

legend of Mulian to explore the gendered articulation of Buddhist notions of salvation and damnation. Such narratives, she argues, were used to reconcile Buddhist and Confucian values which, in turn, helped to “further institutionalize Chinese conceptions of the feminine” (p. 204) as embodying inferior *yin* qualities. Similarly, in her analysis of *heqin* intermarriage practices in medieval China’s frontier policy, Ning Chia shows how the establishment of family ties between imperial daughters and inner Asian rulers provided a rhetoric that helped naturalize (and hence secure) the hierarchical political relation between China and its rival states.

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Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. By DANIEL L. OVERMYER. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 49. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1999. xi, 444 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

C. K. Yang wrote in *Religion in Chinese Society* that, aside from Buddhism and Taoism, the third form of institutional religion in China “was that of the syncretic religious societies” (University of California Press, 1961, p. 301). Daniel Overmyer has studied some of these popular religious sects, which he calls “folk Buddhist religion,” and compared them to religious reform movements such as “the Pure Land Buddhist in thirteenth century Japan, the Lutheran in sixteenth century Europe, and *bhakti* sects in medieval Hinduism” (*Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976], p. 1). While they incorporated elements from Maitreyan, Pure Land, and Ch’an Buddhism, Inner Alchemy Taoism, and Confucian ethics, the religions should be regarded as new, for they possessed important characteristics that set them apart from traditional Chinese religions. These characteristics included the belief in a mother goddess who is the creator and savior of humankind, an eschatology marked by three stages, and universal salvation unmediated by religious professionals. Another striking characteristic is that they possessed their own scriptures known as *pao-chüan* (precious volumes). These texts, believed to have been divinely revealed to sect founders, are characterized by “simple classical language interspersed with vernacular constructions, the alternation of prose sections with seven- or ten-character lines of verse, usually in rhyme; and direct expositions of mythology, doctrinal teaching, and moral exhortation” (p. 3).

Overmyer is a pioneer in the Western study of precious volumes. He has now written a definitive work on this subject. He tells us that since 1976 he has “collected, photographed or read library copies of 131 *pao-chüan* of all types and periods” (p. ix). This book is based on 34 sectarian scripture texts dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although some studies of individual texts and bibliographical surveys of *pao-chüan* are available, this is indeed “the first book-length study in a Western language focused on the contents of these books as a genre developed over time” (p. x). According to Overmyer, sectarian precious volumes “represent a fifth type of scripture text in the history of Chinese religions, along with the Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist classics and scriptures that preceded them and the popular spirit-writing books that have largely taken their place since the late nineteenth century” (p. 8). In claiming a place for them next to the canons of the Great Traditions, he “assumes that popular religious texts are just as deserving of such study as any other

form of religious literature" (p. 7). Indeed, through this and previous publications on *pao-chüan* and spirit-writing texts (*The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*, coauthored with David Jordan [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986]), Overmyer is one of the leading scholars who have revolutionized the study of Chinese religions by successfully convincing students in the field of the validity of this view.

The book has eight chapters and nine appendices. Chapter 1 discusses the "antecedents" of precious volumes in the history of Chinese sacred texts. They include indigenous Buddhist scriptures, transformation texts, and sutra-lectures, Ch'an writings such as the *Platform Sutra* and "recorded sayings," three presectarian precious volumes (one of which is the *Chin-kang ching k'e-i* composed in 1242 by a monk who referred to it as a *pao-chüan*, "which may be the earliest known use of this term," p. 37), and texts belonging to Ch'uan-chen Taoism. However, after noting similarities and parallels between these texts and precious volumes, he concludes: "In retrospect we can see antecedents, but in most cases it is not clear how they were known to the authors of *pao-chüan*, who had their own ways of putting things together. The result was a new form of religious literature with its own distinctive content and style" (p. 50). Of these "antecedents" he is most struck by the similarities found in indigenous Buddhist scriptures, but cannot explain why. This is because he only used the indigenous scriptures composed during the fifth to the eighth centuries and recovered from Tun-huang near the beginning of the twentieth century. "Because most of the earlier texts were lost nearly a millennium ago and rediscovered only recently, there is little possibility of their textual influence on *pao-chüan*" (p. 15). For him, "this is the most puzzling issue in the background of Ming and Ch'ing sectarian scriptures" (pp. 22–23). Later in the book, he again says, "The close similarity of this language with that of the indigenous Buddhist scriptures found at Tun-huang is one of the mysteries of the origins of *pao-chüan* teaching" (p. 160). Perhaps the authors of precious volumes did have access to other indigenous scriptures which were not sealed up in the caves of Tun-huang, but were actually in circulation during medieval and late imperial times. We know that indigenous Buddhist scriptures continued to be composed after the eighth century. Alan Cole discusses some of them in his recent book on *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford University Press, 1998). I have also discovered a number of texts promoting faith in Kuan-yin which were composed after the T'ang and not found in Tun-huang (*Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* [Columbia University Press, in press]). Like precious volumes, some indigenous Buddhist scriptures were also critical of monastic Buddhism and presented their teachings and practices as superior to those taught in canonical scriptures. They stress particularly the chanting of mantras. The emphasis on "charms" found in some later precious volumes, seen in this light, may not simply "reflect old Taoist practice" (p. 270), but be a direct borrowing from the indigenous scriptures.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are devoted to a detailed analysis of individual precious volumes: the *Huang-chi pao-chüan* of 1430, the so-called "Five Books in Six Volumes" by Lo Ch'ing (1443–1527), the founder of the Wu-wei Sect, and the *Chiu-lien pao-chüan* of 1523, respectively. These early precious volumes represent two distinct "streams of *pao-chüan* teachings" (p. 1). While the 1430 and 1523 texts share the mythology of three ages and belief in mother-goddesses or the Eternal Venerable Mother (Wu-sheng Laomu), the texts written by Lo are more interested in explicating his religion of "nonactivism" and the necessity of renouncing all "activist" religious practices. Overmyer finds it hard to establish a developmental history for the ideology of precious volumes. This is particularly true in the case of the Venerable Mother, a central sectarian belief. Overmyer finds some thirty references to divine figures known

as mother goddesses, including a “Kuan-yin Mother” (p. 70) in the 1430 text in which “the primordial Divine Mother of all humanity does not yet appear” (p. 69). But in the 1523 text, “The Venerable Mother for the first time has a central role. . . . It is in the period between these two texts that the Venerable Mother mythology took shape” (p. 139). However, in chapter 5, after his survey of thirteen texts (a summary of each is found in appendix H) belonging to several sectarian traditions, he is forced to conclude: “within the sixteenth century, historical development of the mother-goddess belief is difficult to discern. Singular and plural references alternate right down to the end of the century” (p. 179).

Chapter 6 is a survey of another thirteen precious volumes written in the seventeenth century (a summary of each is found in appendix I). They share themes similar to those found in the sixteenth-century texts discussed in chapter 5: the distinctiveness of their own teachings, the end of the age, the use of inner alchemical terms in describing meditation practices, emphasis on sufferings in purgatory, and practical aid provided by their deities. Maitreya is now the supreme deity, replacing Amitabha in the earlier texts. Interestingly, although the state proscribed these sects, the later sectarian texts place “more emphasis on Confucianism as a model of lay religion,” and the primary religious rival for them “is monastic Buddhism” (p. 216). Chapter 7 is devoted to one single precious volume, the 1654 “Dragon-Flower Scripture (*Lung-hua ching*),” written by the disciples of Kung Ch’ang, the founder of the Yuan-tun Sect who first began to write it in 1641. Overmyer regards this text as the “most sophisticated and detailed” and “best organized” of precious volumes (p. 249). Not only do we find the Eternal Venerable Mother, who is declared to be the progenitor of humanity in this text, but also the Venerable Mothers Kuan-yin, T’i-tsang, Manjusri, and Samanthabhadra (p. 250). The pattern of referring to different deities as “mother” (*mu*) was in fact already present in earlier precious volumes (p. 267). It is noteworthy that Kuan-yin appears as the Venerable Mother in several precious volumes written in the late Ming. One of them is the *Hsiao-shih Pai-i Kuan-yin p’u-sa sung ying-erb hsia-sheng pao-chüan* in which Kuan-yin is called Lao-mu throughout. She sends a childless couple a boy and girl, but because she misses them very much she descends to earth and, in the guise of a wet nurse, personally takes care of them. Overmyer mentions the story in a footnote but says, “The boy and girl are in fact the children of the Venerable Mother” (p. 405), not realizing that Kuan-yin is no other than the Venerable Mother in this text. The image of Kuan-yin as the Mother was entirely new when it appeared, and without any scriptural basis. The obvious explanation for why it came into being after the sixteenth century is that it was due to the fame of the sectarians’ Venerable Mother. But this does not actually answer the question. For what were the sources for the Venerable Mother? Why did she suddenly emerge as the supreme deity of the sectarians in the sixteenth century? Could she have appeared so suddenly and triumphantly if Kuan-yin were not already a feminine deity commanding great respect and affection? The relationship between the Mother, Kuan-yin, and other female deities certainly needs more research.

In chapter 8, the concluding chapter, Overmyer sums up his findings and uses four more precious volumes to back up his arguments. To the question, “What do sectarian ‘precious volumes’ tell us about Chinese religions?” he answers as follows. First, “the importance of correct belief,” and second, “ritual practices that make ultimate deliverance possible for ordinary folk” (pp. 280–81). The appendices give very useful translations of vernacular terms, tune names, official titles, and types of documents found in some texts as well as copious summaries of precious volumes (occupying 69 pages) not discussed in the chapters. Although we are introduced to

many precious volumes in this book, because he provides generous translations of key passages from the ones he discusses, we come away with clear ideas about their structures and contents. His translation is flawless and elegant. There are only two places where I would offer a different interpretation. Instead of translating *ming* and *an* as “light” and “darkness” (p. 65), I would suggest “public” and “secret.” This would make *an-shen* “secret gods,” which is much better than the sinister sounding “gods of darkness.” This is also consistent with his later translation of *ming-an ch’a-hao* as “public and secret verification titles” (p. 146). The other suggestion is to translate *k’ou-t’ou san-mei* as “lip service samadhi” instead of “other oral teachings of samadhi” (p. 80).

Precious volumes, as Overmyer eloquently argues, “stake out a territory of their own,” occupying a space “between the realms of ordinary popular religion and orthodox Buddhism” (p. 281). One cannot have a full understanding of Chinese religions without a knowledge of this tradition. Thanks to his dedicated research resulting in this important work, future students interested in this subject now have an indispensable guide.

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Chinese Modernity and the Peasant Path: Semicolonialism and the Northern Yangzi Delta. By KATHY LE MONS WALKER. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999. ix, 330 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

The trajectory of nationalism in China is commonly traced through the activities and ideologies of people who either aspired or were destined to participate in the formation of a state. In her study of peasant society in the northern Yangzi delta, Kathy Le Mons Walker sets out in search of an alternative nation, one defined by community rather than by the state. This is a neo-Gramscian project, as Walker’s citations and terminology make clear, and it runs into some of the same theoretical problems encountered by the Subaltern Studies Collective in its early work. These are, in brief: can the subaltern speak? Can the subaltern be represented? Is the subaltern an autonomous subject?

The book focuses thematically on developments during the late Qing and early Republic when Nantong, Haimen, and coastal lands further north were being yoked to the modernizing projects of Zhang Jian (1853–1926). Nantong lies on the other side of the Yangzi River from Shanghai. The river, as Walker makes clear, constituted a great divide between south and north of the Lower Yangzi Delta—Jiangbei and Jiangnan, Subei and Sunan. Wealth and poverty, different sets of economic and social relationships, are demarcated by its course. In the late Ming and Qing periods, to which Walker pays attention early in the book, these contrasts were already apparent.

Zhang Jian, the subject of an early biography by Samuel Chu, provides a key to the process of modernization in Nantong. Much of Walker’s study is devoted to documenting and analyzing the economic changes consequent on Zhang’s creation of an industrialized cotton industry in the northern delta. Factories, banks, and extensive cash-cropping fundamentally changed landholding patterns and economic relations in the affected counties. The cotton industry, in combination with modern banks, brought the northern delta into the ambit of the world economy via Shanghai.