The Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond in the “Telling Scriptures” Tradition in Changshu, Jiangsu, China

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Abstract: The Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond is a newly discovered manuscript (copied ca. 1993), used in the “telling scriptures” tradition in Changshu, which represents ritualized storytelling based on the vernacular narrative texts called “precious scrolls” (baojuan). The local tradition of “telling scriptures” can be traced back to the 19th century, though it may have even earlier origins. While it has been generally accepted that precious scrolls had ritual functions in the late imperial period, little research has been done on the local varieties of this type of storytelling in connection with ritual practices. The material of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond from Changshu demonstrates how the Mulian story, widely known in China, has been adapted to the folk ritual of the afterlife salvation of a female soul through repentance of her sin of physiological impurity. While the related ritual in the neighboring Jingjiang on the northern bank of the Yangtze River has been thoroughly studied, the Changshu practice has received little attention of scholars so far. The Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond from Changshu demonstrates that the Mulian narrative was also associated with the ritual of “breaking the Blood Pond” in the Jiangnan areas, which also provides a new angle of evaluation of the Jingjiang tradition of “telling scriptures”. This article discusses relations between modern ritual practices and several variants of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond, mainly using fieldwork materials collected by the author in Changshu and adjacent areas in 2011–2018.

Keywords: baojuan (precious scrolls); telling scriptures; scroll recitation; chinese folklore; popular religion; buddhist narrative; ritual

1. Introduction

The Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond is a newly discovered manuscript, used in the “telling scriptures” (jiangjing 譲經, Suzhou dialect: kō 51 win44)1 tradition in Changshu 常熟, which represents ritualized storytelling based on the vernacular narrative texts called “precious scrolls” (baojuan 寶卷).2 It is the manuscript copied by Li Desheng 李德生 in the guiyu 干酉 year (presumably 1993), as stated in a note at the end of the manuscript; now in possession of Xu Juzhen 徐菊珍 (b. 1950), the female performer of telling scriptures from Weijiatang 衛家塘 village in Zhangqiao 張橋 district of modern Changshu city.3 One can suppose that Li Desheng represents the older generation of performers in this area, as it is common for the performers to inherit manuscripts of their teachers and older friends. According to the hereditary master of telling scriptures Yu Dingjun 余鼎君 (b. 1942) from the Shanghu district of Changshu,4 this variant of text is still in use by the precious scrolls performers in Zhangqiao district (Wu 2015, vol. 2, p. 1116).

Though the manuscript by Li Desheng has the title of the Precious Scroll of Mulian (Mulian baojuan 目蓮寶卷) on the cover, it represents an adaptation of the Precious Scroll of Mulian (Mulian baojuan 目蓮寶卷), which is a text commonly used in the modern tradition of telling scriptures in Changshu. This is attested not only by the contents of this text, but also its self-reference as the Precious Scroll of Mulian. For example, the concluding verses of this variant say: “The Scroll of Mulian rescuing his mother has ended . . . ” (目蓮救母卷...
The contents of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond can be traced back to the traditional versions of the Precious Scroll of Mulian, which widely circulated in Jiangnan since the end of the nineteenth century. This is the famous Precious Scroll of Mulian’s Three Rebirths (Mulian sanshi baojuan 目蓮三世寶卷; hereafter abbreviated as the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths), the earliest available printed version of which is dated 1876. It is represented in the variety of woodblock and lithographic printed editions, made by the publishers in the urban centers of the Jiangnan region at the end of the nineteenth–early twentieth centuries.

Although the story of monk Mulian (Skt. Maudgalyāyana; one of the major disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni in the Buddhist scriptures) rescuing his mother’s soul from the afterlife punishment in the underworld is of ancient origin; the developed form of this originally Buddhist subject appeared in the vernacular narratives of the eighth—ninth centuries—“transformation texts” (bianwen 變文). Later this subject was used in various dramatic and storytelling forms in China. The popularity of this subject in the old vernacular literature is usually explained by its emphasis on the filial piety (xiao 孝), a cardinal value in Chinese society (also regarded as an attempt to reconcile Buddhist precepts with the Confucian values and concepts). The emphasis on the description of the afterlife punishment for sinners, typical of the Mulian narratives, also had important didactic and indoctrinating meanings in traditional society.

There are many common features between the printed recension of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths and manuscript by Li Desheng. The Li Desheng’s version preserves the main storyline of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths, centered around three rebirths of Mulian, during which he rescues the soul of his sinful mother Liu Qingti 劉青提: as a son...
of wealthy landowner–Fu Luobo 傅蘿卜; the rebellious leader Huang Chao 黃巢 and the butcher He Yin 何因. The latter eventually converted to the way of self-perfection and thus achieved his original identity as monk Mulian. The Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths represents the late stage of the development of this story. With the use of additional details of two new rebirths of Mulian, the original Buddhist story propagating vegetarianism and abstinence is intertwined with the historical legend about Huang Chao’s rebellion (875–884) at the end of the Tang dynasty and with the propagation of ideas of syncretic religious movements at the end of the Qing period (see Berezkin 2013b). This amplification of the original Mulian story is characteristic of the texts of the system of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths that presumably was compiled somewhere in Jiangnan region in the middle of the nineteenth century.

There are further numerous minor details that demonstrate close relations between the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond and the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths. For example, both texts start with the scene that explains the origins of the Mulian’s lay name: Luobo (Turnip). It says that this name was given to the child, because he was a reincarnation of an itinerant monk who received a turnip as alms from Fu Xiang 傅相, the Mulian’s father. In the corpus of precious scrolls of the Qing dynasty, this detail is specific of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths and also brings it close to the local dramas of Zhejiang (especially city of Shaoxing 紹興), performed in the areas close to the locality where the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths apparently was written down in the middle of the nineteenth century (Berezkin 2017, pp. 140–41). This detail demonstrates the interaction between precious scrolls and local dramas on this subject, which is also expressed in other aspects of the contents of precious scrolls (see Sections 3 and 4).

Another detail testifying to the common origins of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond and the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths is the scene, where Guanyin tests the sincerity of Mulian’s intentions, when he travels to the Western Heaven in search of his mother’s soul. Even several poetic parts of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond demonstrate close proximity to the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths. For example, it also contains an aria on repaying of ten great mercies of the mother, a special piece dedicated to the necessity of children’s gratitude towards the mother. All these details can prove that the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond from Zhangqiao originated in the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths.

On the basis of this comparison one can conclude that Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond is an abbreviated adaptation of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths. The supposition also may be substantiated by the printed copies of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths discovered in possession of the masters of telling scriptures in Changshu. For example, Yu Dingjun possesses the lithographic edition of this text, printed in Shanghai in 1907. One of the performers in the Baimao district of Changshu, interviewed by Qiu Huiying, kept a xerox copy of the woodblock edition of this text, printed in Changzhou in 1886 (Qiu 2010, p. 214). One can suppose that such printed copies also were circulated in the Changshu area in the earlier period.

The version by Li Desheng also continues the original discourse of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths, in which didacticism and religious proselytizing is combined with the entertaining element of numerous narrative details (including some comic scenes) and well as the ritual function of the major narrative line (connected with the message of afterlife salvation for pious followers) (see Berezkin (2013b)). Still, there are some details that demonstrate modification of the original text of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths in the Li Desheng’s version. Significantly, many details of the story have been abbreviated in the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond. For example, such an important episode as the interference of Liu Jia 劉假, Mulian’s maternal uncle, who persuaded Liu Qingti to break vegetarian fast and start killing animals, is only briefly mentioned in the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond, while it is narrated with some details in the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths.

It is important to note that many episodes in the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond are narrated in verses, which breaks the usual principle of repetition of the contents of prosaic parts of a precious scroll in following verses. This tendency is typical of the precious
scrolls of the late period (late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries), which in general can be characterized by the developed literary qualities, such as smooth flow of narration, entertaining elements, prolonged descriptions, etc.

Many modifications of the text in the folk variant apparently were caused by copyists’ mistakes. For example, in the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond the surname of Fu Luobo and his father is written as 父, which is a borrowed character with the same pronunciation. At the same time, there are also significant deliberate alternations in this text. For example, it says that Fu Luobu goes to the monastery and becomes a monk before his mother’s death, while in the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths he does this only after Liu Qingti’s death. This detail appears similar to other precious scrolls versions of the late nineteenth century as well as several local dramas.

Other varying details appear in the episode of Huang Chao’s rebellion. While the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths narrates in some details the story of Zhu Wen 朱温 (852–912, historical founder of the Later Liang dynasty, 907–923), his name does not appear in the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond. The Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths says that Huang Chao after the capture of the Tang dynasty capital Chang’an was defeated by Li Cunxiao 李存孝 (?-894), the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond mentions another famous general of the Five Dynasties period (907–960), Wang Yanzhang 王彦章 (863–923), in this episode instead. As both these military leaders are famous in Chinese history, here we apparently see the impact of different historical narratives on these two recensions of the precious scroll.

Some details of the underworld description in both texts also vary. This part has been significantly abbreviated in comparison with the standard recension of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths. Here, one does not find the regular scheme of description of each hell compartment, as can be seen in the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths. This rigid scheme of alternation of prosaic passages with verses is characteristic of the precious scrolls of the early period of development and therefore can be regarded as the vestige of the original features of the genre in its late specimens.

Still, comparatively detailed description of hells in the Li Desheng’s version continues the didactic discourse of the standard version of this precious scroll. We also can find some new details there, which also hint at the use of other sources by the local storytellers. For example, in the place, where the sinners are cut by saws in two parts it is said that these are infidel widows, who in this way are punished for re-marrying. This detail is absent from the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths, but is known in modern Chinese literature. This detail also betrays the extremely conservative outlook of the editors of this version of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond that may be taken as a testimony of its comparatively early origins.

Several special features of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond are related to the performative context of the narrative. Needless to say, the text uses words and expressions of the local dialect, a variety of the Wu group of dialects, prevalent in southern Jiangsu. In this way, it appears more comprehensible to the local audiences, which are constituted mainly by people with a low level of education.

The ritual function of recitation also is emphasized in this variant of precious scroll. Its ritual meaning is clearly expressed in invocations of Bodhisattva Dizang’s name, who in popular beliefs is regarded as the Lord of Underworld. The introductory verse in this text says:

Incense in the burner is burning and emits bright light,
It broadly shines in ten directions and penetrates the high vault [of heaven].
Above we invite all buddhas to arrive to our assembly,
Below we pay respect to King Dizang of the Netherworld,
He is accompanied by the guardian of law, Squire Fu,
And sage monk Mulian, who rescued his mother . . .

爐內乍熱放毫光，普照十方透上蒼。
According to the text of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond (Che 2009, p. 391), I have observed recitation of both Precious Scroll of Dizang and Blood Pond Precious Scroll of Mulian protagonist of the narratives is passing through all hells observing sufferings of sinners variant of the Precious Scroll of the Liang King (Liang wang fa chan baojuan) and very popular in the Wu-speaking areas of Jiangnan since the nineteenth century). While the first two are devoted to the origins of the female rebirth of Dizang), the assembly that I witnessed in Yushan, the rural house of the Yushan district of Changshu on 7 September 2017 (not far from the old county city of Changshu). At the same time, the contents of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond used on that occasion in 2017 were completely different from the contents of the Li Desheng’s version. Though it mentioned the story of Mulian rescuing his mother, it did not have as developed narrative part as in the Li Desheng’s version.

The Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond was recited during the assembly of the “thirty-fifth day”, witnessed by Professor Che Xilun in the Gangkou area of Zhangjiagang city in 1997 (Che 2009, p. 391). I have observed recitation of both Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond and Precious Scroll of Mulian during the rituals of the “thirty-fifth day”, performed in the very traditional mode for a deceased female relative of a young master of telling scriptures in a rural house of the Yushan district of Changshu on 7 September 2017 (not far from the old county city of Changshu). At the same time, the contents of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond used on that occasion in 2017 were completely different from the contents of the Li Desheng’s version. Though it mentioned the story of Mulian rescuing his mother, it did not have as developed narrative part as in the Li Desheng’s version.

Other narrative precious scrolls performed on these occasions in Changshu are the Precious Scroll of Dizang (Dizang baojuan), Precious Scroll of the Earth God (Tudi baojuan), Precious Scroll of the Ten Kings (Shi wang baojuan), Precious Scroll of the Penitence Rites of the Liang King (Liang wang fa chan baojuan), and Precious Scroll of the Liang King, very popular in the Wu-speaking areas of Jiangnan since the nineteenth century). While the first two are devoted to the origins of deities functioning in the underworld (considered to be deified historical figures, as is typical for Chinese popular religion); the last two (along with the Precious Scroll of Mulian) tell the stories of afterlife retribution and salvation. A “telling scriptures” service for the dead also includes a number of salvation rites, which differ according to the occasion: a funeral or the “thirty-fifth day” assembly (Yu 2015, pp. 2589–93). For example, during the assembly that I witnessed in Yushan, the Precious Scroll of Dizang (the variant with the female rebirth of Dizang), Precious Scroll of the Ten Kings, Precious Scroll of Mulian, and Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond were recited, along with the special litanies accompanying rituals of offerings to the soul of deceased, Ten Kings of Underworld, and receiving the soul at home on the “thirty-fifth day” (Precious Scroll of the Five Watches [Wu geng baojuan]). The masters of telling scriptures also usually recite the Scripture of the
Blood Pond (Xue hu jing 血湖經), which makes an important addition to the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond. This text has the Daoist background: for example, one of its variants collected in Zhangjiagang has the complete title of the “Wondrous Scripture of Releasing from Sins in the Blood Pond of Fengdu Pronounced by the Celestial God Taiyi, Rescuing from Sufferings” (Taiyi jiu ku tian zun shuo ba zui Fengdu Xue hu miaojing 太乙救苦天尊說拔罪酆都血湖妙經).

This Daoist coloring of scripture also is related to the history of the Blood Pond beliefs in China (see Section 3). This feature also reflects the syncretic religious background of the “telling scriptures” practice in Changshu.

The Precious Scroll of Mulian is one of the major texts recited during funerary and memorial services for dead women. There are multiple variants of this text in the Changshu area. The most expanded variant that I have seen is the one transmitted in the family of Yu Dingjun, titled the Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescuing His Mother from Hell (Mulian jiu mu diyu baojuan 目蓮救母地獄寶卷).

Ritual actions accompany every nineteen sections of the Precious Scroll of Mulian, into which the second part of the first fascicle (juan) of this text is divided. They describe nineteen compartments of the underworld (hells) through which Mulian passed in search of his mother, following the relevant part in the standard recension of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths (see Section 2). Accordingly, masters of telling scriptures kneel nineteen times and burn nineteen certificates for each compartment. Thus, they imitate the pattern of the similar ritual actions accompanying the Precious Scroll of the Ten Kings and Precious Scroll of Hell (the latter is now performed in Changshu exclusively for the deceased men, not for women).

As attested by my observations on the site as well as interviews with the performers, recitation of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond on the contrary, is not accompanied by any ritual action. Thus, it appears very dissimilar from the Daoist ritual of “breaking the Blood Pond”, which is usually performed on the next day after the telling scriptures service. Unlike funerary telling scriptures, usually performed at night, the Daoist service (daochang 道場) takes place in the daytime, following telling scriptures. This was the case which I witnessed on the “thirty-fifth day” occasion in Yushan in 2017. The Daoist ritual of “breaking the Blood Pond” also was performed, but it was centered on the ritual action, involving the destruction of the symbolic picture of the Blood Pond, drawn on the floor with the use of rice grain as well as the bowl representing the pond itself. The descendants of the deceased women are expected to drink some red water, which represents the mother’s blood from the pond. As the emphasis here is not on the Daoist ritual, I will not describe it in detail. What is important here is its completely different form from the recitation of the relevant precious scroll in the tradition of telling scriptures. In this perspective, Daoist ritual in Changshu appears complementary to telling scriptures with the hell thematic.

Thus, the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond, in the manuscript by Li Desheng, represents the combination of two ritual texts—Precious Scroll of Mulian and Scripture of the Pond of Blood—into one. Here, the story of Mulian rescuing his mother’s soul from hell is used to substantiate the traditional ritual of “breaking the Blood Pond” (po xue hu 破血湖), still commonly performed in the traditional rural environment of Changshu. On the other hand, the emphasis here is not on the ritual action, but on the narrative component, which in the traditional environment of Changshu had entertaining aspect.

4. Blood Pond Beliefs and the Precious Scroll of Mulian

The concept of the “Blood Pond” that apparently developed out of the symbol of Blood Bowl in Chinese Buddhist and Daoist literature has been an important notion in the literature about Mulian since around the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. It also has been related to the ritual practice of the salvation of a female soul from afterlife sufferings.

According to Chinese popular beliefs, mainly spread at the bottom levels of traditional society (the origins of which are not clearly documented), after death women are imprisoned in the Blood Pond, which is formed in the underworld (Chinese equivalent of hell, or sometimes interpreted as “purgatory” in comparison with the Western beliefs) from blood they lose during childbirth and menstruation. One can find
the earliest mention of these beliefs in the Daoist ritual text dated to 1194 (Soymié 1965, p. 132). Sometimes the confinement in the Blood Pond is presented as a punishment for violation of post-partum taboos (as in the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths and its derivatives in the scroll recitation traditions of southern Jiangsu); however, more often it is described in the ritual texts as the inevitable consequence of female ritual impurity. It is the duty of pious descendants to perform the ritual of the salvation of their mother’s soul and in this way to repay the mother’s mercy of “birth and nurture of children”.

These beliefs have foundation in the Buddhist notions of the physiological impurity of a woman’s body as well as in the principle of one’s filial duty towards one’s mother (Cole 1998, pp. 197–214). They also are propagated in the Blood Bowl Sūtra of the True Teaching way to repay the mother’s mercy of “birth and nurture of children”.

Another important aspect of this text in connection with the later precious scrolls with the Goodness of Mulian Rescuing His Mother (1518–1595) on the basis of earlier recensions of this drama (first printed ca. 1582). Expanded versions of the Blood Bowl scriptures from the later period (Ming and Qing dynasties) usually have the form of...
“penitence books” (*chanfa* 懺法) and serve the direct function of cleansing all woman’s sins. Several texts of penitence books that deal with the salvation from the Blood Pond (one of them dated to the end of the Ming dynasty) that are very close in contents and form to precious scrolls have survived. They continue to circulate in the modern period: a text of one of such penitence books, the *Precious Penitence of the Merciful Blood Bowl* (*Cibei Xue pen bao chan* 慈悲血盆寶懺) has been printed in Taiwan until now. As was mentioned above, the ritual text of such form also was collected from performers in Changshu.

Besides, the symbol of the Blood Pond also was incorporated in the ritual systems of the sectarian teachings of the sixteenth – seventeenth centuries and appears in precious scrolls compiled by their followers. An example is the *Precious Scroll of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [and Helping Her] to Escape from Hell and Be Born in Heaven* (*Mulian jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan* 目犍連尊者救母出離地獄生天寶卷), which most probably is an adaptation of the early *Precious Scroll of Mulian* (1373 manuscript) by the followers of the Teaching of Non-Interference (*Wuwei jiao* 無為教) in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. It has a special section on the Hell of the Pool of Blood (*Xue hu* 血湖, no. 55). Several sectarian groups employed the rituals of salvation from the Blood Pond in the propagation of their teachings. For example, there is a scripture of the Teaching of Vast Yang (*Hongyang jiao* 弘陽教) with the title of the *Precious Penitence on the Blood Pond of the Vast Yang of Chaotic Origin* (*Hunyuan hongyang xue hu bao chan* 混元弘陽血湖寶懺) dating back to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century that explains the origins of the Blood Pond and the ways to escape from it. It tells that in 1594 patriarch Piaogao 飄高 (original name Han Taihu 韓太湖, 1570–1598), the founder of Teaching of Vast Yang, established the Glorious Assembly of the Blood Pond (*Xue hu sheng hui* 血湖勝會) in response to requests of his followers (Pu 2005, vol. 106, pp. 117–18).

At the same time, the ritual of the salvation of deceased women from the suffering in the Blood Pond makes an important part of the ritual practice of common folk in China until now. In many places of southern China (including the island of Taiwan), this ritual has been performed together with the dramatic pieces on Mulian (e.g., Seaman (1989); Duan (1999, pp. 152–60); Wang (2010, pp. 164–66, 181–82)). The Blood Pond also is often mentioned in the precious scrolls of the nineteenth century, including the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths of Mulian*, which also can be related to the contemporary ritual practice in the southern part of Jiangsu (see Berezkin (2017, pp. 163–67)).

The episode with the Blood Pond plays an important role in the recension of Li Desheng, following the original text of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths*. In this episode when Ms. Liu is brought to the Blood Pond after death, the verse says:

> Women who came before you will tell you, listen [to us]!

> While alive, we gave birth to sons and daughters and thus committed grave sins.

> Before the completion of the full month, we passed in front of the [family] hall,

> And thus insulted the god of hall and six deities of the household.

> Before the completion of the full month, we passed through the skywell,

> And thus insulted the three lights of sun, moon, and stars.

> As soon as Ms. Liu heard about these sins,

> She wailed and cried, enduring these torments.

> 未曾滿月堂前過，觸犯家堂與六神。

> 却未滿月天井過，觸犯三光日月星。

> 劉氏一聽如此罪，啼啼哭哭受災幸。 46

Then women in the Pond address their sons and daughters, asking them to perform offerings to Yan-wang (King Yama), so that he can forgive their sins (Wu 2015, vol. 2,
In this way the topic of the salvation from the Blood Pond is fully revealed in the recension of Li Desheng.

Thus, the association of the Mulian narrative with the rituals of the Blood Pond can be traced back to the late imperial period and appears in the forms of ritualized storytelling (scroll recitation) as well as the ritual drama. It can explain the survival and development of scroll recitation with this subject in the modern period, despite general decay of precious scrolls and persecutions of their recitation in the second half of the twentieth century.

5. Comparison with the Jingjiang Practice

One can find a similar case of the use of the Mulian narrative in the “telling scriptures” (Jingjiang dialect: kaŋ44) tradition of the nearby city of Jingjiang, located on the opposite bank of the Yangtze River from Changshu and Zhangjiagang. Similarly with Changshu, telling scriptures in Jingjiang takes place at religious assemblies, mainly arranged in the believers’ houses nowadays. Presumably, recitation of precious scrolls originally was introduced to this area from the lands south to Yangtze (Suzhou area), where many settlers in Jingjiang, originally an island in Yangtze, came from.48

The Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond is a prominent text of “telling scriptures” there.49 Similar with the variant, represented by the manuscript of Li Desheng, the Jingjiang version of this text combines the Mulian story with the references to the ritual practice aimed at the salvation of a female soul. At the same time, many details of the narrative in the Jingjiang version are different from the version of Li Desheng’s manuscript.

In this connection, one needs to note that the texts of precious scrolls performed by professional storytellers in the Jingjiang area (locally known as “fotou” [Jingjiang dialect: v2di31; lit. “the Buddha’s head”]) in the modern period (1950–2000) existed primarily in the oral form, originally transmitted from masters to their disciples through oral instruction.50 This implies the existence of multiple varying recensions of the same text as recited by individual performers. For example, the text of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond, labeled as been recorded from an audio tape of a live recitation session, was deciphered and published by the local scholars.51 Besides, the performative context of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond in the Jingjiang practice is different from the Changshu ritual assemblies.

In Jingjiang, telling scriptures is not performed during funerals or memorial days of the dead. Instead, it takes place during the assemblies held for living people, usually on occasions of anniversaries (sixty or seventy) and thus is known as the “assembly of prolonging one’s life” (yan sheng hui 延生會). The repentance of sins of physiological impurity is performed for a still living woman, but also with the aim of preventing her from falling down into the Blood Pond after death. The reason for such difference with the Changshu area is not clear; it may be explained by the special features of local culture. In the modern period, the funerary (and memorial) rituals in the Jingjiang area are conducted by the local Daoist priests, but it is not clear whether this situation was the same in the past. The Daoist priests in Jingjiang also perform the ritual of “breaking the Blood Pond” on the female funerals (similar with their colleagues in the Changshu area), but in this case it is considered to be an afterlife ritual in comparison with the “present-world” ritual by the performers of “telling scriptures”.

As I have witnessed both forms of this ritual in the Jingjiang area, I can describe their main difference as “narrative” (didactic) versus “action” (spectacular and dramatic). While performers of precious scrolls obviously emphasize didactic meaning of the Mulian story, the Daoist priests concentrate on the physical destruction of objects, symbolizing the Blood Pond (special scheme of hell drawn on the ground and the bowl placed in the middle of it). While the precious scroll is understandable for the local audience, the Daoist ritual spells are not, and the meaning of the Daoist ritual is mainly embodied in the “action” part. Still, “telling scriptures” with the topic of destruction of the Blood Pond also involves ritual action; which makes two rituals variants of similar practice of a woman’s soul salvation.
Despite the significant textual differences between two narrative variants of the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* from Jingjiang and Changshu that I have mainly consulted for this research, they presumably have the common source, namely the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths of Mulian*. Though, as has been already noted, the texts of telling scriptures in Jingjiang have been transmitted primarily in the oral mode in the modern period, there have been suppositions of the original existence of written texts in Jingjiang. Chinese scholars Che Xilun and Lu Yongfeng, who specially studied the modern variants of precious scrolls in Jingjiang, have supposed that the majority of texts there with the religious contents (the so-called “sacred scrolls” [shengjuan 聖卷]),\(^5^3\) originally were adapted from the written texts of precious scrolls, transmitted to this area either in the form of printed copies or manuscripts (Lu and Che 2008, pp. 436–37). Leaving aside the discussion of whether this hypothesis is correct, we can note that several major texts in the Jingjiang tradition, including especially the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond*, indeed can be traced back to the written versions.

First, comparison with the old printed editions of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths* demonstrates their close affinity with the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* (Jingjiang version). Of course, many elements have been added by the local performers, especially as concerns the ritual practice with which this text is associated in Jingjiang. Second, written materials in possession of modern *fotou* can prove that these printed copies may have reached Jingjiang quite long ago. For example, one *fotou* owned the printed copy of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths*, the lithographic edition made by the Hongda Morality Bookstore (宏大善書局) in 1922.\(^5^4\) It is unclear, though, when this copy was transmitted to the Jingjiang area, similarly with the copies of the old printed texts of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths*, discovered in the Changshu area.

6. The *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* in the Ritual Practices of Southern Jiangsu

Comparison with the Jingjiang materials demonstrates that the story of Mulian, embodied in its late precious scroll version, has been widely used in the ritual practices of the southern Jiangsu areas. This is further collaborated by other data on the precious scrolls recitation in the Suzhou area in the first half of the twentieth century. While nowadays “masters of scroll recitation” (*xuanjuan xiansheng* 宣卷先生) in Suzhou suburbs mostly do not recite either the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* or *Precious Scroll of Mulian* and even do not participate in the funerary (memorial) rituals, like their colleagues in Changshu; the situation must have been different in the past – the period before 1950. Besides, the available historical evidence on scroll recitation in the Suzhou area suggests an alternative performative context for the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* and *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, namely collective ritual assemblies organized by local women praying for their afterlife salvation “in advance”.

According to the information from the old master of scroll recitation Jin Wenyin 金文胤 (1926–?) from Shengpu 勝浦, a town near Suzhou,\(^5^5\) such “assemblies of the Blood Pond”, known under the name of “submission of the Blood Pond” (*jiao Xue hu* 繹血湖) once were comparatively common in the broader Suzhou area.\(^5^6\) They were organized on the village basis and required participation of the majority elderly women in these communities. These communal assemblies usually took three days, including performance of various rituals; and in the evening recitation of precious scrolls in the individual households took place. Unfortunately, not much evidence of these assemblies is available now. No doubt, texts devoted to Mulian once were widely used on these occasions. Such texts also circulated in the Suzhou area. For example, the manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* by Gao Zhuqing 高竹卿, dated 1922, was preserved in the collection of Suzhou Museum of Chinese Drama (Guo 2018, p. 258). Precious scrolls in the collection of this museum (mostly manuscripts of the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries) were gathered from local scroll recitation performers during expeditions in the early 1960s. Among them, there is also a considerable number of manuscripts titled the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, mostly closely following the contents of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths* (Guo 2018, pp. 121–22).
According to the evidence of Jin Wenyin, the big assemblies of the Blood Pond declined since the 1930s because of the damage caused by the Japanese aggression; but some relevant ritual elements, including recitation of precious scrolls, were transferred to the meetings in private houses that are usually dedicated to the anniversaries of old women (mothers of families). Still, the tradition of communal assemblies in the Changshu area can be regarded as a vestige of this old tradition. According to Yu Dingjun, such “assemblies of the Blood Pond” (Xue hu hui 血湖會) are still occasionally held in Changshu. These are also communal rituals, in which all elder women in a community take part (Yu 2015, pp. 2584–85). These also involve recitation of the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond*, *Penitence of the Blood Pond*, *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, and *Precious Scroll of the Penitence Rites of the Liang King*. Apparently this assembly has to do with the preservation of custom of “telling scriptures” during communal “Buddhist assemblies” (Fohui 佛會), including temple celebrations for various deities, which still survives in the Changshu area.

Similar to the Jingjiang tradition of the private assemblies of “prolonging one’s life”, as well as the big assemblies in the Suzhou suburbs, these assemblies of the Blood Pond represent the “advance” performance of the rituals of post-mortem salvation, which are followed by the Daoist rituals of the “destruction of the Blood Pond” during funerals of local women. Such assemblies are similar to the “advance rites” performed for the women in rural areas of southern China, including Guangdong and Fujian (e.g., Ma (2007); Cheung (2008)). In traditional society, these rituals also have meaning of purification and protection of women who have reached the menopausal age. However, in southern China these assemblies do not involve recitation of precious scrolls. The form of “telling scriptures” (or scroll recitation), which combines the vernacular narratives of precious scrolls with the ritual action, seems to be peculiar of southern Jiangsu areas, now best preserved in the Changshu, Jingjiang, and Wuxi areas.

Despite the great popularity of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths* and its derivatives in the Suzhou area in the modern period, one should not overemphasize its impact on the local culture. This is well observed in the discrepancy between local ritual practice and values propagated in the written texts. While the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* by Li Desheng, same as the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths*, encourages audiences to keep vegetarian diet, this prohibition does not have much impact on the real-life practice of “telling scriptures”. Though it is common in Changshu to abstain from meat on the day before the ritual assembly, funerary recitations of precious scrolls usually use meat offerings, which contradicts mainstream Buddhist practices. Apparently, though the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths* was adapted for ritualized recitations in the Changshu area, the religious injunctions of this text were not accepted by the local society in Changshu. Major religious values and symbols of this text were not absorbed in the local ritual practice of “telling scriptures”.

7. Conclusions

The manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond* by Li Desheng demonstrates the use of an old narrative text in the modern practice of folk storytelling for ritual purposes. While not typical of the practice of funerary “telling scriptures” in Changshu, this manuscript presumably represents one of its local variants; it embodies combination of a vernacular narrative of precious scroll devoted to the Mulian story and a ritual text on the destruction of the Blood Pond (Bowl). Though apparently not reflecting the ritual action, this variant of precious scroll directly refers to this popular ritual of the woman’s salvation. This text was apparently adapted from the famous text of the *Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths*, which was transmitted in southern Jiangsu in the form of printed editions and manuscripts since the end of the nineteenth century. In its own turn, the printed recension of the late nineteenth century must have been rooted in the storytelling and ritual practices of the Jiangnan (Lower Yangtze Valley) region.

The manuscript by Li Desheng represents survival of the old Buddhist literary subject in the modern ritual environment of southern Jiangsu. While originating in the ancient
narratives (basically starting with the “transformation texts” of the Tang period), this subject still attracts the attention of local believers, as it propagates the Buddhist form of the filial piety concept, so important in traditional China. Thus, it is especially appropriate for the funerary and memorial days’ services for the salvation of mothers’ souls—an important element of local ritual culture in Changshu. The combination of ritual meaning (escape from the Blood Pond hell) with the didactic and entertaining elements of storytelling in the vernacular language forms the unique feature of this type of folk practice.

The manuscript by Li Desheng contains additional information on the use of the Precious Scroll of Mulian (in its southern variant of the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths) and the area of its transmission. It demonstrates that the Mulian story, adapted from the text of precious scroll edited and printed in the cities of Jiangnan at the end of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries, has been used for ritual assemblies centered at the “breaking of the Blood Pond” not only in Jingjiang, but also in Changshu (and more broadly, in the Suzhou area in the past). This gives one a new perspective of evaluation of the “telling scriptures” tradition in Jingjiang that presumably was related to the culture of the Jiangnan area. Some common points in the subjects and ritual background of precious scrolls in these areas contributes to the study of connections between telling scriptures (scroll recitation) practices in the territory in between Suzhou, Changshu, and Jingjiang. The reconstruction of exact history of transmission and adaptation of these texts (if even possible, given the paucity of credible historical data now) still awaits further research.

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**Notes**

1. I express my gratitude to Prof. Sheng Yimin 盛益民 (Fudan University) for the help with the transcription of the Suzhou dialect.
2. For a general introduction to precious scrolls, see, e.g., Sawada (1975); Overmyer (1999); Che (2009); Berezkin (2017, pp. 3–34).
3. I am using the variant reprinted in the collection of precious scrolls in Changshu, see Wu (2015, vol. 2, pp. 1116–32). Xu Juzhen started to study telling scriptures at the age of forty-five; originally she participated in the amateur entertainment troupe and also can sing Wuxi drama (xiju 锡剧), see Wu (2015, vol. 3, p. 2549). Professional female performers in the Changshu tradition of telling scriptures appeared around the beginning of the 1980s; originally this job was exclusively male, as only men were allowed to conduct related rituals, Yu Dingjun, personal communication 2 June 2011. Xu Juzhen’s husband is a Daoist (local ritual master), which also can explain her interest in the ritual texts of precious scrolls (masters of telling scriptures often cooperate with Daoist priests in the ritual services).
4. The father and brother of Yu Dingjun were performers of telling scriptures; on his background and activities, see Berezkin (2013a, pp. 173–200).
5. On Changshu “telling scriptures”, see, e.g., Qiu (2010); Yu (2015); Berezkin (2013a).
6. Hence, the name of the “Buddhist service” (fo shi 佛事) is also applied to “telling scriptures” in Changshu.
7. Here I do not go into details of performative manner of “telling scriptures” in Changshu and vicinity. Just suffice to say it alternates prose narrative with the singing of verses, as typical of “precious scrolls” genre; mainly simple percussion instruments accompaniment is used, see Berezkin (2013a, pp. 198–200).
8. On them, see also Berezkin (2017, pp. 155–63).
9. See also Lu and Che (2012, pp. 98–105).
10. The copies of this edition are available in the Shanghai City Library and Harvard-Yenching Library, for the digital copy, see https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:2370758681i (accessed on 1 May 2021). For the reprinted copies of this text (two different woodblock edns. of the late nineteenth century), see Pu (2005, vol. 11, pp. 134–72); (Huang et al. 2002, vol. 352, pp. 199–305). There is a complete English translation of this text (the 1885 Yidezhai—德齋 edition made in Nanjing) by Wilt L. Idema, see Grant and Idema (2011, pp. 35–145).
11. For the list of printed and manuscript copies, see Berezkin (2017, pp. 181–83).
On the origins and development of this story, see e.g., Teiser (1988, pp. 43–195); Mair (1989, pp. 14–15, 17–18, 123–27); Liu (1997, pp. 1–64); et al.

On the evolution of this subject in precious scrolls, see Berezkin (2017, pp. 48–170).

In the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond his name is written with another character 賈.

This character is never used in Chinese surnames; this is an obvious mistake by substitution of characters.

See e.g., Mulian jiu mu youming bao zhuan (Anonymous 1900, pp. 41a–42b).

In the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths, this whole episode was borrowed from the novel dating back to ca. late sixteenth—early seventeenth centuries, see Berezkin (2013b, pp. 86–93).

See Berezkin (2017, pp. 127–28).

See, e.g., famous short story by Lu Xun (1881–1936), “A Prayer for Happiness” (Zhu fu 祝福): Lu (2005, vol. 2, p. 8).

For the sake of volume, I do not go into details of its linguistic characteristics.

On the development of the cult of Dizang in China, see Zhiru (2007).

Wu (2015, vol. 2, p. 1116). On the ritual aspects of introductory and concluding verses in precious scrolls of the late period, see Berezkin (2017).

This notion also includes some areas of modern Zhangjiagang city. In 1962, northern areas of former Changshu county were transformed into the new Shazhou 沙洲 county (also including a part of Jiangyin 江陰 county). In 1986, Shazhou was transformed into Zhangjiagang 張家港 city. Both Changshu and Zhangjiagang cities are under the jurisdiction of Suzhou 蘇州 city now. On “telling scriptures” in the Fenghuang 凤凰 (Gangkou 港口) area of Zhangjiagang, see Yu (1997); Che (2009, pp. 386–419).

There is a service on the first day after a person’s death, called “immediate hell” (suishen diyu 隨身地獄).

On this day a soul of the deceased is believed to return home to enjoy offerings and rituals of salvation.

The topic of underworld travels is common in precious scrolls since the early period of history of this genre, see Sawada (1975, pp. 66–68); Overmyer (1999, pp. 38–47, 240–47); Che (2009, pp. 65–89); Grant (1989).

For the sake of volume, I will not go into detailed ethnographic description of such assemblies; for some details see Yu (2015, pp. 2587–93).

I also have a copy of the similar manuscript of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond copied by Yu Baojun 余寶均 in 1991, which is now in possession of his brother Yu Dingjun. Another variant of this precious scroll was preserved in the Changshu City Library (undated manuscript of ca. first half of the twentieth century), published in Wu (2015, vol. 2, p. 1109–15). It also might have been collected from a local performer. This demonstrates that several versions of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond have been widespread in the vicinity of Changshu.

The similar text, also titled the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond (marked as property of Zhou Sulian 周素蓮, dated by wuchen year [1928?]), not containing the developed narrative part of the Mulian story, belongs to the earlier period. It was reprinted in the 2005 collection of precious scrolls by Pu (2005, vol. 14, pp. 156–69). Its place of origin and remains unknown, but it also certainly comes from the southern part of Jiangsu.

For the narratives of Dizang in the Changshu tradition, see Wu (2015, vol. 3, pp. 974–1006).

For the published text, see Liang (2007, vol. 2, p. 1361).

Another variant of this text, also related to the Daoist ritual tradition, is the Penitence of the Blood Pond (Xue hu chan 血湖懺), for the published variant, see Wu (2015, vol. 3, pp. 2277–80). According to Yu Dingjun, it was borrowed into telling scriptures from the Daoist ritual.

According to Yu Dingjun, the second part of this text also can be recited during the ritual assemblies aimed at praying for babies (in case of couple barrenness or miscarriage), when this text is connected with the ritual of expulsion of the “Heavenly Dog” (tiangou 天狗): Yu (2015, pp. 2565–66). However, many other local masters of telling scriptures do not use it on such occasions, so this cannot be considered a usual function of this precious scroll.

For the published text, see Wu (2015, vol. 3, pp. 1033–55).

Its complete title is Precious Scroll of Explicating and Clarifying [Origins] of Hell (Xiaoshi mingzheng diyu baojuan 素釋明證地獄寶卷); this is a Ming-dynasty text used in the modern ritualized recitation of Changshu, see Che (2009, pp. 394–95).

On cooperation between masters of telling scriptures and Daoist priests in Changshu, see Qiu (2010, pp. 201–2); Yu (2015, pp. 2573–74, 2587).

According to recollections of old performers, telling scriptures on such occasions attracted multiple listeners from among relatives and neighbors of the family, especially women and children who came to listen.

According to traditional beliefs, women were required to stay in confinement for a month after childbirth (“doing the month”: zuo yuezi 坐月子), see Pillsbury (1978).

It is an incomplete illustrated manuscript, now mounted as an album (originally presumably an “accordion-style” book—jingzhe ben 經冊本), that is dated to 1373. It belonged to the famous scholar of Chinese literature Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958) and now is held by the National Library of China. The Japanese scholar Yoshikawa Yoshikazu (Yoshikawa 2003, pp. 123–34).
has published the transcription of the surviving part of this text. The similar manuscript entitled the Precious Scroll of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [and Helping Her] to Escape from Hell and Be Born in Heaven (Mujianlian zanzhe jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan) and dated 1440 has been preserved in Russia (originally in a private collection, later purchased by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg); see Berezkin (2017, pp. 48–71).

This detail, which can be traced to the early Mulian narratives (transformation texts, eighth–ninth centuries) is absent from the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths and its derivatives in the scroll recitation traditions of southern Jiangsu, including the Li Desheng’s version.

See Zheng (2005, pp. 371–79). The drama on this subject has been known in China since the twelfth century, but the early versions did not survive, see Liu (1997, pp. 32–50).

See for example Li (2012, pp. 157–62, 363–92).

Originally in possession of Fu Xihua 傅惜華 (1907–1966), now kept in the Library of the Research Institute of Drama in Chinese Academy of Arts (XE “Library of the Research Institute of Drama in Chinese Academy of Arts”) (Beijing (XE “Beijing”)). On this text, see Che (2009, pp. 491–96).

Followers of these teachings usually offered ritual services to the commoners, see Berezkin (2017, pp. 114–16).

A house yard.

(Wu 2015, vol. 2, p. 1118). The similar verse can be found in the Precious Scroll of Three Rebirths (Mulian san shi baojuan 1876, pp. 8a–10a).

One of Ten Kings of Underworld, usually interpreted as the main one among them in the popular traditions.

This is substantiated by the fact that telling scriptures in Jingjiang still uses a variety of the Wu dialect, also originating in Jiangnan, see Lu and Che (2008, pp. 9–12).

For its study, see Che (2009, pp. 348–63), see also Berezkin (2017, pp. XV–XXIV).

On the origins and use of this term in Jingjiang, see Lu and Che (2008, pp. 120–24).

This has been one of the major special features of “telling scriptures” of Jingjiang in the contemporary period, making it look very different from other traditions of precious scrolls recitation in China.

You (2007, vol. 1, pp. 407–30). This is a recension by fotou Wang Guoliang 王國良; considerable editing by local scholars also took place.

As opposed to the “entertaining scrolls” [caojuan 草卷], mainly using “secular” subjects, many of them adapted from other forms of storytelling.

For the modern critical edition of the text, see You (2007, vol. 1, pp. 379–405).

Once the head of the performative team that enjoyed considerable popularity in the eastern suburbs of Suzhou; he resumed his place.

As reported by Che Xilun, who interviewed him in 1995 and 1998, see Che (2009, pp. 364–65).

It is clearly pronounced in the concluding verses of the Precious Scroll of the Blood Pond, see Wu (2015, vol. 2, p. 1131).

While Yu Dingjun insists that only vegetarian offerings can be used on this occasion, it contradicts the usual practice in this area Yu (2015, p. 2587); the same for the Fenghuang area, see Yu (1997, p. 76).

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