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Idema/Personal Salvation and Filial Piety

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Introduction

Even while the stern and majestic image of the Śākyamuni Buddha occupies the place of honor in every Buddhist temple throughout East Asia, among lay believers the veneration he receives pales in comparison to that offered to the bodhisattva Guanyin. If the Buddha holds out the elusive promise of nirvana to those who have chosen a monastic career, the bodhisattva is eager to come to the rescue of all those in need who appeal to her. The bodhisattva's almost universal veneration is testified to both by the ubiquitous small statues on domestic altars and by the colossal images erected in the open air, wherever the public manifestation of this veneration is allowed. Guanyin—the Chinese translation of Avalokiteśvara—has enjoyed this popular veneration almost from the very moment his/her name was introduced into East Asia a little less than two thousand years ago. Initially Guanyin was venerated in the form of a handsome young prince, whose male gender was underlined by his thin moustache. In later centuries he/she was also venerated in various esoteric manifestations, the most popular of which was the Guanyin with a Thousand Arms and a Thousand Eyes. From the tenth century onward, however, Guanyin was increasingly venerated in the shape of a woman, initially a dazzlingly beautiful young girl, later more often a stately matron.¹

Modern scholarship continues to debate the question of Guanyin's change of gender.² But from the ninth century, the popular imagination came up with various legends that related, often in great detail, the history of Guanyin's female manifestations. The most popular of these legends focuses on her mortal life as the Princess Miaoshan (Marvelous Goodness). The beginning of the development of this legend can be traced to the very first years of the

twelfth century. As the legend was taken up in various genres of literature, from formal biographies to plays and novels, it adapted itself to the changing demands of place and time.³ The most popular version of the legend of the miraculous life of the saintly Princess Miaoshan, however, was a version titled *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* (*Xiangshan baojuan*). Intended for performance, the story in this version is told in an alternation of prose and verse. While the earliest external reference to this text dates only from the early sixteenth century, and its earliest preserved printing only to 1773, its history may perhaps be traced back as far as the twelfth century.⁴ The text circulated both in a more elaborate version and in a later, shorter version. This monograph offers an annotated translation of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* based on this later, shorter version of the text, which circulated widely among Guanyin's devotees in the second part of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century and is known through many printings. *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is both an important document in the history of Chinese popular Buddhism that provides important insights into images of the religious experience of women and also a powerful and moving work of literature that merits wider exposure.

On the frontispiece of the 1773 edition of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, however, Guanyin is not portrayed as Princess Miaoshan. While her legend was the most popular tale explaining Guanyin's female nature, Miaoshan as such did not become an important subject in Buddhist religious art.⁵ The female Guanyin was more widely venerated in the forms of the White-robed Guanyin or the Guanyin of the Southern Sea, and in later popular iconography these images became fused. Accordingly, the frontispiece depicts a White-robed Guanyin, seated on Potalaka Rock. She is placed in front of a bamboo grove, which is depicted in the upper right-hand corner. Above her, to the left, flies her white parrot, while Good-in-Talent (Shancai, Sudhana) and Dragon Girl (Longnü, Nāgakanyā) are shown in the lower left and right corners respectively.⁶ The story of how the bodhisattva Guanyin acquired these three disciples is narrated in the second text translated here, *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* (*Shancai longnü baojuan*), a relatively short prosimetric text that may date from the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain is very much con-

cerned with the conflicting demands of religious salvation and filial piety. Religious salvation requires the individual to break with all social bonds and obligations in order to achieve his or her personal liberation, while the demands of filial piety insist on the subordination of the child to the family because of all the grace and favors the parents bestow on a child by raising it. *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl*, borrowing from popular lore and legend, pokes fun at the common tendency of people to forget the favors they have received and at the fact that their greatest desire is not for religious salvation, but rather for personal gain and satisfaction. But as *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* shows, the desire for religious salvation, which appears initially as utterly selfish and antisocial, proves in the end to be the most filial act of all, as it results not only in the salvation of a single individual, but also the salvation of her parents, when Princess Miaoshan donates her eyes and arms to rescue her father from a wasting disease.

In presenting these translations of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* and *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl*, I hope to make a contribution to the study of both Chinese Buddhism and Chinese literature. Through my discussions in this Introduction, I also hope to point out some aspects in which these texts may be of interest to students of comparative studies. While *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* and *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* are clearly set in a Chinese world, and grapple with problems phrased in Chinese terms, some of the motifs underlying these narratives would appear to be far more widespread, if not universal.

Avalokiteśvara and Guanyin

Guanyin is only one of the several common translations of the Sanskrit name Avalokiteśvara. The precise meaning of the name Avalokiteśvara is not clear; most modern scholars suggest the name means roughly “the lord who looks down.” The early Chinese translators of Buddhist scriptures apparently based themselves on the alternative form Avalokatasvara (He who sees sounds), and accordingly translated the name as Guanyin (He who contemplates the sounds) or Guanshiyin (He who contemplates the sounds of the world). The famous seventh-century monk and translator Xuanzang (600–664) strongly argued that the correct translation should be

Guanzizai (The lord who contemplates), but despite his scholarly authority this rendering never displaced the earlier translation.⁷ Very little is known about the early veneration of Avalokiteśvara in India before his cult was introduced into China. One theory holds that Avalokiteśvara started out as a protective deity of horses, a theory that would explain the existence of later images in which Avalokiteśvara is crowned with a horse head.⁸

When Buddhism was introduced into China by way of Central Asia from the first century CE onward, it arrived largely in its Mahayana Buddhist form, which had come into being in northern India in the second and first centuries BCE.⁹ Buddhism of earlier centuries may have focused on the historical Buddha Śākyamuni (sixth century BCE?) and his teaching of a method to liberate oneself from suffering by one's own efforts. Buddhism accepted the ancient Indian worldview that every living being is subject to *samsāra*, the endless cycle of reincarnation and retribution. According to this belief, one's life as a demon or a god, an animal or a human being, a man or a woman, on earth or in one of the many heavens and hells is determined by one's deeds (karma) in an earlier existence.¹⁰ Buddhism stressed that each and every existence, even a life as one of the gods, is marked by suffering. The cause of suffering is the attachment to the impermanent phenomenal world by our "ego" or self, which believes itself to be permanent but actually is as impermanent and empty as all other phenomena, as it is only a temporary bundle of elements (dharma). Once the ephemerality of all phenomena is realized, one is freed from attachment, liberated from suffering, and enters into nirvana (extinction/annihilation), never again to be reborn. Those who followed the Buddha's teaching (Dharma) and achieved this superior insight were called arhats. Early Buddhism taught that, if one was truly serious about achieving enlightenment, one had to cut off all social ties to one's family by "leaving the household" and joining the *sangha*, the monastic community of monks and nuns (tradition held that the Buddha had only reluctantly agreed to the establishment of the order of nuns). Although the Buddha condemned extreme forms of ascetic behavior, monks and nuns were expected to relinquish all worldly possessions, adhere to a strict code of moral conduct and physical behavior, and engage in meditation and other religious exercises. Pious laymen and laywomen were encouraged to lead a moral life so as to achieve a better rebirth, in which they might join the mo-

nastic community and achieve enlightenment too. No deed promised more merit than donations to the monks and nuns, who were forbidden to engage in either agriculture or commerce and had to survive by begging.

The biographies of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni tell how he prepared himself for his final life of teaching and liberation over the course of innumerable lifetimes, during which he performed many meritorious deeds of self-sacrifice.¹¹ At one stage in this process toward becoming a buddha, he had received the promise of his future buddhahood from the preceding buddha, Ratnagarbha. As he pursued his pious career through many reincarnations he was called a “bodhisattva,” one who is destined to become a buddha. If early Buddhism focused on this single buddha and bodhisattva, Mahayana taught that in this cosmos, which is made up of innumerable worlds, there exists not just one buddha, but innumerable buddhas, and that, by the same token, innumerable bodhisattvas are preparing themselves for a future buddhahood. Mahayana commends the bodhisattva-path and its goal of future buddhahood as an ideal that all beings should embrace, a goal that is in fact deemed superior to that of an arhat. Eventually Mahayana thinkers would teach that all living beings share the same Buddha-nature and that each has the potential to become a buddha.

Mahayana also taught that some of these innumerable buddhas had dedicated their hard earned merit to the creation of a Pure Land or a world of heavenly bliss. In China none of these Buddha-worlds became more popular than the Pure Land of the Buddha Amitābha, the buddha of the west, who held out the promise of a rebirth in his paradise to each and every believer who called on his name with complete sincerity, even if only once.¹² The cult of Amitābha was often paired with that of Maitreya, the future buddha. Maitreya was believed to be residing in the Tuṣita Heaven, preparing for his descent to the human world, from which he would lead all who had faith in him to final liberation.¹³

Mahayana not only turned buddhas from human teachers into supernatural deities, it turned the buddhas-to-be or bodhisattvas into compassionate saviors, as Mahayana bodhisattvas have taken a vow to put off their final exit from *samsāra* until they have saved each and every sentient being. As a result, Mahayana Buddhism introduced into China a large pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas, all eager to deliver pious men and women.¹⁴ One of the most popular

of these bodhisattvas introduced into China in the early centuries of the first millennium was Avalokiteśvara, although the images of Avalokiteśvara that were introduced into China in the early centuries of the first millennium were far from uniform.

One important and influential early image of Avalokiteśvara was as one of the two assistants of the Buddha Amitābha (the other being Mahāsthāmaprāpta or, in Chinese translation, Dashizhi). The two assistants were often depicted together with Amitābha and shared in his widespread veneration; Avalokiteśvara was often depicted wearing a crown that featured an image of Amitābha.¹⁵ Avalokiteśvara also plays a prominent role in the final section of the *Avatamsaka* or *Flower Garland Sutra* (*Huayan jing*), which narrates the pilgrimage of the young student Sudhana (Shancai, Good-in-Talent), who in his quest for wisdom visits fifty-four teachers. One of the “good friends” who is consulted by Sudhana is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who is portrayed as seated atop the Potalaka Rock at the edge of the world.¹⁶ The pilgrimage of Sudhana became a popular subject in Buddhist iconography and popular literature from an early date.¹⁷ In China for the last thousand years or so, Avalokiteśvara’s Potalaka has been traditionally identified with Mt. Putuo (Putuoshan), a little island in the Zhousan archipelago off the Zhejiang coast near Ningbo. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Mt. Putuo was a major pilgrimage center, and Guanyin was believed to occasionally manifest herself there to ardent believers. Many paintings show “Guanyin of the Southern Sea” seated on her favorite rock, shaded by a willow tree, and contemplating the reflection of the moon in the waves.¹⁸

By far the most influential literary portrait of Avalokiteśvara introduced into China in the early centuries of the first millennium was the one provided by the *Lotus Sutra*.¹⁹ This enormously influential sutra devotes an entire chapter (which also circulated separately as the *Pumen jing* [Sutra on the gate of universal salvation] or *Guanyin jing* [Guanyin sutra]) to the Buddha’s glowing praise of the salvific powers of Avalokiteśvara. According to the Buddha, Avalokiteśvara will come to the rescue of anyone who appeals to him for his aid, whatever the nature of his or her distress. Moreover, the Buddha credits Avalokiteśvara with the ability to manifest himself in whatever shape, male or female, is best for accomplishing his salvific miracles. The *Lotus Sutra* mentions twelve perils from which the bodhisattva will rescue those who call on his

name: being threatened by falling into a great fire or into swift river currents, being shipwrecked on the island of giantesses, being executed by the sword, being attacked by goblins, being locked in manacles or fetters, being assaulted by brigands, being tempted by lust, being in a state of delusion, being threatened by thunderbolts or snakes.²⁰ Aside from these, the bodhisattva was also ready to come to the rescue of those who desired a male or female child, or great wealth.²¹ This portrait of Avalokiteśvara greatly contributed to the popularization of his cult, and from the fifth century onward collections appeared that chronicled the miraculous rescues and cures said to have been effected by the bodhisattva. These miracle accounts only increased in number as time went by.²² To invoke the aid of the bodhisattva people could simply invoke his name, but even better results might be obtained by the repeated devout recitation of the *Pumen jing* or, better still, the complete (and quite long) *Lotus Sutra*. Many sutras would follow in which even greater powers were ascribed to Avalokiteśvara, and which often included magical formulas (*dhāraṇī*) and elaborate rituals designed to ensure his aid.²³

Avalokiteśvara was a popular subject of Buddhist iconography of the first millennium. Usually the bodhisattva was depicted as a richly arrayed, handsome (Indian) prince. Despite the rather feminine curves of his two- or three-dimensional body, the male sex of the bodhisattva is often clearly indicated by a thin moustache. Tantric Buddhism of the Tang dynasty (617–906) resulted in popular images of Avalokiteśvara with numerous heads and hands, symbolic of his omnipresent readiness to come to the aid of his devotees. The most magnificent iconographical type of Avalokiteśvara shows the bodhisattva with “a thousand arms”: the standing bodhisattva is surrounded by “a thousand arms,” each with an open eye in the palm of its hand.²⁴

From the tenth century onward, however, images increasingly depicted Avalokiteśvara in female form, and it is in this female manifestation that the bodhisattva has attained greatest popularity in late-imperial China.²⁵ The female Guanyin was venerated by men, but especially by women. Her power is seen as practically unlimited; while she is nominally subject to the highest deities, whether the Buddha or the Jade Emperor, these never refuse her requests on behalf of her protégés. Modern scholars have been greatly puzzled by the gender change of Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin. But while

the *Lotus Sutra* is clear in stating that Avalokiteśvara may manifest himself as a woman (and so provides scriptural support for depictions of Guanyin in female form), it is a more likely explanation that as Buddhism spread across China and became more and more a truly popular religion, its deities came to replace generic local divinities, including “dragon ladies and rain maidens,”²⁶ often assuming their characteristics. Where Buddhism replaced local cults of goddesses, Avalokiteśvara would be the logical replacement of the local female deity.²⁷ Whereas modern mythology holds that some goddesses are born from a drop of blood of Guanyin,²⁸ it is more likely the other way around: that local goddesses lend their form to Guanyin, whereupon legends sprang up to explain the background of Guanyin’s female transformation. We should not forget that Avalokiteśvara continued to be venerated in his male manifestation too.

One group of legends focuses on Guanyin’s use of her physical charms to convert men to the emptiness of all existence. Buddhism teaches that we can achieve enlightenment through any of the senses, and touch is one of those senses. According to early legends Guanyin manifested herself as a loose woman, willing to give herself to any man if doing so would convert him to the Dharma. In later legends she promises herself in marriage to any man who can meet her demands (for instance, memorizing the *Lotus Sutra*), but as soon as such a man successfully completes the task and happily goes to fetch the young wife he has won for himself, he finds the bridal sedan empty, the sight of which awakens him to the emptiness of all phenomena. One such legend tells of a certain village fated to be destroyed with all its inhabitants because of their accumulated sins. Guanyin obtains permission from the Jade Emperor to make one final attempt to get inhabitants to change their ways.²⁹ She then appears to them as an ugly old fishwife. In this form, she is ignored by all. But in the shape of a pretty young girl, she is immediately surrounded by the men of the village, eager to meet her ever-increasing demands in order to possess her. In the end, a young Mr. Ma succeeds in doing just that, only to discover that his bride has disappeared, leaving Mr. Ma and all the men of the village to realize the illusory nature of all striving and convert to Buddhism. Versions of this legend can be found in a number of literary genres, and Guanyin Carrying a Fish Basket (*Tilan Guanyin*) or The Wife of Mr. Ma (*Malang fu*) became a popular motif in Chinese religious art as well.³⁰ Another common female manifes-

tation of Guanyin was the White-robed Guanyin (*Baiyi Guanyin*). Images of the White-robed Guanyin started to appear from the tenth century onward in Sichuan and Hangzhou. In Hangzhou it was especially the Upper Tianzhu Monastery that was linked to the cult of the White-robed Guanyin. The monastery would in later centuries develop into a major site of Guanyin pilgrimage.³¹ In prints of the Ming and Qing dynasties the Guanyin of the Southern Sea (*Nanhai Guanyin*) is also usually depicted as being dressed in white.³²

The most popular legend to explain the female appearance of the bodhisattva was, however, that of Princess Miaoshan. We can trace the origin of this legend to a very precise time and place. In 1100, Jiang Zhiqi, the prefect of Ruzhou (in modern Henan province), visited the local Incense Mountain Monastery (Xiangshan si). This monastery was famous for its grand statue of Avalokiteśvara with a Thousand Arms and a Thousand Eyes. While Jiang was there, the abbot Huaizhou recounted to him the tale of Princess Miaoshan, which he claimed to have heard from a mysterious monk who had recently visited his monastery. This monk, the abbot claimed, had shown him a book that had been revealed to the monk Daoxuan (596–667), who was famous for his visions. According to this tale, Princess Miaoshan is the youngest daughter of King Miaozhuang of the country of Raised Forest (Xinglin) in the far west (that is, a mythical India). As the king has no sons, he wants his daughters to marry and bear him grandsons to succeed him on the throne. While her two elder sisters are only too eager to marry, Miaoshan stubbornly refuses as she wants to devote herself to spiritual cultivation and escape from *samsāra*. When even the physical hardships she has to endure as a novice at the nearby White Sparrow Convent fail to change her mind, her father has her executed, but she is miraculously saved to pursue a life of religious austerities on Incense Mountain. After this, the king falls ill, afflicted by a foul disease that none of his doctors is able to cure. He is then informed that only the arms and eyes of someone without anger will cure him. When his two eldest daughters refuse to donate their limbs, the king is informed that only the hermit of Incense Mountain would be willing to make such an extreme donation. The king thereupon eats these body parts and is subsequently cured. He then visits Incense Mountain to express his gratitude to the hermit, only to discover that she is none other than his youngest daughter. Overcome

by remorse, he falls to her feet, whereupon she manifests herself as the Avalokiteśvara with a Thousand Arms and a Thousand Eyes, whose statue is venerated in this very monastery. Upon his return, Jiang Zhiqi wrote an account of his visit to the monastery, including a lengthy account of the legend as told to him by the abbot. This account was subsequently inscribed in stone and erected at the monastery.³³

Glen Dudbridge sees this story as a ploy on the part of the local abbot to revive the fortune of his monastery as a pilgrimage site (which may well have suffered from a growing popularity of the cult of the female Guanyin). If that was the abbot's intention, his ploy was successful: the monastery has survived all the vicissitudes of nearly a thousand years and is still in existence, although in an ironic twist of events, it has been taken over by the nuns of the White Sparrow Convent and turned into a convent. While the abbot invoked the authority of the early-Tang monk Daoxuan, we have no reference whatsoever to the tale of Miaoshan from the eleventh century or earlier. The tale would appear to have been concocted from whole cloth by the abbot, who drew heavily from the *Lotus Sutra* for names and motifs.³⁴

When Jiang Zhiqi was appointed as prefect of Hangzhou in 1102, he also had his account inscribed in stone at the local Upper Tianzhu Monastery (famous for its White-robed Guanyin statue), contributing further to the rapid popularization of this legend over many areas of China. Soon the legend was enriched with a description of a visit of Guanyin to the hells following her own execution.³⁵ From later centuries we have many adaptations for the stage and as novels. However, by far the most popular adaptation was *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*.

***The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain:* Authorship and Editions**

The first reference to *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* probably is found in an early-sixteenth-century list of precious scrolls, which mentions a *Scroll of Incense Mountain (Xiangshan zhuan)*.³⁶ The text must have been in circulation in some form or another by the middle of the sixteenth century as it would appear that the adaptation of the legend as a short vernacular novel of the late sixteenth century was based on the precious scroll version. The earliest

surviving printed version, however, dates only from 1773. This edition is representative of the more elaborate version of the text and has as its formal title *Sutra of the Original Life of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin* (*Guanshiyin pusa benxing jing*).³⁷ The editions of the text that date from the second half of the nineteenth century on usually offer a somewhat shorter version of the text and carry the title *Abbreviated Collection of the Sutra of the Original Life of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin* (*Guanshiyin pusa benxing jing jianji*).³⁸

Both the elaborate version and the abbreviated version of the text come with a preface that credits the authorship of the text to the monk Puming of the Upper Tianzhu Monastery near Hangzhou, who, it is said, composed the text after having had a vision of the bodhisattva Guanyin on the night of the fifteenth of the eighth month of the second year of the Chongning reign-period, which corresponds to the year 1103. This would mean that Puming had been inspired to write a prosimetric version of the legend of Miaoshan only a few weeks after Jiang Zhiqi's first visit to Upper Tianzhu Monastery! This coincidence is almost too good to be true. However, research has shown that a monk by the name of Puming was living at the Upper Tianzhu Monastery at the time and that he later rose to the position of abbot there, which suggests that he must have been a man of at least some learning.³⁹ However, he is not a well-known name in the history of Chinese Buddhism, and it is difficult to imagine that a later author or publisher would have tried to enhance the attractiveness of this precious scroll by associating it with such an obscure monk.

Another argument for a relatively early date for *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is that, despite its popular title, there is no reference to itself as a precious scroll within the text itself. The term "precious scroll" (*baojuan*; also translated as "precious volumes") would appear to have become the general designation of Buddhist prosimetric narratives (and of the prosimetric canonical texts of the many new religions of the Ming and Qing dynasties) only from the fifteenth century onward.⁴⁰ On the three occasions when *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* refers to itself, however, it calls itself a "[tale of] cause and conditions" (*yinyuan*) or a "long [tale of] cause and conditions" (*da yinyuan*). As we know from the manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang, so-called *yinyuan* (*nidāna*) texts represent a well-established genre in the Buddhist prosimetric literature of the ninth and tenth centuries. These Dun-

huang *yinyuan* are relatively short texts, composed in alternating passages in prose and verse (both rhymed seven-syllable verse and unrhymed six-syllable verse). A specific feature of the performance of a *yinyuan* text was that at regular intervals the performer would recite the name of a buddha or bodhisattva and then invite his (or her) audience to join in, repeating the invocation. Some of the Dunhuang *yinyuan* deal with the life of the Buddha, but others recount pious legends, often featuring a female protagonist, and there are indications that these texts were written with a primarily female audience in mind.⁴¹ *Yinyuan* texts survived as a genre of Buddhist storytelling into the Southern Song and the Yuan. *Tanchang yinyuan* (strumming and singing tales of cause and conditions) is listed as a variety of Hangzhou storytelling by Zhou Mi in his *Old Things about Hangzhou* (*Wulin jiushi*) of about 1275;⁴² and in chapter 5 of the early novel *The Story of Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*), one of the main protagonists, the large and violence-prone hero Lu Zhishen, claims at one point that while hiding in a monastery at Mt. Wutai, he “learned to narrate tales of cause and condition.”⁴³

The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain is not only much longer than the average Dunhuang *yinyuan* text; it also does not make any use of unrhymed six-syllable verse. It does, however, retain the regular invocation of the name of a bodhisattva, and it features a female protagonist. The main body of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is divided into segments, each of which consists of a passage in rhyming seven-syllable verse followed by a passage in prose; the prose passage then ends with two lines of seven-syllable verse that draw a lesson from the preceding narrative, often couched in religious metaphors, and the segment as a whole is brought to a conclusion by the congregational invocation of the name of the bodhisattva Guanyin.

Whereas the main body of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* shows great similarity to Dunhuang *yinyuan* in formal matters, the text opens and begins with long passages that show characteristics of the *shihua* (tale with poems) format, as we know it from the *Tale of the Reverend Huiyuan of Mt. Lu* (*Lushan Yuangong hua*) discovered at Dunhuang and the *Tale with Poems of Tripitaka of the Great Tang Fetching Sutras* (*Da Tang Sanzang qujing shihua*), which was printed at Hangzhou in the late thirteenth century. Both of these texts are primarily in prose, with the close of each paragraph or major segment marked by a *gātha* (here meaning a four-line

poem on a Buddhist theme) spoken by one of the characters in the text. We find the same arrangement in the opening pages of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, which narrate the miraculous birth of Princess Miaoshan, and then again in the final section, which recounts her apotheosis.⁴⁴

The story as told in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* contains a number of episodes that are absent from the earliest known versions of the legend. It also includes some passages that seem to echo ideas associated with Quanzhen Daoism,⁴⁵ and one of the arguments of King Miaozhuang against Buddhism closely echoes a late-fourteenth-century diatribe against Buddhist monks by the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398). These various facts would seem to support Dudbridge's conclusion that the text as we have it substantially dates from the fifteenth century. Even if it were the case that a twelfth-century monk of the Upper Tianzhu Monastery may have been the author of a prosimetric account of the legend of Miaoshan,⁴⁶ a comparison between the elaborate version and shorter version shows that the text was continuously updated and revised throughout the following centuries, in response to the needs and interests of different groups of users.

The textual changes apparent in the shorter version are decidedly minor for the first one-third of the text. For the most part they are limited to the judicious suppression of verbiage in the verse sections. However, following the arrival of Princess Miaoshan at the White Sparrow Convent, they become more extensive. Following her return from the Underworld, the abbreviations also increasingly start to affect the prose passages. Once King Miaozhuang has arrived at Incense Mountain and has recognized his daughter in the mutilated hermit, the cuts of the editor of the *Abbreviated Collection* become even more drastic. He has very little patience with the many sermons that are found in the elaborate version at this point (although he does retain a long diatribe against sectarian teachings) and makes short shrift of the long (but isolated) description of the association of the bodhisattva Guanyin with Mt. Putuo.

The elaborate version of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, which may have been related to the Putuo pilgrimage, also contains a number of quite explicit anti-clerical passages. When Princess Miaoshan arrives at the White Sparrow Convent, for example, she berates the abbess at length for her luxurious lifestyle. This passage is considerably toned down in the shorter version, which

also omits a detailed description of the panicked reaction of the nuns when the troops sent by King Miaozhuang surround the convent. The shorter version of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* has been edited (perhaps by a local monk or nun connected with the Hangzhou pilgrimage?)⁴⁷ for performance on the birthday of the bodhisattva on the nineteenth of the second month and makes an effort to emphasize the scriptural authority of the text by including at its very beginning a long quote from the *Lotus Sutra* on Guanyin's powers. An interesting aspect of the shorter version is that it includes instructions on how to perform the text (printed in smaller characters in the woodblock editions, and in italics in this translation).⁴⁸

Female Saint and Female Bodhisattva

Scholars have noted that the legend of Miaoshan draws heavily on the *Lotus Sutra* for many names and incidents. As the *Lotus Sutra* is a primary canonical source for the veneration of Avalokiteśvara, this is only to be expected.⁴⁹ Scholars have also noted the folktale motif of the three sisters and the correspondences between the legend of Miaoshan and the story of King Lear.⁵⁰ *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* also exhibits many other folktale motifs. To bring out some until now neglected characteristics of the legend of Miaoshan as retold in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* it may, however, be especially instructive to compare our text to the roughly contemporary European genre of the vernacular verse hagiographies of virgin saints.⁵¹ For practical purposes I shall limit myself here primarily to a comparison of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* with the texts translated and studied by Brigitte Cazelles in *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*.⁵²

In the introduction to her translations, Cazelles concludes that “the saints celebrated in hagiographic romance are the product of a predominantly male discourse that elaborates an idealized representation of female greatness.”⁵³ The same holds true, it may be stressed, for *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*: while it is conventional wisdom that women have constituted its main audience, all people known or believed to have been involved in the production of the text as author or editor were male. Cazelles also notes that the medieval French poets, when dealing with female saints,

showed a “remarkable preference for legends whose storylines involve the disrobing, torturing, cross-dressing, or physical transformations of mute and powerless heroines.”⁵⁴ As not only *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* but many other precious scrolls recounting the lives of pious women demonstrate, their male colleagues from China shared these interests to a large degree.

Cazelles points out that most of her thirteenth-century tales are set in a faraway land and in a distant past. The same is true of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*: the action takes place in the mythical country of Raised Forest, somewhere to the far west of China in a time long past. In the case of the medieval French hagiographies one might argue that this setting is historically required inasmuch as many texts describe the confrontation of a virgin saint and a pagan tyrant. This situation does not apply, however, to *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*: our heroine is not shown in opposition to a long since displaced superstitious creed; rather, she refuses to submit to the demands of a commonly accepted social ideology that, very generally speaking, might be called popular Confucianism. More important may be the consideration that the heroines in hagiographic romances are not intended as direct models for emulation in daily life: “the audiences of vernacular hagiographic texts . . . were not asked to imitate the saint.”⁵⁵ The texts were rather intended to deepen the popular expression of piety toward the saint.

“To be a saint, one must be born noble, handsome, courteous, wise and devout.”⁵⁶ Virgin saints tend to be of aristocratic birth, to be exceedingly beautiful and precociously intelligent, and to display a remarkable piety from a very early age. The Chinese Miaoshan is no exception: she is the third daughter of a king, exceptionally gifted, and from birth inclined toward a religious lifestyle. “The basic saintly storyline revolves around the encounter between the heroine and a male protagonist, the result of which is an emphasis on the relation between genders.”⁵⁷ In the French hagiographic romances studied by Cazelles, the male protagonist may be a suitor, a father, a tyrant, or the devil in person. While the heroine prefers to remain a virgin as the bride of Christ, the male protagonists often urge her to marry, and promise her great riches. In the case of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, all these different male roles are exemplified by the figure of the king, who combines in a single person the highest parental, political, and ideological authority.

While he does not go so far as to set himself up as her suitor, his insistence that she marry a husband who will live with her at home in the palace brings him dangerously close to filling that role as well.

In many French hagiographic romances the male protagonist is portrayed as a hated tyrant while the virgin saint enjoys the sympathy of everyone else; this is not the case in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. Miaoshan does not have the outspoken or silent support of her surroundings in her fight against the male protagonist. As her father is the representative of authority and as such represents (Confucian) common sense, he can draw upon the support of all segments of the court.⁵⁸ When his promises and threats are unable to sway his stubborn daughter, others who appeal to her common sense replace him. Miaoshan finds herself confronted at one time or another by her mother, her elder sisters, all of the palace ladies, the prioress of the White Sparrow Convent, and the assembled civil and military officials. Only the common folk who live in the city consistently sympathize with her.⁵⁹ This may well be an indication of the intended audience of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*.

Cazelles stresses at various points the silence of the victims, despite including in her corpus of texts the story of St. Catherine, whose eloquent words were said to have left dumbfounded fifty philosophers. In fact, many of the other virgin saints she describes are quite outspoken in their declarations of faith. They are of course not great theologians, but then theological nitpicking is not always an indication of deep faith. Still, when compared to the French hagiographic romances, *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* allows much more space for debates between the representatives of common sense and the representative of religious aspiration, Miaoshan. "In the first half of the story, ending with Miao-shan's execution, the effect is a series of incidents (the refusal to marry—the punishment in the palace garden—the entry to the threatened monastery—the return to the palace) punctuating an endless, agonized dialogue between Miao-shan and her baffled family."⁶⁰ In these dialogues, all the well-known arguments in favor of a married life and against a religious career and a monastic existence are paraded out, as Miaoshan's dialogue partners alternately stress the joys of palace life, appeal to classical authority, describe the sufferings of a monastic existence, and bring out all the conventional Chinese arguments against Buddhism.

The author of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* does not for a moment assume that Miaoshan's choice will have the automatic support of either her kith and kin or of his audience. Miaoshan has a lot of explaining to do. While her opponents sing the praises of a life of luxury and indulgence, Miaoshan counters by stressing the transience of human life and the inevitability of death and the karmic punishments that will inevitably follow. While the virgin saints look forward to the blessings of heaven where they will be united with their heavenly groom (blessings that are often described in titillating physical detail), Miaoshan's positive motivation is highly abstract. Nevertheless, one finds references to a heavenly marriage, if only in an ironic way. When her father orders her to marry and asks her what kind of husband she would prefer, she replies that she will not marry unless he can find her a physician who can cure all the ills of the world—the Buddha. Miaoshan may ask for such a husband, but it is clear that nowhere in the world will her father be able to find him. And when, after her return from the Underworld, the god of the Morning Star in the guise of a Daoist hermit jokingly suggests to her that they devote themselves to religious exercises as a couple, she indignantly rejects his proposal. Miaoshan does not aspire to be the Buddha's bride, and she certainly does not want to preserve her virginity merely for his sake: she rejects all physical comforts, including the pleasures of the flesh. Rather, Miaoshan asserts her (near) equality with the Buddha as his younger sister.⁶¹

Although it is true that the dialogues between Miaoshan and her interlocutors take up much of the text, one should note that the author has taken care to include speakers of both sexes and from different social classes. While Miaoshan usually remains respectful when she replies to her parents, she is much more direct when she counters the arguments of her sisters and the other palace ladies, and she is downright sarcastic when she addresses her social inferiors, such as the prioress and her father's officials. These contrasting attitudes adopted by Miaoshan may have provided a skilled narrator ample opportunity to enliven his performance. One of the very first instructions to the performer in the shorter version reads "It is essential to imitate the sounds of suffering, joy, and sadness" (*kule aiyin xuyao xiangxiang*), although this could also be translated as "It is essential to imitate suffering and joy, sadness and accents."⁶² It also may be noted in passing that while the editor of

the shorter version considerably softened Miaoshan's harsh castigation of the prioress of the White Sparrow Convent, he apparently felt no qualms about retaining the full text of the sarcastic put-down of the officials.

When the massive social pressure of all the appeals to common sense, all the promises, and all the threats are still not enough to make Miaoshan give in to her father, action has to follow. "Suffering," writes Cazelles, "is presented as a prerequisite for the attainment of sainthood. Forced exposure, forced enclosure, accusation, tortures, and death at the stake are integral components of our narratives."⁶³ *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* exhibits all these elements. First Miaoshan is locked up in the flower garden behind the palace. Next, when Miaoshan is allowed to take up residence at the White Sparrow Convent, she is burdened with the impossible task of taking care of all the physical needs of the five hundred nuns in the convent. She does not for a moment shrink from her duties, and immediately animals and gods come to her rescue. When the king is informed of these miracles, he decides to have the convent burned down. This time Miaoshan intervenes with a miracle of her own: stabbing her palate with a hairpin, she spits out blood, which turns into a red rain that quenches the fire. The king, convinced now that his daughter is a witch, condemns her to death, and orders her execution.

Elizabeth Robertson in her 1991 article "The Corporeality of Female Sanctity in *The Life of Saint Margaret*,"⁶⁴ treating a medieval English hagiography, reaches many of the same conclusions as Cazelles. She places an even stronger emphasis on the centrality of sexual temptation in the female saint's experience and is more explicit in spelling out the sexual symbolism of some of the images in her text. She notes her author's "obsessive interest in the physical torture of the female saint" and argues that his "interest may be linked... to his focus on female sexual temptation."⁶⁵ She further notes that "the focus on female blood seems to reflect a male fascination with and horror of female blood."⁶⁶ While in other precious scrolls on devout Buddhist women, for instance the many retellings of the legend of Woman Huang, the inherent impurity of sexually active women because of their menstrual bleedings and loss of blood during childbirth is often stressed,⁶⁷ this issue is not explicitly raised in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. This may well be because Miaoshan remains a (presumably prepubescent) virgin,

whereas Woman Huang is depicted as a married woman and a mother of two children, who renounces all sexual intercourse as soon as she learns about the pollution she involuntarily but inescapably causes. When Miaoshan does shed blood, she does so with a self-inflicted and inverted “defloration,” which turns her (potentially polluting) blood into a life-saving rain.⁶⁸

In the earliest known versions of the legend of Miaoshan, the burning of the White Sparrow Convent brings about the death (and subsequent resurrection) of the protagonist. In a following phase in the development of the legend, represented by the *Life of the Mahā-sattva Guanyin (Guanyin dashi zhuan)*, a text associated with the name of Guan Daosheng (1262–1319), Miaoshan visits purgatory and the hells before coming back to life.⁶⁹ The introduction of this element has attracted the attention of scholars, many of whom regard it as closely connected to the function of Guanyin in the Pudu festival of feeding the hungry ghosts (there are also precious scrolls of a later date solely devoted to the description of Guanyin’s visit to the Underworld).⁷⁰ However, the introduction of a separate scene devoted to her execution in that text may well be equally meaningful. The scene of the execution of Miaoshan and the events leading up to it are greatly developed in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. In a final attempt to change Miaoshan’s mind, in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* the king (at the suggestion of the queen!) decides to have her brought back to the capital and led through its streets as a condemned criminal, naked and in shackles, while her parents and relatives watch from specially erected decorated grandstands, in a conspicuous display of luxury and enjoyment. In this scene we encounter the stress on corporeality and visibility that Cazelles sees as one of the most important elements of her hagiographic romances.⁷¹ Miaoshan’s public humiliation perfectly illustrates the following characterization by Cazelles of the medieval French verse hagiographies: “Exposure of the female martyr, therefore, implies an involuntary projection onto center stage. Revelation . . . implicates the concrete disrobing of the heroine.”⁷² Cazelles notes that such a forced exposure and public disrobing is endured by every one of the female martyrs in her study and so may be seen as an essential episode in their legends. In the description of Miaoshan’s humiliation in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, it is clear that although Miaoshan herself hardly pays any attention to the displays of worldly pleasures, she is very much

the object of the gaze of the whole population of the capital, from emperor to common citizen.

At the very last moment, however, the execution of Miaoshan is postponed for one day, and she is once again locked up in the garden of the palace. After a series of visits by the queen, her sisters, and the palace ladies, none of whom succeed in changing her mind, her father comes to visit her at midnight in her prison cell, where he appeals to her one last time. Cazelles describes the function of forced enclosure in her texts in the following terms: “The narrowing of space experienced by the women martyrs . . . serves to stress the intimate, and therefore dangerous, dimension of the encounter between heroines and tormentors. Temporary imprisonment . . . is a narrative device that amplifies the erotic element inherent in these stories.” And she adds, “In Passions devoted to persecuted daughters (Christina and Barbara), enclosure is an ordeal imposed by incest-minded fathers who become tyrants out of sexual frustration.”⁷³ Many of these elements have their counterpart in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. Miaoshan’s father is described as a typical tyrant who flies into a rage if his orders are not immediately obeyed. He can also be said to suffer sexual frustration as he has been unable to sire a son, despite the number of his concubines; his behavior toward Miaoshan is certainly overly possessive, and it is not difficult to detect incestuous motives in his behavior and language—his repeated reference, for example, to his daughter as “a slut” (*dizi*) and “a she-devil” (*yaojing*). During his nighttime visit to his naked and shackled daughter in her cell, he describes to her the pleasures of the flesh in great detail. And even if we grant that the father himself may not be aware of the full implications of his complex and strong emotions toward his daughter, his daughter is fully aware of her father’s unconscious intentions and repulses his advances in the terms that leave little room for doubt:

When Marvelous Goodness heard this, she replied: “My father the emperor, dear daddy, you are misled and deluded and unenlightened, and your perverse heart is all ablaze. This is not the behavior of a lord and emperor in possession of the Way! Daddy, you are the ruler of the myriads of people, the lord of the whole nation. If you cannot control your family, how can you control the nation? If you are a

Son of Heaven and an emperor of men, in possession of the Way, how would you, a father, ever think of entering this side palace at midnight, in the third watch,⁷⁴ and urge your daughter to marry a husband? How would it look if the world came to know of this?⁷⁵

On the surface the legend of Miaoshan tells a Buddhist moral romance of filial piety, the tale of a girl who eventually sacrifices herself for the sake of her father, even to the point of allowing him to eat her flesh.⁷⁶ Underlying *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, however, is the hidden horror story of the patriarchal family, the tale of the father who tries to impose his will on his daughter. When Miaoshan's father appeals to her sense of duty and filial piety in order to convince her to take a husband who will live with them in the palace, he is making an extraordinary demand. The normal behavior of a father as head of the family is to sire a son who as his heir will continue the ancestral sacrifices, and to allow his daughters to leave the family so they may bear children to other patriline. So when the king fails in his own filial duty to sire a son (a failure that, according to *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, is a punishment for his inordinate attachment to hunting), he experiences this as a great sorrow and falls into a deep depression. He does not immediately conclude that the problem can be solved by having his daughters marry an in-living son-in-law who will give him a grandson. As adoption is considered to be unnatural and therefore fraught with danger,⁷⁷ the king has to be persuaded to pursue this course of action by his officials. But as soon as the king as father makes this unnatural demand on the bodies of his three daughters, he is confronted by one daughter who not only wants to leave the family but, equally unnaturally, wants to do so not in order to marry into another patriline, but to pursue her own individual salvation. She refuses to allow her father to dispose of her person.⁷⁸ If the king can be seen to impose an extraordinary and therefore unnatural degree of control on his daughter, the daughter displays an equally extraordinary and uncommon desire to free herself from such familial constraints. As such, both become extremes of male and female will and desire. While the father goes to the extreme of symbolic rape (torching the convent) and seduction (the midnight visit to his daughter's cell), the daughter counters with her unnatural auto-defloration. And while her father is unable to

have her killed by the sword, she allows herself to be suffocated. The introduction of the execution episode into the legend of Miaoshan and its lengthy development in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, therefore, serve to make explicit the issues of gender and sexuality, which are only implied in the earliest version of the legend. The emphasis on the contrast between the king and the princess as male and female is strengthened in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* by the frequent use of the word “dragon” (*long*) as an adjective for the king and by the association of Miaoshan with the tiger: on two occasions Miaoshan is shown to ride that symbol of death and female sexuality.

Miaoshan is not only a martyr; she claims near equality with the Buddha as his younger sister, and her story therefore goes beyond that of a virgin martyr. As she is a savior, her birth is miraculous, and her death only a stage in her spiritual career. Her death as a martyr, however, is not yet self-sacrifice on behalf of others. It may be followed by a harrowing of hell and a resurrection (as her soul reenters her dead body and brings it back to life), but the self-sacrifice by feeding her own flesh to the worst sinner still has to take place. So when her father is punished for his evil-doing by a terrible disease (inspiring one of the most gruesome descriptions of illness in all of Chinese literature)⁷⁹ and all his servants and relatives have forsaken him (with the exception of his wife), Guanyin offers up her own eyes and arms to him to consume as medicine.⁸⁰ This act of self-sacrifice is again explained by a reference to filial piety, but it is followed by a lengthy exposition by Miaoshan on her father's many sins. Only after she has sacrificed her eyes and limbs for the worst sinner of them all (who happens to be her father) and has been reduced to a blind and bloody trunk can her apotheosis finally take place.

This extensive comparison of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* and the medieval hagiographic romance has shown some remarkable parallels. While *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* puts more emphasis on social pressure and less on virginity as such than the female saints' lives, it shares with them to a large extent the basic outline of the story and its emphasis on the corporeality of the heroine, culminating in a scene of forced public disrobing of the aristocratic virgin. *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* also shares with its medieval European counterparts an emphasis on issues of gender and sexuality, pitting male lust

against a female desire to be the sole mistress of her own body. But while the Christian saint was pitted against a long since displaced pagan religion, Miaoshan had to deal with a conventional morality that was very much alive and had the full backing of society and the state. Further, while the role of the saints was constrained by a centralized Christian theology, Miaoshan had the room to develop into a universal savior. In fact, her story also acquired elements that in the Christian tradition are associated with Christ, such as the harrowing of hell, the resurrection, and the sacrifice of the body for the sake of others. While it is tempting to discern signs of cross-cultural influence, there is no clear evidence of any direct influence in either direction.

Filial Daughter and Filial Son

The comparison between *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* and medieval hagiographies of female saints has helped to highlight the sexual tension between father and daughter in this text. The romance of filial piety turned upon closer reading into the horror story of the patriarchal family. As a story of the sexually loaded tension between father and daughter we might classify the legend of Miaoshan as a Chinese representative of a universal family-complex tale. Recognizing the legend of Miaoshan as an instance of the family-complex tale would go a long way in filling the almost total absence of Chinese examples in *Oedipus Ubiquitous: The Family Complex in World Folk Literature* by Allen W. Johnson and Douglass Price-Williams.⁸¹ As the authors claim that the family-complex tales are universal, the fact that Chinese culture is represented in their study by a single obscure joke should at least have given them occasion for thought.⁸² While the authors argue that the expression of the incestuous desires within the family tends to be more hidden in more complex societies, our examples from both ends of the Eurasian continent should go a long way to show that in the case of the father-daughter relationship this euphemistic veneer is very thin indeed.

We might therefore be tempted to read the legend of Miaoshan as an ahistorical reflection of the tensions inherent in the patriarchal family in China. Furthermore, when looking for a Chinese parallel for the Oedipus tale of incestuous desire between mother and son, we might be inspired by Alan Cole's monograph *Mothers and*

Sons in Chinese Buddhism and identify the legend of Mulian as such.⁸³ “Buddhists in China developed a style of filial piety that was preoccupied with the mother. . . . The Buddhists aimed their filial piety discourse at sons and not at daughters. . . . A mother-son dyad came to headline Buddhist family values.”⁸⁴ The legend of Mulian presents us with a family in which the father is absent and in which the relationship between mother and son is extremely close. In the fully developed version of the legend, the mother’s sin is her sexuality as such, and the son realizes that by being born he is implicated in his mother’s sexuality (if she had not given in to sinful desire, he would not have been born in the first place). “Mu Lian is a living evidence of his mother’s sexuality.”⁸⁵ This is why even to this day in at least some areas of China, sons are required by tradition to atone for their deceased mother’s sinful sexuality by drinking the (ritual equivalent of) her menstrual blood as part of the funerary ritual.⁸⁶

But whereas the patriarchal family would appear to have been a permanent fixture of Chinese civilization, the legend of Mulian took a longer time to develop.⁸⁷ As the study of Alan Cole makes clear, in order to develop it first had to establish the sinfulness of female sexuality. Whereas male sexuality continued to be seen as pure, female sexuality was increasingly viewed as inherently sinful.

A man is not really to blame for his desires because he is the victim of sexual predation. It is the goblins, themselves consumed by desire, who try to lure men away from their duties as well as from their parents and the obligations owed to them. . . . Buddhist men are again cast as pure, upright types who are in charge of culture, while women are dangerous non-human beings who are outside the system and intent on ruining both it and the men who dominate it.⁸⁸

Their sinfulness is reified by their uterine blood, which is a defilement of the gods. Because of her menstrual bleeding and the pains of parturition, a woman is considered to be a denizen of hell not only after her death, but even while she is still alive. Cole traces the developments of these conceptions in popular Chinese Buddhism from the medieval period to the Song, culminating in the composition of the *Blood-Bowl Sutra* (*Xuepen jing*) by the twelfth century.⁸⁹ I would argue that the legend of Miaoshan could only have emerged

once the notion of the sinfulness of female sexuality had been firmly established. I read Miaoshan's repeatedly expressed fear of death and of the punishments of hell as well as her refusal to marry as an expression of her fear of her own female, and therefore sinful, sexuality.⁹⁰

The patriarchal family is confronted with a dilemma. To ensure its survival, it needs fertile women from outside the family, but at the same time it fears the potentially disruptive power of these women's sexuality. To obtain daughters from outside for his own sons, the father has to give away his own daughters. So to obtain a grandson and fulfill his own duty to the patriline, a father must force his daughters to give up their virginity and engage in sexuality, or in other words, to sin.⁹¹ This is basically the situation that is presented in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*: to assure himself of an heir, the king insists on the marriage of his daughters. But by causing his daughter to sin, the father commits a sin for which he must suffer the karmic consequences, in this case the rotting away of his diseased body.

Some women, fired by desire, eagerly agree to sin—and thereby assure themselves of the sufferings of hell. If a woman refuses to sin by denying her sexuality, she is by that very act freed from hell—the powers of the Underworld have no hold over her (this applies even when a married woman decides to forgo sex, as demonstrated in the case of Woman Huang)—and she may be said to have subverted hell itself. The sinning father can be saved only if a daughter is willing to selflessly, without anger or desire, give her body away, as in the case of the hermit.

The legend of Princess Miaoshan has often been interpreted as a charter for opposing marriage. There is no doubt that it was used as such.⁹² I would argue, however, that it may also be read as a guide to marriage under the conditions of the sinfulness of female sexuality: a woman behaves without sin and virtuously, as a filial daughter, not if she agrees to marriage because of her own lustful desire, but rather if she agrees of her own free will to make a sacrifice of her own body for the sake of her father's well-being and the continuity of his patriline. By this act of hers, her father is retroactively freed from the sin of forcing her to sin, and the patriline can be vigorously continued. In this respect, the final healing of her father's illness is indeed the crowning episode in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*; from that moment both father and daughter

may ascend to heaven.⁹³ *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* may therefore also be seen, despite its surface narrative, as a tract designed to persuade daughters to accept marriage, to accept being sacrificed for the sake of the patriarchal family. It is for this reason, I would suggest, that the virgin Guanyin can also be a bestower of sons.⁹⁴

The existence and widespread popularity of the legend of Mulian and the legend of Princess Miaoshan might be taken as proofs of the universality of the family-complex tale. However, the origin and development of these two legends during a specific period in Chinese history may also be taken as arguments against the universality of the family-complex tale. I would argue that only after the establishment of the patriarchal family at all levels of Chinese society could these tales have acquired their massive importance. In this respect one could easily point to developments in Song-dynasty (960–1278) society (such as the strengthening of lineage organization and the rise of neo-Confucianism) as explanations for the rise of these legends. On the other hand, one could also cite the spread of these legends as proof of the growing importance of the patriarchal family outside elite circles. In any case, the historicity of the development of these legends is an undeniable fact and so would seem to deny the universality of the family romance.

The development of the Mulian legend (and the subsequent development of the legend of Miaoshan), in accordance with historical changes from the Tang to the Song, has a close parallel in the development of the legend of Shun, China's primordial filial son. The various early versions of the legend of Shun have recently been revisited by Robert G. Henricks in "The Three-bodied Shun and the Completion of Creation."⁹⁵ In this article, Henricks argues that the legend of the filial son Shun may be interpreted as a reworking of an ancient creation myth, in which first the fire of heaven has to be dominated by elevating heaven, and next the waters of the earth have to be regulated. Only after these two feats have been successfully carried out can the third feat—agriculture—be instituted. Henricks sees a parallel between Shun's escape from the top of a burning barn by floating down by means of two winnowing baskets and legends of men who become birds and elevate the sky. In passing, Henricks remarks that in the early versions of the tale he studies, Shun's stepmother plays only a minor role in the machinations against Shun.⁹⁶

Henricks has not included in his consideration of variants of the legend of Shun the most extensive treatment of these materials, the *Tale of the Son Shun* (*Shunzi bian*), one of the texts discovered among the Dunhuang manuscripts together with the *Tale of Maudgalyāyana Saving His Mother from the Dark Realm* (*Da Muqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen*) and most likely of roughly the same date.⁹⁷ In this version of the tale of Shun, the stepmother plays a very prominent part indeed. While she is said to hate Shun, she also attempts to seduce him during her husband's absence (or at least she tries to create the impression that he is flirting with her when she asks him to remove a thorn from her foot). Later she accuses Shun of having tried to rape her.⁹⁸ Once she has convinced her husband of Shun's sins, she first hatches the plots to burn Shun while he is repairing the barn and then to kill him with stones when he is down in the well. In this way, the unnaturally close relationship between heaven and earth in the reconstructed early myth is, in this Tang-dynasty version of the tale, replaced by the equally unnatural desire of a (step)mother for her son. It seems a safe assumption that in this version the burning barn no longer represents the scorching heat of a heaven that lies too close to the earth, but rather the unnatural desire of the stepmother. After all, fire as a symbol for desire is one of the oldest tropes in Chinese literature. The basic configuration of characters in the *Tale of the Son Shun* now is very close to the one in the fully developed Mulian legend: an absent husband, a filial son, and a sinful (step)mother.

If the growth and spread of the Mulian legend may have been a precondition for the rise of the legend of Miaoshan, the narrative of the *Tale of the Son Shun* offers a remarkable structural parallel to the legend of Miaoshan as told in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. Whereas Shun is pursued by his (step)mother, Miaoshan must live in fear of her father's desires. Whereas Shun escapes from a burning barn, Miaoshan is almost engulfed by flames when her father torches the White Sparrow Convent. When Shun is trapped in the family well, a dragon bores a tunnel for him to the well of a neighbor's house, a journey below the surface of the earth, which may be said to be equivalent to Miaoshan's visit to the Yellow Springs.⁹⁹ Both then retire to the wilds of a mountain, where they enjoy the help of animals and achieve supernatural powers (Shun establishes his unique qualifications as king by being the only one to reap a bountiful harvest; Miaoshan through her religious exer-

cises achieves buddhahood). Once they have acquired these powers, they return to the world to secretly assist their families, who are being punished for their former evil deeds by sickness and poverty. By feeding their families with the products of their achievement, Shun and Miaoshan show their magnanimity and manifest their power in all its glory.

I do not intend to suggest that *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* at any stage modeled itself on the *Tale of the Son Shun*. *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is a much more developed story than the occasionally clumsy *Tale of the Son Shun*. Moreover, the ideological orientation of these two texts is diametrically opposed: if Miaoshan is the epitome of Buddhism, Shun as the future emperor is the exemplar of Confucianism: as soon as he has a chance, he retreats to his room to study the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety*. But a few incidents in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* do seem to echo some in the *Tale of the Son Shun*. For instance, the dragon that digs a tunnel for Shun reappears in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, where he bores a well for Miaoshan after she is ordered to do all the kitchen work in the White Sparrow Convent. But it is especially the structural parallels that I find striking. One wonders to what extent this common pattern may reflect an ancient tradition of shamanistic initiation (domination of desire, of fire and water, voluntary death, and solitary retirement to a mountain).

The legend of Mulian incorporates some of these same structural elements: searching for his mother Mulian three times ascends to heaven and three times descends into hell, acquiring greater powers with each journey. We reencounter the fires of passion in the thirst and fire Mulian's mother has to suffer as a hungry ghost. But Mulian's final descent into hell is not followed by a period of seclusion in the wilds—although one might argue that it has been removed to the beginning of the story, when Mulian leaves home for a long business trip, thus unwittingly providing his mother with an opportunity to sin. However, while the basic configuration of characters in the Mulian legend closely resembles that of the *Tale of the Son Shun*, the development of the story may well show a greater structural parallel to the narrative “The Count of Zheng Defeats Duan in Yan” (Zhengbo ke Duan yu Yan) from the *Zuozhuan* (Duke Yin, year 1). As part of the *Zuozhuan* this story is usually treated as sober historiography, but perhaps it is better treated as

myth. This story held a strange fascination for traditional (male) Chinese readers; in later ages it figured as the first selection of the *Epitome of Ancient Prose (Guwen guanzhi)*, though it could hardly function as a model for prose essays.

“The Count of Zheng Defeats Duan in Yan” tells the story of a man who is willing to go down to the Underworld to be reunited with his sinful mother, whom he had imprisoned. Although the sin of the mother is not explicitly identified as sexual in nature, it clearly has sexual overtones. She is said to hate her eldest son because of the pain he caused her at birth and to love her younger son because his birth was much easier. When later the younger son rebels against his elder brother, his mother promises to open the gates of the capital for him. In this way, her transgressive love for her (younger) son threatens the proper order of both the family and the state. After the rebellion has been suppressed, her elder son has her locked up and swears that he will not see her again unless it is at the Yellow Springs (i.e., after death). When later one of his dinner guests refuses to eat the best part of his food because he wants to take it home to his mother, the count is filled with regret and with longing for his own mother. At the suggestion of his guest, he has a deep tunnel dug and meets with his mother below the earth. If the artificiality of the tunnel suggests a ritual scenario, the contemporary southern Chinese ritual of the smashing of the City of Hell by the filial son as part of the burial rites for a mother may well have a very long history indeed.¹⁰⁰

The Count of Zheng did not rely on a higher instance, secular or divine, to punish his mother; he ordered her imprisonment on his own authority. Cole argues that deep down it is Mulian himself who punishes his mother for her sin of sexuality.¹⁰¹ In the same way, one may well wonder whether Miaoshan isn't responsible for causing her father's disease: it is her memories of the White Sparrow Convent that cause the Buddha to punish the king by his disease. The Count of Zheng needs the example of a filial son to change his mind and forgive his mother. In *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* the queen facilitates the reconciliation between father and daughter. The queen, who is given a prominent role in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, is both the only one to stay with her husband during his foul illness and the first to suspect that the “hermit of Incense Mountain” may be her own daughter. Later, although Miaoshan refuses to disclose her identity to her father,

despite his formal display of gratitude, she reveals her identity to her mother, when the latter washes her wounds. But whereas Miaoshan may demonstrate her exceptional character as a saint by her willingness to donate her limbs to a father she will go on to berate at length for his moral turpitude, her mother shows herself to be a truly compassionate human being. Miaoshan may show what one may be capable of if, transcending all attachments, one frees oneself of all anger, but her mother demonstrates the strength of a love that grows from attachment. That may be why *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* in its final pages devotes quite some space to the king's future buddhahood but has nothing further to say about the queen.

Guanyin's Acolytes: *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl*

In popular iconography of the Ming and Qing dynasties the White-robed Guanyin is often accompanied by two young acolytes, one male and one female. While triads of deities are common in medieval Chinese Buddhist iconography, it is not usual to find a buddha or bodhisattva accompanied by both a male and a female disciple. For instance, on a Northern Song-dynasty painting from Dunhuang, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Avalokiteśvara is still accompanied by a *shan tongzi* (youth [keeping track] of good deeds) and an *e tongzi* (youth [keeping track] of evil deeds).¹⁰² Many scholars therefore assume that the representation of Guanyin with one male and one female acolyte was inspired by the iconography of the Jade Emperor, the highest deity in the traditional Chinese pantheon, who is often accompanied by the Golden Lad and the Jade Maiden. However, irrespective of their ultimate origin, Guanyin's acolytes soon became identified as Shancai (Good-in-Talent, Sudhana) and Longnü (Nāgakanyā, Dragon Daughter).¹⁰³

Both Shancai and Longnü have a well-established scriptural pedigree. The same *Lotus Sutra* that in chapter 25 elaborates on the miraculous powers of Avalokiteśvara devotes a large part of chapter 12 to a description of the precocious wisdom of Dragon Girl. She is there described as the eight-year-old daughter of the Dragon King Sāgara; she achieves instantaneous enlightenment and offers a pearl to the Buddha.¹⁰⁴ While the *Lotus Sutra* does not

explicitly connect her to Guanyin, other sutras have her offer her pearl to Avalokiteśvara.

The adventures of Sudhana fill the final chapter of the *Flower Garland Sutra*: in search of enlightenment the young Sudhana visits fifty-four teachers. The story of his pilgrimage originally constituted an independent work, known as the *Gandavyūha*. In the twenty-eighth episode of his pilgrimage, Sudhana visits Avalokiteśvara at Potalaka.¹⁰⁵ The story of the pilgrimage of Sudhana became very popular in China during the Song dynasty, when it was adapted and circulated in small and amply illustrated devotional booklets, one page devoted to each of Sudhana's "good friends."¹⁰⁶

Shancai and Longnü make a nice contrasting couple. Whereas his long pilgrimage makes him a perfect example of gradual enlightenment, she (a female child with an animal nature) dramatically represents sudden enlightenment. However, no canonical scriptural source connects both of them at the same time to Guanyin. The first work to explain how the two of them became disciples of Guanyin is the short sixteenth-century "novel" *Complete Tale of Guanyin of the Southern Seas (Nanhai Guanyin quanzhuan)*, itself a rewriting of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*.¹⁰⁷ In chapter 18 of the novel, after Princess Miaoshan/the bodhisattva Guanyin has achieved enlightenment and retired to Mt. Putuo, she needs disciples. Shancai, in his search for enlightenment, presents himself. To test his resolve, Guanyin has the trees and plants on Mt. Putuo turn into brigands who threaten to kill them. When she jumps from a cliff to escape them, Shancai immediately follows her example. When they have reascended the cliff, she tells him to look down, and at the foot of the cliff Shancai sees his mortal remains.

When next Guanyin learns that the third son of the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean while swimming about as a carp has been captured by fishermen, she orders Shancai to go and buy the prince in order to set him free again. When the Dragon King orders his son to take a pearl to Guanyin as a token of gratitude, the prince's daughter steps forward and volunteers to go in place of her father; after she has offered the pearl to Guanyin, she stays with the bodhisattva as her disciple.¹⁰⁸ Only a few elements of the scriptural sources have been retained by the novel, in which the legends have been reduced to a minimum.¹⁰⁹

In the *Complete Tale of Guanyin of the Southern Seas* the legend

of Shancai and Longnü occupies only a single chapter. From a later (eighteenth- or nineteenth-century?) date, however, we also have a short precious scroll that is completely devoted to their legend and that provides a new and much more developed story. This text, *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl*, is known in a woodblock edition of 1912. It has been mentioned in passing in a number of studies on the popular veneration of Guanyin,¹¹⁰ but it merits a more extended discussion in its own right. Within its genre it is a well-crafted work, and the story it tells shows many and unexpected ramifications to other popular legends.

The text of *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* occupies twenty-nine folios, each single page consisting of nine columns of twenty characters each.¹¹¹ The text opens with a conventional four-line poem in which the audience of believers is admonished to attend to the performance of the precious scroll that is about to begin with utmost reverence, as such an attitude will confer great blessings. The story is then told in alternating prose and verse. Both the prose and the verse sections vary considerably in length. The verse passages are written almost exclusively in seven-syllable verse, the staple of prosimetric literature. Occasionally, a seven-syllable line may be preceded by a three-character extrametrical phrase. Only in one short passage, in which Guanyin provides a description of meditation techniques to Sudhana/Shancai/Good-in-Talent, does the text make use of an alternation of lines of six syllables (two times three) and of seven syllables (pp. 22a–23a).

The story of *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* is set in the Qianfu reign-period (874–879) of the Tang dynasty. The virtuous minister Chen Debao and his wife, lady Han, are still childless and are getting older with each passing year. When Chen refuses his wife's suggestion to take a concubine, she then suggests that they pray to Guanyin. Guanyin, who knows that the couple is destined to remain without descendants, nevertheless orders a Boy Who Brings Wealth (Zhaocai tongzi) to be born into the family, so he may save his parents by his example. Lady Han thereupon becomes pregnant and eventually gives birth to a boy, who is named Chen Lian, but she dies when he is only five years old.

Even as a child, Chen Lian is interested not in the study of civil or military affairs, but only in the pursuit of religious truth. When he is seven, his father gives in to his pleas and allows him to study

under the Yellow Dragon Immortal (Huang Long zhenren) at the Hemp Lady Grotto-Heaven (Magu dongtian).¹¹² Here Chen Lian, now called Shancai/Good-in-Talent, gladly accepts all the tasks assigned to him by his master, but whenever his father invites him to return home for a visit, Shancai, who has left the household, refuses to go.

When the sixtieth birthday of his father approaches, Chen Lian is invited home once again. His teacher leaves on some business, and in his loneliness Chen Lian decides to visit his father just this once since it is very special occasion. As soon as he starts down the mountain, he hears a voice crying out for help; the voice turns out to be that of a snake that has been locked up in a bottle for eighteen years. Shancai releases the snake from the bottle, but as soon as he does so, it turns into a huge monster that threatens to devour him. When Shancai protests at this unseemly behavior, the snake makes the argument that it is the way of the world that a favor is repaid by a feud. However, it agrees to submit their disagreement to the judgment of three persons.

Shancai first comes across an old man who is an incarnation of the Golden Buffalo Star, who sides with the snake in view of his own experiences at the hands of man. They next meet with an old Daoist priest, who also sides with the snake. This Daoist priest turns out to be Master Zhuang (Zhuangzi), who once brought a skeleton back to life—but as soon as the skeleton had been revived, he took Master Zhuang to court for stealing his money. They next meet a young girl, and the snake begins to salivate in anticipation of a tasty dessert. The girl promises the snake that it may eat her too, provided it can worm its way back into the bottle from which Shancai had earlier released it. As soon as the snake has wormed its way into the bottle, it finds itself trapped inside. The girl then reveals her true form, which is the bodhisattva Guanyin.¹¹³ When the snake begs for her mercy, Guanyin says that in order to be saved it must first engage in religious exercises for seven years in the Grotto of the Sounds of the Flood at Mt. Putuo.

Inserted at this point in the precious scroll is a potted version of the legend of the filial parrot, who in popular iconography is often depicted with Guanyin. This short account provides a summary of *The Precious Scroll of the Parrot* (*Yingge baojuan*), itself a sectarian reworking of the fifteenth-century *Tale of the Filial Parrot* (*Yingge xiaoyi zhuan*), a prosimetric adaptation of a well-known

jātaka tale.¹¹⁴ The little parrot is an emblem of filial piety: it is captured when it is looking for its mother's favorite food. When it finally manages to escape, its mother has already died. It then mourns its mother and provides her with a fitting funeral before becoming Guanyin's disciple.

The story then skips ahead to three years later, when Guanyin returns to Mt. Putuo and appears to Shancai in the middle of the ocean, standing on the head of a huge tortoise (*ao*). Shancai joins her, walking across the waves. "To this very day, this picture remains in the world" (p. 27a–b). Following this confirmation of the sincerity of his faith, his parents are reborn in heaven. After the snake has submitted itself to austerities for seven years, it has rid itself of all its poison and created a pearl. It is now transformed into the Dragon Girl and joins Guanyin, Shancai, and the filial parrot at Mt. Putuo.¹¹⁵ The text concludes with an eight-line poem in which the members of the audience are once again urged to persist in their devotions.

The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl tells its pious tale efficiently and not without touches of humor. The Buffalo Star, for instance, relates how he never wanted to descend to earth but was pushed out of the Gate of Heaven by the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha (Dizang), who had taken pity on the toiling masses and had vowed to the Buffalo Star that his eyes would fall out on the ground if humans would not repay a favor with a favor. Because of his fall from heaven, the buffalo had lost the teeth in his upper jaw, and because of the bad treatment the buffalo subsequently suffered at the hand of man, Kṣitigarbha's eyes had indeed fallen to the ground, where they turned into the snails that are trampled by the buffalo when plowing the fields.

If we take *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* first of all as the religious biography of Shancai, as seems to be suggested by the text, the story reads very much like a minor mirror image of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. This mirroring even extends to the matter of names: Miaoshan's mother is called Baode; Chen Lian's father is named Debao. But whereas Chen Debao allows his son to pursue a religious career, Miaoshan's father is fiercely opposed to his daughter's wish to become a nun. And whereas Miaoshan is brought back from the White Sparrow Convent in shackles, Shancai returns to his father's home on his own initiative. Miaoshan stubbornly frustrates all attempts to persuade

her to marry, but Shancai is immediately seduced by the voice of the snake. Miaoshan, following her execution, frees all the suffering beings in hell; Shancai frees a snake from its bottle. And whereas Miaoshan happily donates her arms and eyes to serve as a medicine for her cruel father, Shancai refuses to become a meal for the hungry snake he has liberated. Miaoshan is continuously in control; Shancai soon finds himself at the mercy of his antagonist.

Both *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* and *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* deal extensively with the issue of *en* (favor, grace, care, kindness) and the need to repay it. Whereas a filial Miaoshan, following her enlightenment, freely repays her parents' *en*, the refractious snake refuses to repay Shancai's *en* and even argues that ingratitude is the way of the world. So perhaps we should have a closer look at Shancai's crafty adversary. After all, she shares equal billing with the male protagonist in the title of this precious scroll.

The ingratitude of a creature that has been saved from danger is a well-known motif. All over the world this ungrateful animal usually is a snake, but in China the best-known representative of this ungrateful creature is the wolf in the tale of the Wolf of Zhongshan.¹¹⁶ The tale of the Wolf of Zhongshan also introduces the three judges to whom the wolf and his savior appeal in order to settle their quarrel. The three unlikely judges (animals, trees, objects) have their counterparts in other parts of Eurasia, too, wherever the story of the ungrateful animal is told.¹¹⁷

The story of the Wolf of Zhongshan first appeared in print when it was included in the *Ocean of Stories from Past and Present* (*Gujin shuohai*) of 1544 as an anonymous tale in the classical language, entitled *Tale of the Wolf of Zhongshan* (*Zhongshan lang zhuan*). The contents of this tale may be briefly summarized as follows.¹¹⁸ When Lord Jian of Zhao goes out hunting, he comes across a wolf that raises itself on its hind legs like a human being. He shoots at it, but the beast escapes and runs away. The wolf then meets with a traveling Mohist scholar, Master Dongguo, whom he implores for help, appealing to the Mohist teaching of universal love. The scholar takes pity on the animal and hides it in one of the book chests strapped on his donkey. He then meets up with the hunters, who ask him whether he has seen the wolf. The scholar denies any knowledge of the animal's whereabouts, and after the hunters have gone, he lets the wolf out of the chest. However, the

hungry wolf now wants to eat him: only by serving as his food, the wolf claims, will Master Dongguo complete the act of saving his life. Master Dongguo protests, and they decide to submit their quarrel to the judgment of three elders. The first, a withered apricot tree about to be chopped down, and the second, an old buffalo about to be slaughtered, both side with the wolf, but the third, an old man, feigns disbelief and first wants proof that the wolf could really have fitted into the chest. The wolf climbs into the chest to demonstrate, but as soon as he has done so, the old man takes the scholar's sword, and together they put an end to the ungrateful creature.

In classical Chinese literature, the *Tale of the Wolf of Zhongshan* is an unusual text in that it is a rare example of a fully developed animal fable. While texts in which animals are described as imbued with human emotions are not uncommon, we only seldom encounter a prose fable or a poem in which animals as such, without first having to be transformed into human beings, are allowed to speak.¹¹⁹ In this tale not only are a wolf and a buffalo allowed to speak, but so is a tree. This latter phenomenon may be due to a possible Indian origin of the tale. In his 1826 rendition of the Indian fable-collection *Pañcatantra* on the basis of versions from South India, J. A. Dubois included a fable in which a brahmin carries a crocodile at the latter's request from a small creek to the river Ganges; when they arrive there a few days later, the hungry crocodile wants to eat his benefactor, and they put their quarrel before a mango tree, a buffalo, and a jackal.¹²⁰ One may also discern the influence of fifteenth-century Chinese drama in the figure of the complaining apricot tree, as the plays of Zhu Youdun (1379–1439) feature a large number of quite talkative plants and trees.¹²¹ The disgruntled old (but still alive) buffalo has his direct predecessor in the slaughtered animal that in a long song suite by Yao Shouzhong (second half of the thirteenth century) pleads his case in the underworld before King Yama.¹²²

Despite its obvious roots in international folklore, the *Zhongshan lang zhuan* is anything but a popular legend when it first appears in print. Its many classical allusions mark it as a learned fable on ingratitude. The authorship of this text is a matter of dispute. Both Kang Hai (1475–1541) and Ma Zhongxi (1446–1512) have been mentioned as author, and both are said to have written this text as an attack on an ungrateful former friend. Later the text was

also credited to a Song-dynasty author, and even a Tang-dynasty poet. The story was very popular with playwrights as well: in addition to a four-act play commonly ascribed to Kang Hai, there is also a one-act adaptation ascribed to Wang Jiushi (1468–1551).¹²³

A more detailed comparison between *Tale of the Wolf of Zhongshan* and *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* may be useful to highlight the underlying themes of the latter work as a popular legend. When we first turn our attention to the judges, we notice that the apricot tree has been dropped from the panel, perhaps for a variety of reasons. The simplest explanation may be that a talking tree was regarded as being simply too fantastic to be believable. The precious scroll also tries to provide a rationale for the miracle of a speaking buffalo by turning the animal into an old man who is a manifestation of the Heavenly Star of the Golden Buffalo (*Tianshang jin niuxing*, p. 13b). On the other hand, the suppression of the apricot tree may also be related to the Buddhist background of the legend of Shancai and Longnü as told in our precious scroll.

Traditional Chinese thought, whether Confucian or Daoist, is very much concerned with life. In this worldview, life is shared by human beings, animals, and plants alike, and demands respect in all its manifestations.¹²⁴ The *zouyu*, a mythical white tiger that appears during the reign of a holy ruler, not only refrains from eating any meat but also is careful not to tread on a single blade of living grass. Daoist immortals eat no grain; a special subgroup of Daoist deliverance plays even feature trees that achieve immortality. Chinese Buddhism, on the other hand, ended up being much more concerned with souls and their transmigrations. Although the tiniest insect is credited with a soul that once may have been human, plants were not regarded as having souls. Thus, it was considered a sin to eat meat but a virtue to be a vegetarian. From a Buddhist perspective, the complaint of the tree and the complaint of the buffalo in the tale of the Wolf of Zhongshan are of a completely different order. The buffalo, a harmless and useful creature, accuses man of a sin when he complains about his many years of servitude without reward and his master's desire to have it slaughtered to be eaten. But what can a soulless tree complain about if its fruit and its timber are used by men?

If one regards the disappearance of the apricot tree from the panel of judges in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* as related to the Buddhist orientation of the genre, one can only be surprised

to see the tree replaced by the figure of Master Zhuang, the main hero of the competing genre of *daoqing* (Daoist ballads). The story of the meeting of Master Zhuang with a skeleton has a long pedigree.¹²⁵ The *Zhuangzi* itself already contains an anecdote of Master Zhuang coming across a skull, and this theme was later taken up by poets in the second and third centuries CE, in works such as *Rhapsody on a Skull (Dulou fu)* by Zhang Heng (78–139). The theme became popular again in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the founding fathers of Quanzhen Daoism. Their obsession with skulls and skeletons as objects of meditation may well have been due to Buddhist influence. In the writings of these early Quanzhen masters we encounter two related themes. First, all persons who have not been reborn into the light are characterized as living corpses or running skeletons.¹²⁶ This theme was later also taken up by both sectarian and Buddhist precious scrolls, such as *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*.¹²⁷ A second theme is the encounter with an unburied skeleton by the side of the road; texts on this theme stress the transience of our earthly existence. Such laments eventually found their way into both Buddhist and Daoist funeral liturgies.¹²⁸ The theme also found a more narrative development in the story of Master Zhuang's meeting with a skeleton. This story was already in circulation in the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368), and by the Ming had become the favorite subject of Daoist storytelling, although it would appear to have been largely forgotten by the eighteenth century.

According to this story, Master Zhuang in the course of his travels comes across an unburied skeleton. After wondering what kind of person the skeleton might have been during his lifetime, Master Zhuang takes pity on him and decides to bring him back to life. As three pieces of bone in his shoulder are missing, Master Zhuang replaces them with willow twigs. When the skeleton has been brought back to life, he turns out to have been a traveling merchant, and when he cannot find the money he was carrying with him, he immediately accuses Master Zhuang of robbing him and hauls him before the local magistrate. To prove his innocence, Master Zhuang has no choice but to turn his accuser into a skeleton again, the willow twigs serving as proof of the truth of his version of the story. (*The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* has Master Zhuang replace a missing thigh bone with the branch of a mulberry tree.) But Master Zhuang makes use of more extraneous matter in resurrecting the skeleton. In an obvious echo of the story

of the Wolf of Zhongshan, he makes use of “a wolf’s heart and a dog’s innards” (p. 17b) to fill out the corpse. The ingratitude of the resurrected skeleton now is perhaps only to be expected, and Master Zhuang is finally led to conclude that “in this world all people are evil skeletons!” (p. 18b).

In contrast to the story of the Wolf of Zhongshan, the major change in *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* is of course that the wolf is replaced by the snake as the ungrateful protagonist. The snake can be regarded as the embodiment of female sexuality, and as such as a tempting and destructive power. In many other legends and tales the snake has the same function: it may present itself in the guise of a young and alluring woman ready at any moment to devour the man it has seduced.¹²⁹ One only has to think of the famous Hangzhou legend of the White Snake. That the dangers to a young man of sexual passion are very much on the mind of the anonymous author of the precious scroll is shown by the following passage, which appears right before Chen Lian’s departure from his parental home for the hermitage of his master:

Let’s talk about the mahāsattva Guanyin. “Seven years have passed since I sent that lad down to the mortal world. He was given the name of Chen Lian and was born into the realm of dust. He does not eat any pungent food: his root in the Way has not yet been obscured, and his single-minded heart is still undivided. If I do not provide him guidance along with the Way and its Virtue, I fear he will end up taking the wrong road. ‘By practice people grow distant.’ Availing myself of the opportunity that ‘his hole of passion has not yet been opened,’ I will lead him into the Way, so he will avoid stumbling into the domain of misty flowers.”¹³⁰

By “leaving the household” a man puts himself outside the ties of marriage (and sexuality). But as soon as he entertains the thought of even a temporary “return to the household,” he opens himself up to temptation. This is what happens to Shancai. While the bodhisattva (who herself succeeded in evading marriage) may wish to safeguard Shancai from experiencing passion, the author of *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* shares with the author of the famous eighteenth-century novel *Dream in the Red*

Chamber (Honglou meng) the insight that passion can be transcended only after it has been experienced to the fullest degree. The danger implied in passion, as it is spelled out in *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl*, is annihilation: the snake threatens to devour Shancai.¹³¹ Shancai's meeting with the buffalo and Master Zhuang may also hint at a message that was spelled out in more detail in the writings of the early Quanzhen masters: a man who is induced by passion to marry is only a beast of burden to his wife and children, a running corpse pulling a cart filled with his dependants, a walking skeleton engendering ungrateful skeletons.¹³² It is also important to note that the man is incapable of killing the snake. Nor are the old buffalo and Master Zhuang of any use either. The snake has to be subdued by the intervention of a young girl, who tricks the snake into returning to its bottle.

While the intervention of the three judges in *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl* seems to be inspired by the story of the Wolf of Zhongshan, the victory of a young girl over a snake echoes much older legends and seems to reflect more general anxieties about female sexuality (at least in the southeastern coastal areas). Let us have a look at the story of Li Ji as told in the fourth-century *In Search of the Supernatural (Soushen ji)*. A man-eating snake that lives in a cave in the wilds of Fujian has the power to bring either prosperity or disaster to the surrounding area, depending on whether or not it is supplied with its annual offering of a young virgin. The officials, the male representatives of the community, find themselves unable to subdue the monster. A young girl, Li Ji, against her parents' wishes, volunteers to be sacrificed. She tricks the monster and succeeds in killing it with the help of a dog and a sword; the snake dies as it crawls back into its cave. When Li Ji enters the monster's cave, she finds all the skulls of its earlier victims. The story ends with the marriage of Li Ji to the local king.¹³³ In this tale we can already see the various motifs we encountered in *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl*: a devouring snake, ineffective males, skulls and skeletons, and a victorious maiden.

The tale of Li Ji may be read in many different ways. It may be read as a reflection of the many dangers the first settlers of the southeastern coastal region encountered while clearing the snake-infested jungle. It may also be read as a reflection of the development of yet another local cult in which an animal is replaced as

object of veneration by a deity in human form who incorporates the full range of powers of his or her predecessor. Another way to read the tale is as a paean to the daring and inventiveness of women. I would suggest, however, that one may also read the tale as a myth about the incorporation of female fertility from outside into the patriarchal family. As stated before, the patriarchal family cannot reproduce itself and needs outside female fertility for its very survival. However, women from outside the family also constitute a danger to its survival as they may not fully commit themselves to their new family by marriage, but continue to prefer their natal family and seek ways to transfer wealth from their new home to their old one. This dangerous power of fertility/female sexuality is represented in this tale by the monstrous snake in its grotto. Men are shown to be ineffective against this danger. Only when a woman is willing to act against the instructions of her own parents and slay the monster is a full integration into her new family by marriage possible. If not, even a virgin is turned into the very image of death—a skull.

The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl is not simply a retelling of an old myth. After all, its main theme is not the continuation of the family but rather leaving the family. However, many motifs are still clearly recognizable. The nature of the snake as an embodiment of female sexuality is made clear from the very start in the precious scroll. The grotto has been replaced by a bottle, which is described as a *huangsha ping* (yellow earth bottle). While the term *huangsha* is used to refer to the grave, the bottle may stand for the gourd, which in Daoism represents the inexhaustible container or womb. Shancai, by showing himself susceptible to female charms, is defenseless as soon as the snake wants to devour him, and it is now he who is in danger of being turned into a skeleton instead of the hapless virgins in the tale of Li Ji. Again, the savior is a young girl who tricks the snake, in this story by getting it to crawl back into the bottle from which it had emerged. Both tales, although centuries apart, in this way credit the victory over the snake to virtuous female cunning. In the tale of Li Ji, the heroine finally marries the king, for whom, one assumes, she will bear many sons. In *The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon-Girl* it is the snake that is turned into a dragon daughter, who in turn produces a pearl of wisdom, while Shancai pursues his religious career.¹³⁴

Conclusion

The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara enjoyed wide and fervent veneration almost from the very moment of his introduction into China. The bodhisattva's popularity only increased after he was, from the tenth century on, increasingly worshipped in female form. This new manifestation gave rise to many legends, the most popular of which was that of Princess Miaoshan, who refused to marry and give her father a grandson, but who was willing to give her limbs to him to use as medicine when he was wasted by a terrible disease. The most powerful version of this legend is *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, which may go back to a composition by the monk Puming of 1103 but has reached us only in the heavily revised versions of later centuries.

The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain presents a powerful and gripping account of the problems and opposition facing a young woman in a Confucian society if she is determined to pursue her own individual religious salvation, even as it holds out the promise that her personal salvation may benefit her entire family, including the father who wanted her dead. The text has traditionally been read both as a charter for opposing marriage and a paean to filial piety. A comparison with the hagiographies of Christian female saints from medieval France shows many structural parallels and also draws attention to some of the sexual tensions in the patriarchal family that help to give the narrative in the precious scroll its particular tension and dynamism.

The Precious Scroll of Good-in-Talent and Dragon Girl, which probably dates from the eighteenth or nineteenth century, is an original and charming account of how Shancai and Longnü (and the white parrot) became the acolytes of Guanyin. This enjoyable, fairy-tale-like narrative returns to many of the same themes as those of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, such as the tension between the duties toward the family and society and the yearning for individual salvation, the dangers posed by female sexual hunger, and the need to repay the favors one has received.

The overwhelming majority of Buddhist texts were written by monks for monks. Both these precious scrolls, however, offer us texts that, although most likely written by monks, were intended for an audience of laypeople, for they spoke to the issues confronting laymen and, especially, laywomen. In this respect, the precious

scrolls continued the tradition of the transformation texts and other genres of Buddhist prosimetric storytelling known from the manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang. The continuing popularity of *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* over many centuries serves as the best proof of how well it succeeded in speaking to the yearnings and needs of its largely female audience and helped them give meaning to their existence.

Translator's Note

Longer passages in verse tend to be constructed of building blocks of four lines. To help the reader, the beginning of a new group of four lines is marked by an indentation. I have made no attempt to rhyme the verse passages, but I have tried to keep the lines of verse roughly of equal length within each verse passage. At times I have been rather successful in this, at other times not. In six-syllable lines that are made up of two three-syllable half-lines, the division between the half-lines is marked by a slash. The same slash is also used to separate lines of verse that are quoted inside prose passages. Occasional three-character phrases that precede seven-syllable lines are printed in smaller format in the original text; here they follow a double indentation.

The "stage-directions" in *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* are printed in smaller size too in the original, but in the translation they are printed in italic. Passages in the main body of the text that are preceded by honorific empty spaces are printed in capitals.

I have translated more personal names than is usual nowadays, but many of these names are "speaking names," so I felt justified in doing so. On the other hand, I have left the formula *Namo Guanshiyin pusa* (Hail, Bodhisattva Guanshiyin) untranslated.