

Oral Literature: The Translation and Dissemination of *Mulian Baojuan* in the English World

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Mulian baojuan, originating from the *Sūtra of Ullambana*, tells the story of Mulian rescuing his mother from hell. Rostislav Berezkin, David Johnson, and Wilt L. Idema have studied and introduced it. This paper mainly discusses the translation and dissemination of *baojuan* to sort out and verify its spread in the English world. The translation and dissemination of *baojuan* have shifted towards its performances, illustrations, and social functions. The study of *baojuan* has presented a new development trend by breaking the restrictions of the genre of text and through dynamic interactions with novels, dramas, and other forms of literature.

Keywords: *Mulian baojuan*, translation, dissemination, English world

Introduction

The Precious Scroll of Mulian (Mulian baojuan), also known as *Precious Account of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in the Underworld (Mulian jiu mu youming baozhuān)*, *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in Three Rebirths*, *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing His Mother From Hell*. The origin of the story of Mulian rescuing his mother is universally agreed as *Sūtra of Ullambana, Expounded by the Buddha (Fo shuo Yulanpen jing)* of the Western Jin Dynasty. In later times, Buddhist sermons for the laity (*sujiang*) of the Tang Dynasty and transformation text (*bianwen*) on the theme of Mulian rescuing his mother provided the material for the formation of *baojuan*. The earliest known *Mulian baojuan* text is *Baojuan of Maudgalyāyana*, which is represented by two manuscripts, both of which are incomplete (Berezkin, 2017, p. 47). *Five Books in Six Volumes* by Luo Qing mentions *Mulian baojuan* in the 24th chapter of *Baojuan of Deeply Rooted Karmic Fruits, Majestic and Unmoved Like Mount Tai (Weiwei budong Taishan shengen jieguo baojuan)* (Berezkin, 2017, p. 51). Even today, performances of *Mulian baojuan* remain in the rural areas of Jiangsu and Zhejiang in the south and in some areas of Gansu (mainly in the so-called Hexi corridor), Qinghai, Shanxi, and Hebei in the north.

The story of Mulian rescuing his mother has been handed down for 1,600 years and widely disseminated in East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. This paper focuses on the translation and transmission of *Baojuan of Mulian* in the English world. Rostislav Berezkin, David Johnson, Victor H. Mair, and Rüdiger Breuer have also conducted relevant studies on *baojuan*. The study of the *Mulian baojuan* turns to the performative and ritual aspects, distinguishing from other scholars who regard *baojuan* as a single narrative type. They incorporate the social environment and functions of *baojuan* and break the limitations of the text to attempt

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to construct a living baojuan. In this paper, I propose to sort out the history and current situation of the translation and research of the *Mulian baojuan* in the English world, analyze its characteristics, and provide a new perspective for studying baojuan to promote the discovery and overseas transmission better.

Translation and Introduction of *Mulian Baojuan* in the English World

Rostislav Berezkin

Berezkin conducted a systematic and comprehensive study on *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in Three Rebirths* (*Mulian sanshi jiumu baojuan* 目连三世救母宝卷) during his associate degree. He mainly discussed the following aspects of *baojuan*: the development of the story of Mulian rescuing his mother and the evaluation of *baojuan* genres, the illustrations, performances, and rituals of *baojuan*, and its social functions or values. Berezkin introduced a rare early manuscript of *baojuan* text preserved in Russia entitled *Baojuan of Maudgalyayana: Baojuan of Reverend Maudgalyayana Rescuing His Mother [and Helping Her] to Escape From Hell and Be Born in Heaven* (目犍连尊者救母出离地狱生天宝卷). Then he compared the content, style of illustrations, music form, and text layout of two *baojuans*. He noted that *Baojuan of Maudgalyayana* remained part of the format and content of early versions of Mulian stories like *Sutra of Mulian*, *Bianwen of Mahamaudgalyayana Rescuing His Mother From the Underworld* (*Da Muqianlian mingjian jiu mu bianwen* 大目乾连冥间救母变文), and provided information on the evolution of Buddhist subjects in Chinese popular storytelling, the history of storytelling accompanied by visual aids in China, and the audience for the earliest examples of *baojuan* texts (Berezkin, 2013, p. 130). Although with the evolution of the genres of *baojuan* and the influence of the sectarian context of the 16th through 17th centuries, the later *baojuans* gradually deviated from *Baojuan of Maudgalyayana* in terms of the theme and rhythm pattern. *Baojuan of Maudgalyayana* still serves as a significant connecting link between earlier *baojuans* and later.

Berezkin migrated historical image Huang Chao into the study of *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* (目连三世宝卷), witnessing the dynamic interaction between the literature of the elite class and Chinese folk popular literature. It was for the first time associated with the story of Huang Chao and his failed rebellion, grafting it onto a religious tale recited in connection with folk rituals (Berezkin, 2013, p. 85). Then Berezkin traced the origins and evolution of the story of Huang Chao regathering souls in popular literature. He argued that the formation of the apocryphal story of Huang Chao in *Baojuan of Three Rebirths* was influenced by the legend of Zhong Kui, especially in the details of the protagonist's appearance and examination failure. Besides, the exorcist power of Huang Chao is able to achieve the salvation of deceased people to better rebirth, which is entirely appropriate for the ritual context of *baojuan* performances (Berezkin, 2013, p. 107). This adaptation of a historical subject for the religious context calls attention to the interaction of several written and oral traditions associated with elite and popular ideas and values (Berezkin, 2013, p. 114), which can make us reconsider the meaning of *baojuan*.

In "Pictorial Versions of the Mulian Story in East Asia (Tenth-Seventeenth Centuries): On the Connections of Religious Painting and Storytelling", he analyzed the images of the Mulian story in different pictorial versions. Illustrations of the Mulian story are multifunctional. Observing the images in murals, *Sūtra*, *bianwen*, *baojuan*, those images are presented in different formats, styles, layouts by textual versions and audiences, which could satisfy their purposes. On the one side, illustrations used for both written versions and performances constitute a coherent story and reproduce all details of the textual part (Berezkin, 2015, p. 10). On the other side, they are considered the tools to promote Buddhist teachings and the ideology of monarchy ruling society. In addition, the

illustrations also serve the purpose of popular entertainment, helping audiences from different social classes comprehend the story of Mulian and creating a rich space for imagination. The presentation of illustrations allows people from the lower class of society to accept the didacticism of “female salvation and filial pity”. The esthetic function of illustrations was also of great importance. They might have assisted poorly educated or semi-literate readers in deciphering the text or just served the esthetic purpose (visualization of the selected scenes in the text) (Berezkin, 2015, p. 11).

His most significant contribution to studying *baojuan* is his *Many Faces of Mulian—The Precious Scroll of Late Imperial China*. The author placed particular emphasis on clues about performance contexts embedded in the texts while examining the historical traditions of *baojuan*. Based on theories of Richard Bauman and John Miles Foley, Berezkin’s prologue offered a thick description of a live *jiangjing* (telling scriptures) recitation of “Breaking the Blood Pond”, which is a segment of the Mulian story as performed in a night-time ritualized storytelling session in Jingjiang, located near the northern bank of the Yangzi River in Jiangsu (Bender, 2001, p. 101). Then he revolved around the portrayal of performance settings, implicit viewership, and rhetorical characteristics associated with live performances as described in written *baojuan* and related records in text.

Baojuan is also performed during funerals, memorial services, and religious meetings. It permeated the values of family integration and moralizing instruction through souls’ salvation during the performances, but contained exorcistic meaning in order to “ward off calamities and bring fortune” (Berezkin, 2017, p. 192). Visual aids still played an essential role in establishing their performance arena. Illustrations are used to help complete rituals and create the performances atmosphere. Especially, “The display of images of deities during a performance forms the visual part of the rituals of ‘inviting’ and worshiping deities during the ritualized performance session” (Berezkin, 2017, p. 160), interacting well with performance audience.

David Johnson

Johnson introduced the descriptions of private performances recorded by Chu Chieh-fan. Then he briefly reviewed two performances described in *Jin Ping Mei Cihua* while presenting slight differences in texts, settings, and performances. After summarizing, he concluded that performing *baojuan* was a decotional and exorcistic act with aim to salvation and to bring immediate benefits in private setting. The text presented tended to be prosimetric narratives, and the primary audience was women (Johnson, 1995, p. 67). He also mentioned different types of performances: *shuo yin-guo* (说因果), sacred edict lectures (*sheng yu* 圣谕), *shan-shu* recitation (讲善书), lecturing, which had a different set of performances. Then he discussed the relationship of *The Precious Tradition of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in Hell* (*Mulian jiu mu you ming baojuan*) to performance and noted that “texts seem to have always been part of *hsüan chuan* [xuanjuan] performances, either as props or as actual scripts” (Johnson, 1995, p. 77). Performances have been based on texts, and texts are reshaped and modified to make them more suitable for performances. The language of *You-ming Baojuan* was plain and straightforward, with the simplest verse form and rhyme scheme (Johnson, 1995, p. 88), implying that it was written to teach the intended literati audience.

Rüdiger Breuer

In his work titled: “The Mulian Sanshi Baojuan (Precious Volume on Maudgalyāyana’s Three Life-Cycles): Interplay of Performative Genres and Traditional Values Within a Complex Plot System”, Breuer also focused on the performances of *baojuan*. In addition to providing a detailed introduction to the content, he stated that the story of Mulian rescuing his mother had been continuously adapted and expanded over thousands of years,

resulting in a composite text known as the “*Mulian sanshi baojuan*” that incorporated elements from various genres such as opera and novel. The use of specific effects and techniques from operatic performance and the inclusion of popular motives from narrative fiction further helped to make the story even more appealing to the general believer (Breuer, 2009, p. 155). As a result, the dialogues between characters became even more vivid, and the chanted rhyming verse sections changed frequently as the plot developed, enhancing the “operatic character” (Breuer, 2009, p. 152) of *baojuan*.

Translations of *Mulian Baojuan*

There still needs to be more fully translated versions of *Mulian baojuan*. One such translation is by Wilt L. Idema on *Mulian sanshi baojuan*. It is the first complete annotated translation of this text (the 1885 Yidezhai edition made in Nanjing) into English by Wilt L. Idema. His primary aim is to provide translations that are faithful to the original and easy to read (Grant & Idema, 2011, p. ix). The translation continues with the consistent characteristic. Extensive introduction, notes, and explanatory texts are supplemented to help readers construct the narrative, cultural context and further comprehend the text. The introduction to the translation, which spans 35 pages, focuses on the origins and development of the Mulian story, the evolution of its performance, a comparison of the three *Mulian baojuan*, and the religious and social significance reflected in the plots and rituals. The main text does not follow the original rhymes, but it also creates a similar visual effect by reproducing the structure of the original lines.

Berezkin had previously translated the *Mulian sanshi baojuan* text into Russian, which was included as an appendix to his dissertation. He also selected and translated some of the verses from the *Baojuan of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in Three Rebirths* (*Mulian san shi jiu mu baojuan*) and the *Mulian sanshi baojuan*. In his opinion, the terms “precious volumes” and “precious scrolls” are inadequate to convey the cultural information contained in the Chinese *baojuan* fully. Rather than translating the term “*baojuan*” directly, he suggested adopting a transliteration approach similar to the German term “*Volksbuch*”, with detailed annotations to explain the main features of this form of folk storytelling. Like Idema, Berezkin also prioritized the completeness of the translation. Therefore, he abandoned the prosimetric structure of the original text and instead adopted a more flexible free verse form to ensure the transmission of a complete translation. Apart from the translation of the *Mulian baojuan*, Mair once fully translated the *Transformation Texts on Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother From the Underworld With Picture One Scroll, With Preface*.

Features of Translation and Introduction of *Mulian Baojuan*

Transfer to the Performances of *Baojuan*

The most notable feature is scholars’ attention to the performances of *baojuan*. They have shifted their focus on the rituals, contexts, and audience. The reasons for doing so can be seen as follows:

The performance of the story of Mulian can be traced back to the Song Dynasty, and it was primarily performed on the occasion of the Yulan Bowl Festival. Mulian play also predated the *baojuan*. The earliest Mulian play was published by Zheng Zhizhen in 1583 as *Newly Compiled Drama Exhorting Goodness of Mulian Rescuing His Mother* (*Xinbian Mulian jiu mu quan shan xiwen*) with hundreds of separate scenes. Performances of Mulian plays were often quite spectacular, boasting a wide variety of subplots and filled with acrobatic displays and vivid costuming (Johnson, 1995, p. 56). Throughout thousands of years of development, the tradition of performances has been preserved. The format of singing and the tunes employed by the *baojuan* are similar to

the *kunqu* style of operatic performance (Grant, 1989, p. 236). It is the mature and extensive evolution of *Mulian baojuan* that has attracted the attention of western scholars.

The “Blood Pond” in *baojuan* refers to the “Breaking the Blood Pond” ritual in the Jingjiang area of China, intended to purify the pollution brought by women’s menstrual blood and childbirth blood. In addition, the performances of *baojuan* have exorcistic meaning in funeral ceremonies. Furthermore, these rituals are based on the local cultural context, embodying the local history and cultural characteristics, which can provide more background support for the study of *baojuan*.

Once again, *baojuan* has often been regarded as folklore or oral-derived texts, which better realizes its social value of entertaining and educating the masses in performances. In the 1970s and 1980s, western scholars could not conduct field investigations in mainland China, so they needed more information on contemporary *baojuan* performances in various regions. However, they have provided a good explanation of the ritual functions of *baojuan* from the perspective of analyzing literature. With the increasing exchange between China and the West, western scholars have collaborated with Chinese scholars to conduct field investigations in rural areas of China, attempting to construct a living *baojuan* from multiple dimensions, including its formation environment, performance setting, and interaction between *baojuan* performers and audiences.

Transfer to Visual Illustrations

The story of *Mulian* appeared in mural form in Dunhuang Yulin Caves in ancient times. From *Mulian bianwen* to *Mulian baojuan*, the tradition of using illustrations in written versions persisted until later periods. Mair also pointed out that they represented the tradition of “picture storytelling” that supposedly spread from India through Central Asia to China (and later—to Japan and Korea) with the advance of Buddhism (Mair, 1988, pp. 2-3). Therefore, there is a certain connection between the formation of *baojuan* and the use of illustrations. Early versions of *baojuan* were characterized by their exquisite production and beautiful mounting, and the style of illustrations was particularly attractive. “Pictures whose content can be related to an oral or written story in which something happens, and whose representation evokes that story to produce some kind of transformative effect on the viewer” (Murray, 2007, p. 12). The use of illustrations reduced barriers that might have arisen from differences in written language and helped western scholars to understand the meaning of *baojuan* better.

The close combination of painting and performance is also one of the reasons. In the process of preaching, the “divine image” is used to lead the audience into the performance context so as to achieve a better effect. The appearance of illustrations in *baojuan* serves the multiple needs of religion, imperial power, and the masses, making it a value synthesis that integrates the needs of upper and lower social classes and highlights the social value of *baojuan*.

Transfer to Multi-dimensional Studies on *Baojuan*

Western scholars have broken through the limitations of the genre of *baojuan*, focusing on the evolution of *baojuan* and analyzing their development and characteristic changes from a diachronic perspective. They have also moved beyond the confines of popular literature, exploring the connection between *baojuan* and classic novels and regarding *baojuan* as composite texts, which are constructed from multiple dimensions such as form, content, value, social influence, and function to create a “non-traditional” understanding of *baojuan*. They emphasize the dynamic collaboration among the text, illustrations, and performance and their mutual shaping. The studies of ritual and images allow scholars to engage with *baojuan* in new ways, breaking free from the constraints of texts alone. Berezkin redefined *baojuan* as “performance-oriented texts with a varying degree of

interchange with oral folk literature”. The integration of images and text is essential to construct narrative context, annotate plot points, and build the development of the story. Both texts and images work together to enhance the effect of the presentation. David noted that opera and ritual, with their potent combination of words, elaborate visual imagery and music, were without rival as summoners-up of emotions, each in own way (Johnson, 1995, p. 102). This breakthrough of the fusion of the three not only provides baojuan with new research perspectives but also has great significance for reconstructing active living baojuan through field work and recovering now-lost performance contexts.

Conclusion

The study of the *Mulian baojuan* witnessed the opening up of a new perspective on the research of baojuan by western scholars. On the one hand, scholars gradually detached from the constraints of the text itself and turned to the chronological study of baojuan, enriching the research context and providing more historical materials for the study. On the other hand, based on the exploration of the social context of baojuan, they realize the dynamic combination of texts, images, and performances in order to construct a living baojuan. It not only presented the original form of baojuan to the public to the greatest extent possible but also provided new ideas and references for how to promote the spread of baojuan in the world.

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