

An Excerpt from *The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang**

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Abstract

The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang was one of the most widely reprinted “precious scrolls” of the Qing and Republican periods in China. Within this broad genre, it is a particularly well-told, exciting representative of the subgenre of narratives about women seeking to follow a religious path. Though such heroines face all kinds of opposition, often from family, these narratives chronicle their persistence and victories against all odds. In the excerpt translated below, we focus on Liu Xiangnü as she navigates the difficult transition from daughter to daughter-in-law in her new home. In addition to offering an eager defense of lay Buddhist practices, this excerpt addresses family dynamics, class-based hierarchies, and performance of socially acceptable gender roles.

Keywords:

Liu Xiang baojuan, precious scroll, popular religion, women’s religious practice

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《劉香寶卷》節略

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摘要

《劉香寶卷》是清與民國時期翻印最多的寶卷之一。在寶卷文類中有關婦女修行故事的題材中，《劉香寶卷》是一部極為優異且具代表性的作品。儘管婦女修行故事中的女主角面對各式各樣的磨難，特別是家人的反對，但到最後這些故事都描繪她們克服一切困難的勝利。在此論文所翻譯的節略中，我們聚焦於劉香女在結婚之後如何在新家庭裡當媳婦。而在此節略文中，不但為在家修行辯護，也涉及家庭關係、社會階層以及性別角色。

關鍵詞：

劉香寶卷、寶卷、說唱文學、民間宗教、婦女修行

Introduction

The genre of “precious scrolls” (寶卷 *baojuan*) in Chinese literature describes a broad range of literature spanning from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries. Rooted in earlier practices of popular Buddhist preaching, and depending heavily on more vernacular registers of language, in the sixteenth century, precious scrolls also came to be used by sectarian religious groups for proselytizing new deities and faiths.¹ Eventually, such groups faced government persecution and repression, and their texts could not circulate openly.² Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, precious scrolls continued to have something of a mixed reputation, if not for advocating officially-designated heterodoxy, then instead for representing the religious misconceptions of lay audiences using colloquial language and lurid plot details. Official suppression and elite condemnation notwithstanding, precious scrolls continued to develop and flourish, albeit taking on a less explicitly proselytizing style, tending more towards narrative in the later centuries. These tales of both Buddhist and Daoist exemplary figures often focused on the struggles that their undaunted protagonists faced in the pursuit of religious convictions, while imparting devotional techniques and moral maxims to their listeners at the same time. Once they were picked up by commercial publishers in Shanghai in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, precious scrolls tended to be even less overtly religious, and these mass printed texts frequently retold popular secular tales within the same loose framework of karmic justice that structured most popular literature of the Ming and Qing.³

Precious scrolls are texts that are meant to be read aloud to audiences who might not have enough education to understand dense Classical Chinese, or even read at all.⁴ Early examples use mostly seven-character couplets or ten-character lines with end rhymes. Songs of praise, set to tunes from popular arias,

¹ For English language scholarship on the early precious scroll traditions see Overmyer, *Precious Volumes* and ter Haar, *Practicing Scripture*.

² For more on these groups and their relationship with imperial prohibitions and suppression, see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*.

³ For close analysis of this shift, see Berezkin, “Lithographic Printing” and Berezkin, “Printing and Circulating ‘Precious Scrolls’.” For a broader approach to how precious scrolls about the same story complex changed over time, see Berezkin, *Many Faces of Mulian*.

⁴ For more on literacy rates and texts accessible to those with low literacy in the era when *The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang* circulated, see Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy*.

also delineated chapters or subsections within the texts.⁵ Later, precious scrolls became simpler, dispensing with chapter divisions and clearly labeled popular tunes, but retained the alternation between narrative prose and metrical verse. They spread in both printed and manuscript form, with publications intended as a way to earn merit for the donors who funded the imprints with religious print houses. Performers of precious scrolls, both Buddhist clergy and lay professionals, tended to use personal manuscript copies, and devotees also hoped to earn merit through hand-copying these texts.

The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang was arguably one of the most popular precious scrolls of the later period of the genre. While we see fragments of the story itself emerge during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, all our currently available editions are from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶ Che Xilun's detailed, yet still incomplete, catalogue of *baojuan* in East Asian library collections, lists forty-four extant printed and manuscript editions of *Liu Xiang*, an exceptional number considering that many texts about more famous religious figures are catalogued with closer to twenty to thirty extant print and manuscript versions.⁷ *Liu Xiang* was so popular that when Confucian moralists in the mid-nineteenth century composed a precious scroll intended to carry their moral reform messages to female audiences, they borrowed its protagonist, using Liu Xiangnü as their mouthpiece in an oddly contrived sequel.⁸

Why was it so popular? Lacking firsthand evidence from its audiences or performers, we cannot say for sure, of course. We also do not know who wrote it, though given its roots in popular religious performance, we should likely assume many different people were involved before it crystalized into its

⁵ Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 3–5.

⁶ According to Che Xilun's entry in *Zhongguo baojuan zongmu* on *Liu Xiang*, the earliest extant edition dates to 1774 and is held at the library of the Institute for the Study of Indigenous Drama 戲曲研究所 of the Chinese National Academy of the Arts 中國藝術研究院 in Beijing. However, in private correspondence with Che, he relates that he has not personally seen this edition, rather that the entry comes from Li Shiyu's earlier catalogue of *baojuan*, published in 1961. (Che, e-mail message to the author, February 15, 2014.) My own time spent at this archive did not uncover this edition in their card catalogue, and neither did it emerge accidentally from the stacks as other uncatalogued editions did. For an archival discovery that emerged on that trip instead, see Alexander, "Conservative Confucian Values." For more on the textual and print history of *Liu Xiang baojuan*, please see Alexander, "*The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang*."

⁷ Che, *Zhongguo baojuan zongmu*, 153–156.

⁸ Alexander, "Conservative Confucian Values."

popular printed form. This story, in many ways, is a collage of motifs and language drawn from other popular sources, including songs, other precious scrolls, non-canonical sutras, and poetry. In broad strokes, Xiangnü's narrative borrows heavily from famous stories of the bodhisattva Guanyin's incarnations as Princess Miaoshan and chaste commoner Miaoying, struggling against family members who try and dissuade her from practicing Buddhism.⁹ Xiangnü's husband Ma Yu, in his conflicts with his mother and brief journey through the underworld after his family's mass death, owes a debt to the tale of Mulian, a filial son who rescues his evil mother from the depths of the underworld.¹⁰ Upon closer reading, we find many places where the story seems to lift whole sections from other sources, some traceable, others no longer extant in print, or maybe never set down in writing in the first place. The "Buddhist songs" Xiangnü sings, two of which are included in the translation below, are examples of such ephemera.

Liu Xiang is a well-designed collage, however, with flashes of originality that emerge when we see how its component pieces were arranged for maximum effect. Between scenes of moralistic instruction come dramatic instances of shocking violence, ironic humor, and romantic intimacy. An exciting tale of one woman's triumph over all odds, the dramatic road that leads to her religious enlightenment, also ends with glorious heavenly revenge on all who abused her, especially her cruel, ignorant mother-in-law. As a tale that that entertained and enlightened its Chinese audiences hundreds of years ago, the brief selection that follows (approximately 10% of the whole story) will hopefully give you a taste of the feast they enjoyed.¹¹

⁹ For more on Princess Miaoshan, see Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan* and Idema, *Personal Salvation and Filial Piety*. The latter includes a full translation of the precious scroll version of her story. For more on Miaoying, see Berezkin, "The Precious Scroll of Miaoying."

¹⁰ For a translation of *The Precious Scroll of the Three Lives of Mulian*, see Grant and Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell*.

¹¹ One choice I have consciously made in this translation is to, in cases where I will not sacrifice anything substantive in the Chinese, favor English readability over strict adherence to the original grammar and word choice. For the most part, this means that I have not always reproduced repetitive words or grammatical structures, which though they do sound natural and fitting in Chinese, may not flow so well in English. This is especially true when it comes to dialogue, for which I have attempted to capture the spirit of natural speech as much as possible. I find this text extremely enjoyable to read and hope I have conveyed a fraction of its entertaining qualities in this English rendering.

The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang: Summary and Excerpt¹²

The Precious Scroll of Liu Xiang begins by introducing a butcher, Liu Guang, and his wife Xu, who are blessed late in life with the miraculous birth of their only child, a daughter. They name her Xiangnü because a holy fragrance filled the room at her birth. After she hears a local nun recite scriptures about how difficult it is for women to repay their parents for the debts incurred in giving them life, and also to maintain their purity after marriage, Xiangnü dedicates herself to earnestly pursuing the life of a lay Buddhist. She convinces her father to abandon butchery in favor of running a vegetarian noodle shop, which they operate only in the morning so as to spend their afternoons meditating and practicing *nianfo*.¹³

When Xiangnü is fifteen *sui*,¹⁴ a wealthy landowner sees her at the restaurant and forces her father to betroth her to his third son, Ma Yu. Xiangnü

¹² This translation and transcription are based on the edition of *Liu Xiang baojuan* reprinted in *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo cang Su wenxue congkan*. Beginning from the final couplet on Volume 1, 36b, I translate up to the first sentence on Volume 1, 48a, and again from Volume 1, 51a to 53a. I have chosen this edition, likely printed in the Tongzhi era (1862–1874), as my base for this translation because of its legibility and the relative ease to access in library collections (in contrast with some other reprint collections that are not so easy to acquire via interlibrary loan or are not as clearly printed). While some scanned editions are available online via Harvard University’s digitized collections or Waseda University library’s website, they are either incomplete (missing anywhere from a few pages to the entire second half), or from a later time or different place than the initial explosion of editions of *Liu Xiang* in Jiangnan in the 1860s–1870s. During the 19th and 20th centuries, from edition to edition, with only a few notable exceptions, the core text of *Liu Xiang* remains largely the same. Here, I have transcribed it as accurately as I can, given some limitations of font support for variant characters, thus preserving the mix of simplified and traditional characters, as well as some homophonic substitutions or orthographic errors in the original text. Some scholarship which employs excerpts or summaries of *Liu Xiang* to address larger questions about late imperial Chinese religion or literature includes: Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan*, Rawski, “Popular Culture in China,” Overmyer, “Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature,” Grant, “Patterns of Female Religious Experience,” and Chen, “Funü xiuxing gushi baojuan yanjiu.”

¹³ A practice most commonly associated with Buddhists seeking rebirth in Amitābha Buddha’s Pure Land. One of Amitābha Buddha’s vows included the promise to give rebirth in his paradise to all who call on his name.

¹⁴ Traditionally, age in China was counted ordinally in relation to the lunar year. An infant is one *sui* at birth (in their first year). When the next lunar new year begins, they would then be two *sui* (in their second year), even if they might be only a few

rejects almost all of the betrothal gifts and says she will consent to the match only if she can speak directly to Ma Yu to determine the quality of his character. In negotiating the terms of their marriage contract herself, she demands that he respect her Buddhist devotion, and he agrees. After all this has been arranged, Liu Guang is visited in a dream by a pair of heavenly messengers, who tell him that he and Xu have completed their merit cultivation and will soon die to be reborn in the Pure Land.¹⁵ Xiangnü seeks help from the Ma family to provide her parents with a funeral, after which she is taken to the family as a bride.

We now join Xiangnü as her new sisters-in-law try to loan her fancy clothes so she'll look better at her third-day wedding celebration, even though she looked just fine at the celebration on the second day!

As soon as the assembled relatives saw Liu Xiangnü,
they all began to praise her feminine beauty.

都來稱贊女釵裙 眾親一見劉香女

With steps like clouds her skirts did not stir,
her voice was clear but her lips barely moved.

行走如雲裙不動 聲音朗朗不搖唇

A natural, rare beauty so young and delicate,
beautiful like a flower, she looked like a Jade Maiden.¹⁶

天生絕色多嬌嫩 美麗如花像玉人

months old if counting cardinally. When this story begins, Xiangnü is about fourteen years old.

¹⁵ The Pure Land is the paradise where Amitābha Buddha promises that all who call on his name can be reborn in to enjoy limitless happiness. Though it is not the final attainment of nirvāṇa and true escape from the endless cycle of rebirth, it does provide a life without all of the suffering and unmet desire that plagues humans in the regular world, and therefore a much-desired rebirth.

¹⁶ Most generically used to refer to a pretty girl, when paired with “Golden Boy,” Jade Maiden can also refer more specifically to the juvenile supernatural assistant of deities, both Daoist and Buddhist. These supernatural children were sometimes believed to appear at death to escort a worthy soul to Daoist immortality or a rebirth in the Pure Land.

As if Chang-E¹⁷ had descended from the moon,
or an immortal had come down to this realm of dust.
好像嫦娥離月殿 猶如仙子下凡塵

A clever artist would have difficulty sketching her,
her remarkable likeness could not be painted.
聰明畫工難描畫 奇樣丹青畫不成

How could there be anyone better looking?
Like flowers, like jade, her looks were without compare.
那有真容來好看 如花如玉貌超群

Under heaven, in this world of humans, she was clearly number one.
On earth it would be difficult to find a second like her.
天下凡間爲第一 世上難尋第二人

Though her sisters-in-law in all their makeup and finery looked good,
they could not compare in even the slightest measure to the bride's beauty.
伯姆粧扮雖然好 不及新人半毫分

When Ma Yu and Xiangnü were married, all sorts of relations came to congratulate them and celebrate. The party had already been going on for two days when Ma Jin and Ma Yin's wives came up with an idea. "Second sister, you've noticed how the new bride comes from a poor family. She has little to wear and few accessories. You and I should lend her some jewelry and clothes. Tomorrow is the third morning when all the relatives will be here, and our family's reputation is on the line."

馬玉與香女成親。諸親百眷。都來賀喜。忙了兩日。那馬金馬銀之妻說道。二孀孀吓。你看這個新人。原來是窮人家出身。少穿少戴。我與你。拿些首飾衣衫。與他穿戴。明日自個三朝了。諸親到來。也是我家之

¹⁷ Chang-E is an ancient mythical figure said to live on the moon. There are many variations, but all begin with her as the human wife of a legendary figure Houyi, who obtained the elixir of immortality in reward for his heroism. Chang-E takes the elixir instead (versions differ as to whether this was out of her selfishness or to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands) and ascends to live on the moon forever after. The legends all say she is a great beauty.

體面。

“Big sister’s got the right idea. Let’s both take her some things.”

大姆之言。甚是有理。我與你。拿了首飾衣衫大家同去。

The two went to Xiangnü’s room and said, “Third sister, we have a few pieces of jewelry and clothing here for you to wear tomorrow on the third day of celebrations. Should relatives come to see you, it is also our family’s reputation is on the line.”

兩人竟到。香女房中。二人說道。三孀孀。我們有些。首飾衣裙在此。明日是三朝了。與你穿戴穿戴。倘有親戚到來。也是我家的體面。

Xiangnü said, “Please be seated, dear sisters-in-law. I am so grateful for your thoughtfulness. Until now, I’ve never had any good fortune, and also, I’ve never gotten in habit of dressing up. So many thanks to both of you.”

香女說。二位伯姆請坐。多蒙厚情。奴家一來沒福。二來不曾穿戴慣的。多謝了二位伯姆。

Women with plain faces love to get dressed up,
but virtuous and filial wives don’t have such affectations.

容陋女子愛穿戴 賢孝夫人別有情

*Namo Amitufo*¹⁸

南無阿彌陀佛

“Women’s bodies, from birth, have five imperfections.”¹⁹

18 When devotees call out to Amitābha Buddha, hoping for rebirth in the Pure Land, they use the phrase “*Namo Amitufo*” means “I take refuge in Amitābha Buddha”. “*Namo*” is a transliteration from the Sanskrit word, *namas*, meaning “to take refuge in” or “to submit to.” On the first instance of this invocation earlier in *Liu Xiang*, the text includes the instruction: “Recite the name once. 和佛一聲” (*Liu Xiang*, Volume 1, 2b). On subsequent instances, the audience would be expected to continue to do so as an interactive element of the ritual performance.

19 In the *Jingang xin zong chilun* 金剛心總持論, translation attributed to the third to fourth century monk Fotu Cheng (佛圖澄), the five imperfections of being born a woman are that women cannot be masters of 1) their own bodies, 2) of households, 3) of other people, 4) of their belongings, or 5) of religious orders. These all make

Now, I'm just a young woman of sixteen *sui*,
女體生來五漏身 奴年十六歲青春

Having paid off the debts incurred by wearing silks and furs,
I've never used cosmetics or lipstick,
穿破綾羅皮毛債 從來脂粉不搽唇

Never dotted on rouge or applied powders,
never worn silks or put on gold,
不點臙脂不搽粉 不着綾羅不戴金

Never used fragrant powders or decked myself with flowers,
in all my life I've most hated getting dressed up.
香粉不搽花不戴 生平最不愛穿紬

We were all born with natural looks,
getting all made up enchantingly is hypocritical!
容貌本是天生就 妖嬈打扮假惺惺

Powders and rouge all attract others' gaze,
seducing the stupid and arousing their desires.
搽粉點脂招人眼 引誘呆人動慾心

One day of romance creates a day of debt,
and the evil karma you create will follow closely after you!
一日風流一日債 造些孽障緊隨身

Plain cloth or hempen clothing is so much purer,
in every way capturing the essence of a person's form.
布草麻衣多潔淨 百般體態有精神

I sigh over how our lives are all emptiness,

following Buddhism and attaining better rebirth more difficult for women to achieve.

why bother drawing on your brows or powdering your face?
堪嘆人生總是空 何必搽眉畫粉容

Carvings of gold and jade just decorate our dry bones,
embroidered silks and gauzy garments cover our skeletons.
金玉雕鏤粧枯骨 錦繡羅衣着骷髏

When our three inches of breath cease, our faces will change,
and thousands of charms and hundreds of beauties revealed to all be in vain!
三寸氣斷容貌改 千嬌百美一場空

From my childhood I've been used to simple cloth outfits,
so why would I need to hang fancy silks from my body?
從小布衣穿着慣 那有綾羅掛體身

I've never crowned my head with hair ornaments or jewelry,
since my family was poor and really never associated with our betters.
頭上從來無插戴 家貧實未見高人

Thank you, sisters-in-law, when I am in a better position,
someday I will pay you back for the generous favor."
多蒙伯姆來擡舉 後來補報你恩情

The two sisters-in-law, after seeing that she refused to change her clothes and suffering through her rambling, were extremely unhappy. They went to report on it all to their mother-in-law. "We noticed that Third Sister didn't have anything to wear, so we generously tried to give her some things so she could change up her look. After all, tomorrow is the third day of the ceremony when all the relatives will show up, and our family reputation is on the line. But when we gave her the clothes, if she'd just refused them that would have been fine, but instead she bored us with all kinds of nonsense. At first, we thought we should scold her a little, but then we realized we should report it to you instead; anyway, she's new here, so we should go easier on her."

兩個伯姆。見他衣衫不換。反受了許多閒話。心中十分不悅。走到婆婆面前。去說道。媳婦們。見三孀孀。沒有的穿戴。好意與他。首飾衣衫。與其脫換脫換。明日是個三朝之日。諸親到來。也是我家的體面。與

他衣服。不換到也罷了。反受他許多閒話。本來要謫罰他幾句。一則不曾稟告婆婆。二則道他新來初到。所以忍受其言。

Lady Ma said, “You don’t owe her any more courtesy. Let’s see how she appears before us tomorrow.”

院君說。你們不要去禮貌他。看其明日如何來見我。

When the human frame is born, the body is self-sufficient.

How could ordinary people know it’s the field where the Buddha-mind²⁰ is planted?

骨格生來體自然 凡人那曉佛心田

Namo Amitufo

南無阿彌陀佛

No need to say anything more about how the night passed,
before you know it, a new day dawned.

一宵晚景休題起 不覺一霎到天明

As they banqueted in the great hall, hung with colored lanterns,
pipes and drums harmonized in elegant tones.

廳堂燈綵華筵盛 悠揚簫鼓雅和聲

All the close relations and distant cousins assembled,
and invited Liu Xiangnü to come out [and join them].

諸親百眷來聚集 請出劉香女一人

Her hair was in a simple snail-shell bun,
with a pair of straw sandals on her feet.

頭上挽個螺螄髻 一對蒲鞋腳下行

A simple bamboo hair stick adorned her head,

²⁰ Especially in Chinese Buddhism, Buddhists were taught that everyone inherently possesses a “Buddha-mind”, which enables all sentient beings to embark on the road towards Buddhahood through following Buddhist practices.

and she wore an old blue cotton outfit.
竹簪一枝頭上插 身穿藍布舊衣裙

As soon as her mother-in-law saw this, her heart flared with fury,
and the sisters-in-law were at her side to add their criticism.
公婆一見心發怒 伯姆旁邊論是非

“The new sister-in-law doesn’t want to get along with us!
Look at the plain blue outfit she’s in to greet the relatives!”
新來嬌嬌不要好 藍布裙衫見眾親

Lady Ma heard what these sneaky demons said,
and immediately her anger deepened to rage.
婆婆聽了妖精語 登時發怒便生嗔

Though all the relatives gossiping wasn’t so bad,
the curses of Lady Ma were serious indeed!
諸親談論猶是可 院君喝罵不非輕

“All we hoped was for her to bring us some honor,
how could she shame our home like this?”
只望討來多榮耀 緣何羞辱我門風

Lady Ma, in a rage, began to scold her loudly,
yelling, “You penniless little bitch!”
院君發怒高聲罵 喝罵貧窮下賤人²¹

²¹ The term *jian* 賤 is a difficult one to translate and capture its many inflections. Legally speaking, until abolished by the Qing dynasty’s (1644–1911) Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1722–1735), *jian* referred to a class of “debased persons” which included entertainers, sex workers, and enslaved persons. These and other members of the *jianmin* 賤民 class were barred from participating in the civil service examination, but more broadly speaking, in contrasting them with the legal classification of “good persons” *liangmin* 良民, calling someone “*jian*” takes on moral connotations as well. Someone *jian* was held to lower expectations for sexual morality and behavior. For more on this shift in legal status and the impact it had on Qing society, see Sommer, *Sex, Law and Society*. See also Hansson,

At this moment when Xiangnü was so happy,
Lady Ma could only curse her for being a bewitching demon.
此時香女生歡喜 院君只管罵妖精

Xiangnü approached her with a smile on her face,
and sank to her knees on the dusty floor.
香女上前倍笑臉 雙膝跪在地埃塵

Lady Ma kept up her stream of curses,
yelling “Bewitching demon, you lack all human decency!”
院君只管連聲罵 喝罵妖精不是人

Your sisters-in-law gave you other clothes to wear,
is there any reason to take such personal offense?
伯姆與你衣衫換 有何得罪你們身

They gave you advice on makeup out of the goodness of their hearts,
and in turn you replied with insulting demonic words!
他是好意來粧扮 反招惡語聽妖聲

It’s not easy for a lowly person like you to wear treasures on her head.
You need to have good fortune in order to wear fine silks and satins.
賤人頭上難戴寶 綢緞原要福來穿

It might have even been fine if you’d just refused to change your clothes,
but why did you need to give such offense with your words?
衣衫不換猶是可 語言冲撞爲何因

Chinese Outcasts. In my translation, the sexual connotation often does not apply to Xiangnü, and it would seem incongruous for her mother-in-law to call her a “whore,” which is one valid translation of the insult, when she is furious that Xiangnü has not put on fancy clothes and makeup, as above, or begun a sexual relationship with her son, as she gets angry about later. Instead, at the suggestion of Tina Lu, I translate *jianren* 賤人 as “bitch” when used as a specific insult by Lady Ma, and with various class-based terms in the context of Lady Ma’s insults about Xiangnü’s family more broadly.

Silks and satins cannot disguise your lowly bones,
gold and pearls cannot adorn the head of a peasant.

綢緞不包貧賤骨 金珠難上賤人頭

This little bitch doesn't know what's good for her,
and is totally dependent on her sisters-in-law to teach her how to act.

年少賤人不要好 全仗伯姆教成人

If you have self-respect and dignified conduct, people will respect you,
if you lack self-respect and demean yourself, you'll be looked down on.

自尊自重人尊重 自輕自賤被人輕

Even when beggars get married, they borrow new clothes.
When we marry off servant girls, they change their outfits.

乞丐做親也要借件新衣服 了鬟出嫁換衣裙

It really doesn't matter who's coming to the banquet,
you still need to wear new clothes from head to toe!

不拘誰人來會席 也要上下一齊新

This little bitch has no face,
it gave my heart such a great shock as soon as I saw her:

年少賤人沒臉面 使我一見好心驚

Head adorned with just a bamboo hair stick in a snail-shell bun,
a pair of straw sandals on her feet!

頭戴竹簪螺絲髻 一對蒲鞋腳下行

All the relatives are here to pay you respect,
and here you put your hands together and bow like you're worshipping Guanyin.²²

²² Guanyin is the most commonly used name in Chinese for the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, associated particularly with compassionate virtue. Originally identified as male in Indian sources, in Chinese Buddhist traditions Guanyin came to be most commonly depicted as female. For an English translation of a popular

諸親與你來見禮 雙手拱揖拜觀音

Neither nun nor laywoman, what is there to say about it?

I'm so angry fire is erupting directly from my heart!

不僧不俗何腔調 惱得心頭火直噴

Your behavior today made laughter burst from so many mouths.

But being talked about by people is by no laughing matter!

從今笑破多人口 被人談論不非輕

When others say that someone's appearance is good,

they will treat you fairly when seeing you.

別人稱贊容顏好 看他相貌也公平

Yet you insist on having such an obstinate nature.

Even if there were a remedy, it would be hard to cure someone with lowly bones!

爲人情性多執拗 有藥難醫賤骨人

Daughters from wealthy families have proper upbringing,

daughters of lowly households have flimsy bones!

富貴女兒有家教 小家女子骨頭輕

Born with the bones of a pauper,

how can they enter the homes of the rich and powerful?

生來骨骼多貧賤 如何進得富豪門

Even if our family isn't true gentry yet,

our glorious halls still deserve their good reputation!

我家雖非真鄉宦 赫赫門庭也有名

We never should have arranged marriage with this daughter of paupers!

Today she's flayed the skin from of our family's face!

precious scroll on one of Guanyin's earlier incarnations before she became a bodhisattva, see Idema, *Personal Salvation and Filial Piety*.

不該討了貧寒女 今朝剝我面皮門

If you continue to ignore your mother-in-law's words,
don't complain that I am not showing any feeling!

以後不聽婆婆話 休怪爲婆沒面情

If you listen to my instruction then maybe we can still get on,
but if you don't listen, you'll only bring yourself pain!"

聽我教訓還猶可 不聽婆婆苦自身

As many people came forward to offer their advice,
Lady Ma's anger gradually subsided.

衆人上前來相勸 院君怒氣消漸平

"I'm just scolding this bitch so that she'll correct her mistakes.

Unless she corrects her earlier mistakes, she'll never be able to conduct herself properly!"

就罵賤人來改過 改過前非好做人

Today, since this is the first time, I will forgive you,
so hurry up and go change your clothes now.

今朝初次權饒你 快將急速換衣裙

I'll let you off the hook and forgive you!"

So Xiangnü apologized and returned to the inner chambers.

我今發放饒你去 香女謝罪進房門

After Xiangnü apologized to her mother-in-law, she went back to her rooms. Seeing Ma Yu, she asked him, "Husband, what is it that you do here?"

香女在婆婆面前。謝罪之後。回到房中。一見馬玉就問。官人呢。一向在此作何事業。

He answered, "I stay at home and focus on hitting the books"

三官人說。我在家只管攻書。

Xiangnü replied, “What’s the use of reading books? You ought to study the Way instead; good fortune can only be found in this!”

香女回言道。要讀書何用。即要你學道。祿在其中矣。

He said, “But my chest is filled to the brim with literature! I must aim for a high-ranking government post!”

三官人說。我滿腹文章。必得要圖一番貴顯纔好。

Xiangnü replied, “One lifetime of official service begets feuds for ten-thousand generations, when will the cycle of retribution ever cease? I’ll point you on the road to the Western Regions,²³ and advise you to begin self-cultivation before it’s too late! Cultivate before it’s too late!”

香女回言道。一世爲官萬世仇。冤冤相報幾時休。奴奴指你西方路。奉勸夫君趁早修。趁早修。

The myriad things of this world are all insubstantial,
the only truth is in wholeheartedly chanting Buddha’s name.
世間萬般都是假 一心念佛是真情

Namo Amitufo

南無阿彌陀佛

Xiangnü immediately admonished her husband:

“You’ve painstakingly studied books your entire youth.

香女即便勸夫言 苦志攻書是少年

Diligently reading by light reflected off the snow and the glimmer of fireflies,²⁴
when did you ever sleep in cozy blankets and pillows?

雪案螢窗勤苦讀 枕袋沅褥幾時眠

²³ This most likely refers to the western heavens of Amitābha.

²⁴ This section includes many references to classical tales about hardworking scholars. This idiomatic phrase refers to one example of a poor student who, unable to afford artificial light, read late into the night by the moonlight reflected off the snow outside. Another exemplary student in similar dire straits filled a paper lantern with fireflies to read by.

Day and night exhausting yourself with the Classics, diligently reading,
with such application can you ever find a moment's leisure?

日夜窮經勤苦讀 功夫能有幾時間

Lantern oil and heart's blood both completely used up,
your iron inkstone worn completely through,²⁵

燈油心血都耗盡 墨挨鐵硯也磨穿

From dawn reading until the night's third watch,²⁶
hitting the books until the middle of the night, taking only a quick midday nap,

黃昏讀到三更後 半夜攻書午時休

Not dividing night from day, never taking a rest,
the chilly mat you've been sitting on for ten years is worn out too,

不分晝夜無休歇 十年坐的破寒毡

If only you'd apply such a firm heart to cultivating the Buddha's Way,
there'd be no need to worry when you will meet the Master!

這等堅心修佛道 何愁難到祖師前

You've finished reading five cartloads of books,²⁷

but who was all this striving even for?

五車書卷都讀盡 這翻辛苦爲誰忙

If you used your Confucian principles to understand Buddhahood,

25 This refers to a classical story about a student who, after being disqualified from taking the civil service exams, swore not to give up on his studies until he'd worn through an iron inkstone from his continued efforts.

26 The night was always divided into five watches, beginning around dusk and ended at dawn, which puts the third watch right in the middle of the night.

27 Five cartloads of books, which by this period had become a general reference to broad learning, originally comes from *Zhuangzi*, where the ancient philosopher Huizi (the philosopher Zhuangzi's friend and rival) is described as having filled five carts with his writings, but none of them are judged by Zhuangzi to be correct.

you'd leap out of this secular world into the realm of night-less sky!
若將儒理參佛道 跳出娑婆不夜天

Still, worldly people all say how good it is to become an official.
Arriving at court by moonlight at cock's crow,
世人都道爲官好 雞鳴戴月進朝房

Waiting for water-clock to mark the fifth watch so you can attend the morning audience,
standing in formation and making three cheers of 'Myriad years!'
五更待漏隨朝殿 三呼萬歲列班行

Thronging with the civil and military officials of the imperial court,
entering it as if about to meet the living King Yama.²⁸
兩班文武朝北闕 進朝如見活閻王

Subordinates of the sovereign are always in danger,
a sheep among jackals and wolves will surely lose its life.
臣伴君王終有險 羊伴豺狼命必休

Will you have any chance for quiet meditation on your prayer mat
as you rush about toiling for a salary, striving for profit and fame?
靜坐蒲團能有幾 奔波勞碌利名忙

As soon as you change your heart and tread the right path,
you don't have to worry about hell or heaven.
一念回心行正道 那管地獄與天堂

Others all say being an official is good,
but I tell you that studying the Way is better.
別人都道爲官好 奴勸官人學道高

²⁸ King Yama presides over the underworld, in some formulations as its sole ruler, and in others as the king of the fifth of ten courts of purgatory through which souls of the dead in need of punishment must progress before attaining rebirth.

Serving as an official you eat up all the food of sons and grandsons,
and for generations your descendants will turn to crime.

爲官吃盡兒孫飯 後裔代代出匪人

One lifetime of officialdom creates a myriad of karmic entanglements,
reincarnating through the six paths of existence, suffering from all these ties.²⁹

一世爲官萬劫纏 輪迴六道受牽連

It doesn't compare with practicing meditation and striving to grasp the truth.
Before the venerable Three Treasures³⁰ you'll achieve your excellent fate!"

不若參禪勤悟道 三寶尊前結善緣

Ma Yu said, "But my chest is filled to the brim with literature, so I absolutely must aim for an eminent position to be happy!"

三官人說。我滿腹文章。必要圖一番貴顯纔好。

Xiangnü replied, "In life, getting an eminent position is truly awe inspiring. From songs at dawn to feasting at dusk, it's even better than heavenly paradise. But once fortune runs out, naturally disaster will follow, and chained in shackles you will meet King Yama. But follow my humble views, and cultivate an escape from this all with good karma. Wouldn't it be much better?"

香女說道。人生貴顯實軒昂。朝歌暮宴勝天堂。福盡自然災禍到。披枷帶鎖見閻王。依我奴奴主見。修一個出頭因果。豈不是好。

From the moment husband and wife talked about this in their bedroom, both sisters-in-law were, unnoticed, right outside, listening to every word. They immediately went to their mother-in-law and got another quarrel started.

²⁹ The six paths of existence refer to six different kinds of rebirth that ordinary beings may attain, depending on the karma accumulated in their previous lives. These are: in hell, as a hungry ghost, an animal, an asura (spiritual being often, but not always, at war with the gods), a human, or a god.

³⁰ While "Three Treasures" usually refers to the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) and the Saṅgha (monks and nuns), in this case it is likely used in the more popular understanding as the images of the Buddha flanked by two other significant buddhas or bodhisattvas that would be on display for veneration in the main hall of a temple.

他夫妻兩個。剛剛在房中說話。不想被兩位伯姆。聽得明明白白。走到婆婆面前。挑翻一場口舌。

Exhorting her husband to cultivate the Way because of prior causes,³¹
chatting in their bedroom becomes the root of disaster.

勸夫修道為前因 說話房中惹禍根

Namo Amitufo

南無阿彌陀佛

“Mother-in-law, please listen to us,
your daughters-in-law have something to tell you!

婆婆在上聽原因 媳婦有事告知聞

We were just passing by our youngest sister-in-law’s rooms
when, from outside the door, we heard them talking about karma!

方從孀孀房門過 兩人門外聽緣因

She told brother-in-law to cultivate the Buddha’s Way,
and not to recite the Sages’ texts!

他叫叔叔修佛道 不須誦讀聖賢文

She said that becoming an official has no good outcome,
and that when people pursue it, it doesn’t amount to much.

他說做官無結果 人家弄的不成文

If he listens to what she says,
he won’t study Confucian books and will go practice self-cultivation!

若還聽了他言語 儒書不讀去修行

If she persists in persuading him to cultivate the Buddha’s Way,
she’ll stir up our family into a chaotic mess!”

³¹ This means that what is happening in this lifetime caused by things that happened in their previous lives.

苦苦勸君修佛道 家中攪到亂紛紛

When their mother-in-law heard this, her heart burned with anger,
and loudly she began cursing: “That little witch!

院君聽得心焦噪 高聲喝罵小妖精

She’s been in our home just two or three days,
and has only made mischief and a total mess!

他到我家三兩日 只等作怪亂胡行

Tricking her husband into following the Buddha’s Way,
when sharing the same bed and pillow she chants scriptures!

哄騙丈夫修佛道 同牀共枕念經文

She doesn’t admonish her husband to study diligently,
instead from dawn to dusk they just amuse themselves in her bedroom!

不勸丈夫書勤讀 朝歡暮樂在房中

Alas you bitch! Even if your husband gets an official position,
you’ll see that you are not fortunate enough to become a titled lady.

嗒賤人吓丈夫若得官來做 看你沒福做夫人

Today it’s late so I’ll let you off the hook,
but tomorrow morning I am going to split you two apart!”

今朝天晚權饒你 明朝打發兩分離

Lady Ma said, “It’s already late today, and there’s no sense discussing this so deep into the night. You should just go to sleep. Let me put her in her place tomorrow when I get up.”

院君說。今日天色已晚。夜靜更深不必說了。你們都去睡了罷。待我明日起來。擺佈她。

The next day, she called for Ma Yu. “I want to tell you that from today on, you’re going to stay in your studio and spend all your time studying. Even on

the Festival of Clear Brightness,³² you needn't come home. And from this day forward, you are not allowed to see that bitch. If you long for your wife and turn your back on your mother, your mother will not agree to let matters rest like that!”

到了第二日。院君就叫馬玉。我對你說你今日到書房去讀書。就是清明佳節。你也不必回來。自今以後。總不許同賤人見面。你若思妻背母。爲娘不得甘休的呢。

Her son replied, “How could your child dare to disobey your orders?”

三官人說道。孩兒怎敢違命。

When a filial son sincerely respects his loving mother's commands,
a virtuous wife, in her quarters, is filled with joy.

孝子謹遵慈母命 賢妻房裏喜歡心

Namo Amitufo

南無阿彌陀佛

“Ma Yu, you are a scholar!

Let your mother explain a few things to you.

馬玉你是讀書人 爲娘有話說分明

Last night at dusk, once all had quieted down for the day,
you and your wife were talking about scriptures in your bedroom.

昨夜黃昏人靜後 夫妻房裏講真經

How can newlyweds keep their bodies pure,
cuddled under the blankets just talking about [Buddhist] cultivation?

新婚那得身干淨 被頭裏面講修行

She's made up all kinds of bewitching words
and, in her bedroom, deceived you into falling for them!

³² This important spring holiday has its roots in ancient Chinese ancestral ritual, and generally involves visiting family graves to clean them and offer sacrifices to the departed.

粧出許多妖嬈話 哄你迷戀在房中

I have never heard of such a thing,
and I'm so distraught my heart is a basin of flames!
這樣新聞我未見 惱得心頭火一盆

I'm now so angry I am shaking all over,
how could I close my eyes at all last night?
我今氣得身發抖 一夜何曾合眼睛

From now on, your only focus is to be hitting the books,
leave practicing asceticism and becoming a Guanyin to her.
你今只管攻書去 由他修煉做觀音

Your whole heart should be on reading your books,
do not let it get stuck on that bewitching demon.
一心勤把書來讀 休要掛念這妖精

I can see how your whole face is filled with sadness,
your heart must be filled with love for your wife.
看你滿面愁容貌 心中戀着為妻身

Love between newlyweds is difficult to sever,
your entire chest must be filled with hatred for your mother right now.
新婚恩愛難割捨 滿腔怨恨老娘身

But if you really don't listen to my words,
and turn your back on your mother out of love for your wife, you are a criminal beast!
若還不聽娘言語 背母私妻忤逆人

Considering me, your own mother, detestable,
thinking that your wife is telling the truth!
看我娘身如厭物 妻子說話是真情

It's not that my heart is especially cruel!

It's just I fear that you will become enchanted by her and die young.³³

不是爲娘心忒狠 恐你迷戀夭亡身

Hurry, pick up your books and study hard,

don't think of that bewitching demon who will drag you to your death!

快把詩書勤苦讀 勿想妖精送命人

A man must be determined to seek after glory,

when he makes his name with one exam, everyone under heaven will know it.

男兒立志圖榮貴 一舉成名天下聞

Once his name is listed on the golden plaque and he obtains an official post,
the vermilion robe and jade belt are no minor matter.

金榜題名封官職 紫袍玉帶不非輕

When one day he succeeds at the top of the list, he'll surpass the world,
and his head will be fragrant with blossoms from the palace.

一朝高中魁天下 宮花插得滿頭香

I think that someday, son, you will pass the imperial exam
and I will get to be a lady-dowager!

我想孩兒來及第 後來做個太夫人

If you listen to that bewitching demon, it won't end well.

That debauched and sex-loving slut!

聽了妖精沒結果 貪淫好色下流人

Be diligent and work hard at reading your books,
wholeheartedly focusing on your future career.”

³³ Lady Ma's fear here references the belief that supernatural or preternaturally beautiful women can bewitch a man, leading him to overindulge in sex and draining him of his finite supply of semen, which will lead to his premature death. There is very real irony in her accusations that Xiangnü is a “bewitching demon” and “slut” (below) given what we, the audience, know about Xiangnü.

用心勤把書來讀 一心只管奔前程

Ma Yu said to his mother, “Then your child bids you farewell now.”

馬玉對母親說。孩兒就此拜別。

When he returned to his rooms, he saw Xiangnü and said, “Last night you admonished me to practice self-cultivation, and my mother found out about it. Today, she’s forcing me to go to the study and I have to leave immediately.”

又回進房中。見香女說。你昨夜勸我修行。却被婆婆知道了。今日。逼我到書房去。即刻便要起程。

Even though the mandarin duck couple is separated today,
perhaps in the next life they will go to the Western Heaven together?

雖然今日鴛鴦散 誰知後世共西天

Namo Amitufo

南無阿彌陀佛。

“Last night, in our room we discussed practicing piety,
but my loving mother heard about this and became angry.

昨夜房中講修行 慈母聞知氣惱生

Today she’s forcing me to go to my study.

Husband and wife for but three days now split in two.

今朝逼我書房去 三日夫妻兩地分

I now have to temporarily give up our affection,
and force myself to hit the books for some weeks.

我今暫把恩情捨 勉強攻書過幾旬

Even though my body will go to the study,
day and night my heart will be fixed on my wife.

我身雖到書房去 心中日夜掛妻身

By day, I will worry that you have no company,

and at night we will, each in our own places, hug our lonely quilts.

日間愁你無陪伴 夜來兩處抱孤衾

You must follow your mother-in-law's instructions,
and pass your days in harmony with your sisters-in-law.

婆婆言語當依順 伯姆和睦過光陰

My mother is an honest, upright person,
and has people who report on everything to her.

我娘爲人心正直 有人察出聽知聞

I just hope that my mother's heart will change,
and she'll allow us to meet as husband and wife again.

只望母親回心轉 與你夫婦有相逢

Today I have no choice but to depart from you.
Virtuous wife, please do not resent your husband!

今朝無奈分離去 賢妻切莫怨夫君

Speaking of parting, my heart is filled with suffering,
Tears course down like rain as I suppress my feelings.

話別此言心苦切 淚流如雨忍含心

Pity the mandarin duck couple torn apart,
who do not know what day they might meet again!"

可憐拆散鴛鴦伴 未知何日再相親

Xiangnü heard her husband speaking like this, and replied,
“Husband, don't worry about this as you leave,

香女聽說回言答 官人此去放寬心

Absolutely do not get hung up on your feelings for me,
sincerely follow your mother's command to study.”

切勿爲奴情牽掛 謹遵母命讀書文

Xiangnü at this time secretly rejoiced,
“Keeping my body pure is great for practicing piety!”
香女此時心暗喜 一身清淨好修行

Lady Ma ordered her son to leave the house. After he had left, she called Xiangnü from her room and cursed at her for quite a while. “You little bitch! Last night in your bedroom you told your husband to practice self-cultivation instead of telling him to study! Where do you get this kind of idea? If your husband becomes an official, with your sort of looks it’s going to be difficult for you to be a lady! As I see it, you’re just low class and should never be elevated. From today on, you’ll go to the kitchens to do hard labor. Fetching water and splitting kindling, stoking the fire and cooking our food. It will all be up to you to do.”

院君打發三官人。出門之後。就叫香女出房來。辱罵一場。你這小賤人。昨夜房中。叫你丈夫修行。不叫你丈夫讀書。你是何人的主意。你丈夫倘若能做個官時。看你這面皮也難做夫人。依我看來。你是個下流之人。不承擡舉的。如今你到廚房中粗做。挑水劈柴。燒火煮飯。一應都要你做。

As they were talking, Ma Jin and Ma Yin returned from hunting with a huge catch of birds and beasts. When the lady saw it all, she was overjoyed, and told Xiangnü, “Take these to the kitchen and prepare them for me to eat.”

說話之間。馬金馬銀。打了許多。飛禽走獸回來。院君一見喜之不勝。就叫香女。擎到廚房中去。烹調來吃。

Xiangnü replied, “Mother-in-law, I only know how to prepare vegetarian food and don’t know at all how to prepare such game.” Lady Ma replied, “If you won’t do the cooking it, at least go start the fire.”

香女說道。婆婆。媳婦只為安排素菜。不會烹調這個野味將如之何。院君道。你不為上竈。就去燒火。

Xiangnü said, “I understand,” and went off, singing a Buddhist song.
香女說曉得。口唱佛曲而去。

(*Singing*) Look at these living beings!

How does it not startle us all?
Their previous lives' evil karma turned them into birds.
Today they met their murderers,
this too is because of prior causes!
If you'd stealthily snuck away and hid in the deepest mountain wilds,
you could have avoided this disaster today!

【唱】見生靈。怎不叫人心下驚。前生孽重變飛禽。今遭毒手。也是前因。你若潛身避跡深山地。可免今朝災禍臨。

(*Speaking*) It's often said, "I admonish you not to hunt birds in the spring. Babies are still in the nest waiting for their mother's return!"

【白】常言道。勸君莫打三春鳥。子在巢中望母歸。

(*Singing*) Pity them!
It's impossible for mothers and children to survive.
When I think of it,
it just fills my heart with grief!

【唱】可憐他。母子難存活。想起來。只落得好傷心矣。

Xiangnü finished singing her Buddhist song. She was overheard by her eldest sister-in-law. She immediately went to their mother-in-law and reported, "The new third sister-in-law must have been someone in the habit of singing songs in the streets and lanes,³⁴ she actually sings pretty well!"

香女唱完了佛曲。被大姆姆聽見了。到婆婆面前去說。新來三阿嬭想必是沿街唱門詞小曲慣的。到也唱得好聽。

Lady Ma replied, "You don't need to pay any attention to her. Just see what happens to her in the future."

院君說。你們不要去睬他。看其將來如何。

Now, the story briefly takes us to court, where the emperor puts out a call for qualified scholars via examination. Ma Yu takes it, gets first place in the first-

³⁴ The sister-in-law is likely implying that Xiangnü was from a debased-class entertainer family, and insinuating further that she may have been a common prostitute.

degree exam, and upon returning home is immediately sent back to his study to prepare for the next level, without a chance to see Xiangnü. Meanwhile, back at home, Xiangnü sings a longer song while working in the kitchen. Her sisters-in-law also report on this to their mother-in-law, who once again tells them to ignore her.

However, the third song she sings finally gets her into trouble!

One day, Lady Ma was sitting in the main hall when one of the family's servants, Ma Zhong, returned from the family estate. After kowtowing, he knelt before her and said, "This insignificant one pays his respects to Madame. The squire sent me home early with over seven hundred *liang*³⁵ of silver and a letter for you."

一日之間。院君坐在廳上。有家裡人。馬忠。從庄上回來向了院君。跪下叩頭。小的請太太金安。員外先打發小的回家。有銀子七百餘兩。書信一封呈上。

Lady Ma asked, "How have collections of the rent accounts in the village gone this year?"

院君問道。今年庄上賬目。收得如何。

Ma Zhong replied, "In previous years, we'd collected about one thousand two or three hundred *liang* worth silver in grain. This year we only got a little over seven hundred *liang* worth! Because of this, the squire was furious! He strung up all the debtors in a barn, and demanded his money every three days. He beat them all until their skin was split open and their flesh was like raw meat. Every one of them just cried out like, 'I tried to sell my wife but found no buyer! I tried to sell my children but no one wanted them!'³⁶ They all were unable to pay what they owed. This year there's a famine so there's nothing we can really do about it."

馬忠回言。往年庄上賬目。收米折銀共有一千二三百兩。今年只收得七百餘兩。故此員外大發其怒。就把這些欠戶，都弔在馬房裏。三日一

³⁵ Silver currency in this period was calculated in terms of its weight. A *liang* was technically an ounce of silver, however, based on quality, the actual weight of a *liang* differed, as did its definition from place to place across China.

³⁶ For more on the buying and selling of people in Qing and early Republican China, when *Liu Xiang* was at the height of its popularity, see Ransmeier, *Sold People*.

比。打得他們皮碎肉爛。口口聲聲。都說道。賣妻子賣不去。賣兒女竟沒有人要。他們都還不清。年成荒薄。沒奈之何。

Lady Ma said, “I understand. Go get yourself something to eat.”

院君說。曉得了。你去吃飯去罷。

This time, Xiangnü overheard everything. Remarking to herself about how violent and evil this all was, she said a few extra “*Namo Amitufo*” and then went off to the kitchen, singing another Buddhist song.

此時香女聽見。說得如此兇惡。多念幾聲阿彌陀佛口唱佛曲而去。

(*Singing*) Those who do good suffer hardships and meet with disaster.
Those who do evil have excessive wealth and riches.
Those who do good wear ratty clothes and rushes.
Those who do evil are dressed in satin and clothed in silk gauze.
Those who do good swallow their hunger and suffer starvation.
Those who do evil feast all night with music and song.
I told all this to Amitābha Buddha, and he had nothing to say in reply.
But one arhat³⁷ laughed out loudly,
‘Just be patient and don’t say too much about this.
Wait and see what kind of consequences they will reap!
From dusk to dawn they eagerly busy themselves,
they live their lives busying themselves eagerly.
Evil people lend money and impose heavy interest.
But in the end, their wealth and rank are squandered in a flash.
You should admonish people that they ought to do good,
so the buddhas and gods will protect them.
Acting perversely and creating a ruckus goes against Heaven’s principle.
When King Yama inspects his register of good and evil deeds,
evil people will wear heavy chains on their necks!
Our enemies! While good people’s feet tread on pure lotus flowers.

³⁷ Most broadly, “arhat” is a term used for someone who has attained a high degree of Buddhist cultivation, though the height is relative across different strains of Buddhism.

Ha! On lotus flowers!’

【唱】行善的。受苦遭魔。作惡的。錢財廣多。行善的。衣衫破簑。作惡的。着緞穿羅。行善的。吞饑受餓。作惡的。酒宴笙歌。我將此事。竟告到阿彌陀佛。也無言應我。惟有羅漢笑呵呵。你且忍耐莫言多。看他們收成結果。收成結果待如何。朝也巴來暮也巴。巴巴急急做人家。惡人放債盤重利。總然富貴眼前花。勸人必要行善事。佛祖神祇保護他。打街罵巷沒天理。閻王善惡簿來查。惡人頸上帶長枷。噯。也麼冤家。善人腳下踏蓮花。哈。也麼蓮花。

Xiangnü finished singing her song.

香女唱完佛曲。

But the whole time her mother-in-law had, unbeknownst to her, been behind her listening, and she had understood it all. Lady Ma picked up a stick of firewood. Grasping on to Xiangnü’s hair, she wrenched her over and hit her two or three hundred times without stopping. Xiangnü passed out and fell to the floor.

不料婆婆背後聽得明白。院君手拿一根柴棍。把香女頭髮。一把揪扭過來。一連打了二三百棍。香女暈倒在地。

A housemaid, Yumei, went down on both knees before Lady Ma, saying, “Madame, I, Yumei, have a request to beg of you. Now, Third Sister-in-law deserved to be beaten. But please look at her youthful immaturity and go easy on her. She doesn’t know anything of how the world really works. I beg you, Madame, to show her some earthshattering kindness. Just as the heavens cover over the earth, so too can the great encompass the small. Just now, calm your anger a little. And if she should ever offend you again so that you need to punish her, I will not dare to ask you to pardon her again. Someone as venerable and righteous as yourself should absolutely not be crossed so!”

玉梅丫鬟。雙膝跪下。說老太太。我玉梅求討一情。三娘原應該打的。看他年紀尚且還輕。不知世務。求太太如開天地之恩。又道天能蓋地。大能容小。纔時息怒些罷。以後再犯恁憑太太重處我玉梅也再不敢來求恕了。況是年高有德之人。切勿可氣壞了。

Lady Ma said, “First, I’ve been beating her for so long that my arm is sore. Second, this bitch is already unconscious. Third, you begged me for mercy, Yumei. So, for the time being I’ll be merciful to this bitch. Damn! She really is

going to make me die of anger. She's going to be the end of our family. We never should have brought this lowly bitch into our home!"

院君說道。我一來打得我手痠了。二來這個賤人暈絕去了。三來你玉梅求饒。權且饒這賤人。咳。真真要氣死我吓。這自我家氣數。原不該討這個賤人的嘎。

With this, the cycle of conflict between Xiangnü and her in-laws escalates dramatically, and after many more beatings (after which friendly servants nurse her back to health), she is ultimately expelled from the household after her sisters-in-law falsely accuse her of adultery. Wandering the streets, homeless and joyful Xiangnü takes advantage of her newfound freedom to proselytize lay Buddhist practices. The local community sets her up in a hermitage at which she frequently reads sūtras and preaches to the men and women who visit her.

When Ma Yu returns home in triumph from passing highest level exam and gaining an official post, he is distraught when he discovers how his family treated his wife, and attempts suicide before they agree to help him track her down. Once they find her, he cannot convince her to return home, and they force him into marrying a concubine. Thankfully, this young woman is one of Xiangnü's local converts, so she takes up Xiangnü's role in admonishing Ma Yu to practice Buddhist piety.

The Jade Emperor³⁸ sends down punishment on the rest of the Ma family and they all die. Ma Yu faints and his soul travels through the underworld, where he sees his family suffering and they beg him to cultivate merit for their sake. He returns home to find Xiangnü already performing the proper funeral rituals, after which his family appears to him in a dream to thank Xiangnü for saving them. Ma Yu retires from his post and spends the rest of his life practicing piety with Xiangnü, the concubine, and Yumei, the virtuous servant girl. Eventually, all of them are reborn as buddhas and bodhisattvas.

When the Jade Emperor looks into their karma, it is revealed that Ma Yu and Xiangnü were fated to a three-day marriage because of a bond created in their previous lives. Ma Yu was a monk distracted from his practice by the scent of a flower worn in the hair of the woman Xiangnü had been. They shared a significant glance that karmically bound them to each other, setting in motion the entire tale of their suffering and piety.

³⁸ The Jade Emperor is an important figure in Daoism who presides over the Heavens near the top of the pantheon. His appearance here reflects his role in popular religion more broadly, however, not as an explicitly Daoist deity intruding on a Buddhist text.

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