

# The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* in the Modern Performance Tradition of ‘Telling Scriptures’ in Changshu County, China

Rostislav BEREZKIN\*

Fudan University, National Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies, PRC Shanghai,  
People's Republic of China;  
Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

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## ABSTRACT

The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* (the earliest known manuscript is dated 1867) is a representative example of narrative texts used in the scroll recitation practices of southern Jiangsu since the nineteenth century. It uses a subject widespread in folklore to propagate belief in Bodhisattva Guanyin, a popular Buddhist deity, and thus it combines indoctrination with didacticism and entertainment. A comparison of several variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* (falling in between 1867 and 1989) demonstrates the evolution of its functions and cultural meaning in the modern practice of precious scrolls recitation, taking ‘telling scriptures’ of Changshu as an example.

## KEYWORDS

precious scrolls (*baojuan*), telling scriptures, ritualized storytelling, Chinese folklore, Bodhisattva Guanyin, folk Buddhist beliefs, folk ritual

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: bairuosi@fudan.edu.cn

The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* was once among the most popular texts in the practice of precious scrolls recitation in the southern part of Jiangsu 江蘇 (mainly areas around Suzhou 蘇州), that appeared in the period of its fluorescence in the region of Lower Yangtze Valley, Jiangnan 江南 (ca. mid-nineteenth century). This text is still used in the recitation practices of the Suzhou area, which demonstrates a remarkable continuity in this type of folk ritualized storytelling.

Here I analyze the cultural and religious meaning of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* in order to uncover the reasons for its popularity in the context of scroll recitation (*xuanjuan* 宣卷) of southern Jiangsu, and also to explain its literary value. I take the tradition of scroll recitation of the former Changshu 常熟 county as an example, alternatively known there as ‘telling scriptures’ (*jiangjing* 講經, Suzhou dialect: *kā51 tēin44*).<sup>1</sup> It is performed by the masters of telling scriptures (*jiangjing xiansheng* 講經先生, Suzhou dialect: *kā51 tēin44 sɿ44 sā44*) who have professional or semi-professional status; besides scroll recitation, they perform life-cycle rituals for local believers.<sup>2</sup> Precious scrolls are used as scripts in this type of storytelling, and thus the local name is ‘telling scriptures.’ These mostly narrate stories of deities and local heroes.

As a typical example of the narrative type of precious scrolls widespread in the Wu-speaking 吳 areas (Jiangnan region) in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is also related to folk religious culture, namely belief in the female forms of Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音, a popular Buddhist deity in China. Hence, one of its variants has the alternative name *Precious Scroll of Guanyin Testing the Heart* (*Guanyin shi xin baojuan* 觀音試心寶卷) (Liang 2007: 1/243). I endeavor to trace the evolution of functions of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* through examining its several variants from different time periods. This study offers research on precious scrolls as texts of popular devotion in the modern period, as opposed to ‘sectarian scrolls’ of the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, a type better known in the West through previous studies (see Overmyer 1999; ter Haar 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Though several scholars of precious scrolls all over the world previously have given attention to this text,<sup>4</sup> they have not studied it in detail, especially as it concerns the origins and evolution of this subject and its use in popular storytelling and religious culture. Here I mainly use the unpublished materials that I studied in Chinese libraries as well as results of my own fieldwork in several places around the city of Suzhou in 2008–2015.

## 1. ON THE MANUSCRIPT VARIANTS OF THE *PRECIOUS SCROLL OF WATERMELONS*

The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is mainly represented in the form of manuscripts used by the performers of scroll recitation (telling scriptures). Originally this text appeared in manuscript form; only later was it printed. It appears that the earliest printed version dates to 1916, when

<sup>1</sup> I express my gratitude to Prof. Sheng Yimin 盛益民 (Fudan University) for help with the transcription of the Suzhou dialect.

<sup>2</sup> On Changshu ‘telling scriptures,’ see, e.g., Qiu 2010; Yu 2015; Berezkin 2013a; 2013b; 2015. Here I do not provide ethnographic descriptions of this practice.

<sup>3</sup> This period of precious scrolls development can be termed the ‘middle’ one, as opposed to the early period of predominantly Buddhist narratives and the late period of the nineteenth–early twentieth centuries; see Berezkin 2017: 3–5.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Yü 2001: 435–437.



Wenyi 文益 Publishers in Shanghai published it using lithography (see fig. 1 and 2).<sup>5</sup> The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is represented in a number of lithographic editions by Shanghai 上海 and Ningbo 寧波 publishers, dating to the 1920s–1930s.<sup>6</sup> Though printed copies of precious scrolls of this period reached the rural areas of Jiangsu, professional performers mainly use manuscript copies of the texts, which usually are significantly different from the edited versions printed in the cities. Here, I deal only with the manuscript versions of this text.

The earliest manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* available to me is dated 1867. This manuscript is preserved at the Library of Beijing Normal University (Beijing Shifan Daxue 北京師範大學) in the collection called the ‘Compendium of Old and New Precious Scrolls’ (*Gu jin*



Fig. 1: Bodhisattva Guanyin. Frontispiece illustration from the lithographic edition of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. Shanghai, early twentieth century. Private collection.

<sup>5</sup> For the almost identical lithographic edition, re-printed by Wenyuan 文元 Publishers in Shanghai, see Huang 2002: 355/323–350.

<sup>6</sup> On the printing of precious scrolls in this period, see Berezkin 2014.



Fig. 2. Acolytes of Guanyin: Good-in-talent and Dragon Girl; main characters of the precious scroll – Li Hengnian (Heixin 黑心) and Li An 李安. Frontispiece illustration from the lithographic edition of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. Shanghai, early twentieth century.

*baojuan huibian* 古今寶卷彙編), which originally belonged to the Wanderer of the Geese Lake (Ehu sanren 鵝湖散人). It has the title 'Story of Watermelons' (*Xigua ji* 西瓜記) at the beginning of the text, but the title *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is used in the concluding verses of this manuscript.<sup>7</sup> The text is very similar to that of the variants later used in the Changshu area. The special features of the 1867 variant, such as references to the performative context, as well as certain linguistic features, demonstrate that this text was used in scroll recitation of the Wu-speaking areas of the Lower Yangtze region, where it started to spread in exactly the same period.<sup>8</sup> We can

<sup>7</sup> The similar title is used in one of the modern manuscripts, see Zhonggong Zhangjiagang shiwei xuanchuanbu 2011: 1/522.

<sup>8</sup> The last lines of the concluding verse in this text refer to recitation at the assemblies organized by believers, which is common for precious scrolls in the Changshu area now: 'Buddhas and deities are happy, disasters and obstacles have been eliminated; the host of the meeting has received happiness and his longevity will extend' (佛歡神喜消災障，齋主受福壽延增). The term of *zhaizhu* refers to the patron of assemblies, originally known as 'vegetarian feasts,' following Chinese Buddhist tradition.





assume, therefore, that the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* was the product of the southern tradition of scroll recitation (as opposed to the northern and northwestern traditions of Zhili 直隸, Shandong 山東, Shanxi 山西, and Gansu 甘肅).<sup>9</sup> According to my research, early manuscripts of this precious scroll have not been discovered so far in northern China.

There is also a comparatively early text, presumably also from the Jiangnan region, the contents of which is very similar to that of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. However, this one has another title: *Precious Scroll of Vegetarian Feasts for the Monks* (*Zhai seng baojuan* 齋僧寶卷). Its earliest manuscript, kept in the Suzhou Museum of Drama (Suzhou xiqu bowuguan 蘇州戲曲博物館), was copied in 1866 by Fan Weisheng 範偉生, the teacher of the Yunzhong private school (Yunzhong Shuyuan 雲中書院).<sup>10</sup> Thus, it predates even the earliest known manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* for one year. Though Chinese scholar Che Xilun 車錫倫 (2000: 297) listed it in the entry of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* in his catalogue (which is the most comprehensive catalogue of precious scrolls to date); the details of its storyline are different from the versions with the title *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*.<sup>11</sup>

The *Precious Scroll of Vegetarian Feasts for the Monks* (1866 manuscript) tells the story of two brothers, the pious elder brother Gu Jinlong 顧金龍 (Gu the Golden Dragon), who is rewarded for his treatment of mendicant monks, and the greedy younger brother Gu Yinlong 顧銀龍 (Gu the Silver Dragon), who is punished for his avarice. In this case, the story is not about master and servant, as are most variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* (see below). Still, the motif of miraculous watermelon seeds given to brothers by Guanyin is similar. Thus, the *Precious Scroll of Vegetarian Feast for the Monks* can be considered a variant of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. I do not deal with it in this article, as I discuss only the texts continuing with the subject matter of the 1867 manuscript.

Numerous manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*, dating back to the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, which are similar to the manuscript of 1867, testify to the spread of this version in the Wu-speaking areas (Jiangnan region). For example, a manuscript dated 1887 is preserved in the Zhejiang Provincial Library (Zhejiang sheng tushuguan 浙江省圖書館, Hangzhou 杭州), and another manuscript dated 1884 is kept in the Shanghai Library (Shanghai tushuguan 上海圖書館).<sup>12</sup> There are altogether eighteen manuscripts of this precious scroll in the collection of the Suzhou Museum of Drama.<sup>13</sup> Of those credibly dated, ten fall into the period between 1901 and 1942 (Guo 2018: 198–201). Another manuscript from 1910, presumably also from the Suzhou area, is kept in the National Library of China (Guojia tushuguan 國家圖書館, Beijing). These data demonstrate that the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* was very popular with the precious scrolls performers of the Suzhou area in the first half of the twentieth century.

Here I mainly compare three variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*: the earliest manuscript dated 1867 with the modern variants discovered in the Changshu area, the manuscripts

<sup>9</sup> According to the hypothesis of Che Xilun, the tradition of precious scrolls recitation originally spread to the Lower Yangtze areas from the north; see Che 2009: 131–134; Lu and Che 2012: 98–105.

<sup>10</sup> Guo 2018: 238–239. There are four other manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Vegetarian Feasts for the Monks* in this collection, two of them dated to 1895 and 1917: Guo 2018: 239–240. This precious scroll must not be confused with the text of the same title, as it tells a different story, also represented in the same collection: Guo 2018: 237–238.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it can be considered an independent text of the precious scroll.

<sup>12</sup> According to the Che Xilun's catalogue (2000: 297), there are also manuscripts dated to the 1870s.

<sup>13</sup> Those were gathered from local performers of precious scrolls in the early 1960s.



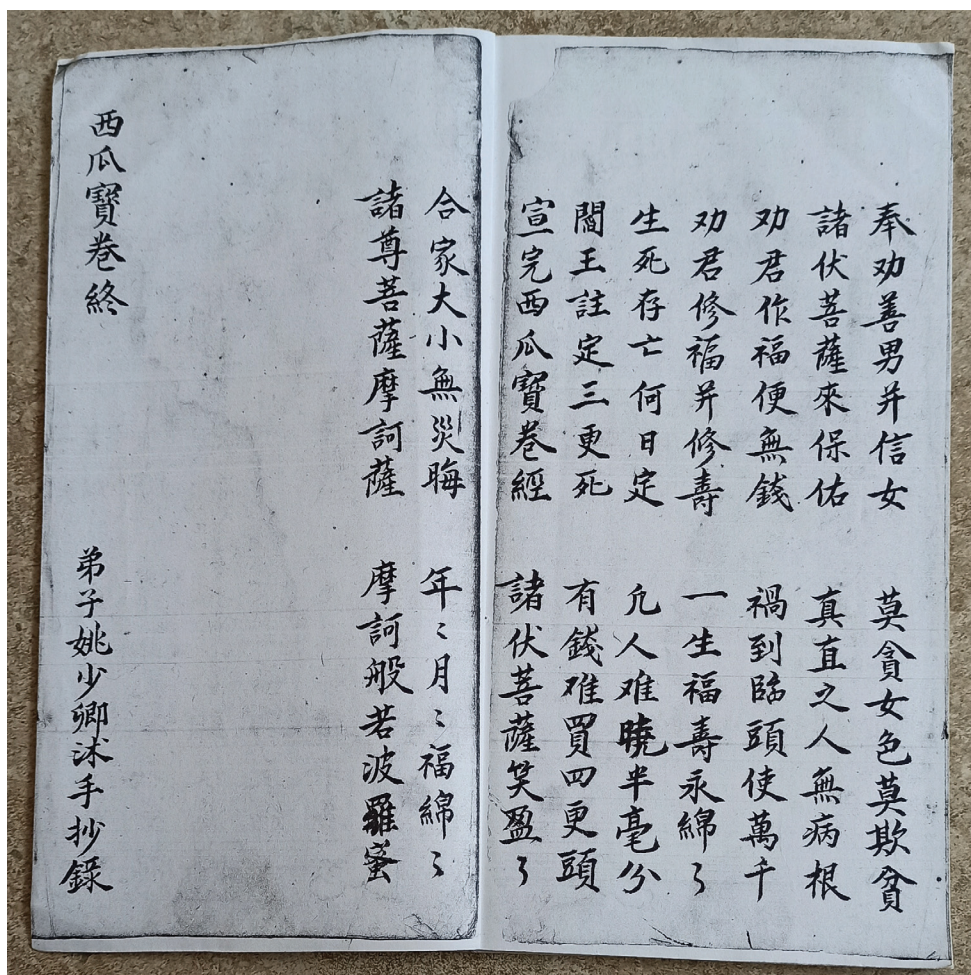


Fig. 3. The manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*, by Yao Shaoqing 姚少卿, the last page. Picture courtesy of Yu Dingjun.

of Yao Shaoqing 姚少卿 and Di Jianxin 狄建新. The manuscript of Yao Shaoqing is preserved in the collection of Yu Zhifei 余知非 from the Shanghu district of Changshu (now in his nineties), a hereditary performer of ‘telling scriptures’ who started to perform in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> It is not dated but apparently was copied in ca. 1920s (see fig. 3).<sup>15</sup>

Manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* are rarely found in the collections of masters of telling scriptures of the Changshu area now (see fig. 4). Still, such manuscripts also were used by masters of the Fenghuang township 鳳凰鎮 of Zhangjiagang 張家港 city, which was formerly

<sup>14</sup> The copy was collected by Yu Dingjun 余鼎君 (b. 1942), also a hereditary performer; he started to collect and study precious scrolls in 2000; for more on him see Berezkin 2013a.

<sup>15</sup> According to Yu Dingjun, Yao Shaoqing was two generations ahead of Yu Zhifei in this lineage of performers.





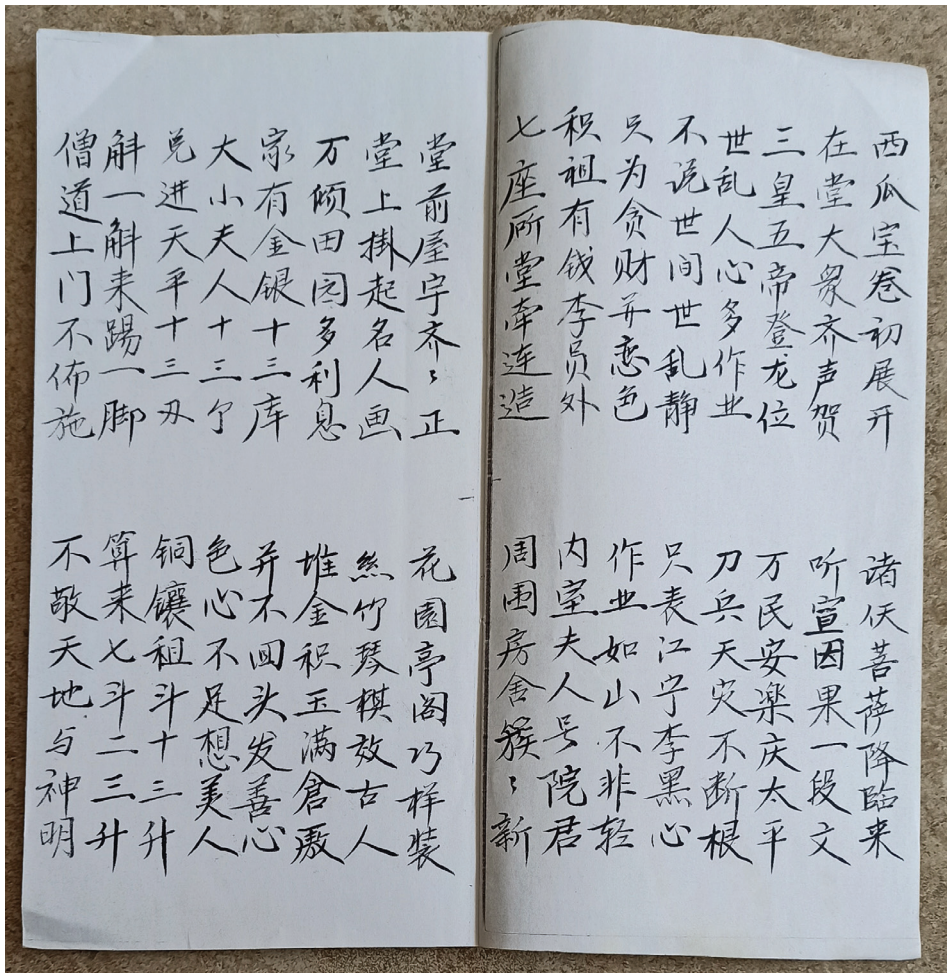


Fig. 4. A modern manuscript of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* from Changshu, the first page. Picture courtesy of Yu Dingjun.

part of Changshu county.<sup>16</sup> An example of these is Di Jianxin's variant (1989), representing modifications of the traditional text.<sup>17</sup>

Di Jianxin (b. 1928) is an old performer from the Qingshui village 清水村 of Fenghuang (Gangkou 港口) township, who can trace his lineage of teachers back to the end of the nineteenth century. He started to study telling scriptures at the age of sixteen and in 1948 organized his own

<sup>16</sup> In 1962, northern areas of former Changshu county were transformed into the new Shazhou 沙洲 county (also including a part of Jiangyin 江陰 county). In 1986, Shazhou was transformed into Zhangjiagang city. Both Changshu and Zhangjiagang cities are now under the jurisdiction of Suzhou city. On 'telling scriptures' in the Fenghuang (Gangkou) area, see Yu 1997; Che 2009: 386–419; Berezkin 2011.

<sup>17</sup> For another modern variant of this precious scroll, collected in the 'Sandbank' 沙上 area of Zhangjiagang (bank of the Yangtze river), see Zhonggong Zhangjiagang shiwei xuanchuanbu 2011: 1/522–528.



performance team (*jiangjing banzi* 講經班子). In the 1980s he resumed his performance activities, becoming a famous local master of telling scriptures (see Liang 2007: 2/1472). He possesses a large collection of precious scrolls, mainly manuscripts that he copied himself from the older performers. The 1989 manuscript also must have been transmitted in this way.

## 2. CONTENTS OF THE *PRECIOUS SCROLL OF WATERMELONS* FROM CHANGSHU

The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* can be considered a traditional text in the tradition of ‘telling scriptures’ in Changshu, as attested by the variety of its manuscripts (versions) preserved there. Despite the large time difference between the three variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* analyzed here, the basic contents of these are similar. Below is a summary based on the Yao Shaoqing’s version.<sup>18</sup> Though his manuscript is not dated, it is presumably the oldest one discovered in Changshu so far.<sup>19</sup>

The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* tells about evil landowner Li Heixin 李黑心 from Jiangning 江寧 prefecture in Jiangsu.<sup>20</sup> He had thirteen wives and thirteen stores filled with goods, but still cheated and mistreated poor people. Everyone in the Li Heixin’s family, except for his gatekeeper Li An 李安, was evil. Guanyin decided to descend to the earthly world in order to convert Li Heixin and his family members (see fig. 5). For this reason, she turned into a beautiful widow who attracted the attention of Li Heixin, but agreed to marry him only if he organized lavish funerals for her late husband. In order to punish Li Heixin for his greed, Guanyin makes one condition after another, each more difficult than the previous one, and Li Heixin agrees to fulfill all of them. Eventually the widow requests Li Heixin to invite deities to be the organizers and servants of the wedding, a demand he of course cannot fulfil. At this point Guanyin ascends into space and disappears. Li Heixin is in rage, because he has exhausted his thirteen storehouses. He blames Li An for introducing him to the young widow, but on confronting him he discovers that Li An has unexpectedly become rich. Li An tells Li Heixin the miraculous story of how he became rich because of watermelon seeds given to him by a mendicant monk.<sup>21</sup>

Previously, Guanyin had appeared to Li An as a mendicant monk, coming to his house to beg for food, in order to test his sincerity. After Li An and his wife had fed the monk, Guanyin gave Li An three watermelon seeds and told him to plant them in the back yard. These were the miraculous seeds, which immediately produced watermelons. When Li An opened each fruit, inside he found silver and gold that could fill thirteen rooms. Li An tried to persuade Li Heixin to give the monks treats of vegetarian food, and Li Heixin decided to imitate his example. He ordered servants to sell some of his land and used this money to treat the mendicant monks. Guanyin then came again as a monk and gave Li Heixin a watermelon seed, just as she

<sup>18</sup> For comparison, see the summary of the story by Yü Chün-fang, based on the manuscript of 1887, see Yü 2001: 435–437. For the Chinese summary, based on the early twentieth-century manuscripts from the Suzhou area, see Guo 2018: 198.

<sup>19</sup> A very similar version of this text is represented by the undated manuscript rpt. in Pu 2005: 13/497–506. In addition, that manuscript can be considered a more complete version than that of Yao Shaoqing; see below.

<sup>20</sup> Jiangning prefecture was a historical name of the location of modern Nanjing 南京 city (912–1912). In the older versions of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* (such as the manuscript of 1867) Heixin 黑心 (Black Heart, i.e., Cruel) is the nickname of Li Kui 李睽. In the later versions from Changshu it is used as his personal name.

<sup>21</sup> The episode in which Li An is sent away from Li Heixin’s household and is visited by Guanyin, common in the old variants: e.g., Pu 2005: 13/503, is missing in this manuscript.







Fig. 5. Deities of fire and thunder; Guanyin arriving to the Li Heixin's house. Frontispiece illustration from the lithographic edition of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. Shanghai, early twentieth century.

had Li An. However, Li Heixin does not provide a meal to Guanyin, which provokes her anger. She decides to punish Li Heixin. The seed she gives him produces a watermelon, as for Li An, but when it is cut open, the raging fire inside breaks out, because Guanyin has ordered the god of fire (Nanfang Huode xingjun 南方火德星君) to hide inside the watermelon and destroy Li Heixin. Li Heixin's home is burned to ashes (see Fig. 6). He turns into a latrine worm in the next rebirth. His entire household, because of their evil karma, all receive appropriate punishments. His wives turn into flies and gnats. Li An, on the contrary, is rewarded with the title of the city god (*chenghuang* 城隍) of Songjiang 松江 city.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The Yao Shaoqing's manuscript says that Jiangning prefecture was renamed Songjiang, which does not accord with historical texts (Wu 2015: 3/1227). The association of Songjiang with the variant of precious scroll preserved in Changshu is discussed below.





Fig. 6. Li Heixin's house is destroyed by fire. Frontispiece illustration from the lithographic edition of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. Shanghai, early twentieth century.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENTS OF THE *PRECIOUS SCROLL OF WATERMELONS*

The core story narrated in the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* can be interpreted in general terms as an instance of 'karmic causation' (*yinyuan* 因緣), which is typical of precious scrolls from a very early period of their development (fourteenth–sixteenth centuries).<sup>23</sup> The stories of rewards and punishments meted out by Guanyin in general are characteristic of the texts used in 'telling scriptures' practices of Changshu and nearby areas.<sup>24</sup> The association with a female form of Guanyin is very important for the interpretation of this text in the context of telling scriptures. The description of a beautiful young widow, clad in all white clothes, was certainly inspired by

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Sawada 1975: 66; Che 2009: 62–63.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Liang 2007: 2/829–844, 1025–1032.





the image of White-Robed Guanyin (Baiyi Guanyin 白衣觀音), a particular form of the Buddhist deity Bodhisattva Guanyin (Skt. Avalokiteśvara), widespread in late imperial China.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, one needs to note the links of this plot with the other female forms of Guanyin, also popular in China at the same period. Yü Chün-fang already has noted the similarity between the trick of Guanyin in the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* and other popular stories of female forms of Guanyin, also appearing in the texts of precious scrolls dating to the nineteenth century: *Precious Scroll of Miaoying* (*Miaoying baojuan* 妙英寶卷) and *Precious Scroll of Fish-Basket Guanyin* (*Yulan Guanyin baojuan* 魚籃觀音寶卷). The subjects of these precious scrolls have prototypes in the Guanyin lore of an even earlier period, going back to the ‘miracle tales’ of the twelfth–fifteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup> In these two precious scrolls Guanyin also takes a charming guise and promises to become a wife of a lustful man, which in these cases eventually leads to his realization of the illusory nature of life and its pleasures, conversion to Buddhism and ultimate salvation.<sup>27</sup> Thus, these stories can be interpreted as the realization of the ‘expedient means’ (Ch. *fangbian* 方便, Skt. *upāya*), an important notion of the Buddhist Mahayana philosophy.<sup>28</sup>

Still, the contents of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* significantly differs from other two precious scrolls of Guanyin’s miracles in the tradition of Changshu ‘telling scriptures’. The contents of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* involves punishment and even destruction of the evil household, though eventually it still leads to the conversion and salvation of people in the audience. Thus, it represents the adaptation of Buddhist beliefs and ideas in Chinese folk milieu.

The element of the miraculous watermelons does not appear in other precious scrolls devoted to Guanyin; it constitutes a special subplot of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* in the various recensions of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. What are the origins of this story? Most probably it originated in Chinese folklore, as similar stories are common in folk tales recorded in different regions of China. On the whole, it belongs to the story type of ‘The Kind and Unkind Brothers (Women) and the Grateful Bird’ (no. 480F in the Ting Nai-Tung’s system, following the Aarne-Thompson motif-index of folk literature) (Ting 1978: 43).<sup>29</sup> There are different variants of this subject in Chinese folklore, also recorded among the Dungsans (Hui 回) people who moved to the Central Asian part of the Russian Empire (mainly in modern Kyrgyzstan) after the rebellion in 1866–1870.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, in the majority of such variants of the ‘secular’ (folk tale) form in China, the magic seed, which brings wealth to a kind person, is usually brought by a bird, grateful to the kind person who found it and nursed it back to health. Deities and magical figures rarely appear there.

<sup>25</sup> The origins of this form of Guanyin still are not very clear, see Yü 2001: 247–262.

<sup>26</sup> Both were reworked into numerous precious scrolls, widely circulating in the Jiangnan area in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. Both precious scrolls are still often performed in the tradition of Changshu ‘telling scriptures’: Wu 2015: 1/173–189, 241–248; see also Berezkin 2020. Therefore, they constitute the close entourage of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*.

<sup>27</sup> Yü 2001: 437; on these stories, see Yü 2001: 259–260, 419–435.

<sup>28</sup> According to the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha tried to attract the attention of listeners and to lead them to enlightenment with the words and images that they were familiar with; see, e.g., Schroeder 2001: 9–37.

<sup>29</sup> See also Eberhard 1937: 36–37; Jin 2007: 265–266, no. 747.

<sup>30</sup> Such a tale with the title of ‘Swallow’ (Ёнчжир/Yongzhir) was recorded in Frunze (Bishkek) from the Dungan (Hui) storyteller by the local scholar M. Khasanov in 1972; for the Russian transl., see Rifting *et al.* 1977: no. 12, pp. 104–107.





Tales of this type were collected in southeastern areas of China (Zhejiang province), close to the places where the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* originally spread.<sup>31</sup> Still, such tales, focusing on a reward for the kind and punishment for the evil person (usually these characters are brothers),<sup>32</sup> are common in the folklore of various peoples of the world, not only those of East and Central Asia.<sup>33</sup>

Apparently, the first written records of this subject in China precede the composition of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*; according to the German scholar of Chinese folklore Wolfram Eberhard, the earliest available record dates to the early seventeenth century, in the collection of *Langya dai zui bian* 瑯琊代醉編 by Zhang Ding'en 張鼎恩.<sup>34</sup> There is a similar story in the collection by the famous Chinese writer Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) *Xing shi heng yan* 醒世恆言 ('Age-old Stories to Awaken the World'); however, it has only the 'reward for the kind' part (Ting 1978: 43). Very similar stories were found in the literature of neighboring countries Vietnam and Korea, and they probably even predate the earliest Chinese records. For example, a similar story is included in the collection of *Wondrous Tales of Linh Nam* (*Linh Nam chích quái* 嶺南摭怪, postface 1493), written in Han van 漢文 (modified variant of classical Chinese), ascribed to Trần Thế Pháp 陳世法 (dates unknown) and edited by Vũ Quỳnh 武瓊 (1452–1516) and Kiều Phú 喬富 (1447–?).<sup>35</sup> It has the title 'Story of Mr. Mai Planting Melons' (枚氏種瓜記), and it presents this case as a historical one, also including only the 'reward for the kind' motif. This is also a story of the origin of watermelons, which spread to East Asia from the West.<sup>36</sup>

The Korean version of this subject is represented by a short vernacular novel with the title *Story of Hungbu* (Kor. *Hungbu jon* 興夫傳), the earliest versions of which are dated to the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries.<sup>37</sup> This work, represented in a variety of versions, contains this subject in the 'complete form,' including the episodes of both reward and punishment, which thus appears especially close to the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* version. Still, in the Korean novels this subject is not explicitly related to the Buddhist ideas. Unlike the precious scroll, the seed of the magical calabash, which brings wealth to Hungbu, is brought by a swallow with a broken leg that Hungbu has nursed back to health.

Apparently both Vietnamese and Korean written versions were derived from their own folklore, though Chinese influence is also possible.<sup>38</sup> Similar to the precious scrolls, the *Story of Hungbu* was also related to performative literature (songs of the *Pan'sori* form, hence it is called 'a *Pan'sori* novel') (Kim 1976: 401–402), and this fact demonstrates the wide dispersion of this subject in performative genres across East Asia in the early modern period.

These materials of popular literature in China and other East Asian countries suggest that the tale of the magic watermelon seed originally was not related to the worship of Guanyin. Appar-

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Ts'ao and Eberhard 1941: 42–43.

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, the *Precious Scroll of Vegetarian Feasts for the Monks* (manuscript of 1866), is also about two brothers, thus standing even closer to the folklore variants of this motif.

<sup>33</sup> See Riffittin *et al.* 1977: 449–450.

<sup>34</sup> He, however, cited it from the *Gazetteer of Hua Peak* (*Hua yue zhi* 華嶽志), compiled by Li Rong 李榕, the nineteenth-century source (first edition: 1831); see Eberhard 1937: 36–37.

<sup>35</sup> I am using the variant represented by a manuscript from the National Library of Vietnam, Hanoi: Vũ Quỳnh and Kiều Phú (undated: 13–14).

<sup>36</sup> Therefore, its Chinese name means 'Western pumpkin'.

<sup>37</sup> See Kim 1976: 401–403. For the Russian transl., see Eliseev *et al.* 1990: 113–192. I express gratitude to Prof. Anastasiya Gurieva from Saint Petersburg State University for the help with these materials.

<sup>38</sup> For the comparison of Vietnamese and Korean versions, see Nikulin 1988: 117.



ently it became associated with a popular female form of Guanyin in the later period, when it was included in the precious scroll (around the mid-nineteenth century). Although the history of this subject remains unclear, one still needs to note its popularity in Chinese folklore and more broadly in the whole of East Asia. It clearly has a pronounced moralistic meaning, so it is little wonder the subject was included in precious scrolls of the Jiangnan region.

#### 4. ON THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF THE *PRECIOUS SCROLL OF WATERMELONS*

In discussing the cultural meaning and function of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*, I will start with an early variant of this text (1867), proceeding with the more recent variants by Yao Shaoqing and Di Jianxin. First, one needs to note its didactic function, which was in general characteristic of scroll recitation since the time of its spread in the Suzhou area (ca. beginning of the nineteenth century). Since then, scroll recitation has been related to the propagation of traditional ethical values. This function of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is clearly pronounced in the concluding verses of the 1867 recension:

We admonish people in this world to seek for goodness;  
Do not study [the example] of Li Heixin from Jiangning!  
He only craved for wealth and beauties and did a lot of bad,  
He was punished by turning into a maggot until the present day.  
Li An and his wife were good persons,  
So Bodhisattva rescued them and they ascended to the Celestial Court.  
We admonish you to repent your sins as soon as possible,  
The Buddha and Heaven protect kind-hearted people!  
奉勸世人須向善，莫學江寧李黑心。  
貪財好色多作惡，罰做蛆蟲到如今。  
李安夫婦為人好，菩薩超度上天庭。  
勸君及早回心轉，佛天保佑善心人。

This moralistic message is typical of precious scrolls of the later period. One also can find similar passages in the later versions of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* from Changshu, including the variant by Yao Shaoqing.

The second important function of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* was that of religious indoctrination, as it could be used as a sacred text devoted to Guanyin. Connection with the popular form of White-Robed Guanyin clearly contributed to the popularity of this text in Changshu and neighboring areas. Guanyin is one of the most popular deities in this area, and its 'White-Robed' form in particular has been worshipped there for the long time.<sup>39</sup> This deity is featured in a number of precious scrolls from Changshu, especially the *Precious Scroll of Miaoying*. The

<sup>39</sup> There were numerous temples dedicated to Guanyin in vicinity of Changshu at the end of the nineteenth–beginning of the twentieth century, some of them with the name 'White-Robed [Guanyin] temple' (Baiyi an 白衣庵 or Baiyi Guanyin tang 白衣觀音堂); their history can be traced back to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries; see, e.g., Pang 1904: 153/904, also Liang 2007: 2/1477.



combination of the deity's image with the amusing plot on the punishment of the evil people enhanced this text's usefulness in the practice of scripture recitation.

Unlike the usual perceptions of Guanyin, here she appears not only as the embodiment of mercy, but also as the wrathful deity that punishes the evil. This double role of Guanyin is embodied in several precious scrolls, recited in this area, and also appears in a number of old precious scrolls, where she tests the sincerity of believers' intentions (see *Mulian san shi jiu mu baojuan* 1876). This text also contains a salvational message, as Guanyin saves humankind from torment; for example, the Yao Shaoqing's and Di Jianxin's versions say that Guanyin descended to the earthly world with the purpose of not only admonishing Li Heixin, but also saving kind people from his cruelty as well as the heavenly punishment (Liang 2007: 1/243).<sup>40</sup> Thus, it preserves the original role of Guanyin as the Buddhist deity of mercy and saviour of people, also well reflected in the precious scrolls of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries.

In several variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* we note the appearance of mendicant preachers, called *daoren* 道人 (men of the Way), who bring the miraculous seeds of watermelon to the protagonists of the story (Wu 2015: 2/1224–1225; Liang 2007: 1/248–249). Usually interpreted as 'traveling monks,' *daoren* here most probably refers to the practitioners of a religious movement focused on the propagation of Buddhist ideas among the laity. This term can be traced back to the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, and later appears in the context of 'sectarian movements' of the Ming and Qing periods (ter Haar 1999: 80–81, 204–205). Since the very early period these mendicant preachers appear in historical sources in connection with the recitation of popular explications of the Buddhist scriptures, related to the form of precious scrolls (Che 2009: 136–137). Apparently, *daoren* were predecessors of 'masters of scroll recitation' (*xuanjuan xiansheng* 宣卷先生) that emerged as a group of professional storytellers in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is possible that in this text *daoren* are related to the preaching practices involving recitation of precious scrolls. This type of proselytizing used stories of miracles with entertaining elements.

The third main function of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* certainly was that of entertaining. Entertaining features are observable in all versions of this text that I have collected so far. They are represented by prolonged colorful descriptions of the appearance of characters and rituals involved in the storyline of Guanyin luring Li Heixin (Li Kui) into marriage with her. These are often contained in the verses that are sung with the use of several folk melodies in the modern form of 'telling scriptures' practiced in Changshu (Berezkin 2013a: 198–199).<sup>41</sup> For example, in the early version (1867), there is a comparatively dramatic scene in which Guanyin, disguised as a young widow, walks down the street to the Li Heixin's house and attracts men of all walks of life:

<sup>40</sup> According to another variant of this precious scroll, reprinted in a modern collection of *baojuan*, the Jade Emperor was so enraged by the sins of Li Heixin that he decided to destroy his whole household with fire. Only the interference of Guanyin, who volunteered to descend to the earthly world, saved such kind persons as Li An (Pu 2005: 13/498).

<sup>41</sup> The accompaniment of telling scriptures in Changshu usually uses only percussion instruments, mainly the so-called 'wooden fish' (*myu* 木魚). Here I do not provide detailed description of the musical accompaniment of telling scriptures, but see, e.g., Berezkin 2013a: 198–200.





As she was walking at ease along the road,  
 She caused a sensation among the people of Jiangning,  
 Men and women were bustling to see her first,  
 All of them wanted to see that beauty!  
 一路行程滔滔走，哄動江寧多少人。  
 男男女女爭先看，個個要看女佳人。

People of all professions are described in a caricaturist way, including Buddhist monks and Daoist priests:

A Buddhist monk was so astonished, he raised his bald head;  
 A Daoist priest threw-off his ragged headscarf.<sup>42</sup>  
 和尚動出光頭頂，道士拋落破方巾。

Thus, both are allured by the female beauty, which contradicts their religious status. Similar lines appear in the Yao Shaoqing's manuscript and other variants (Wu 2015: 2/1218).<sup>43</sup> This demonstrates the ambiguous stance of folk editors and performers of precious scrolls towards traditional religious institutions. On the one hand, this feature also can reflect competition between religious specialists in the late Qing 清 society, which was caused by a proliferation of new religious movements.<sup>44</sup> As we know, performers of scroll recitation formed a special professional group of that period, and they were also performing life-cycle rituals in the homes of believers, which could cause conflicts with other religious specialists, especially the Daoist priests.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, it can just be an expression of 'humoristic' style in precious scroll and should not be over-interpreted from the perspective of denominational conflicts in the late-Qing period. At any rate, it fits well into the entertaining style of this text.

In the Di Jianxin variant of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*, this scene is absent, but there we find a similar episode, which gives a sarcastic description of the ugly and wicked wives of Li Heixin, all deficient in one or another way: 'He said: "I have thirteen wives, but all of them are old; indeed they have nothing to look at. If you place them in front of your eyes, they indeed seem so ugly" 說道：「我有十三位夫人，年紀全老哉，實在無看頭，擺在眼睛門前實在難看。」 (Liang 2007: 1/244–245). Then the detailed description in verse follows. Such details, which also comprise critique of the harem system in traditional China, are characteristic of Chinese local drama in the early modern period.

Similar amusing descriptions can be found in the Yao Shaoqing's version of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*. Thus, the aspect of entertainment, observable in the traditional variants of this text, is preserved in its modern variants. One should also note dialectal expressions in such passages, which relate this text to the live storytelling performances. 'Telling scriptures' is always performed in the local dialect, a variant of the Wu topolect of the lower Yangtze Valley. One needs to note that the written texts of precious scrolls can serve as simply librettos of recitation, where

<sup>42</sup> A piece of cloth, which was used as male headgear in old China, is preserved in the costume of Daoist priests.

<sup>43</sup> See also Pu 2005: 13/499.

<sup>44</sup> For comparison, many precious scrolls of the Ming and Qing periods also contain criticism of ordained clergy, see Overmyer 1999: 113; ter Haar 2014.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Sang 1992: 123–124; also Che 2009: 212–215.



many local expressions and episodes can be added. In this aspect, ‘telling scriptures’ approaches other storytelling genres of a predominantly entertaining nature, such as ‘Suzhou chantefable’ (*pingtan* 評彈), also very popular in the Changshu area in the modern period.

## 5. THE PRECIOUS SCROLL OF WATERMELONS IN THE MODERN RECITATION PRACTICE

In the modern practice of telling scriptures in Changshu, the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is included in the category of ‘entertaining scrolls’ (*xian juan* 閒卷, or *baixiang juan* 白相卷).<sup>46</sup> This means that the text is one recited at religious assemblies after the recitation of precious scrolls, themselves devoted to the major nationwide and local deities. These (collectively known as the ‘sacred scrolls’ [*shen juan* 神卷]) vary on different occasions.<sup>47</sup> ‘Entertaining scrolls’ were in demand in the traditional period (before the 1980s), when the religious assemblies in this area went on for a very long time (usually a day and a night). According to the recollections of the old performers (who still remember the situation of the period), such texts were used to amuse the sleepy audience, which was tired by the night-long recitation of the sacred scrolls and ritual texts (*keyi* 科儀)<sup>48</sup> required for the invocation of numerous deities.

In the 1980s, when telling scriptures started to revive, its basic arrangement changed. Nowadays, assemblies held for the welfare of living people mainly take place in the daytime and last for around twelve hours (6 a.m. – 6 p.m.) with short breaks.<sup>49</sup> Entertaining scrolls usually do not appear in the modern arrangement of ‘telling scriptures,’ where only texts devoted to deities are recited, as attested by Yu Dingjun and other professional performers from the suburban areas of Changshu (Yu 2015: 2577).<sup>50</sup>

Still, as the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is not a purely entertaining text, its other functions, namely didactic and indoctrinating, have become more important in the modern situation. For this reason, this precious scroll occasionally appears in telling scriptures of Changshu and neighboring areas.<sup>51</sup> One reason is that, in addition to the cult of Guanyin, it is related to other local beliefs, such as the invocation of the city gods (*chenghuang*). The second is that it retains its didactic function.

The devotional meaning of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* in the context of ‘telling scriptures’ is especially clear in the Yao Shaoqing’s variant. As we have already noted, there Li An is appointed a city god of Songjiang, a nearby prefectural city (now a district of Shanghai).<sup>52</sup> In this

<sup>46</sup> 白相 (Suzhou dialect: bəʔ<sup>3</sup>siā<sup>21</sup>; ‘play, leisure’) is a common word in the Wu group of dialects.

<sup>47</sup> Here I do not provide ethnographic descriptions of ‘telling scriptures’ sessions; the interested reader can turn to earlier published scholarship.

<sup>48</sup> Sometimes also translated as ‘litanies’ in the English-language scholarship.

<sup>49</sup> The arrangement for funerary recitation is different, just as is its subject matter, see Berezkin 2016.

<sup>50</sup> I have not encountered recitation of entertaining texts in the home assemblies that I witnessed in the Changshu area in 2012–2015.

<sup>51</sup> According to the information of Wuxi 無錫 storytellers (locally known as *fotou* 佛頭 [the Buddha’s head]), it is still performed in this area, related to the custom of eating watermelons on the fifteenth day of the sixth lunar month. This may be a local custom that grew out of the contents of this precious scroll, but it awaits further research.

<sup>52</sup> In the 1867 variant, Li An and his wife receive rebirth in heaven.



way, a story related to the Buddhist deity (Bodhisattva Guanyin) is also associated with the local god in the folk pantheon.

The detail of Li An turning into the city god of Songjiang appears in several variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*, presumably originating in Jiangsu.<sup>53</sup> Belief in the city gods has been widespread in this region since the Song period, and it was not limited to the cities; in the late imperial period such beliefs spread among inhabitants of the commercial towns and even rural areas (Hamashima 2008: 8–9). As attested by historical sources, the cult of the city gods was especially significant in the old county city of Changshu.<sup>54</sup> There are several versions of precious scrolls dealing with the city gods in the Changshu area now.<sup>55</sup> In this context, the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is an equivalent of ‘sacred’ texts devoted to tutelary local gods, which are traditionally recited at the end of a ritual assembly (Berezkin 2013b). It is associated not only with Buddhist beliefs, but also with indigenous religious cults – the characteristic feature of telling scriptures in Changshu. Here one can see further adaptation of Buddhist beliefs in the Chinese religious landscape.

The continuing didactic meaning is observable in the later version of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* represented in the Di Jianxin’s manuscript, which demonstrates significant modernization of the traditional text. In the introductory verse of this variant, one can find many modern things that reflect the changes in rural life in the 1980s, such as a color TV, a motorcycle of the Jialing 嘉陵 brand, a private car, etc. Still, though life has changed, the didactic message of the text remains the same: it calls for moral propriety and kindness. It says it is a pity that people of this world do not know satisfaction, but as soon as Impermanence (i.e., death) arrives, the soul will go to the West<sup>56</sup> (可惜世人心不足，一旦無常魂歸西; Liang 2007: 1/243). Prosperity and well-being in this world are explained by the good karma of previous rebirth. The pleasures of modern life offer just another ramification of the old religious concept. Interestingly, there are also lines here that explain people’s diseases and injuries by the karmic burden – the ideas often found in other old precious scrolls from the Jiangnan region such as the *Precious Scroll of Mulian Rescuing His Mother in Three Rebirths* (*Mulian san shi jiu mu baojuan* 目蓮三世救母寶卷) (see *Mulian san shi jiu mu baojuan* 1876).

Only after this moralistic exhortation does the usual narrative start, with a description of Li Heixin and his household. One can assume that this new introductory passage was composed by Di Jianxin or perhaps another person, whose manuscript he copied. As in other types of popular literature in China, it has been common for performers to make additions and alterations in a traditional text. Often it is explained by the need to make it more attractive and comprehensible to the audience. Though such alterations in general are not characteristic of precious scrolls, occasionally they appear in the modern form of telling scriptures in Changshu (Yu 2015: 2571).

The introductory passage in this version also mentions the story of Mulian rescuing his mother’s soul from hell,<sup>57</sup> which forms the subject of an important precious scroll still commonly

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., the undated manuscript reprinted in Pu 2005: 13/497–506.

<sup>54</sup> There were two city gods there, following the administrative division during the Qing dynasty, see Wu 1916; juan 1, pp. 12–13; juan 3, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Five different variants of the *Precious Scroll of the City God* (*Chenghuang Baojuan* 城隍寶卷) have been collected by local scholars in Changshu, see Wu 2015: 3/2508–2509.

<sup>56</sup> Here presumably meaning the Western Realm (Pure Land) of Buddha Amitabha.

<sup>57</sup> ‘If there is no response for the karmic links, for what did Mulian rescue his mother’s [soul]?’ (若然因果無感應，目蓮救母為何因?) (Liang 2007: 1/243).





recited in the Changshu area (Berezkin 2017: 155–169). It provides the context (or metatext) of the salvational message of this text, in general also characteristic of the ‘telling scriptures’ genre.

The didactic meaning is enhanced in the introductory and concluding verses of the Di Jianxin’s variant of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*:

Now we open the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*,  
 We ask two rows of listeners to chime in [with the Buddha’s name].  
 We admonish two types of people in this world;  
 Do not study [the example] of Li Heixin from Jiangning.  
 If you did evil, on the road to [Yellow] Springs,<sup>58</sup>  
 You will clearly see the meaning of the words ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’  
 If you, people, do not believe in retribution,  
 Please listen to this precious scroll, and it will become clear!  
 西瓜寶卷初展開，奉請兩廊和起來。  
 奉勸世間兩種人，莫學江寧李黑心。  
 若是作惡歸泉路，善惡二字全看清。  
 眾人不信惡人報，請聽寶卷見分明。(Liang 2007: 1/243).

The concluding verses say:

When a good person falls into trouble, the Buddha and heavens will help him,  
 The heavenly retribution for an evil person – he will not be successful.  
 Good and evil are clear according to Heaven’s response,  
 The only difference is whether it comes soon or late!  
 善人落難佛天救，惡人天報沒收成。  
 善惡分明天報應，只爭來早與來遲。(Liang 2007: 1/250).

The didactic meaning of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is connected with social criticism, especially conspicuous in its modern variants. Though this aspect is implicit in the earlier variants of this text (late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries), it is expressed most directly in the Di Jianxin’s variant, which uses the modern phraseology. It repeatedly says that Li Heixin ‘exploited honest people’ (剝削良民). This modernization of phraseology already has been noted by Che Xilun (2009: 387) in other manuscripts of precious scrolls in the Fenghuang area. It further demonstrates modification of a performative text in the living tradition of folk storytelling.

The note in verse at the end of the text also refers to its didactic meaning. It appears after the colophon of this manuscript, giving the copyist’s name and date of copying (as is common in modern manuscripts of precious scrolls), and offering a glimpse of the circumstances of the copying:

It is very hard to copy books in July; insects bite one terribly.  
 The weather is so unbearably hot that the sweat is pouring down.  
 If you turn on an electric fan, it is even worse, as papers fly in the air.  
 As you copy one *baojuan*, you waste a couple of boxes of mosquito-repellent incense.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Yellow Springs’ is the ancient Chinese name of the netherworld.



If someone does not believe it, how can one endure this toil [of copying books]?

It is really hard to copy books in hot weather, even your eyes get tired [from it].

七月抄書真為難，蚊蟲叮得要命哉。

天氣熱得交交關，汗水常常滴下來。

電扇一動勿來三，紙頭全部飛起來。

一本寶卷來抄好，蚊香燬落二三盒。

若要啥人勿相信，只怕苦頭吃勿來。

抄書天熱真正難，眼睛又要好困哉。(Liang 2007: 1/250).

While not stated explicitly in this verse, it can be inferred that Di Jianxin undergoes the hardships of copying this particular manuscript because he regards this precious scroll as a useful didactic book (and this is still a common perception of precious scrolls by locals in Changshu): his poem expresses the hope that the audience will believe its injunctions.<sup>59</sup> This passage also is noteworthy for the extensive use of dialectal words, obviously related to the performative context of this text. This colophon gives a vivid sense of immediacy. Similar notes are found on the manuscripts of 'sūtra-explanation texts' (*jiangjingwen* 講經文) and other popular narratives in vernacular language dating to the ninth to tenth centuries that were discovered in Dunhuang in 1900 (see Mair 1989: 132–133). Early precious scrolls with Buddhist themes may have been related to these texts, or at least their functions were similar (Che 2009: 50–64). The motif of religious merit gained through the copying of religious texts also makes precious scrolls manuscripts similar to the Dunhuang scrolls.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, in the manuscripts of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* copied in the Changshu area in the modern period we can see a continuation of old traditions of storytelling, related to proselytizing, that used written texts as promptbooks. The practice of copying manuscripts of precious scrolls can also be traced back to similar traditions of the medieval period.

## CONCLUSION

The *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* is an old text in the tradition of scroll recitation of the Suzhou area that combines religious devotion with an entertaining literary subject. It uses the story of reward for the kind and punishment for the unkind, presumably of folkloric origin, to support the worship of White-Robed Guanyin, still very popular in this area. Several elements of this story are also associated with other precious scrolls devoted to Guanyin, also widespread in this area. Thus, the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* preserves the original association of this literary form with Buddhist ideas and figures, prominent in Changshu 'telling scriptures' even now. At the same time, the usual religious syncretism, including cults of local tutelary deities, also is reflected in the later recension of this text from Changshu. The process of transmission of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* (in its several variants, falling into the period between 1867 and 1989) can be regarded as a case study of propagation of popular beliefs through the storytelling practice.

<sup>59</sup> Compare with these lines in the introductory verse: 'If there are people who do not believe [in retribution], please listen to the story in this scroll!' (若然有人不相信，請聽卷中一段情; Liang 2007: 1/243).

<sup>60</sup> See also Lu 2012.



In several variants of *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* from different time periods, one finds an amalgamation of religious propaganda, moral injunctions, and entertaining storytelling that is characteristic of several Chinese performative genres, and precious scrolls during the later period of their development in the Jiangnan region (late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries) in particular. At the same time, some elements of these texts' contents can be traced back to an even earlier period in their history (sixteenth–seventeenth centuries), as well as mainstream Buddhist scriptural literature (Chinese translations and indigenous texts), demonstrating continuity in the special features of this genre.

Modern variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons* also represent the survival and modification of a traditional religious narrative in the contemporary practice of ritualized storytelling (telling scriptures in Changshu) that has experienced revival in the past forty years (since the 1980s). The unique practice of manuscript copying, characteristic of the transmission of precious scrolls even in the period of developed print technologies, assisted the preservation of a traditional text in the folk milieu. Still other functions of the text became prominent in the modern period (i.e., didactic and indoctrinating vs. entertaining). Not all of the original functions and meanings of this text have survived in the modern period of telling scriptures (starting in the 1980s), as entertainment is not any longer the main function of modern telling scriptures.

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### Appendix: Major variants of the *Precious Scroll of Watermelons*

1. Manuscript by Xie Juting 謝菊亭, dated 1867. Beijing Normal University Library, with the title 'The Story of Watermelons' (*Xigua ji* 西瓜記).
2. Manuscript of 1884, Zhejiang provincial library.
3. Manuscript of 1887, Shanghai library.
4. Manuscript of Ling Jichang 凌繼昌, 1910; National Library of China.
5. Lithographic edition of Wenyi 文益 Publishers, Shanghai, 1916. A Xerox copy in the author's collection.
6. Lithographic edition of Wenyi Publishers, distributed through the Wen Yuan 文元 Publishers, Shanghai, undated (beginning of the twentieth century). Rpt. in Huang 2002: 355/323–350.
7. Undated manuscript (ca. first half of the twentieth century). Rpt. in Pu 2005: 13/497–506.
8. Undated manuscript by Yao Shaoqing 姚少卿, in the collection of Yu Zhifei 余知非, ca. beginning of the twentieth century; published in Wu Wei 2015: 2/ 1217–1227.
9. Manuscript by Di Jianxin 狄建新, dated 1989; published in Liang Yibo 2007: 1/243–250. Alternative name: *Precious Scroll of Guanyin Testing the Heart* (*Guanyin shi xin baojuan* 觀音試心寶卷).





10. Manuscript in the possession of Zeng Suqin 曾素琴 from Yonglian 永聯 village of Nanfeng 南豐 township, undated (ca. end of the twentieth century); published in Zhonggong Zhangjiagang shiwei xuanchuanbu 2011: 1/522–528. With the title ‘Precious Scroll on the Story of Watermelons’ (*Xigua ji baojuan* 西瓜記寶卷).

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