

Rostislav Berezkin, *Many Faces of Mulian: The Precious Scrolls of Late Imperial China*

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The story of the filial monk Mulian rescuing his mother from hell is, by all means, one of the quintessential narratives for understanding Chinese popular religious culture, and it has long attracted scholarly attention. Rostislav Berezkin's *Many Faces of Mulian* is, however, the first English-language monograph that explores the evolution of the Mulian story in the relatively less-studied genre of *baojuan* (precious scrolls). Earlier scholarly engagement with *baojuan*, an art of prosimetric religious storytelling, has been mainly based on textual analysis. Even though scholars such as Daniel Overmyer from early on advocated the method of "THF" (text, history, and fieldwork), such an ethnographic approach was simply not available to earlier generations of scholars. The ability to conduct fieldwork in mainland China has enabled younger scholars like Berezkin to add depth to the growing scholarship that treats *baojuan* as a performance-oriented genre and studies the subject *in situ*.

Different forms of religious storytelling have been common in a variety of regions across Eastern and Southern Asia, for example, the Hindu *kathā* and the Japanese *etoki*. In the Chinese tradition, *baojuan*, literally, "precious scrolls," written in prosimetric format (alternating between prose and verse), are popular religious narratives. As a genre of religious storytelling, its repertoire includes liturgical texts; stories of Buddhist themes; legends about local deities; and tales of historical figures, such as Liturgical Exposition of the Diamond Sūtra, Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain (*baojuan* about the legend of Princess Miaoshan, Bodhisattva Guanyin's reincarnation), and Precious

Scroll of Thunder Peak (*baojuan* about the White Snake legend). The genre of *baojuan* has been used for a number of purposes: to impart Buddhist and sectarian teachings, to entertain spirits and people, to ward off evil and bring good fortune, and so on. Performed at religious assemblies, home banquets, funerals, and temple fairs, *baojuan* recitations were widespread during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, and, despite numerous religious and political vicissitudes, continue to be performed today in some areas in China, such as in western Gansu province and southern Jiangsu province. Field-study-based research on *baojuan* traditions and their survival and revival will help us better understand the genre’s history and charm, the role of popular religion and society, and the nature of religious experience and spiritual fortitude.

During the years of 2009–2013, Berezkin conducted fieldwork in several parts of Jiangsu Province where *baojuan* traditions remain alive. He observed actual *baojuan* performances and collected printed texts and manuscripts from local areas, all of which he has put to good use in this book. In doing so, he is able to explore *baojuan* as a performance-oriented genre. This work, therefore, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature and history of the *baojuan* genre, and, as Victor Mair notes in the foreword, “above all, the performative aspects of these prosimetric works” (ix).

Many Faces of Mulian opens with a fascinating prologue that documents Berezkin’s first encounter with live *baojuan* performances in Jingjiang, Jiangsu Province in 2009. It interestingly echoes the preface to *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (1988), in which Stephen Teiser describes his first exposure to the annual celebration of the ghost festival in Taiwan in 1979. Berezkin’s field notes on an “assembly of prolonging life” for celebrating a woman’s anniversary, a ritual service characterized by the recitation of a variety of *baojuan* works including the Mulian *baojuan*, provide readers with a detailed and vivid account of the contemporary reenactment of *baojuan*, and they show how compellingly the Mulian story is performed in the present-day ritual arena.

The introduction outlines the historical development of the *baojuan* genre and introduces the main goals of this book. Breaking with earlier scholarship, Berezkin argues for a new periodization of the genre’s history. The three periods are the early period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), the middle period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries), and the late period (nineteenth to twentieth centuries). This periodization of the *baojuan* genre leads readers to ponder a few important issues that Berezkin will dive into in later chapters, such as the antecedents of the genre and its affiliation with sectarian religions.

Chapter 1, “*Baojuan* about Mulian and Performance Literature,” grapples with the interplay of orality and textuality in oral performance literature. Berezkin argues that *baojuan* works demonstrate the interaction between oral and textual traditions. Inspired by theories of oral performance, especially John M. Foley’s theory of “word-power” (1995), Berezkin argues that “[t]he rhetoricized storyteller’s voice in *baojuan*, introductory formulas and interruptions, and notes prescribing the transmission of accompanying rituals all are signs of the establishment of the performance arena” (26). Chapter 2, “The Mulian Story in Chinese Literature,” delineates the history of the Mulian story in Chinese literature by introducing the antecedent versions of the Mulian story in a number of genres, such as Buddhist sutras and *bianwen* (transformation texts) from Dunhuang.

Chapter 3, “An Early Example in *Baojuan*,” introduces the two earliest extant yet incomplete *baojuan* manuscripts on Mulian from what the author defines as the “early

period”: the National Library manuscript (dated 1372, preserved in China) and the Hermitage Museum manuscript (dated 1440, preserved in Russia). Besides providing a close analysis of performative context and register in both manuscripts, Berezkin makes good use of his knowledge of resources (including Russian materials) and carefully examines the paratextual elements of the manuscripts, such as colophons and illustrations. In doing so, he uncovers the aesthetic value of the imperial court-commissioned *baojuan* manuscripts from the early period.

Both chapter 4, “Sectarian Examples in *Dizang Baojuan* and *Baojuan* of Benefiting Living Beings,” and chapter 5, “Beliefs and Practices in Sectarian *Baojuan*,” focus on two sectarian examples of Mulian *baojuan* from the second half of the seventeenth century during the “middle period.” They advance our understanding of the complex transformation of the religious landscape by showing how the Buddhist narrative of Mulian was appropriated by sectarian doctrines as well as other popular beliefs, such as the cult of Dizang. Berezkin argues that “[t]his marks the beginning of the period in the development of *baojuan* genre when recitation of and listening to these texts separated from the specific sectarian ideology and became an act of popular devotion” (117).

We are introduced to two “late period” *baojuan* in chapters 6 and 7. The discussion on the publication history of two *baojuan* about Mulian, *Precious Account of Mulian* and *Baojuan of Three Rebirths*, sheds light on how developments in printing technology impacted the production, circulation, and consumption of *baojuan* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In chapter 7, “The Religious and Performative Context of the Late *Baojuan* about Mulian,” the author returns to his field research on present-day popular ritual performances in Jingjiang and Changshu, both in Jiangsu Province. What Berezkin has accomplished in this chapter is a full demonstration of the vitality of *baojuan* traditions. Contrasting his findings to earlier Mulian *baojuan* scholarship based on written materials (Johnson 1995; Grant and Idema 2011), here Berezkin contextualizes *baojuan* performances by exploring their moralizing, entertaining, and exorcistic functions.

In his conclusion, Berezkin reiterates his main arguments about the periodization of *baojuan*’s history, the genre’s mixed audiences, its diverse functions, and the interaction between orality and textuality. The value of this book is also enhanced by abundant illustrations and the two appendixes, which list the texts on the Mulian story used in this study.

Many Faces of Mulian is a fine interdisciplinary study on the *baojuan* genre that spans the boundaries between popular literature, religion, folklore, and anthropology, among others. This book also represents the new stage of *baojuan* scholarship. Berezkin, in command of the genre and various types of research tools, is able to not only closely analyze and interpret the *baojuan* corpus but also to contextualize the *baojuan* performance. This study explains the staying power of the Mulian story and offers new insight into the *baojuan* genre, and thus, scholars in Chinese (and East Asian) religions, popular literature, and folklore will find it exceptionally valuable.

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