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An Early, Fourteenth-Century Version
of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*:
A Translation with Introduction

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An Early, Fourteenth-Century Version
of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*:
A Translation with Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

The *Precious Scroll of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [So That She] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven* (*Mujianlian zunzhe jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan* 目犍連尊者救母出離地獄生天寶卷), as represented by a manuscript dated 1440 (abbreviated title used in this text is the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* [*Mulian baojuan* 目連寶卷]), is a rare prosimetric text in vernacular language narrating the story of monk Mulian's (Maudgalyāyana), a disciple of Buddha Shakyamuni, rescuing his mother. *Baojuan* (precious scrolls), originally related to Buddhist proselytizing, were designed mainly to be vocalized in front of broad lay audiences. Still, they were transmitted in the form of written texts (manuscripts and printed copies).¹ Precious scrolls as a special literary form appeared around the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, and, while they underwent a long evolution,² maintained their popularity among commoners till the beginning of the twentieth century. Storytelling based on *baojuan* texts still persists in several areas of China (Berezkin 2017, 3–5).

The *Precious Scroll of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [So That She] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven* is most probably the earliest extant text of narrative precious scrolls, which we know because it survives in the manuscripts of 1373 and 1440, the earliest known specimens of this genre. The manuscript of 1440 (hereafter, the Hermitage manuscript) originally belonged to Vladimir A. Desnitskiy (1878–1958), a famous literary critic and scholar of Russian literature. It was recently purchased by the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (Inv. No. LT-8702).³ When and where Desnitskiy obtained the manuscript is unknown. It is an “accordion-style” book (*jingzheben* 經折本), a format typical of Chinese manuscripts and editions of the Buddhist scriptures and precious scrolls of

¹ For a general introduction to precious scrolls, see, e.g., Sawada Mizuho 1975; Overmyer 1999, 4–5; Li Shiyu 2007; Che Xilun 2009, Berezkin 2017, 3–5.

² In the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries several popular syncretic religions (sects) composed their own scriptures in the form of precious scrolls, but in the later period (nineteenth–early twentieth centuries), these works mostly lost their connections with such associations.

³ On this manuscript and its significance in the history of precious scrolls, see also Berezkin 2013; 2017, 58–71. The introductory article by Dr. Kira F. Samosyuk (State Hermitage Museum) deals mainly with illustrations in this text; see Samosyuk 2011.

the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. The manuscript is incomplete: only volumes one, three, and four of the original four survive.

The Hermitage manuscript is in very good condition. It appears that the manuscript was restored twice in the past. The first time, the original pages were padded with new paper, and damaged portions of the text and illustrations were repainted. The second time, the manuscript was remounted on paper of roughly the same length but of a greater width, producing wide margins at the top and bottom of the pages. The size of the covers (and the later mounting of the manuscript) is 40×18.5 cm; the size of the original pages, containing illustrations and text, is about 30×16.3 cm.

The Hermitage manuscript contains thirty-five color illustrations, each painted with bright mineral colors, with golden, pink, and azure pigments prevailing. The illustrations are evenly distributed in the main text, closely following the contents of the narrative. The manuscript also has an opening image of the Buddha preaching to the assembly and a closing image of the guardian of faith (Weituo 韋陀), an arrangement typical of the manuscripts and editions of sūtras and precious scrolls (fourteenth–sixteenth centuries). Most illustrations of the *Baojuan of Mulian* are spread over multiple pages; usually they occupy three pages, though some occupy just double pages.

The manuscript of 1373 (hereafter, the Zheng manuscript) is even less complete, as only part of the original volume three and the last volume have survived (as is evident from comparison with the Hermitage manuscript). The remaining portion of the original text was rebound as an album at an uncertain date, though originally it also was an accordion-style book, as seen in its folding. It originally belonged to the famous Chinese scholar Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), one of the first specialists to study Chinese vernacular (popular) literature; later it was donated to the National Library of China.⁴ The very similar title of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescuing His Mother [So That She] Escapes Hell and Is Born in Heaven* (*Mulian jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan* 目連救母出離地獄生天寶卷) appears at the end of the 1373 manuscript⁵ which corresponds to the Hermitage manuscript. The two

⁴ Zheng Zhenduo reproduced part of this text in a modern typeset form in his *Zhongguo su wenxue shi* (Zheng Zhenduo 1996, 486–495). The Japanese scholar Yoshikawa Yoshikazu, who studied the original manuscript in the National Library of China, reproduced the entire surviving part of the text (again, in modern typeset form); see (Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2003, 123–134).

⁵ Zheng Zhenduo mis-transcribed part of the title as *sheng tian* 升天 (ascending to heaven) instead of *shengtian* 生天 (born

manuscripts share a similar form and size, and the contexts of text and illustrations in the Zheng manuscript are almost identical with those of the Hermitage manuscript, which allows us to regard them as two copies of the same text. This also helps to date the text of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* to the second half of the fourteenth century, or perhaps even earlier.⁶

Very little is known about the history of the two manuscripts, though there is some information in them about their sponsors. The colophon in the Hermitage manuscript, which is represented by a line of text written with gold ink on the dedicatory placard at the end of the manuscript, records that the work "was respectfully donated by Imperial Consort Jiang in the fifth year of the Zhengtong reign period of the Great Ming [1440]" 大明正統五年皇妃姜氏敬獻. I have not been able to find any information about Consort Jiang, but her patronage is quite possible, and one can suppose that the manuscript was made by the court artisans.⁷ She presumably donated the manuscript to a Buddhist institution. We know nothing of the calligrapher or painter.

The Zheng manuscript also has a dedicatory inscription at the end, harder to decipher than that of the Hermitage manuscript (see fig. 1). The generally accepted transcription of this inscription is: "Made on Imperial order on the auspicious day in the third year of the Xuanguang reign period, donated by the disciple Tuotuo [Toghtō]" 勅旨宣光三年谷旦造，弟子脱脱氏施捨. Xuanguang was a reign period of the so-called Northern Yuan dynasty (1369–1404), established after Ming troops captured the main Yuan capital, Dadu 大都. It refers to the reign of Prince Ayushiridara 愛猷識理 (禮) 達臘 (1371–1376), also known by the posthumous name Zhaozong 昭宗. Not all scholars agree with this reading of the reign title,⁸ but these objections are not well substantiated with solid evidence. The characters on the dedicatory plaque are so faded that it is hard to discern them, even working with the original manuscript. Again, we know nothing about the sponsor of this manuscript, the place of its creation, or

in heaven). This mistake appears in later research works on Chinese vernacular literature but later was corrected by scholars who studied the original manuscript; see, e.g., Che Xilun 2009, 72.

⁶ Also attested by the special features of the tunes used in this text; see Che Xilun 2009, 73.

⁷ Buddhism enjoyed the support of the court women at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The fact that the manuscript was commissioned by a female member of the imperial court is in accord with the information that we have about later manuscripts and editions of precious scrolls in the sixteenth–early seventeenth centuries; see, e.g., Che Xilun 2009, 33–34.

⁸ For example, Yoshikawa Yoshikazu's interpretation of this year is 1337; see Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2005, 27.

the names of the calligrapher and painter who completed the text and illustrations. Despite the Mongolian name of the sponsor, we cannot confirm a proposed connection of this manuscript with Mongolian lands. One can note that the reign title of Xuanguang was used at that time in several peripheral areas of the Yuan Empire that had not as yet been conquered by the Ming, including northwestern and southwestern regions of China.



Figure 1. Final pages of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, manuscript of 1373.

Though the provenance of both manuscripts is not clear, they presumably were related to sponsors of very high standing (members of the imperial court or aristocrats), a supposition attested by the high quality of their illustrations. A manuscript with color illustrations of a similar style is the *Sūtra of Sudden Attaining of the Profound Dharmadhatu, Vajra-wisdom through Deep Meditation—Inner Seal* (*Zhen chan nei yin dun zheng xu ning fajie jinggang zhi jing* 真禪內印頓證虛凝法界金剛智經), a Tantric Buddhist text made for the court treasury (*nei fu* 內府)⁹ in 1428. The text, also in a calligraphic style similar to that of the Hermitage manuscript, was written by Shen Du 沈度 (1375–1434), a quite famous calligrapher of that period. The *Sūtra of Sudden Attaining of the Profound Dharmadhatu* comes from the original palace collection in Beijing and now is kept in the Palace Museum in Taipei. On the other hand, illustrations of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* continue the tradition of pictorial representation of the Mulian story, which can be traced back to the Tang dynasty (618–907) (see Berezkin 2015). In the case of the manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, the detailed illustrations presumably were intended to provide illustration and entertainment to the audience during the oral recitation or for an individual reading the text. I include an illustration and a page of text from the Zheng manuscript as an example (see figure 2 and figure 3).¹⁰

⁹ This was the name for palace storehouses controlled by eunuchs during the Ming dynasty.

¹⁰ For several illustrations from the Hermitage manuscript, see Berezkin 2013.



Figure 2. An illustration from the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, manuscript of 1373.

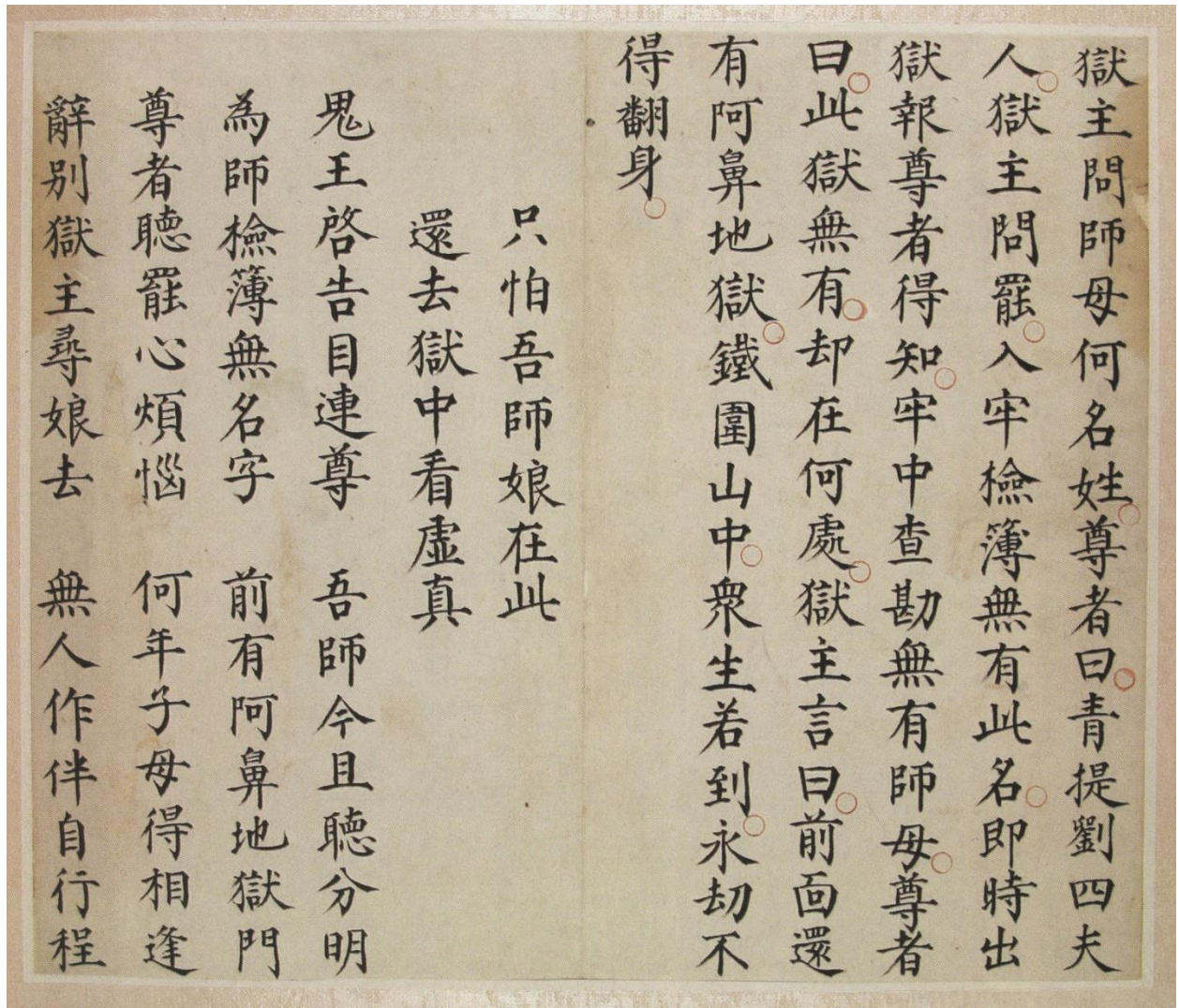


Figure 3. A page from the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, manuscript of 1373.

The *Precious Scroll of Mulian* narrates the story of Maudgalyāyana's (Mulian's) rescuing the soul of his sinful mother from the sufferings of hell and bringing about her rebirth in heaven. Maudgalyāyana was one of Buddha's first ten disciples and a figure prominently featured in Buddhist scriptures. The story of his rescuing the soul of his mother from postmortem sufferings, however, has not been discovered in the literature of Indian Buddhism so far (Berezkin 2019). In China the origins of this story can be traced to the *Sūtra of Ullambana Expounded by the Buddha* (*Fo shuo Yulanpen jing* 佛說盂蘭盆經), the

Chinese translation of which is ascribed to the monk Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護) (ca. beginning of the fourth century).¹¹

This story was elaborated in popular literature forms called *bianwen* 變文 (transformation texts) and *yuanqi* 緣起 (tales of conditioned origin),¹² dating to the ninth through tenth centuries, that were discovered in Dunhuang in 1900, the most famous and complete version being the *Transformation Text of Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld* (*Da Muqianlian minjian jiu mu bianwen* 大目乾連冥間救母變文; its abbreviated title is the *Transformation Text of Mulian*).¹³ This is the earliest known detailed narrative of Mulian's journey to the netherworld in search of his mother's soul. The original *Sūtra of Ullambana* tells the story of Mulian's mother's rebirth in the form of a hungry ghost, but in the *Transformation Text of Mulian* her punishment has been changed to consignment to the deepest of the hells, Avīci.¹⁴ The oral presentation of the transformation scrolls, called *zhuan bian* 轉變, presumably was accompanied by a demonstration of its illustrations, but unfortunately these did not survive. Accompanying illustrations (picture scrolls) in the extant manuscripts of transformation texts discovered in Dunhuang are mentioned several times, but these illustrations probably were never accomplished (Mair 1989, 100–103).

The Mulian story remained a favorite topic in various storytelling and dramatic genres of the late imperial period.¹⁵ The story is particularly prominent in the genre of *baojuan*,¹⁶ but later versions in this genre differ significantly from the early *Precious Scroll of Mulian*. Unlike precious scrolls of the

¹¹ The non-Chinese original, if indeed there was one, has not survived; see Teiser 1988, 48–56.

¹² The name of this form is related to the Buddhist concepts of rebirth and retribution, as circumstances of the present existence are pre-conditioned by the person's deeds in the previous one. *Yuanqi* texts illustrated the working of karma through stories; see Mair 1989, 29; Schmid 2002, 103–110.

¹³ On the development of the story in general, see Chen Fangying 1983; Teiser 1988, 56–112; Mair 1989, 17–18; and Liu Zhen 1997, 1–31.

¹⁴ For a modern critical edn. of this text, see Huang Zheng and Zhang Yongquan 1997, 1024–1070; for the English trans., see Mair 1983, 123–166; see also Eoyang 1978; for the trans. of the similar version in *yuanqi*, see Schmid 2002, 201–229.

¹⁵ Here the discussion of the prominent dramatic tradition on this subject that developed in China since around the twelfth century is omitted; for the basic overview, see Berezkin 2017, 43–47; Zhao 2021, et al.

¹⁶ See Johnson 1995, 55–103; Grant and Idema 2011, 35–145; Berezkin 2017, 72–169.

sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, this early text does not contain developed religious ideas of sectarian teachings that spread in the late Ming period, propagating the millenarian cult of supreme female deity-progenitor. This text mainly concentrates on the propagation of mixed Chan and Pure Land doctrines.¹⁷ Still, there are some references to the nascent special mythology of such religious movements in this text as well. Note for example this passage at the end of the text:

It is clear that it was ancient [Buddha] Amitabha,
 Who in person arrived in the Eastern Land to transform the Sahā world.
 He was reincarnated in [a human] body and called himself Luobo,
 On the Numinous Mountain he went to meet ancient [Buddha] Amitabha.¹⁸
 Tathāgata gave him the appellation of Maudgalyāyana.
 In the department of darkness he rescued his mother, who ascended the gold lotus.

This makes the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* an important antecedent of the later *baojuan* (Overmyer 1999, 46–47; Berezkin 2017, 62–67); still, it is impossible to determine if it was associated with any specific religious movement of this period.

The contents of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, as represented in the manuscripts of 1373 and 1440, appear to be very close to the *Transformation Text of Mulian*, especially as revealed in the details of the secular life of Mulian before the death of his parents.¹⁹ The textual proximity of both texts is reflected also in the description of the Avīci hell and the episode of the Buddha’s descent into hells, where he

¹⁷ Such religious synthesis is characteristic of the “lay Buddhist movements” of the thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, including the Teaching of Non-Activism (Wuweijiao 無爲教) that formed ca. the end of the fifteenth century; see ter Haar 2014.

¹⁸ Apparently Mulian is presented here as an avatar of “Ancient Buddha” Amitabha, as is common in the later precious scrolls of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries.

¹⁹ Note, for example, that the names of Mulian (his secular name was Luobo 羅卜) and his parents: Fuxiang 輔相 and Qingti 青提) are the same. Victor H. Mair translated Mulian’s child name as “Turnip” (this word has a similar pronunciation and is written with similar characters in Chinese), suggesting it was formed from the Sanskrit (or Prakrit) word for turnip; see Mair 1983, 224. Mair also reconstructed the presumably Sanskrit names of Fuxiang and Qingti as Śulakṣaṇa and Nīlādhi respectively; see Mair 1983, 224.

liberated sinners. Several phrases and expressions in this text can be traced back to the transformation text. However, the major source of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* is the later apocryphal text called *Sūtra of Mulian Rescuing His Mother Expounded by the Buddha* (*Fo shuo Mulian jiu mu jing* 佛說目連救母經, hereafter *Sūtra of Mulian*), the details of which it follows. Just as were the transformation texts, it was lost in China but survived in Japan and Korea. The oldest version of this text is the Japanese reprint of 1346 kept in the Kinkōji 金光寺 monastery in Kyoto (now in the National Museum of Tokyo).²⁰ As indicated in its colophon, the original woodblock edition was printed in Yin 鄞 County of Zhedong 浙東 (modern city of Ningbo 寧波 in Zhejiang) in the year identified as 1251,²¹ and it was brought to Japan through Guangzhou 廣州 around the beginning of the fourteenth century.²² The Korean editions of this scripture date back to the later period, the earliest being printed in 1537 (Sa Jae-dong 1988, 224).

A comparison of the Japanese and Korean versions demonstrates that they basically represent the same text, though with some differences in phrasing (Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2003, 116–122). Though they bear the title *sūtra*, these texts are obviously based on a popular narrative similar to the version found in the transformation texts from Dunhuang. It is completely different from the original *Sūtra of Ullambana*. However, unlike transformation texts and *yuanqi*, the *Sūtra of Mulian* is written completely in prose, though it uses many vernacular words and expressions.

Comparison of the *Sūtra of Mulian* and the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* demonstrates the close proximity of their contents: it seems that the precious scroll used the prosaic version of the *sūtra* as its base, which it expanded mainly by adding verses. The principle of compilation of this text thus follows that of the “*sūtra-explanation texts*” (*jiangjingwen* 講經文), the earliest among which also date back to the Tang dynasty (also discovered in the Dunhuang library in 1900), when quotations from popular *sūtras* were elaborated in prose and verse. They continued to be composed in the later periods (Song and Yuan) and apparently contributed to the formation of the precious scrolls genre. Although precious

²⁰ The colophon of the Japanese reprint also contains the date of 1558, when the second reprint probably took place.

²¹ On the argument concerning the original date of printing, which is indicated in the colophon by the signs of the sexagenary cycle, as typical of Chinese and wider East Asian chronology, see Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2005, 116–122.

²² For the photocopies of the text and its modern edited variant, see Miya Tsugio 1968 and Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2003, 116–122.

scrolls of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries rarely quoted Buddhist scriptures, they adhered to a similar principle of rigid prose and verse alternation in each passage.²³ Thus the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* also contributes to our understanding the historical connections between sūtra explication and the nascent *baojuan* genre.

We can suppose that the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* was especially useful for the indoctrination of female followers, as it tells the story of the mother’s salvation. Significantly, the third volume of this text opens with the description of that department of hell in which the souls of female sinners are punished. This section admonishes women to obey their husbands and in-laws. There is also mention made in the concluding part of the text of the Blood Bowl Assembly, which refers to a special ritual for the cleansing of women’s physiological impurity.²⁴ In this context, the sponsorship of the imperial concubine in 1440 seems not to be coincidental.

* * *

My translation of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* is based on the text of the Hermitage manuscript. I have, however, also consulted the text of the Zheng manuscript, as represented in the Yoshikawa’s transcription. A few corrections were made after comparison with the original studied in the National Library of China in 2008. Passages missing in the Hermitage manuscript (second volume) in my translation have been substituted with the relevant part of the *Sūtra of Mulian*, using the Japanese reprint of 1346.

The main text of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* is divided into multiple sections with a set structure. There are fifty-two such sections in the extant three volumes of the manuscript. They correspond to the division into sections called *pin* 品 or *fen* 分 in precious scrolls of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, however, unlike later precious scrolls, these sections are not titled. I have included the first two sections of the original text as an appendix to my translation. Each section of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* consists of a prose part followed by a seven-

23 Another noteworthy example is the earliest recension of the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* (Xiangshan Baojuan 香山寶卷) that survived as a Hanoi reprint of 1772, which places quotations from the *Lotus Sūtra* at the beginning of each section (see Berezkin and Riftin 2013).

24 For the history of this ritual, see Grant and Idema 2011, 23–34; Berezkin 2017, 62–65.

character antithetical couplet (*duilian* 對聯), eight lines of a seven-character verse, a verse with an irregular number of characters per line of a special form often appearing in early precious scrolls that has been called a “hymn” (*gezan* 歌贊) by Chinese scholars,²⁵ and four lines of five-character meter verse. Eight arias (*qu* 曲) are also inserted in these sections. Two different tune patterns (*qupai* 曲牌) are used: “Gua jin suo” 掛金鎖 (Wearing the gold lock) four times and “Jin zi jing” 金字經 (Sūtra [written] with gold characters) four times (once in the conclusion). The poetic parts of the sections usually reiterate the content of the opening prose passages; sometimes they also mention events that will be described in detail in the following prose passage. Another function of these passages is didactic: they often contain moralistic exhortations to people in the audience, which is in accord with the general content of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, often describing retribution in hell for human sins. Numerous dialogues in the prose passages of the precious scroll presumably are connected with the early dramatic tradition that used the subject of Mulian.

I have translated in their entirety just seven sections of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* (three from the beginning of the first volume, two from its end, and two from the end of the fourth volume of the 1440 manuscript). These include the examples of arias with their two tune patterns. In the remainder I have translated the prose passages only, without the accompanying verses and hymns, in order to avoid constant repetition.²⁶ Still, some repetition of details and phrases remain in the prose passages of this text. This repetitive style is very characteristic of precious scrolls and is related to the function of these texts as scripts for recitation. It is also related to the aforementioned origins of precious scrolls in the tradition of sūtra explication, based on the principle of expounding quotations from sūtras. Even popular tunes used in the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* betray the text's connection with the Buddhist literature: in approximately the same period, they were used in Buddhist chants. Tunes with similar names and structures were included in *Tunes with the Names of All Buddhas, World-Honored Rulai, and*

²⁵ On the possible origins of this type of verse, see Che Xilun 2009, 83–84.

²⁶ The difference in the meter of verses also is reflected in my translation. Besides this, I have divided the different poetic forms in these sections by space.

Reverend Bodhisattvas (*Zhu fo shizun rulai pusa zunzhe mingcheng gequ* 諸佛世尊如來菩薩尊者名稱歌曲), compiled on imperial order in 1417.²⁷

The *Precious Scroll of Mulian* has complex introductory and concluding parts, which are important for understanding the ritual context of its performance. The introductory part starts with instructions for the audience, a ritual formula paying obeisance to the three treasures of Buddhism—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Then follows a prose passage summarizing the meaning of the main story, a verse passage in twenty-two lines with seven characters per line, another prose passage, and another seven-character meter verse, which can be defined as “the *gāthā* on opening the sūtra” (*kai jing ji* 開經偈).²⁸ The concluding part consists of the “text of taking vows” (*fayuan wen* 發願文), which is the expression of the wish of the performer (and audience) that all living beings would escape disasters and suffering, the “Hymn of Old Man Chuan” (*Chuan lao song* 川老頌), the “text of transfer of merit” [gained through recitation of the text] (*huixiang [wen]* 回向[文]), and the final aria to the tune pattern of “Jin zi jing.” Several of these elements can be traced back to the old Buddhist tradition of the “sūtra explication” (*jiangjing*), which provides some information on the origins of precious scrolls. I have translated the introductory and concluding parts of the Hermitage manuscript in their entirety.

For my translation I also have consulted the translation of the *Transformation Text of Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld* by Victor H. Mair. For the numerous Buddhist terms, I have consulted the online Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, which contains references to major Buddhist dictionaries in several languages. I have followed the principle of reconstruction of major original Sanskrit names and terms, such as Tathāgata (Chin. Rulai 如來), while translating the meaning of some terms commonly used in Chinese translation, such as Numinous Mountain (Lingshan 靈山), for the convenience of readers.

The *Precious Scroll of Mulian* attests to the use of a traditional Buddhist subject in the new storytelling genre of *baojuan*, mainly related to its religious themes. Compared with the transformation texts of the ninth–tenth centuries, this work of the ca. thirteenth–fourteenth centuries represents further development of the Mulian story in Chinese narrative prosimetric literature, demonstrating its

²⁷ The name of the tune “Sūtra [written] with gold characters” itself points to its Buddhist connections.

²⁸ *Gāthā* is a term for a special type of verse in the Buddhist scriptures and also appears in their Chinese translations.

elaboration and domestication in Chinese popular culture. It served as a predecessor of later narratives on the same subject, still recited in a ritual context in several areas of China, as well as dramatic performances that were popular in the folk milieu until the beginning of the twentieth century.

TRANSLATION

Precious Scroll of Reverend Maudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother [So That She] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven

(*Mujianlian zunzhe jiu mu chuli diyu sheng tian baojuan* 目犍連尊者救母出離地獄生天寶卷)

[In small font] The believers at the ritual area²⁹ should put their palms together in prayer in front of their chests,³⁰ sit upright according to the rules, and recite the *Heart Sūtra*³¹ at the end of this scroll in the spoken language. The participants of the assembly should reverently chant the Buddha’s name in response,³² and this will create merit.

[Sacred formula in Sanskrit]

[In regular font]

29 “Ritual area” or “sacred altar” (lit. “place of the Way/Path”; Skt. *maṇḍa*, *maṇḍala-māḍa*, *daochang* 道場), a place where Buddhist rituals are held; in this and similar texts, it also denotes a setting for *baojuan* recitation, accompanied by special rituals; see Berezkin 2017, 54–57.

30 “Put their palms together” (Skt. *añjali*, *kṛtāñjali-puṭa*; *añjalayobaddhvā*, *añjali-karman*; Ch. *hezhang* 合掌 or *heshi* 合十): a symbolic gesture of reverence made by Buddhist believers, representing the unity of body and mind.

31 The *Heart Sūtra* (Skt. **Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*; Ch. *Bore boluomiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經) is a very popular but also very short Buddhist scripture in China and other countries of East Asia, ascribed to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Ch. Guanyin). Of its seven translations the most popular are those by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 and Xuanzang 玄奘 (T 250 and T 251). It is also recited together with precious scrolls in the modern recitation traditions; see Berezkin and Riftin 2013, 475.

32 “Chanting the Buddha’s name in response” (he Fo 和佛) is a special feature of *baojuan* recitation in which believers in the audience chant the Buddha’s name in unison in each even-numbered line of verses, following the main performer. This is preserved in the modern tradition of *baojuan* recitation; see Berezkin 2017, 67, XIX–XX.

We seek refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha, in all ten directions,³³

The wheel of Dharma³⁴ constantly turns and rescues a multitude of [living beings].³⁵

The *Scroll of Mulian* [tells] how Lady Qingti performed all kinds of evil deeds,³⁶ and, knowing this, she intentionally created much damage [for living beings] and deprived creatures of their lives. She was greedy and slandered Buddha, attacked Dharma, and harmed monks. She did not perfect herself on the road to the chambers of heaven,³⁷ but consciously entered the gates of hell.³⁸ Once the Impermanence arrived,³⁹ she died and entered the Avīci [hell], where she endured a thousand kinds of torments. She was entangled in the cycle of rebirth for ten thousand kalpas.⁴⁰ However, she had a son whose childhood name was Luobo;⁴¹ he turned to the Buddha and left his family [to become a monk];

33 Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha (Ch. Fo 佛, fa 法, seng 僧) are the “Three Treasures” of Buddhism.

34 The wheel of the Doctrine (Dharma) (Skt. Dharmacakra, Ch. fa lun 法輪) means the teaching established by Gautama (Shakyamuni) Buddha, mainly alluding to the Four Noble Truths (Ch. Si sheng ti 四聖諦). He is said to have set rolling the wheel of the Dharma in the Deer Park (Ch. Yeluyuan 鹿野苑) at Isipatana (also known as Sarnath) near the city of Vārāṇasī.

35 This is a common Buddhist praying formula that often appears at the beginning of early precious scrolls (fourteenth–eighteenth centuries): 歸命十方一切佛法僧，法輪常轉度衆生。

36 Can also be interpreted as “evil (bad) karma” (Skt. *akuśala-karma*, Ch. e ye 惡業).

37 Chambers of heaven (*tiantang* 天堂): in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, an analogue of paradise.

38 Lit. “underground prison” (*diyu* 地獄), a translation of Sanskrit Naraka; also an analogue of “purgatory” in Catholicism where sinners are reborn to endure sufferings according to the karmic consequences.

39 Impermanence (Wuchang 無常) is the Buddhist metaphor for “death.” In Chinese popular tradition, it is personified by the ghost-attendant of the netherworld who arrives to a dying person to take his or her soul for judgment in purgatory.

40 A kalpa (also trans. as “eon”; Ch. *jie* 劫) is a very long period of time, usually interpreted as the period between the creation and recreation of a world or universe in Buddhist sources, thus encompassing millions or billions of years (by human calculation).

41 “Childhood name,” lit. “nursing name” (*ruming* 乳名): the original name given to a child at birth, later to be changed to his “adult name” (style), according to the old Chinese tradition of naming.

his monastic appellation was Mulian.⁴² In [the aspect] of spiritual abilities, he was the first [among the Buddha’s disciples].⁴³ When he heard that his mother was enduring all [types] of torments in the netherworld,⁴⁴ he traveled to Fengdu,⁴⁵ relying on the power of the Buddha’s mercy, and rescued his mother, [who left] the hell and ascended to the palace in Trāyas-triṃśa heaven.⁴⁶

The *Precious Scroll of Mulian* has been transmitted since antiquity until now,
 It admonishes people to perform filial piety and forge benign [karmic] links.
 The multitude of buddhas and bodhisattvas took a profound vow:
 Of all the things that people do, filial piety comes first.
 On the eighty-first day after winter starts, the cold is unbearable,⁴⁷
 Wang Xiang for his mother lay down on cold ice,⁴⁸

42 “Monastic/religious appellation” (*daohao* 道號): In the Buddhist tradition, a person receives a new name on entering the monastic order.

43 “Spiritual (or supranormal) abilities,” lit. “spiritual penetration” (Skt. *abhijñā, rddhi, abhijñāna*; Pāli *abhiññā*, Ch. *shen tong* 神通), are ascribed to the Buddha and his disciples (archats); texts usually list six kinds of these: (1) unimpeded bodily action; (2) power of divine vision, wherein they can observe the full course of passage by sentient beings through the six destinies; (3) power of divine hearing, with which they are able to hear all the words of suffering and joy experienced by living beings in the six destinies; (4) power of awareness of the minds of others, whereby they know the thoughts of all the living beings; (5) power of the knowledge of previous lifetimes, whereby they know the events of countless kalpas of previous lifetimes experienced by themselves as well as all the living beings; (6) power of the extinction of contamination, whereby they completely extinguish all the afflictions of the three realms and thus are no longer subject to rebirth in the three realms.

44 Netherworld (lit. dark regions, *youming* 幽冥) is another name for the “underground prison” in China.

45 Fengdu 豐都 is an alternative term for “netherworld” in China, after the name of the famous mountain in Sichuan province, where the entrance to the netherworld was considered to be located.

46 Trāyas-triṃśa is the second of the six heavens of the realm of desire in the Buddhist cosmology, where thirty-three celestials dwell. It is known as the Heaven of Thirty-three (Sanshisan tian 三十三天), or Daolitian 忉利天, in the hybrid Chinese transcription/translation.

47 The coldest time of the year. The beginning of winter (*li dong* 立冬) is one of the solar terms of the traditional Chinese calendar, corresponding to November seventh or eighth.

48 The stories of Wang Xiang 王祥, Guo Ju 郭巨, and Meng Zong 孟宗, cited here, present ancient examples of filial sons;

His filial piety received a response and the protection of “Celestial dragons.”⁴⁹
 He obtained two live carp which he presented to his dear mom.
 Virtuous man of great filial piety, Guo Ju,
 Because his mother, when eating, thought of her grandson,
 Together with his wife he performed [the deed] of great filiality;
 [But when] they were digging the earth to bury their son, Heaven awarded them gold.
 [Among] virtuous men of great filial piety [one should] mention Meng Zong,
 When his mother missed bamboo shoots right in the middle of winter,
 He put his hands on a bamboo trunk and tears poured from his both [eyes];
 [His piety] moved heaven and earth and bamboo shoots grew out [immediately].

With these fine words we widely exhort the people of this world
 To broadly practice the way of filial piety and to serve one’s parents.
 To respect one’s parents is as good as respecting the Lord [A]mitabha,⁵⁰
 “Celestial dragons” favor people with filial thoughts.
 We reverently exhort everybody to practice piety to the fullest,

they became known by the time of the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) and later were included in the list of “twenty-four paragons of filial piety” (*ershi si xiao* 二十四孝), which was set entirely in the thirteenth century. On the origins and meanings of these stories, see Knapp 2005. The references to these stories in the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* demonstrate the extent to which the Mulian story was integrated into the traditional culture of China, such references also appearing in the *Yuanqi of Mulian* (目連緣起), an early prosimetic text, discovered among the Dunhuang manuscripts (ca. tenth century): Huang Zheng and Zhang Yongquan 1997, 1016.

49 “Celestial dragons” (*long tian* 龍天) is used as an abbreviation of the Buddhist term “eight groups of spiritual beings” (*tian long ba bu* 天龍八部), which are *deva*, *nāga*, *yakṣa*, *gandharva*, *asura*, *garuḍa*, *kinvara*, and *mahoraga*. These spiritual beings are taken from Indian mythology.

50 Amitabha (Ch. [A]Mituo 阿彌陀), also known as the Buddha of Limitless Light 無量光佛 or Amitâyus (the Buddha of Limitless Life 無量壽佛), is the Lord of the Western Pure Land (Skt. *Sukhāvatī*, Ch. *jīng tu* 淨土), where the pious believers who chant his name are thought to be reborn. This is in the tradition of the Pure Land Buddhism, very influential in China since the early medieval period. Here, as typical of Chinese Buddhist literature, filial piety is equated to the worship of the Buddha and is called the necessary condition of one’s afterlife salvation.

And by no means let thoughts of disobedience arise.
 Filiality moves both Heaven and Earth,
 For a thousand myriad years you will be seen as a wise man!

This is what I heard:⁵¹ Once the Buddha was in the Gṛdhrakūṭa Mountains⁵² in the state of Śrāvastī.⁵³ Many great monks [bhikṣu] assembled there: twelve thousand persons altogether. In addition, there was a multitude of bodhisattvas: thirty-eight thousand of them,⁵⁴ eight groups of spiritual beings,⁵⁵ arhats, enlightened monks, and deities of the three realms.⁵⁶ All of them put their palms together in prayer and listened to the Buddha, who narrated the karmic causation of the past. All of them rejoiced, accepted the Buddha’s instructions for right behavior, paid reverence to the Buddha, and departed.

⁵¹ “That is what I heard” (Skt. *evaṃ mayā śrutam, evaṃ mayā śrutādibhyaḥ*; Pāli *evaṃ me sutaṃ*; Ch. *ru shi wo wen* 如是我聞) is the formula that usually appears at the beginning of Buddhist sūtras, meaning that they are texts pronounced by the Buddha. They are said to have been transmitted by the Buddha’s disciple Ānanda 阿難陀. Ānanda had attended all of Śākyamuni’s lectures and had a powerful memory, and after the Buddha’s death he was asked to recite them, so that they could be written down. Interestingly, this formula does not appear in the text of the apocryphal *Sūtra of Mulian Rescuing His Mother, Pronounced by the Buddha* (ca. twelfth century) that apparently served as the main source of this precious scroll.

⁵² Gṛdhrakūṭa, translated as Vulture Peak (Lingjiushan 靈鷲山), is a mountain located near Rājagṛha where the Buddha was supposed to have preached many Mahāyāna sermons, among them the famous *Lotus Sūtra* (*Sūtra of the Lotus Blossom of Fine Dharma*; Skt. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, Ch. *Miao fa lian hua jing* 妙法蓮華經, T. 262 – the Chin. transl. by Kumārajīva). Later in the text of this *baojuan* the Chin. transcription of the Indian name—Qishejue 耆闍崛—is also used, as well as the abbreviated transl. of Lingshan 靈山 (Numinous Mountain).

⁵³ Vulture Peak was located in the state of Magadha, not Śrāvastī, which means that the author of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* did not have good knowledge of the Buddhist scriptural tradition.

⁵⁴ One can compare these lines with those describing the great assembly of the Buddha in the final part of the *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld*; see Mair 1983, 113.

⁵⁵ See fn. 50.

⁵⁶ Three realms (or worlds; Skt. *tridhātuka, trailokya*, Ch. *san jie* 三界) in the Buddhist cosmology constitute *saṃsāra*: the desire realm (*kāma-dhātu*, 欲界), form realm (*rūpa-dhātu*, 色界), and formless realm (*ārūpya-dhātu*, 無色界).

The *Precious Scroll of Mulian* is no sooner opened, [than]
 All buddhas and bodhisattvas descend [to the assembly].
 All members in the assembly join in chanting [the Buddha's name],
 It can eliminate eight difficulties and avert three disasters.⁵⁷
 Chanting the Buddha's [name] and keeping the fast—[to start your] cultivation as soon
 as possible,
 [If you] crave for your family links—there is no end [to them] for a rest.
 Sages [of the past] all once were ordinary people,
 Why not take them as examples for perfecting [oneself]?
 Time⁵⁸ [flies] as an arrow, as quick as a [thrown] shuttle,
 But who among [living] people will think about chanting [A]mitabha's name?
 One morning you will die and fall into three mires,⁵⁹
 You will regret that you created [evil] karma when once you were alive.
 The Lord of Teaching Shakya[muni] stays on the Numinous Mountain,⁶⁰
 There assemble myriads and myriads of bodhisattvas.
 Buddha narrates the case of past [karmic] causations,
 Eight groups of spiritual beings all rejoiced.
 Sage Lord Shakya[muni] manifested in [this world of] Sahā,⁶¹

57 In the Buddhist scriptures discourse, the eight difficulties (Skt. *aṣṭāvakṣaṇāḥ*, *aṣṭākṣaṇāḥ*, *aṣṭākṣaṇa*, *aṣṭa akṣaṇāḥ*, Ch. *ba nan* 八難) refer to the circumstances in which it is difficult to see the Buddha or hear his teaching: (1) the condition of a hell-being, (2) hungry ghost, (3) animal, (4) in the long-life heavens (where life is long and easy), (5) in *Uttarakuru* (the northern continent where all is pleasant), (6) as deaf, blind, or dumb, (7) as a worldly philosopher, (8) in the intermediate time between the life of a Buddha and his successor. The three disasters (Skt. *tribhayāni*, Ch. *san zai* 三災) mean wars, pestilence, and famine at the end of the world.

58 Literally “[the change between] light and shadow” (*guang yin* 光陰).

59 The three mires (or paths; Skt. *gati*, Ch. *tu* 途), i.e., paths to the hells of fire, blood, and swords.

60 Numinous Mountain (Lingshan 靈山) is another name for Vulture Peak. See fn. 53.

61 Ch. *suopo* 娑婆, transliteration of the Sanskrit word, meaning the “secular world”: the corrupt world of passion where humans live.

Five years already have passed since he obtained enlightenment,
On the day when all heavens of the three realms will transform at once,
The first one in spiritual abilities is [also] greatly superior in filial piety.

In the old days in the City of the King's Seat [Rājagṛha] there was an elder called Fuxiang. His family was very wealthy: his camels, mules, elephants, and horses filled the mountains and covered the plain; precious pearls filled the storehouses, [together with] heaps of jade and piles of gold. The elder liked goodness,⁶² adhered to fasting, and constantly practiced the *pāramitās*.⁶³ [But] suddenly the elder was struck by a grave illness, and after several days he died. Husband and wife had only one son, who since his birth had liked goodness. His name was Luobo [Turnip].⁶⁴ When Luobo saw that his father had died, he organized a vegetarian feast and a ritual assembly, buried his father in the mountains and maintained mourning for three years.

[When Luobo] had finished mourning for his father,
All the family storehouses and treasuries were completely empty.

People busy themselves wasting their thoughts on account of profit,
In vain they establish family affairs, storehouses, treasuries, and granaries.
They pile up rare treasures as high as mountains,
But no matter how much money you have, you cannot buy off impermanence.
Luobo remained in mourning for three whole years,
Then he addressed his mother, saying “Listen to your son's words:

62 Meaning that he practiced charity.

63 *Pāramitās* (Ch. *boluomi* 波羅蜜), usually translated as “perfections,” are the noble character qualities that can enable enlightenment. There are various lists of *pāramitās* in Buddhist scriptures. The most common one (in the Mahāyāna scriptures) includes six qualities.

64 His name, Luobo, differs from the standard spelling of “turnip” in only one element: 羅卜 vs. 蘿卜.

When father was alive, the family wealth flourished,
Now the treasuries are empty and we lack money.”

All [sentient] beings crave profit, in vain they waste their minds, but all their scheming
is for nothing;
Striving only for wealth and rank, they are not willing to cultivate themselves, and [only
focus] on building their enterprise.
Your children and beloved wife, when impermanence comes [knocking], which of them
will be willing to die for you?

The lifespan of a person does not reach hundred years,
In vain you will store up myriads of coins.
You may pile up treasures as prominent as mountains,
But when impermanence [arrives], it is all for nothing.

After Luobo completed the mourning for his father, he addressed his mother Lady Qingti: “When my father was alive, his money and grain were without count. [However], today the treasuries and storehouses are [almost] empty. I, your son, want to go abroad to engage in trade. I wonder what mother thinks of this?” When Lady [Qingti] heard him saying this, she ordered servants to take the [remaining] money and valuables out of the storehouses. There were three thousand strings of cash, which Luobo divided evenly into three parts: one-third was left for his mother to use to supply the household, another third was left to his mother for the purpose of her making offerings to the three treasures [of Buddhism], while the son took the third part and left for the state of Jin lands,⁶⁵ where he engaged in business.

⁶⁵ This may mean the state of Jin 金 (1115–1234), founded by the Jurchens, which later took over the northern part of China, co-existing with the Song state in the south. Its mention may indicate the approximate date of the *Sūtra of Mulian Rescuing His Mother, Pronounced by the Buddha* (twelfth century), which served as the major source of this precious scroll.

His intentions were to seek profit in the neighboring state,
His thoughts were about obtaining treasures to serve his dear mother.

Luobo evenly divided money into three parts:
"Two-thirds I gave to my mother [to take care] of domestic affairs,
One-third I take myself as the initial [capital].
Dear mother does not need to worry about this!"
When Qingti heard his words, she rejoiced:
"You are a rarely seen dear son with such filial intentions!
As you travel abroad for commercial [enterprise],
Take care and come back as soon as you obtain profit!"

Luobo evenly divided the money into three parts; two-thirds he left with his dear mother,
And with one-third the son traveled abroad to earn money. When Qingti heard his
words,
She was glad and content: "I wish that my son gets profit in commerce and immediately
returns home!"

Luobo reported to his mother:
"I will take capital to the foreign land.
I have intention [to engage in] commerce,
You should not worry about it [at all]!"

Mulian addressed his mother: "I am going abroad for trade; mother, please listen to my words: At home
[every] morning and evening, [please] burn incense, chant the Buddha's name, keep fasting and
donating,⁶⁶ widely [feed] Buddhist and Daoist monks with vegetarian [food], respect the elders and take

66 Donation, or generosity (Skt. *dāna*, Ch. *bushi* 布施), is one of the major virtuous qualities (*pāramitās*) in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

pity on the poor! Every day cultivate your virtues! [Then], after your life comes to an end, you will directly ascend to a lotus seat of [one of the] nine grades,⁶⁷ and will not fall into the torments of the three mires.”

Qingti answered: “My son, you can be at ease [regarding] going as a merchant [abroad]. I at home will keep fasting, chanting the Buddha’s name, and taking refuge in three treasures [of Buddhism].”

As Luobo heard his mother’s words, he was delighted;
With her mouth Qingti agreed, but anger arose in her heart.

Luobo took the trouble to exhort his mother repeatedly:
To keep fasting, chanting the Buddha’s [name], and burning incense widely,
[Perform] donations, feed monks, and cultivate good [karmic] consequences,
[Asking her] not to raise any worries about her loving son,
Piously worship the Buddha and take refuge in the Three Treasures.
[Then,] after her life ends, she certainly would reach the Western Land,⁶⁸
Luobo bid farewell to his mother and the neighbors of his ward,
He packed his valuables and set out on a journey.

Luobo bid farewell to his mother and exhorted her to worship Buddha, burn incense,
And mercifully donate with pleasure, [in order to] accumulate happiness and eliminate
disasters; feed monks, [perform] donations;

67 These are the nine grades (*jiu pin* 九品), or rewards, of the Pure Land, where souls of the pious are considered to be born on the lotus flowers (seats), corresponding to the nine grades of development in the previous life, upon which depends, in the next life, one’s distance from Amitābha, the consequent kalpas (eons) that are needed to approach him, and whether one’s lotus will open early or late. According to the *Sūtra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* (*Guan wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經, Skt. *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*, T.365), one of the main scriptures of the Pure Land form of Buddhism, these are categorized as: the best of the best, middling of the best, least of the best; best of the middling, middling of the middling and least of the middling; best of the least, middling of the least, and least of the least.

68 Western Land (*Xi fang* 西方), here another name of the Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha.

Revere three luminaries⁶⁹ and take refuge in the Three Treasures [of Buddhism], thus to cultivate [the ability] to return to the realm of Ultimate Joy.⁷⁰

As Luobo went on the commercial trip,
He left the exhortation for his mother.
If the mother took refuge in the Three Treasures,
She could cultivate goodness and [later] set off for the Western Land.

Luobo bid farewell to his dear mother, as well as his neighbors and friends, and, leading his servants, traveled to the state of Jin lands [to engage] in trade. Lady Qingti, seeing that her son had departed, raised unkind thoughts about doing all kinds of evil deeds. She called her servant girl Jinzhi and others: "All of you, listen to what I shall say. Our family is very wealthy: Luobo left two thousand strings of cash. There is no need to feed monks and [perform] donations; [go and] buy pigs, sheep, geese, ducks, and other creatures, feed them [so they turn] fat and big, then kill them and bring them to me to eat. If the Buddhist monks or Daoist priests come to our gates [asking for] donations, order servants to kick them out of our gates!"

Lady Qingti ordered her servants to take money and buy pigs, sheep, and other creatures. Every morning they slaughtered these animals, every day they fried and boiled them. [She had] sheep hung on the pillars, stabbed them [so that] blood poured into a basin. [She had] pigs tied up and beaten, so that their terrible cries [were heard] without an end. She had their bellies cut and hearts ripped out. She worshiped demons⁷¹ and performed all kinds of evil deeds. She did not think that Impermanence would arrive [at once] and did not care about the torments of hell. She absolutely did not follow Luobo's exhortation and only craved for the joy [lying] in front of her eyes.

[While] Lady Qingti stayed at home [alone], every day she rejoiced and indulged in luxury, but

69 Three luminaries (*san guang* 三光): sun, moon, and stars.

70 The realm of Ultimate Joy (*Ji le bang* 極樂邦), another name of the Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha.

71 Demonic deities that apparently required bloody sacrifices, a quite common practice in old China. On criticism of these by the literati as well as the Daoist clergy, see, e.g., Lin 2015.

[let us] tell now how Luobo took his servants and money and arrived to the state of Jin lands, [where he] engaged [in commerce]. [Because of] Luobo's filial thoughts, the deities of heaven protected him, so he earned a lot of money: three thousand strings of cash. He was very happy. Suddenly, he thought about his mother, packed his things, and returned home.

Luobo missed his mother, so he had no thoughts for trade [anymore]; he called [his servant] Yili and returned home. Traveling there, he set out at dawn [each day] and stopped for the night, ate when hungry and drank when thirsty. After many days of travel, he returned to his native state. [When he was] around forty-something tricents⁷² away from home, he stopped to rest for a while under the tree to the west of the city and sent Yili to return home first to see what good deeds his mother had performed [while he was away]. [He said:] "If she created fine [karmic] links, I will give her this money for domestic worship; if she performed bad deeds, I will use this money for charity. Yili heard these words and went home to inquire what sort of benign karma [his lord's] mother had produced.

Before Yili arrived home, Jinzhi [had already] suddenly reported to her mistress. Jinzhi said: "Today the small master will return!"

Lady Qingti asked her: "How do you know?"

Jinzhi answered her: "I saw that Yili has arrived."

Lady Qingti said: "Do not let him enter for a while"; she ordered servants to open the storehouse and take out ritual banners and precious parasols to be set up in the rear garden, pretending she was holding a vegetarian [feast] for the Buddhist monks. [They also] arranged benches and tables and set up the ritual banners everywhere, burned incense and lighted candles; spoons and chopsticks [were thrown] in disorder.⁷³ Qingti also ordered that they sweep the Buddhist chapel to make it clean.

When Yili entered the gates and met Lady Qingti, she ordered him to go to the rear garden to observe the place where the vegetarian [feast] for the monks had been held. Yili saw that the benches, tables, and vessels were arranged there; spoons and chopsticks [were thrown] in disorder; the ritual banners were set up everywhere, [as if] the vegetarian [feast] for the monks had just ended, and the incense still had not completely burned out. Qingti also ordered Yili to go to observe the Buddhist chapel.

⁷² Following the term suggested by Victor H. Mair to translate the word *li* 里 (Chinese mile).

⁷³ Lit. "spoons and chopsticks were criss-crossing [on tables]."

He saw that [the lamps] were shining brightly and incense smoke was whirling [in the air]. Lady Qingti told him: "Ever since Luobo departed for the business trip, I [performed] good deeds every morning at home; every day I held vegetarian [feasts] for the Buddhist monks."

As Yili saw that Lady Qingti had performed good [deeds], he reported to his master: "Ever since you, the small master, departed for the business trip abroad, your old mother at home during all the days was performing good [deeds]. Every day she recited sūtras."

When Luobo heard this, he asked Yili: "How do you know [this]?"

Yili answered: "When I arrived home, [I saw that] spoons and chopsticks [were thrown] in disorder, and the incense had not completely burned out. The vegetarian [feast] for monks had just ended, and they still had not cleared up [the disorder]." As Luobo heard this, he was greatly delighted.

When Luobo heard that his mother had done good [deeds], he was greatly delighted and performed a bow to show respect for the space. Suddenly there came relatives, neighbors, and friends. As they learned that Luobo had returned from his trade [trip] abroad, they came out of the city to greet him. When they saw that Luobo performed a bow for the space, the neighbors asked him: "Today you have returned from a long trip; there is no buddha in front of you, and there are no deities behind; why do not you [enjoy] some rest, but perform this rite?"

Luobo answered: "I have heard that [while I was away] my mother at home kept fasting and donating, and worshiped the Three Treasures [of Buddhism]."

All neighbors told Luobo: "Since you have departed and traded abroad for three years, your old mother at home slandered the Three Treasures, beat Buddhist monks and nuns, widely bought pigs and sheep, fed them [so they turned] fat and big, and slaughtered them unscrupulously. [She had] sheep hung on the pillars, stabbed them [so that] blood poured into a basin. [She had] pigs tied up and beaten, so that their terrible cries [were heard] without an end. [She had] their hair removed by boiling water, their bellies cut and hearts ripped out. She worshiped demons and indulged in all kinds of pleasures. None of us has seen your mother feeding monks or [performing] donations."

When Luobo heard this, he was so angered that he fell down on the ground. Blood poured out of all the pores [of his body], and only after a while did he regain consciousness. But let us tell [now] how Lady Qingti, when she saw that her son had returned home, went out to meet him. She saw that her dear son fell down on the ground and could not get up. She grabbed her son's hand and called for

him in a loud voice: “My son, have you lost money [in business]? What is the matter with you? [Today] mother and son have reunited. Is it not joyful?”

Luobo answered: “My trade abroad was very successful. It is only because you have done these indecent [things]: slaughtered and roasted living creatures, I am in such distress!”

Qingti said: “Since you, my son, went on the business trip, I at home fasted always, recited Buddha’s [name], [made] donations, [held] vegetarian [feasts] for monks, and venerated the Three Treasures [of Buddhism]: I perfected [myself] in all kinds of good behavior. If you do not believe me, Yili saw that I was holding a vegetarian [feast] for monks, which still had not ended [when he arrived].” Luobo listened to her words, but did not believe. [Then] Lady Qingti said: “If I at home slaughtered living creatures and did not cultivate good consequences [of my behavior], [then,] when I return home today, I will be stricken by a grave illness, die after seven days, and fall into the Avīci [hell].”

Luobo, hearing his mother take such a solemn vow, was shocked. He at once returned home with her. All onlookers also departed. As Lady Qingti had taken her vow, she indeed received retribution. She immediately was stricken by a grave illness and died in less than seven days. Luobo, seeing his mother’s death, disheveled his hair, grieving much for his mother; he turned his face to heaven, wept and cried.

When Luobo finished his sorrowful weeping for his mother, he held the [Buddhist] vegetarian assembly for her salvation. Luobo put his mother’s [body] into a coffin, and after performing the memorial services of seven weeks,⁷⁴ buried her in the mountains. In that place he built a hut out of grass and guarded her soul [tablet] for a hundred days. He brought earth in baskets on a pole to add to his mother’s mound, and at night he recited sūtras for the salvation of his mother’s [soul]. His filial thoughts did not recede, which moved the dragon spirit. Suddenly sika deer of five colors came to submit [to Luobo], and white cranes descended from auspicious clouds. Blood poured out of the eyes of kind crows, and a hundred kinds of flying birds all arrived with soil in their beaks to help Luobo to [finish] the mound.

⁷⁴ According to Chinese Buddhist beliefs, the soul of a deceased person, during the first seven weeks after death, was passing through several departments of the netherworld. The passage through the netherworld before rebirth traditionally was believed to take up to three years. Special rituals called “seven sevens” (*qi qi* 七七) were prescribed to be conducted during this period; see Teiser 1994, 2–3.

When Luobo saw this, he was delighted,
Only thus one can express his sincere filial thoughts!

With pious thoughts he buried his mother in the middle of mountains,
In the morning and night he thought about his mother and cried in grief.
During daytime he brought earth to his mother's tomb,
At night he turned and recited the Mahāyāna sūtras.
This moved the deer, which brought flowers in their mouths,
And the immortal cranes flew by, bringing auspicious clouds.⁷⁵
The merciful crows wept with bloody tears.
The flying birds with soil in their beaks helped build the mound.

[As] Luobo thought about his parents, tears constantly poured from his eyes.
With sincere thoughts of great piety in the daytime, he brought earth on a pole to add
to his mother's mound.
At night he kept reciting golden sūtras of Prajñā-*[paramita]*,
A hundred kinds of flying birds with soil in their beaks helped build the mound.

He thought about his mother and realized the great piety!
Day and night he persisted in his intentions.
The merciful crows wept with bloody tears,
A hundred [kinds] of birds helped build the mound.

When Luobo saw this, he was greatly delighted. If a person cannot perform his filial [duty], how can he move the great heaven? He quickly found artisans, who made him a statue of the Buddha. From [each] dawn he continued burning incense, performing offerings, and worshiping the Buddha,

⁷⁵ Cranes are considered to be companions of *xian* 仙 (immortals or transcendents) in the traditional Chinese worldview, and thus a type of sacred bird.

repenting [his mother's sins]. He only wished that his dear mother would speedily achieve a good rebirth [in heaven]. Time [flies] as an arrow, as quick as a [thrown] shuttle; the mourning of three years [for Qingti] has ended. Luobo bid farewell to his mother's soul and returned home. He used his money and valuables for donations, fed the monks, and helped the poor. He was not soiled by the [worldly] dust [and realized that] all myriad things are just emptiness.

[Luobo] was not longing for prosperity and splendor, did not crave for wealth and rank,
He left home to study the Way and realize Non-existence.⁷⁶

“Wearing the Gold Lock” [tune]:

Buddha Amitabha

has broadly taken the boundless vows,

As he observed all living beings

constantly drifting and drowning in the sea of troubles,⁷⁷

In the waves of the Naihe river

he created a boat [of salvation],⁷⁸

On which all living beings mount

to set out altogether for the assembly of the Lotus pond!⁷⁹

When both [Luobo's] parents died

he did not crave for the great wealth of his family,

⁷⁶ Non-existence (Wusheng 無生) is here a metaphor for nirvana.

⁷⁷ Sea of troubles (*kuhai* 苦海) is another name of the wheel of rebirths with constant sufferings.

⁷⁸ Naihe 奈河 River (“River of No Recourse,” or Whathellwedo” in Victor H. Mair’s translation) is located in the netherworld. According to popular Buddhist belief, all souls of the dead must enter the netherworld through it; thus it is equivalent to the River Styx in Ancient Greek mythology. Only pious people can cross the bridge over it, but sinners fall down and are bitten by snakes and dogs; see Mair 1983, 95–96; Teiser 1994, 2–3.

⁷⁹ Lotus pond (*lianchi* 蓮池) is another name of the Pure Land.

He abandoned the empty splendor
 with which one spends his time in vain—
 The family property of myriad strings [of coins]
 and countless gold and silver [ingots].
 He took the vow to perfect himself
 and wanted to return to the road of peaceful nourishment.

Mulian took the vow to perfect himself
 And was not contaminated by the world's dust,
 Myriad [human] tricks are all false.
 Only [true] essence exists constantly.⁸⁰

[A PASSAGE FROM THE *SŪTRA OF MULIAN RESCUING HIS MOTHER*]⁸¹

As the mourning for his mother ended, Luobo bid farewell to [his mother's] mound and spirit [tablet] and traveled to Gṛdhrakūṭa Mountains to see the World-Honored One.⁸² Luobo told the Buddha: “The World-Honored One, now my parents already have died, and the term of mourning has ended, I wish to follow the Buddha and leave the family [to become a monk]. What merit [will it bring]?”

The World-Honored One cheered him: “Luobo, it is wonderful! In Jambūdvīpa,⁸³ if someone sacrifices a man or a woman, a slave or a slave girl, to enter the Buddhist order on becoming a monk [or a nun], [this person's merits] would be superior than if it were a donation of eighty-four thousand precious stupas.⁸⁴ [His] parents in this existence will enjoy happiness for a hundred years, and the

80 [True] essence (*xing* 性), means the nature of Buddhahood, which according to Chan and the related teachings of Buddhism, is present in all objects of the illusory world.

81 This section gives a synopsis of the part that is missing in the 1440 manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* (second volume).

82 World-Honored One (Skt. *lokanātha* or *lokajyeṣṭha*, Ch. Shizun 世尊) is the epithet of the Buddha.

83 In the Buddhist cosmology, it is the great continent to the south of Sumeru Mountain, the place of human existence.

84 Here the transliteration of the Buddhist term stupa (Skt. *stūpa*, Pāli *thūpa*): *futu* 浮圖 (also 浮屠), and its Ch. transl. *ta*

ancestors of seven generations all will be reborn in the Pure Land. Even greater [merit] occurs when one develops thoughts for enlightenment!”⁸⁵ Then the Buddha dispatched Ananda to shave Luobo’s beard and hair; he touched his head,⁸⁶ made a prediction [of his future],⁸⁷ and changed his name into Great Maudgalyāyana. [He declared]: “Among my ten great disciples, he will be the first in spiritual abilities.”

Mulian asked the Buddha: “For a magnificent precious pagoda, what merit [can one obtain]?”

The World-Honored One answered: [Even though] a precious pagoda can be high and big, one story rising over another, reaching the Brahma’s [heaven],⁸⁸ after a hundred years [pass] the rain could soak the Buddha [statue’s] face, and this will be your sin. The merit of leaving one’s family [as a monk on the contrary] will [give you] an adamantine incorruptible body.”⁸⁹

Mulian told the World-Honored One: “Now I want to leave you and go into the mountains to study the Way.”

The World-Honored One answered: “If you want to cultivate the Way, you do not need [to go to] another place, you can study the Way in my Gr̥dhraḥakūṭa Mountains.”

塔 (also “pagoda”) are used in the same way. However, a stupa is a Buddhist sanctuary: a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics (such as the remains of the Buddha, or of Buddhist monks and nuns). It is considered to have given birth to the pagodas of East Asia.

85 Enlightenment: Skt. *Bodhi*, Ch. *puti* 菩提.

86 “Laying the hand on the top of the head” (Ch. *mo ding* 摩頂): in Buddhist sūtras, the Buddha pats the head of those who receive his Dharma, or precepts, with his right hand, with the meaning that they are entering the saṃgha. It is an equivalent of the tonsure in the Christian monastic tradition.

87 “Prediction [of the future enlightenment]” (Skt./Pāli *vyākaraṇa*, *vyākara*, Ch. *shou ji* 授記): the Buddha predicts for his disciples the attainment of Buddhahood in the future, usually including information regarding their respective Buddha-kalpas, Buddha-realms, titles, etc.

88 Brahma’s [heaven] (Skt. *brahma-loka*, *brahman*, Ch. *Fantian* 梵天): According to Buddhist cosmology, the heaven in the world of forms (also, “three worlds”), where Brahma, the Indian god, dwells.

89 Adamantine (Skt. *vajra*; Pāli *vajira*, Ch. *jingang* 金剛), an extremely hard material, is identified with the diamond or the essential substance of gold and used as a trope for something hard and indestructible. It is an oft-used metaphor for the wisdom of enlightenment, which can cut through anything and can never be destroyed.

Mulian addressed the World-Honored One: "What food⁹⁰ is there in the mountains that can sustain you to study the Way?"

The Buddha answered: "Mulian, in the mountains there are tigers and wolves, beasts and birds; any time [you need] vegetarian food, they will bring you fragrant flowers in their jaws [and beaks], which can nourish you."

As Mulian heard these words, he hurled up his begging bowl⁹¹ and leaped into space.⁹² He flew to Gr̥dhrakūṭa Mountains and stayed in the Retreat of Pippala.⁹³ He pressed his left foot down upon his right foot and his right foot down upon his left foot; his tongue touched the roof of his mouth.⁹⁴ [In meditation] he observed the Heaven of Thirty-Three and reached the Celestial Palace of Joyous Transformations; but he only saw his father enjoying the heavenly happiness [there] and could not find his mother.

Mulian returned and addressed the World-Honored One: "My mother, while alive, told me that every day she held a vegetarian [feast] for five hundred monks. After death, she must have been reborn in the Celestial Palace of Joyous Transformations, but I cannot see her in the celestial palace. Where is she now?"

The Buddha answered Mulian: "When your mother was alive, she did not believe in the Three Treasures, she was stingy and accumulated evil [karma]. She has committed sins [as prominent] as Sumeru Mountain, and after death she fell into the hell."

90 Lit. "grain."

91 Patra (Ch. *bo* 鉢): a monk's begging bowl.

92 This phrase can be traced back to the Transformation Text of Mulian; see Mair 1983, 91, 112.

93 Pippala (Ch. *binboluo* 賓鉢羅 or *biboluo* 畢鉢羅): peepal tree or ficus religiosa. Pippala-guhā, Vaibhāra-guhā, a cave located near Rājagṛha, where the Buddha's disciple Mahākāśyapa is said to have once lived. Chinese pilgrims Faxian (fifth century) and Xuanzang (seventh century) describe it as a stone house in which Buddha regularly sat in meditation; see Legge 1886, 84; Beal 1884, 156.

94 This is a particular type of Buddhist meditation practice; a similar description is found in the *Transformation Text of Mulian*; see Mair 1983, 90.

When Mulian heard these words, he raised his body and beat it, wailed and cried very desperately. [Then] he rose from the ground and traveled over the hells.⁹⁵

[THE THIRD VOLUME OF THE *PRECIOUS SCROLL OF MULIAN*]

When Reverend [Mulian] saw [this hell] he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the “cage-beds.”⁹⁶ The chief of this hell ordered yakshas⁹⁷ to tie sinners with ropes and put them on the torture-beds. The ghost-guards were beating them with the long-spiked iron cudgels, so that the sinners’ skin was completely torn. Reverend [Mulian] asked him: “What [evil] deeds have the sinners in this hell performed while alive, that they are being punished in this way?”

The chief of this hell answered: “These are women who, while alive, did not respect their parents, slandered and cursed their parents-in-law; after they died they entered the department of darkness,⁹⁸ where they received this retribution.”

As Mulian saw this, he was in distress. He exhorted living beings: “Your husband [is equal] to parents who have raised you, he cannot be harmed. Clever women should quickly realize their mistakes and respect their husbands, so that they will not suffer the torments of this hell.”

Mulian again went forward and saw the hell of the mills. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to stab sinners with iron pitchforks and put them into the mills; their blood and flesh were scattered about [in a mess].

Mulian asked: “What [evil] deeds did the living beings in this hell perform while alive, that they are being punished in this way?”

The chief of this hell answered: “These people, while alive, cut and broke the bloody flesh of

95 The first episode of the description of hell in the *Sūtra of Mulian Rescuing His Mother* is about the division of mortars, which appears later in the third volume of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* (see below). Apparently, the latter contained the prolonged version of the journey through hell in comparison with the apocryphal sūtras, which started in the second volume (now lost).

96 “Cage-bed” (*xiachuang* 厩床): an instrument of torture resembling a bed, over which a criminal’s body was stretched.

97 Yakshas (Skt. *yakṣa*, Pāli *yakkha*, Ch. *yecha* 夜叉): one of the eight kinds of spiritual beings mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. In Chinese popular texts they are depicted as demons, servants of the lords of the underworld.

98 Department of darkness (*yinsi* 陰司) is another name for the netherworld.

[other] living creatures; drank alcohol excessively. After they died they entered this hell, where they have received this retribution."

As Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of pounding in mortars. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to cut sinners into thousands of pieces, [so that] their blood and flesh were scattered about [in a mess]. Sinners were thrown into mortars, where they were pounded so that their bodies were broken and bones smashed [into powder]. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they are being punished in this way?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, cut and broke the skin and meat of [other] living beings; after they died they entered this hell, where they have received this retribution."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the mountains of knives. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to push sinners into the mountainous forest. As their feet stepped on the mountains of knives, the thousand limbs were dissected; as their hands grasped the trees of swords, their hundred joints were scattered. Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they are being punished in this way?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, burned with fire skin and meat of [other] living beings; after they died they entered the dark department, where they have received this retribution."

As reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. He exhorted all people [of the world]: "Never slaughter and fry [animals], craving for the beautiful taste [of their meat]; otherwise, you will fall into [the hell] of the mountains of knives and trees of swords! As you have heard this, hastily repent and cultivate your minds!"

As Mulian could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of smashing by stones. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to push sinners into a cage, where they were smashed between two large stones. As the sinners were smashed [in this way], fresh blood poured all over them, and their bodies were completely broken. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they receive this punishment?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, harmed all insects and ants; after they died they entered this hell, where they have received this retribution."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of splitting by saws. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to put sinners into pressing boards with their heads upside down and feet facing heaven. They were cut with saws, so that fresh blood poured in streams; their sufferings were impossible to bear. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they receive this punishment?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, pursued profit and craved for wealth, they cheated other people, were unrestrained in their greed; after they died they entered this hell, where they have received this retribution."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the hungry ghosts. Their heads were [as big] as Mount Tai⁹⁹ and [their] bellies [as wide] as the blue sea, but their throats were as thin as a needle's eye, and they could not eat anything. When they tried to walk, they made the sound of five hundred broken carts. Reverend Mulian asked them: "What sins did you commit while alive, that you receive this punishment?"

Hungry ghosts answered: "While alive, we [persuaded] other people to stop [observance of] fasting and precepts and not to believe in the Three Treasures [of Buddhism]; so after death we entered the dark department, where we have received this retribution."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the charcoal stream. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to push sinners into the [walled] enclosure with the charcoal stream [inside], where they suffered limitless torments. Their whole bodies were burned down, and they had nowhere to run. When they saw the eastern gate opened, they headed to the eastern gate, but it closed automatically. When they saw the western gate opened, they headed to the western gate, but it also closed automatically. All four gates were like this, so it repeated [endlessly]. In the river there was burning charcoal, which roasted sinners, and they ran around and endured suffering without end. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they receive this punishment now?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, roasted chicken and goslings in fire

99 Mount Tai (Taishan 泰山) in Shandong was a sacred mountain in China.

even before those saw daylight; now, after they died they entered the dark department, where they have received this retribution."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the fire pits. The chief of this hell pushed sinners into a fire pit, where the smoke rose myriad fathoms¹⁰⁰ high, and the fire was blazing in a thousand layers. The fierce flames in this hell were burning living beings. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they receive this punishment now?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, often acted out of hatred, they burned people with fire or set forests and fields on fire, thus harming living beings. After they died they entered the dark department, where they have received this retribution."

When Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the boiling cauldrons. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to stab sinners with iron pitchforks and throw them in the boiling cauldrons: their skin was burned down, bones and meat dissipated. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds did the sinners in this hell perform while alive, that they receive this punishment now?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, did not believe in the Three Treasures [of Buddhism], [and they] fried and boiled living beings. After they died they entered this hell, where they have received this retribution."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress. As he could not find his mother [there], he went forward and saw the hell of the fire bowls. The chief of this hell ordered yakshas to push sinners into cages, where they put fire bowls on their heads. Flames were going through their hundred joints and sutures of bones, their sufferings were impossible to bear. Reverend Mulian asked: "What [evil] deeds have the sinners in this hell performed while alive, that they receive this punishment now?"

The chief of this hell answered: "These people, while alive, liked to eat marrow out of living beings' bones; they craved for the marvelous taste, pared [animals'] bones and took out marrow, causing them unbearable suffering. After they died they entered this hell, where they have received this retribution."

¹⁰⁰ I follow here Victor H. Mair's translation of the Chinese measure *zhang* 丈 as "fathom."

When reverend Mulian saw this, he was in distress.¹⁰¹ As he [still] could not find his mother, he silently sat down and meditated [in front of the gates of hell]. None of the demon-guardians of hell were happy about this, and they all were frightened. They ordered a yaksha to come out to see if this was an auspicious omen, or [might it be that new souls of] the sinners from the world of light had arrived? As the yaksha came to the gates of hell, he saw only a solitary monk, wearing three garments,¹⁰² sitting upright [in meditation]. Yaksha returned and reported this to the chief of hell.

Yaksha informed the chief of hell: “There are no sinners in front of the [underworld] prison, but there is a saint-monk sitting in front of the prison’s gate in meditation.”

When the chief of hell heard this, he came out of the prison to take a look. He saw there indeed was a monk in a monastic robes,¹⁰³ with a shaven head, entering into the [meditative] equipoise¹⁰⁴ and visualizing emptiness.¹⁰⁵ He was practicing a Chan meditation of sudden enlightenment.¹⁰⁶ The chief of hell called him several times and [thus] awoke reverend Mulian. He asked Mulian: “For what did you, our teacher, arrive here?”

Reverend Mulian answered: “I especially came to look for my mother.”

The chief of hell asked him [again]: “Who told you that your mother is here?”

Reverend Mulian answered: “Buddha Shakyamuni told me that my mother is here.”

The chief of hell again addressed Mulian: “What is your relation to Buddha Shakyamuni?”

Reverend Mulian answered: “He is my original teacher.”

¹⁰¹ The surviving part of the 1373 manuscript starts with this passage, the following text basically coinciding with that of the 1440 manuscript.

¹⁰² Three garments constitute the regular costume of a Buddhist monk: assembly robe (Skt. *kāṣāya*, Ch. *jiasha* 袈裟), upper garment (Skt. *uttarā saṃghāṭī*, Ch. *yuduoluoseng* 鬱多羅僧), and a vest or shirt below it (Skt. *antarvāsaka*, Ch. *antuohui* 安陀會).

¹⁰³ Lit. “a square robe” (*fang pao* 方袍), a garment of a Buddhist monk sewn of square pieces (rags).

¹⁰⁴ Entering [meditative] equipoise (Skt. *samādhi-praviṣṭa*, Ch. *ru ding* 入定): a Buddhist practice of mind cultivation.

¹⁰⁵ Visualization of emptiness (Skt. **śūnya-samanuṣāyanā*, Ch. *guan kong* 觀空): meditation on emptiness as the substance of all things in the material world.

¹⁰⁶ Sudden enlightenment (*dun wu* 頓悟): one of the major notions of Chan Buddhism, associated with the name of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638–713). Here it is clearly used out of its original context.

Upon hearing this, the chief of hell lowered his head and [greeted him] with a bow: "Today, I, a disciple [of the Buddha], have been predestined to meet the superior disciple of the World-Honored One [in person]!"

The chief of hell asked Mulian: "What are the surname and name of your mother?"

Reverend Mulian answered: "Her name is Lady Liu Qingti, the Fourth."¹⁰⁷

After learning this, the chief of hell entered the prison to check his records, but her name was not there. He reported to reverend Mulian: "You may know that according to my investigation, your mother is not in my prison."

[Mulian asked]: "If she is not in this hell, where can she be?"

The chief of hell answered: "Ahead of you there is the Avīci hell, enclosed in iron mountains."¹⁰⁸ If anyone falls into it, it is impossible to be reborn [again]."

Reverend Mulian bid farewell to the chief of hell and went directly to the Avīci prison. He saw iron walls myriad fathoms high, black cells of several thousand stories. Flames of fire were blazing in the space; on the four sides black vapor was rising [to heaven]. On the [prison] walls there were iron snakes belching fierce fire, on the [surrounding] mountains there were iron dogs spitting black smoke. Reverend Mulian looked at it for a long time, but there were no gates to enter it. He cried in a loud voice several hundred times, but nobody responded. Mulian returned to inquire about this of the chief of the previous [hell] prison.

Reverend Mulian reached the Fortress, Enclosed in Iron,¹⁰⁹ but there were no gates to enter it. He cried in a loud voice for many times, but nobody responded. Mulian returned to the hell of the fire bowls and lamented to the chief of that hell: "I went to the Avīci hell, but there were no gates to enter. I would like to ask you: why cannot it be opened?"

The chief of hell answered: "That Avīci hell is for those living beings who while alive did not

¹⁰⁷ In traditional China, people were often called by their birth-order number in the family system of generation count, and not by the personal name.

¹⁰⁸ Iron mountains (Skt. *mahācakravāla*, *mahā-cakra-vāḍa*, Ch. *tiewei shan* 鐵圍山): this notion comes from Buddhist scriptures, where it means the circular iron enclosure, the double circle of mountains forming the outer periphery of every world, concentric to the seven circles around Sumeru Mountain, according to the Buddhist cosmology.

¹⁰⁹ Fortress Enclosed in Iron (*tiewei cheng* 鐵圍城): alternative name of the Avīci prison in Chinese Buddhist literature.

believe in the Three Treasures [of Buddhism] and committed limitless great sins. After death, they fell into this hell, where they are blown down by the karmic winds and enter it upside down. If they want a new rebirth, it is so difficult [to achieve]! Your magical abilities are too small. If you want to open this hell, you cannot avoid asking Buddha [to do this]!"

When reverend Mulian heard this, he thought about his mother and was in distress. He bid farewell to the chief of hell and returned to the Numinous Mountain to lament to Tathāgata.¹¹⁰

Reverend Mulian ascended clouds and directly went to the Numinous Mountain, where he respectfully reported this to the Buddha. Mulian said: "I, your disciple, traveled to hells and passed through all of them, but my mother was not there. I saw the Fortress, Enclosed in Iron, with the iron walls myriad fathoms high and black cells of several thousand stories. Iron nets, crisscrossing, covered it on the top. I cried in a loud voice many times, but nobody responded. I could not meet with my mother and [now] lament to the World-Honored One [about it]."

The Buddha said: "Your mother, while alive, committed limitless great sins and after death fell into the Avīci hell." When reverend Mulian heard this, he was in distress, shouting and weeping copiously.

The World-Honored One told Mulian: "My disciple, you should not worry! Listen to my words: this hell has gates, though they have not been opened for a long kalpa. Today you can put on my cassock, take my begging bowl and staff and go to this hell. As you knock on its gates with the staff three times, the gates will automatically open, and locks will fall to the ground. All living beings suffering there, as soon as they hear the sound of my staff, will receive a temporary relief [from torments]."¹¹¹ Upon hearing these words, reverend Mulian was greatly delighted.

[HERE THE FOURTH VOLUME OF THE *PRECIOUS SCROLL OF MULIAN* STARTS]

As reverend Mulian heard the Buddha's words, he was greatly delighted. He put on the Tathāgata's cassock, took his begging bowl and staff, bid farewell to the Buddha, ascended the clouds and flew

¹¹⁰ Tathagata (Ch. Rulai 如來): Thus Coming One, an epithet of the Buddha, with the implication that the Buddha's achievement of enlightenment has come through a practice that other sentient beings can follow.

¹¹¹ Compare with the similar scene in the *Transformation Text of Mulian*; see Mair 1983, 104–105.

directly to the gates of the [Avīci] hell. Reverend Mulian widely revealed his spiritual abilities: he knocked three times, and both leaves of the gates of the Avīci hell immediately opened, the locks falling on the ground by themselves. All the demonic souls inside the hell were astonished. Reverend Mulian entered the hell but was pushed out by the chief of hell. He asked Mulian: "Who are you to open the gates of hell arbitrarily? What reason do you have [to do this]?"

Reverend Mulian answered: "I am the first among the disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni, and I especially came to rescue my mother."

The chief of hell asked: "What is your mother's name? I will check my records of sinners in the prison."

My mother's [name] is Qingti [or] Liu, the Fourth,
[She was] a wife of Fuxiang in the City of the King's Seat.

Reverend Mulian told the chief of hell: "My mother is Lady Liu Qingti, the Fourth." As the chief of hell heard it, he returned to the prison and called: "Lady Qingti!" He called her several times, but she responded only after a while.

The chief of hell asked her: "I have called several times; why do you respond only now?"

Lady Qingti answered: "I was afraid that the chief of hell would transfer me to another place of sufferings. That is why I did not dare to respond."

The chief of hell told her: "You have a son, who followed the Buddha to become a monk, his name is Mulian. He specially came here to look for you."

Lady Qingti replied: "I, a sinner, have just one son, but he is not a monk and his name is not Mulian."

When the chief of hell heard this, he immediately went out of the hell and told Mulian: "Lady Qingti is [in the prison], but she says her only son is not a monk and his name is not Mulian."

As the chief of hell said this, Mulian again addressed him: "[Please be] merciful! When my parents were alive, my childhood name was Luobo. After my parents died, I followed the Buddha to become a monk and changed my name to Mulian."

After the chief of hell heard this, he returned to the prison and told Lady Qingti: “When you were alive, [your son’s] childhood name was Luobo. After you died, he changed his name to Mulian.”

As Lady Qingti heard this, tears poured out of her eyes, and she replied to the chief of hell: “If he is Luobo, he is indeed my beloved son.”

When the chief of hell heard this, he ordered yakshas to raise her with their iron pitchforks, so that the torture bed fell on the ground. Lady Qingti fainted immediately, and blood poured out of all the pores [of her body].

The chief of hell ordered yakshas to take Lady Qingti out of the prison, with the heavy cangue on her neck, her body bound with iron chains, and blades and swords pointing at her body. The chief of hell told her: “If your son was not a disciple of the Buddha, how could you ever get out of the prison and meet with him?” He [also] addressed Mulian: “Do you recognize your mother?”

Mulian answered: “As I cannot see my mother’s appearance, my eyes cannot recognize her.”

The chief of hell pointed to [his mother and said]: “[This creature] in front of you, with her whole body in flames and spitting smoke from her mouth, with the body locked in cangue and chains, is your mother.”

As Mulian looked at her, he immediately fell on the ground and [only] after a while came back to consciousness. He seized his mother and wept loudly.

As reverend Mulian met with his mother, and after he ceased grieving, he put his palms together in front of his chest to greet his mother. With sorrow, he asked his mother: “You told me that while you were alive you worshiped the Three Treasures [of Buddhism], [performed] donations, and [held] vegetarian feasts for the monks. How could it happen that you fell into this hell?”

Mother told him: “It is only because I did not believe my son’s words that I am enduring these torments now.”

As Lady Qingti finished speaking, reverend Mulian took fragrant rice from his begging bowl and gave it to his mother to eat, [but when she started] eating, as soon as the rice entered her mouth, it turned into the fierce fire, and she could not swallow it. When reverend Mulian saw this, he felt distress: “When my mother was alive, she had a round body and a pretty face, [now], as she has died, she has turned skinny and weak, all her body is in flames, and the smoke goes out of her mouth.” As he saw his mother enduring suffering, he wept loudly. Lady Qingti called him: “My son may know, in this hell, when

I am hungry, I swallow boiling iron; when I am thirsty, I drink melted copper. Every day and night I die and am reborn myriad times. For a long kalpa I could not see my beloved son. Who could imagine that you will travel through hells to look for me?"

Mother and son still had not finished lamenting such sufferings, [but] the chief of hell said: "You cannot stay here for a long time; while you have talked, you have delayed your mother's punishment in the hell [prison]. If you do not let her go, I will stab her with the iron pitchfork and bring her back to the prison." When reverend Mulian heard this, he let his mother return to the prison.

Lady Qinti turned back and called to Mulian: "Can you do anything to rescue me right away?"

As reverend Mulian heard this, he wept in a loud voice and pitifully addressed the chief of hell: "Now I am willing to endure punishment instead of my mother!"

[But] the chief of hell answered him:

If while alive you have created limitless [bad] karma,
The punishment after death you will endure yourself!

"Wearing the Gold Lock" [tune]:

As reverend Mulian heard his words,
he could not stop his tears:

"Dear mother, enduring torments,
was returned back to prison.

If I do not advance [on the way],
who will come to rescue you?

As you brought up a dear son,
what use can he be for you?

Mulian ascended auspicious clouds and quickly flew
to the Numinous Mountain assembly.

He greeted Tathāgata and asked Buddha

for repentance [of his mother's sins]:
 “Dear mother, enduring torments,
 when will you be able to escape them?
 On which day of which year will you expiate
 your sins, [countless] as the sand in the river?”¹¹²

After reverend Mulian heard the words of the chief of hell, he ascended auspicious clouds and flew directly to the Numinous Mountain, where he prostrated and greeted Tathāgata by putting his palms together [in front of his chest]: “Your disciple [finally] found his mother, but could not take her out of the hell.”

The Buddha replied to Mulian: “Do not worry, today I myself will go [to rescue her].” As Mulian heard his words, he was greatly delighted and thanked Tathāgata with a bow. At that moment the World-Honored One led his whole retinue to ascend the auspicious clouds of five colors, and, from [a curl] between his eyebrows¹¹³ he emitted myriad rays of bright light that destroyed all great hells. Iron beds turned into ponds of lotus flowers and sword trees turned into white jade.

Ten great Yama Kings¹¹⁴ all put their palms together [in front of their chests] and exclaimed: “How wonderful!” They worshiped Tathāgata with an offering of incense and flowers.¹¹⁵

When the World-Honored One saw that Mulian, with his great filiality, [still] was not able to rescue his mother, he revealed his “expedient means”¹¹⁶ and emitted myriad rays of golden light. It

¹¹² [As numerous as the grains] of sand in the [Ganges] river (Ch. *Heng he sha* 恆河沙, Skt. *Gaṅgā-nadī-vālikā*) is a common expression in Buddhist scriptures, borrowed by Chinese literature.

¹¹³ The curl between the Buddha's eyebrows (Skt. *ūrṇā*, Ch. *bai hao* 白毫), also depicted in some images as a circular dot. From it, in the Mahāyāna sūtras, the Buddha sends out a ray of light that can reveal all worlds; see also the corresponding passage in the *Transformation Text of Mulian*; see Mair 1983, 113–114.

¹¹⁴ According to the beliefs that formed around the seventh–eighth centuries in China, the underworld is governed by Ten Kings [Shi wang 十王], who judge the souls of sinners; Yama (Yanluowang 閻羅王) usually is presented as one of them; see Teiser 1994, 2–7.

¹¹⁵ Incense and flowers (Skt. *gandha-mālya*, Ch. *xiang hua* 香花) are used as offerings for the Buddha.

¹¹⁶ Expedient (or skillful) means (Skt. *upāya*, *upāya-kausalya*; Ch. *fangbian* 方便), i.e., teaching according to the capacity of

completely destroyed all great dark hells, and all sinners, relying on the power of the Buddha's vow, received better rebirths. The World-Honored One returned to the Numinous Mountain and ascended to his lotus throne.

Mulian with reverence [addressed] Tathāgata: "May I ask the World-Honored One, as all sinners have received better rebirths, what place has the disciple's mother gone to?"

The World-Honored One answered: "Your mother, while alive, did not behave in a good way; she slandered the Three Treasures [of Buddhism], and her karmic burden is very heavy. [Therefore] she did not achieve better rebirth. Now, as she has escaped the torments in the Avīci hell, she again fell into the dark hell of all evils."¹¹⁷ Mulian thought about his mother, bid farewell to Tathāgata, and returned to the hell to look for his mother.

Reverend Mulian ascended clouds and, holding a patra, directly went to the dark hell. He took the fragrant vegetarian [food] of Tathāgata to feed his mother. Lady Qingti saw the food, and her avaricious mind [still] had not changed, so she took rice with the left hand, and with the right hand pushed away another ghost [who would have liked to take some too]. As the rice entered her mouth, it turned into the fierce fire. As it poured into her belly, it turned over her intestines and burned her lungs. As reverend Mulian saw that his mother could not eat, he felt distress. He bid farewell to his mother and directly flew to the Numinous Mountain. He addressed the World-Honored One: "I have found my mother, but she cannot drink and eat [anything]. How can she escape these torments?"

The World-Honored One answered: "If you want your mother to leave this hell, [you need] to invite five hundred archats to recite aloud the Mahāyāna sūtras: then she will escape this hell."

When reverend Mulian heard the words of the Buddha, he invited all buddhas and bodhisattvas and a multitude of saints from the ten directions to recite the Mahāyāna sūtras. Lady Qingti, relying on the power of the Buddha's vow and based on the spiritual abilities of the Buddha, left the dark hell and

the hearer, by any suitable method or device; this constitutes one of the key concepts of the major scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

¹¹⁷ This episode regarding Liu Qingti's subsequent rebirth in the dark hell is absent from the *Transformation Text of Mulian* (as preserved in the Dunhuang manuscripts), but appears in the later apocryphal Sūtra of Mulian (Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2005, 120–121), further attesting to the connection between the latter and the precious scroll.

entered the city of hungry ghosts. Mulian asked the Buddha: “Today, as she has escaped these torments, in which form has she obtained [new] rebirth?”

The World-Honored One answered: “Your mother has a heavy karmic [burden]; as she left the darkness, she was born [in the form] of a hungry ghost.” When reverend Mulian heard this, he felt distress; he ascended clouds and descended to the world of the hungry ghosts. When he saw his mother [there], his soul [almost] left his body:

Her head was as the Mountain Tai, extremely heavy,

Her belly, as [big as] the Sumeru Mountain; her throat, [as narrow] as a needle.

Reverend Mulian saw that his mother endured [sufferings] in the form of a hungry ghost, and felt distress. He flew to the Numinous Mountain and lamented to Tathāgata: “Your disciple’s mother fell into the world of the hungry ghosts to endure torments. I want to take my mother to the bank of the Ganges to wash her intestines with its water, but [I do not know] if this will be good.” The World-Honored One told him: “Listen to my words: when all buddhas of three worlds drink water, it [tastes] like sweet cream;¹¹⁸ when monks drink water, it is like the sweet dew; when pious people drink water, it can resolve their thirst; but when your mother drinks water, in her belly it becomes the fierce fire, it turns over her intestines and damages her lungs. It hurts as if [she is being] cut by a knife.” Reverend Mulian heard his words and pitifully addressed Tathāgata: “How can my mother escape from these torments?” The World-Honored One replied: “If [you want] your mother to leave the world of the hungry ghosts, you should reverently invite all great bodhisattvas, light lamps, and create [ritual] banners; all living beings will then escape from this hell.”

When reverend Mulian heard the Buddha’s words, he followed the Buddha’s advice, invited all buddhas and bodhisattvas, lighted lamps and created [ritual] banners, [performed the ritual of] releasing living [beings] to repent [the sins of Lady Qingti]. Lady Qingti, relying on the Buddha’s power, left the world of the hungry ghosts, but then fell into [the realm] of animals.

Reverend Mulian asked [the Buddha] again: “My mother was released from [the form] of the hungry ghost, where has she been reborn?”

¹¹⁸ Sweet cream (Ch. *sulao* 酥酪): sweet yogurt, made from boiling and cooling cow’s milk. It is important to note that drinking it was prohibited for Buddhist monastics.

The World-Honored One told him: "Your mother's karmic [burden] is heavy, she was not able to be reborn in heaven. As she was released from the torments in the hungry ghost [form], she went to the City of the King's Seat [Rājagṛha] and was reborn as a dog." As reverend Mulian heard these words, he felt distress, bid farewell to the World-Honored One, and went directly to the City of the King's Seat, where he roamed the streets and alleys in search of his mother.

As reverend Mulian heard the Buddha's words, he ascended the clouds and flew directly to the City of the King's Seat, where he roamed along streets and alleys in search of his mother. While he was walking [down the street], he suddenly saw a dog that ran as if it were flying; it directly went to Mulian and bit [the end] of his cassock, and its delight was without limit.¹¹⁹ Reverend Mulian said: "This dog is indeed my mother [reborn]." He prayed to all buddhas and [eight kinds] of supernatural beings: if I have such filiality [such that it can cause a miraculous] response, let the dog spit out the lateral bone and talk!"

As he finished speaking, the dog told reverend Mulian: "It is only because while alive I did not believe my son's words, after I died I entered the department of darkness and endured endless torments. If my son did not rescue me, how could I escape from all these hells?"

Reverend Mulian asked his mother: "Now, as you have turned into a dog, how is it in comparison with the hell?"

The dog answered: "I can be a dog for a long kalpa, but when you mention the hell, my liver is trembling¹²⁰ and my heart frightened. I am really afraid of it."

Reverend Mulian bid farewell to his mother and flew to the Numinous Mountain to report to the Buddha: "Your disciple has found his mother transformed into a dog; [now] she receives her retribution in the world of the humans. I hope for the Buddha's mercy: if one son [of a family] becomes a monk, nine [generations] of his ancestors are born in heaven. How can my mother be released from [her rebirth in] the dog's body?"

The World-Honored One answered: "If [you want] your mother to leave the dog's body, [you

¹¹⁹ In the illustrations of two manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*, the dog is painted white, while in the *Transformation Text of Mulian* it is said to be black; see Mair 1983, 104–105.

¹²⁰ In the traditional Chinese view, the liver was regarded as the organ in charge of courage.

need to] choose the fifteenth day of the seventh [lunar] month, the Festival of Middle Primordial,¹²¹ and on this day hold the opulent Ullambana assembly of the Blood Bowl,¹²² setting up the sacred altar. Then your mother will be able to leave the dog's body and receive a better rebirth in a human form."

As reverend Mulian heard his words, he was greatly delighted. He then followed the Buddha's order and organized an opulent assembly, so that Qingti attained release from the dog's body and was brought directly to that assembly. The Buddha touched her head and made a prediction [of her future]. She [accepted] five hundred precepts, immediately abandoned mischievous thoughts, and converted to the true teaching.

The World-Honored One preached Dharma to save Qingti [from inferior rebirths]; the filial piety of Mulian moved heaven and earth. [They] saw only that the fragrant wind was blowing and the auspicious vapors came out. Celestial music reached their ears. [Accompanied by] golden lads and jade maidens,¹²³ the Celestial Mother descended to greet Qingti in person.¹²⁴ Qingti departed from the sea of

¹²¹ Festival of Middle Primordial (Zhongyuanjie 中元節) is the indigenous Chinese name for the Ullambana Festival, also popularly known as the Ghost Festival. This name points to the Daoist connections of this festival, revealing the syncretism of Chinese popular beliefs; see (Teiser 1988, 35–40).

¹²² The Blood Bowl (Xue pen 血盆) is related to traditional beliefs about supposed inherent female impurity, which leads to suffering in a special compartment of hell. These beliefs formed in China ca. the eleventh–twelfth centuries, not long before the composition of this precious scroll. Special rituals are required for the afterlife salvation of women, as reflected in the name of this ritual assembly in the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*. Though the concept of the Blood Bowl appears only once in the extant part of this text, it is widely used in the texts of later precious scrolls, also performed in conjunction with the special rituals devoted to salvation from the Blood Bowl (Blood Pond) hell (*po xue hu* 破血湖); see Berezkin 2017, 68–70, 163–167.

¹²³ Golden lads and jade maidens (jin tong yu nü 金童玉女) are attendants of celestial deities in later Chinese mythology, related to the Daoist teachings. Here again one can see the syncretic religious background of this precious scroll.

¹²⁴ Celestial Mother (Tian mu 天母) is this deity, whose origins are not very clear. In the Buddhist context Celestial Mother is one of the titles of the tantric deity Molizhi 摩里支 (Maricī) or Zhunti 準提 (Cundi), also venerated as one of the forms of Bodhisattva Guanyin (also Guanshiyin, Skt. Avalokitēśvara). This cult appears to have influenced the later development of female deities in late imperial China, including the Mother of Dippers (Dou mu 斗母), an important deity in the Daoist pantheon; see Kohn 2001, 162–166. The *Transformation Text of Mulian* says that Qingti was welcomed by heavenly maidens when ascending to heaven; see Mair 1983, 121. Celestial Mother also appears in the *Sūtra of Mulian* (Yoshikawa Yoshikazu 2003, 121); however, her images in this scripture as well as in the *Precious Scroll of Mulian* do not fit the usual iconography of this deity.

sufferings and ascended the Trāyastriṃśa heaven to enjoy all kinds of pleasures. Mulian, seeing his mother flying in the space, was greatly pleased. He performed a bow to the space [to thank] the eight categories of supernatural beings.

Mother addressed Mulian: “Thanks to my son, who followed the Buddha, became a monk, and concentrated his thoughts on [the realization] of his filial piety, today I have achieved rebirth in heaven. If my son did not [help me] to get out, for the long kalpa I would stay in the Avīci hell to endure all kinds of torments.”

We broadly exhort people in the future to learn from reverend Mulian: obey one’s parents, look for an enlightened teacher, chant the Buddha’s [name], and maintain a fast. [The cycle] of life and death will stop eternally when one has brought his mind to study the Way, [in order] to repay the deep mercies of his parents. If someone copies the manuscript [of this precious scroll] and leaves it for future generations to keep and recite, his nine generations of ancestors [will attain salvation], just as in Mulian’s [case]: as one son becomes a monk, nine generations of his ancestors all will be re-born in heaven.

We have recited the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*: all people praise [Mulian’s deeds]. As one mentions Lady Qingti, everybody feels upset. She has endured torments and hardships in all big hells. [We admonish you] to take refuge in the Three Treasures [of Buddhism], chant the Buddha’s [name] and burn incense, recognize sounds¹²⁵ and expedient means,¹²⁶ respect and obey your parents, feed monks and perform donations, find some spare time among your [usual] chores to listen to the scriptures and learn about the Dharma: it is like a child seeing his mother. Year after year, you should

¹²⁵ “Understanding sounds” (*zhi yin* 知音) in Chinese literature usually refers to the ability of a close friend to understand one’s inner mind. This idiom comes from a story in the ancient Daoist book of *Liezi* 列子 (named after the philosopher who was believed to have lived in the fourth–third centuries BCE, but written down and augmented in the later periods), about a master lute player, Boya 伯牙. He was known for his friendship with Zhong Ziqi 鍾子期, who deeply appreciated his music. When Zhong Ziqi suddenly passed away, Boya broke his lute and gave up playing. In the Chan Buddhist literature this word has another meaning, serving as a metaphor for mind-to-mind communication, without need of words (the central idea of this form of Buddhism); see *Hanyu da cidian*, vol. 2, p. 4715. Here again we see how native Chinese concepts were adapted to the Buddhist religious context.

¹²⁶ See fn. 117 above.

not return; when you meet an enlightened teacher, he will lead you to the Western Realm [of Amitabha]; as Tathāgata converts you, you will personally meet the King of Dharma.¹²⁷ The formula of Amitabha [itself] originally is the ancient sacred altar!¹²⁸

Reverend Mulian has revealed spiritual manifestations:

He transformed his body to rescue his mother in the Eastern Land.¹²⁹

It is clear that it was ancient [Buddha] Amitabha,

Who in person arrived in the Eastern Land to transform the Sahā world.

He was reincarnated in [a human] body and called himself Luobo,¹³⁰

On the Numinous Mountain he went to meet ancient [Buddha] Amitabha.

Tathāgata gave him the appellation of Maudgalyāyana.

In the department of darkness he rescued his mother, who ascended the gold lotus.

Relying on the Buddha's spiritual manifestations, one can receive [divine] protection,

A point of divine light returns to the original source.

As I see it now, I am really in grief. People just want to be entangled in family causation

And do not want to return [to the source]. They inflict disasters and fall into the hells!

¹²⁷ King of Dharma (Skt. *dharma-rāja*, *dharma-svāmin*, Ch. Fa wang 法王), a title of the Buddha.

¹²⁸ Here the text apparently encourages chanting the name of Buddha Amitabha, a practice widespread among Buddhist believers in China.

¹²⁹ Eastern land (Dongtu 東土) means China.

¹³⁰ The topic of reincarnations of various deities in the human world for the salvation of believers is typical of precious scrolls of the later period (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries). Here it represents the new development of the Mulian story in comparison with the preceding versions; see Berezkin 2017, 64–65.

With one sound of the Buddha's title,[equal to] the magic formulas and mantras,¹³¹ [one
can] sit upright on the purple-gold lotus.¹³²

The horrors of hells in the world of darkness—
Even a person made of iron cannot endure them.
As [today] you have heard about the torments of hells,
You should worship the Buddha and [start] burning incense!

Reverend Mulian originally was an ancient Buddha; solely because the living beings of the Eastern land were not kind, he took on this false form to cultivate truth. The true emptiness in fact is not empty.¹³³ Inside the true emptiness, the true emptiness is assembled.¹³⁴ One should recognize one's [real] home, the meaning of [the patriarch's] coming from the west.¹³⁵ In a moment you can turn iron into gold: it will produce a clear and bright point of light.¹³⁶ From the time before the beginning [of the world] you have left your [true] home, but [now] you have encountered the meaning [of the patriarch's]

¹³¹ Chinese words of "sacred formulas and true words" (*mi yu zhen yan* 密語真言) refer here to mantra or dhāraṇī, esoteric utterance, a power-laden syllable or series of syllables that manifests certain cosmic forces and aspects of the Buddha. They are associated with the Tantric (esoteric) forms of Buddhism that spread in China in the seventh–eighth centuries.

¹³² I.e., be reborn in the Pure Land.

¹³³ Such terms as the "true emptiness" (*zhen kong* 真空) and "[original] homeland" (*jiaxiang* 家鄉, *ben xiang* 本鄉) that appear in this passage are typical of the Chinese heterodox religious movements of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, which produced many precious scrolls. Here they may indicate the nascent ideas of the later teachings, as their alternative mythology and eschatology is not clearly revealed in this text; see Overmyer 1999, 136–215; Berezkin 2017, 98–102.

¹³⁴ It is hard to interpret this tautological phrase: 真空裏面聚真空.

¹³⁵ "Meaning coming from the West" (*xi lai yi* 西來意): apparently an abbreviation of the phrase "meaning, of the patriarch's coming from the West" (*zushi xi lai yi* 祖師西來意). It originated in the Chan literature of paradoxes (Ch. *gong'an* 公案, Jap. *kōan*). The question of why the patriarch, Bodhidharma (Damo 達摩), came from the west to China is asked by a Chan master in order to cause a spontaneous and insightful response from his interlocutor.

¹³⁶ These phrases are reminiscent of the terminology of the "inner alchemy" (*wai dan* 外丹) technique, adopted by many religious movements of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries and often mentioned in their precious scrolls.

coming from the west. With one invocation of the Buddha's name you will return to the original homeland!

What moves first and then stops cannot be considered true,
The absence of form and image is the body of the true emptiness.

This formula of Amitabha, who [among the people] know it?
From Cao Creek in a direct line you will ascend the heavenly ladder.¹³⁷
If you meet a teacher, you can completely realize the meaning coming from the west.
You will be reborn in a higher form, escape death, and realize enlightenment.
As soon as you learn to chant [the Buddha's name], you will return home.
In the state of Ultimate Joy you will take your seat in the lotus pond.
Tathāgatas of the three epochs¹³⁸ will arrive at the assembly together,
As you arrive to the Ullambana [assembly] you will meet with Amitabha.

The ritual [assembly] is completed. As we have recited the true scriptures, people in the
audience immediately have repented [their sins],
And all have performed their filial duty. As they serve both their parents, they naturally
prove the fruit [of enlightenment]:
Achieve the Way and return to truth! As you see, chanting the Buddha's name certainly
[provides] you with rebirth in the [land] of Ultimate Joy!

As you have listened to the *Scroll of Mulian*,
All of you have made up your minds,

¹³⁷ Caoxi 曹溪 is a stream southeast of Shaozhou 韶州, Guangdong, the region in which the Chan sixth patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638–713) lived. Here it apparently refers to Huineng's teaching of sudden enlightenment, the influence of which is noticeable in the *Precious Scroll of Mulian*. This phrase combines the belief in the Pure Land with Chan Buddhist practices.

¹³⁸ Buddhas of the three epochs (Skt. *traiya-dhvika*, *try-adhvan*, *try-adhvahak*, *loka-traya*; Ch. *san shi* 三世), i.e., buddhas of the past, present, and future epochs: Dipankara, Shakyamuni, and Maitreya.

The returning light will shine back,
In this way one is able to leave the abyss.¹³⁹

We reverently wish that the *langlang* sound [of recitation] of the sutra shall penetrate the vault of heaven, that the *lingling* sound of Sanskrit words would reach the seat of darkness below.

First, we wish that the mountains of knives would lose their blades!¹⁴⁰
Second, we wish that the spikes of the trees of swords would break!
Third, we wish that the flames of coals in the ovens of [hell] would not burn!
Fourth, we wish the waves of rivers would become calm!
Hungry ghosts with the throats of needle [size] would forever forget about hunger;
Those with scales and horns, feathers and wool would not devour each other;
Evil stars and strange omens would be expelled away from the heavenly gates.
Strange beasts and demonic spirits will hide deep in the earthly caves.
Wishing prisoners in shackles and ropes would be awarded with the heavenly mercy;
Those whose bodies are afflicted by the illnesses would soon find a good doctor!
The blind people would see, and deaf persons would hear;
The lame people would walk, and dumb persons would speak!
Pregnant women would [achieve] reunion with their babies;
Travelers going on the distant journeys would soon be able to return home.
[The status of] poor and lowly people, all sentient beings with an evil karma,
Those killed by mistake and intentionally harmed—all unjust deeds,
Would be eliminated altogether!
The great power of Vajra¹⁴¹ will clean the bodies and souls [of believers],

¹³⁹ Abyss (*chenlun* 沉淪) here means the cycle of rebirths (samsara).

¹⁴⁰ This part is called "the text of taking vows" (*fa yuan wen* 發願文), and it originates in the traditions of Buddhist scriptures recitation.

¹⁴¹ Vajra (Ch. *jinggang* [chu] 金剛杵): a diamond pounder, a ritual object in Buddhism, symbolizing wisdom and power over

The great light of Prajñā¹⁴² will illuminate the precious seat [of the Buddha];
 As one raises or lowers one's feet—everywhere will be the Buddha's land!
 Furthermore, we wish that seven generations of ancestors, who died before,
 Would leave bitter suffering and attain rebirth in heaven;
 And all of them would escape the tortures for sins in hell!
 With these limitless merits, we repay for the four mercies above¹⁴³ and benefit three
 existences below.¹⁴⁴
 The sentient beings of the Dharma-world¹⁴⁵ will all attain the opposite shore.¹⁴⁶

The hymn of the Chuan Oldster¹⁴⁷ says:

As a hungry one obtains food, as a thirsty one obtains liquid;
 An ill person obtains cure, and in the [summer] heat one obtains chill;
 A poor person obtains treasure, a child meets his mother;

illusion and evil spirits.

¹⁴² Prajñā (Ch. *boruo* 般若): wisdom that can extinguish afflictions and bring about enlightenment.

¹⁴³ Four mercies (Ch. *si en* 四恩): this term usually refers to the compassion of parents, sentient beings, rulers, and the Three Treasures. There are various lists of mercies.

¹⁴⁴ Three existences (Ch. *san you* 三有): in the Buddhist context this expression refers to the things that exist in three realms (realm of desire, realm of form, and formless realm). However, in the precious scrolls of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries this transcription is used alternatively with the “three kinds of indulgence” (*san you* 三宥; forgiveness of sins committed because of ignorance, mistake, or obliviousness), as the second character of this expression is pronounced in a similar way.

¹⁴⁵ Dharma-world: Skt. *dharma-dhātu*, Ch. *fa jie* 法界, the universe governed by the law of cause and effect.

¹⁴⁶ The opposite shore (*bi an* 彼岸) here follows the 1373 manuscript; it means salvation. The 1440 manuscript instead gives the “northern shore” (*bei an* 北岸).

¹⁴⁷ According to the research of Chinese scholar Che Xilun, this “Hymn of the Chuan Oldster” (up until the words: “Will all arrive to the great altar...”) was composed by the Chan master Daochuan 道川 around the twelfth century. With various modifications, it was included in several texts of precious scrolls of the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries; see Che Xilun 2009, 71–72, 522–525.

A floating boat reaches the shore, a lonely traveler returns to the homeland;
The drought meets the sweet rain, the state has loyal and fine citizens;
[Peoples] from the four sides will come to greet us; [countries] in eight directions will
surrender.

All of you will be like this, all creatures will be completely revealed;¹⁴⁸
Profane and sage [people] of past and present, hells and heavens.
East and west, north and south¹⁴⁹—you should not think about [these distinctions]!
The living creatures of the worlds, from the innumerable worlds of dust,
Will all arrive to the great altar of Ullambana!

In the three mires¹⁵⁰ constant sufferings will stop forever;
The six destinies¹⁵¹ will discontinue, and karmic causation will stop.
All sentient beings,¹⁵² [countless] as the sand of the Ganges, will realize the true
nature;¹⁵³
And myriads of living beings will ascend the opposite shore.¹⁵⁴
Ever till the worlds of space will come to the end,
All living beings will reach the end of their karma and their troubles will end!

¹⁴⁸ Apparently the text refers here to the universal single nature of all phenomena in the world (i.e., true nature; see fn. 154), one of the central ideas in the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy.

¹⁴⁹ In the translation the order of the four sides is given in the style more common for Westerners, rather than the traditional Chinese style of the original text.

¹⁵⁰ See fn. 60.

¹⁵¹ Six kinds of rebirth (Ch. *liu qu* 六趣): as a deva, asura, human, hell-being, animal, and hungry ghost.

¹⁵² Sentient beings (Skt. *bhautika*, *sattva*, Ch. *youqing* 有情).

¹⁵³ True nature (Skt. *tathatā*, Ch. *zhen ru* 真如): usually translated as “thusness,” “suchness,” or “things as they are.” This concept, fundamental to Mahāyāna philosophy, indicates absolute reality, which transcends the multitude of forms in the phenomenal world.

¹⁵⁴ The opposite shore, i.e., nirvana and salvation.

Same as the four seas are broad without limits,
 We wish that today the merit would be transferred in this way!¹⁵⁵

[The aria on the motif] “Sūtra [written] with gold characters”:

Mulian has made the accomplishments [needed to] rescue his mother:
 He leaped into space and rode on the five-colored clouds, five-colored clouds!
 The Ten Kings [of hell] were all astonished [by this],
 They all came out to meet Mulian,
 Put their palms together on their chests to greet the sage monk.
 Naturally, pious people should engage in self-cultivation,
 Recognize that worldly chores are not real, are not real!
 There is the World-Honored One on the Numinous Mountain,
 He can use the expedient means
 To demonstrate to you the falsity of thoughts of avarice and anger!

Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescuing His Mother [So That She] Escapes Hell and Is Reborn in Heaven
 [ends]

¹⁵⁵ Transfer of merit (Skt. *pariṇāmanā*, *pariṇāmayati*; Ch. *huixiang* 迴向): the concluding ritual of the Buddhist assembly (sūtra recitation), its name refers to the transfer of the merit gained through its arranging for the benefit of all living beings.

APPENDIX: A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT,
COMPRISING ITS FIRST TWO SECTIONS¹⁵⁶

昔日王舍城中，有一長者，名曰輔相。其家大富，駝驢象馬，徧山蓋野。珍珠滿庫，積玉堆金。長者好善持齋，常行波羅蜜。忽然長者得患重病，不過數日而亡。夫婦二人止有一子，生來好善，名曰羅卜。見父亡化，修齋設會，埋殯山中，守孝三年。

守制父親靈孝滿，

家私庫藏盡皆空。

人為財利費心忙，枉置家緣庫藏倉。

積聚珍寶如山厚，有錢難買不無常。

羅卜守服孝三年，啟告親娘聽子言。

有父在日家財盛，今庫空虛缺少錢。

眾生貪利，枉費心機，思惟總是虛。只圖富貴，不肯修持，置造產業。兒女嬌妻，無常到來，誰人替的你？

人生無百載，枉置萬千金。

積寶如山盛，無常也是空。

羅卜守父服滿，啟告母親青提夫人：“父親在日，錢糧無數，如今藏庫空虛，兒欲將往外國買賣，未知母意如何？”夫人聽說便令家人盤運庫內錢物。有三千貫文，羅卜勻分三分：一分留與母親，供給門戶；一分留與母，供養三寶；兒將一分往金地國內，經營生理。

意想邊邦求利息，

心思謀寶奉慈堂。

羅卜均分三分錢，與娘二分作家緣。

兒將一分錢為本，不必親娘心內煎。

青提聞語心歡喜，難得嬌兒孝順心。

你往外國經營去，小心得利便回程。

羅卜將錢，三分均勻。二分與慈親，兒將一分，外國求金。青提聞語，心意歡欣，願子經紀，得利便回程。

¹⁵⁶ Punctuation added by the translator.

羅卜告親娘，將財向外邦。

兒生經紀心，不必掛心腸。

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