

Precious Scrolls and Folk Beliefs during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with Special Reference to the Mulian Literary Tradition

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The Mulian 目連 literary tradition originated in China from a Buddhist sutra—the *Yulanpen jing* 盂蘭盆經, supposedly composed during the Six Dynasties. Transcending the limits of Buddhist legends, it reached its maturity in the *Damuqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen* 大目乾連冥間救母變文, one of the texts found at Dunhuang. Originally, the plot of the stories had Mulian’s mother falling into the realm of “Hungry Ghosts” (*eguidao* 餓鬼道) because of her avarice, but in the *Damuqianlian mingjian jiumu bianwen* she falls into hell. Consequently, this text describes in narrative form Mulian’s wandering in hell as he is looking for her.

The story of Mulian, which in the literature from Dunhuang shows a fixed form, subsequently developed in new directions, still visible in contemporary folk-literature. Probably, the genre was also popular during the Song period, as we can see from works depicting the splendor of urban life such as the “Record of the Dreamlike Prosperity of the Eastern Capital” (*Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄). However, in the material left to us there is no indication about the plot of the legends current at that time. Such kind of source material as well as extant texts all date from the Yuan period onward, and particularly rich are the sources from the Ming-Qing period.

The relation with rituals for saving the dead—an element present in the Mulian tradition from the very beginning—assumed special prominence in Ming-Qing texts. In those periods the stories acquired definitive literary forms such as drama or narrative literature. Regarding drama, the most representative work of the Ming period is the *Mulian jiumu quanshan xiwen* 目連救母勸善戲文 by Zheng Zhizhen 鄭之珍, which in one way or another influenced almost every work after it. Narrative literature, on the other hand, is represented by several of the so-called “Precious Scrolls”, or Baojuan 寶卷. Many scholars have placed this genre in the Buddhist narrative tradition that succeeded the Dunhuang Bianwen 敦煌變文. However, we cannot ignore the remarkable differences that actually exist between Bianwen and Baojuan texts. In these qualitative variations the characteristic structure of modern Chinese society is reflected.