

BEATA GRANT and WILT L. IDEMA (trans.):

Escape from Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang. 278 pp. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011. \$35. ISBN 978 0 295 99120 7.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X12000936

The translation of ballads about Mulian and Woman Huang in *Escape From Blood Hell* makes available some important material that has shaped the religious world of imperial China. The two stories have been known in China for centuries, through performances of many different drama and ballad versions, and they belong to the kind of religious story which once enjoyed great popularity in China. But there is more to the translation than being just good reading material. Annotations help the reader gain a better understanding of the religious as well as linguistic and cultural techniques which helped this kind of popular Buddhism to become so widely accepted in China, because it was able to consider Confucian concepts as well. Experts and friends of early narrative art in China are provided with a descriptive example of those texts which used alternating prose and verse and had much influence on the literature written in the vernacular of *baihua*. The translation of both texts tries to reproduce not only the story itself but render it into a language which sounds familiar to a Western reader because of its “biblical tone”.

The first of the texts – *The Precious Scroll of the Three Lives of Mulian* – is a beautiful fusion of Confucian teachings and Buddhist concepts of retribution and tells the story of the obedient son Mulian who is travelling to the underworld to save his sinful mother. As many versions of this story remain rather short, the translation in *Escape From Blood Hell* is a fascinating document, because it explains Mulian's efforts in periods of different lives and leaves a vivid impression on the reader. Not only are we provided with a rational understanding for the complexity of Chinese religious life in former centuries, but we also learn how this complicated process took place in order to fuse Confucian traditions (especially filial piety, which was the root virtue in Chinese culture) with later religions like Buddhism – and how possible contradictions were solved. Simple, in a modern sense, as the story and its psychological explanations may be, it still provides the audience/reader with a glimpse into the soul of Mulian – a firm believer in Buddhism. The developments in Mulian's attitude – his indignation about his mother's sins, his memories of his childhood and his mother's efforts to raise him, his decision to make every effort to search for his mother, his futile visit to the Western Paradise, and his long travel through the different layers of hell – all shows traces of what has been called the “coming-of-age novel” in the tradition of narrative art in the West.

The technique of exaggeration is especially interesting. Layer after layer of unimaginably cruel tortures in the different hells are explained – but Mulian's mother is nowhere to be found. The puzzled reader may ask where is possible justice: do Mulian's mother's sins still justify these strong punishments? Although the text contains some repetition – a heritage left over from its oral tradition – it still turns out to be rather entertaining as well as educational material, because of its shocking pictures.

Only in the very last of the ten hells – the Avici hell – does Mulian find his mother, and an interesting conflict with Yama, Lord of the Underworld, arises. These two scenes may be new to many readers familiar with the story of Mulian's visit to the underworld. During Mulian's visit to the Avici hell millions of ghosts are able to flee from the hell and return to life. Since Mulian is responsible for

this disaster he is reborn as the historical rebel Huang Chao who instigated a rebellion at the end of Tang-Dynasty. After Mulian has successfully accomplished his mission and caused millions of deaths in the appearance of Huang Chao he can proceed to rescue his mother. To do this, he has to be reborn once again: he becomes a butcher and improves his karma, because he is successful in sending the ghosts of animals back to hell. In the end Mulian kills himself, travels to the underworld again and asks King Yama to allow his mother to be reborn.

Woman Huang Recites the Diamond Sutra is a shorter and less well known story, but it too has appeared in a wide variety of versions and genres since the Song dynasty. The story tells of a woman who is a firm believer in Buddhism and who retreats from family and life altogether because her husband is a butcher. Her respect for her sinful husband makes her recite the Diamond Sutra, and her seriousness and devotedness convince the local gods to let her visit the underworld in order to see Yama. Again, the separation from her family and the visits to the different layers of hell comprise long parts of the text. As in the story about Mulian the similarities between social reality and life in hell become obvious, especially in connection with bureaucratic structures. At the entrance to hell Woman Huang has to stand on scales in order check the weight of her sins. As she has accumulated only a small amount of sin and because she has been practising the “good way”, she is allowed to trek through the numerous hells before appearing in front of Yama. The Lord of the underworld tests Woman Huang’s knowledge about the Diamond Sutra, and he is impressed, because he would never have thought that the recitation of the sutra would have such potency. According to Yama’s decision Woman Huang is reborn on a higher plane than “only” a woman. As a reward for the blessings she receives the body of a man. Again, the underworld bureaucracy works very efficiently: before Woman Huang is reborn into a new family the accountant tells her how many years – according to the registers kept in the underworld – have been allotted to the members of her former family. The following negotiations have a very Chinese taste: because Woman Huang finds the allotted number of years too small, she starts to bargain with the accountant, who makes “corrections” to the ledgers of life and death in the end and increases the number of years according to her wishes. Reborn in a well- to-do family the former Woman Huang becomes a successful official and even recognizes members of her old family. After completing her missions during different lives Woman Huang achieves nirvana.

Despite their didactic intent the two stories are filled with so many tensions and contradictions that they make entertaining as well interesting reading material, especially because they reflect the complexity of society in former China.

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TONIO ANDRADE:

Lost Colony: The Untold Story of China’s First Great Victory over the West.

xv, 431 pp. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.

£24.95. ISBN 978 069114455 9.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X12000948

This book deals with the encounter between the Dutch and the Chinese that led to the fall of the Dutch settlements on Taiwan and the short-lived rule of Koxinga over