Besides, the sixth repay in *the Precious Scroll of Woman Huang* has been tampered as, the final repay of the former *Precious Scroll of the Handkerchief*, and sloppily translated as “let repay the Gate of Emptiness for kindly transmitting the Dharma”. Actually, the same expression has already been properly translated by David Roy as “we must pray that the ten classes of homeless soul may all be reborn, and attain the perfection of wisdom, enabling them to reach the other shore” (Roy, 2011, p. 452). Still, some translations have been deviated from the original meaning. For example, in the 20th chapter of *the Precious Scroll of the Red Gauze*, Idema omits the expression “The officer sends guards to banish Huaxian”, and renders *buke* as “Too bad!”. Actually, instead of sighing for her own fate, the phrase here is the upbraid imposed upon the guards by the princess, which simply means “No” or “Stop”. What’s more, Idema fails to keep the consistency, especially for some sectarian terms. For example, the hyphens of the Dragon-Flower (*Longhua*)

are casually missing in some places, and the proper names of popular deities, such as “The Star of Destruction” (*Pobaixing*) and “Unborn” (*Wusheng*), are occasionally appearing in lowercase form. Finally, the typos like “Tell that that woman Li” and “And this precious scroll complete” should also be avoided.

Although the texts translated by Idema are not perfect, these minor mistakes are far outweighed by the value of having reliable translations of these little-known precious scrolls themed on women practicing Buddhism in Ming dynasty. Idema sets a good example of scholarly translation with nearly 200 annotations. These annotations are substantial in content and well organized just at the foot of the page, which is quite helpful and convenient to check. Also, Idema’s book is well-decorated with a cover picture displaying the rare scene of reciting precious scrolls (*xuanjuan*) borrowed from the 74th chapter of *the Plum in the Golden Vase*. With all these merits, *the Pitfalls of Piety for Married Women* certainly will attract readers interested in Chinese popular culture, literature, religion, and performance, making it an incomparable reference material for the teachers in charge of the relative courses.

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