

CROSSING THE VERGE OF WORLD LITERATURE: MISINTERPRETING OF EARLY CHINESE BAOJUAN (OR PRECIOUS SCROLL)

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Abstract: European and American scholars have studied Chinese baojuan for nearly three hundred years. How it was started and in what form it came into the English world needs to be better researched. A translation of Chinese Baojuan story, The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain, was found in the journal of Chinese Repository. After a close examination of its version and a word-for-word translation comparison of the Chinese and English versions, it was found that the misinterpretation of baojuan genre, intentionally or unintentionally, by its translator, Karl Gützlaff, may be the key reason for the genre not attracting much attention from scholars outside China in the 19th century. Later studies of baojuan by scholars both inside China and outside China from Europe and America helped baojuan cross the verge of world literature.

Many sinologists have studied Chinese vernacular literature in recent years, and Chinese *baojuan* (宝卷) is one type that attracts much attention. Also translated as a precious scroll or precious volume by some scholars, *baojuan* combines vernacular narratives, performances, and rituals and functions as a kind of media to communicate and entertain Chinese gods and local people in the countryside and small towns. It is still prevalent in some northwest regions in the Hexi corridor, like Zhanye, and towns along the Yangtze River, like Chang Shu and Jing Jiang, with an origin that may be traced back to around 1100 AD.¹

In the 1930s, Chinese scholar Zheng Zhenduo started to publish his collection of items of *baojuan* and categorized it into Chinese vernacular literature. Since then, what had been too humble and vulgar in the Chinese literati world became known to the scholastic world of literature and aroused some interest from religion and researchers. Later, some of them did much cataloging and sorting work on *baojuan* stored at private and public libraries in Asia, Europe, and America, etc. for example, Che Xilun (车锡伦) cataloged *baojun* in Japan and Russia, Cui Yunhua (崔蕴华) sorted *baojuan* stored in England, Chen Anmei (陈安梅) sorted *baojuan* in Japan, Huo Jianyu (霍建瑜) sorted *baojuan* in America and Li Yongping (李永平), and other scholars are sorting and photographing *baojuan* stored in libraries overseas, etc. Those *baojuan* are either purchased or

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¹ Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎) believes that *baojuan* may date back as early as the second year of Chongning Reign, i.e., 1103 A.D. or during the Song Dynasty, at least not later than the late Ming dynasty and early Qing dynasty. His first assumption is confirmed by Han Bingfang (韩秉方) in his paper “《香山宝卷》与中国俗文学之研究,” published in *Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2007 (9): 77-85. There are other arguments on the date of *baojuan* origin; for example, Che Xilun (车锡伦) believes that the date could be traced back to 1372, etc.

obtained as gifts from local Chinese, and some of them may date back to the Qing Dynasty, but more are produced in Republican China.

An in-depth study of the research approaches, methods, angles, and achievements of influential European and American scholars found that European and American scholars started *baojuan* research earlier than Chinese scholars. Its evolution route is also different from that of Chinese scholars. The study of European and American *Baojuan* began with the misinterpretation and translation of *Xiangshan Baojuan* (香山宝卷), or the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* in English, by a German missionary, Gützlaff (Gützlaff Karl Friedrich August 1803-1851), in the early 19th century.

Gützlaff was the first priest scholar who studied, translated and introduced *Baojuan* into English. He reported his journey in *the Chinese Repository*² under the name “Journal of Three Voyage along the Coast of China in 1831, 1832, & 1833, with Notices of Corea, & the Loo-Choo Islands, 1840” with a detailed description of how he was attracted by the huge statue of Arya Avalokiteshvara or Bodhisattva Guanyin (观音菩萨)³, which he called as “the goddess of mercy,” on Putuo⁴ Island, and later boarded then visited the island where he received the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* as a gift exchange for a Christian brochure from a monk⁵ from Putuo Temple when he was sneaking around and spying along Chinese coastlines.

A content comparison would help to find the version of Gützlaff's *baojuan*. The earliest *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* can be traced back to around 1100 A.D. As mentioned above, more than ten versions are still available. The contents and plots of the story are more or less similar among these versions but still with subtle differences. Gützlaff did not say a word in his translation about the version of this *baojuan*. Therefore, we could only try to confirm the version by comparing word for word his translation with other versions. Gützlaff collected this *baojuan* in 1833, and the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* that is preserved to this day before and after 1833 are the 1772-1773 version⁶ and 1868 version according to Che Xilun's *Chinese Baojuan Catalogue* (中国宝卷总目).

The third and fourth paragraphs of Gützlaff's translation are as follows:

The author tells us, that during the time of Tsungming, in the second year of his reign, in the eighth month and on the fifteenth day of the month, Tsung-poo-ming, one of those contemplative Buddhist teachers who lived in Hindostan, was seated in a hall. An old priest came suddenly in before him and

² v.2 1833/34.p.221-225.

³ Its literal Chinese meaning is the Bodhisattva, which examines the voices of the world, therefore supposedly solving people's cries for saving.

⁴ Unlike the modern Chinese Pinyin code for Phonics, Gützlaff is put as Poo-to island.

⁵ Gützlaff put it as a “high priest.”

⁶ The 1772 version was studied in detail by Yanyan (严艳) in her “The Difference between Annam version of the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* and the Japanese Qianlong version,” which was included in Zhang Bowei ed.(张伯伟). *A Collection of Overseas Chinese Studies (the 18th issue)*, Shanghai, Zhonghua Publishing House, 2019: 485-495. The 1773 version was collected and studied by Japanese scholar Yoshioka Yoshitoyo (1916-1979).

said; “why do you, Sir, sit here alone and practice religions, without soaring high? Every just and true principle originates from above; how can you otherwise exercise universal benevolence? You ought to act for Budha, transforming and expanding, so that you may gradually and completely perform his actions. Thus you will rule the passions of the multitude, and requite the favor of Budha.

The teacher asked the priest, By what means can I influence mankind? He replied, “I see that the natives of this country are devoted to the idol Kwanyin; therefore give a short outline of her actions from beginning to end, Publish this to the world, thus aid devotion, and your happiness will be secure.” After giving this advice, the priest went away and hid himself. Poo-ming, the contemplative teacher, thought on the affair, and composed this volume. When he had completed it, suddenly the goddess Kwany in herself appeared on the clouds, like pale gold, holding in her hand a clean pitcher and a willow. After a long exhibition she disappeared. All those persons who saw her, looked up with admiration; and those who subsequently heard it, increased in devotion, so that this story has spread throughout the whole empire as an everlasting admonition!

In the 1772 version, which is stored at Hanoi in Vietnam, there are two characters, “景兴,” a name of an emperor’s reign in Vietnam, while there is no such word in the 1773 version. There is only “Tsungming” in Gützlaff’s translation, which should be “崇宁” in Chinese as this is the closest matching pronunciation of a Chinese emperor reign name. Therefore, the 1772 version is excluded.

As for the 1773 version, the author only used “in the past Puming” (昔, 普明) without mentioning the exact dynasty. Furthermore, there are three prefaces in the 1773 version, but there is no counterpart word in it referring to the time of “Tsungming” mentioned by Gützlaff. Gützlaff used the word “Tsung-poo-ming” as the priest’s name in the story. Actually, he did not realize that when ancient Chinese talk about a well-known figure in history, they usually add the name of his time before his name to distinguish people under the same name. That is to say, here, “Tsung” is usually understood as a name of a dynasty, meaning the Song dynasty, not a family name. Together “Tsung-poo-ming” should be combined with the word Chan master (禅师) means “宋, 普明禅师” Chan master Puming, or Poo-ming as Gützlaff put it, in the Song dynasty (960 A.D.-1279 A.D.). Puming is a common monk’s name in history and almost all versions of *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*. It is depicted in these *baojuan* as the author whom Guanyin enlightened to write down the story of Miaoshan, i.e., one of the humanistic forms of Guanyin to enlighten lay people into believing in Buddha. What’s more, in the last sentence, Gützlaff translated, “so that this story has spread throughout the whole empire as an everlasting admonition,” he used the word “admonition,” which can only be traced back to the 1868 version since in this version the author used “人皆见之, 无不敬仰。后人闻已, 愈加精进。以此流传天下, 永为警鉴云尔。” (He who sees it, all show his reverence. People who know it later, work harder for Niyama. This is to spread to the world, as an everlasting admonition). Moreover, Gützlaff translated the word “警鉴” in the 1868 version correctly as “admonition.” However, in the 1773 version, the ending sentence is “人皆见之, 愈加精进。以此流传天下闻, 后人得道无穷数。” (He who sees it works harder for Niyama. This is to spread to the world, and numerous got

enlightened.). There is no such word that can be translated as “admonition.” At last, the 1773 version of *baojuan* contains a picture illustrating Guanyin sitting on a lotus on the shore of the Southsea with her two acolytes Shancai and Longnv (The Good in Talent and Dragon Girl or “善才” and “龙女”), as well her filial parrot. It would be strange if Gützlaff saw it and did not mention it in his report.

Comparing the contents in this English translation with those in the 1772 version, 1773 version, and 1868 version, a transformation of style from simple to complex can be observed. From 1772 to 1773, simple and complex versions may circulate simultaneously among locals. However, from 1773 to 1868, as the story became simpler, its form got more complex; for example, the foreword in the 1868 version is longer and more complex than that of the 1772 version. We can conclude that Gützlaff’s version of *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is close to 1868.

Due to his limited knowledge of Chinese during his early stay in China, Gützlaff made many mistakes in his translation besides the misinterpretation of “宋,普明禅师” which hindered the spread of Chinese *baojuan* in the English world and his work was buried as well.

The most critical mistake Gützlaff made was about the genre of *baojuan*. Besides its simpler or rather “low Chinese style” compared with Chinese classics, *baojuan* is different from other forms of literature lies of its performance-oriented form, functions, and rituals. For its form, it is a combination of verse and prose. The prose part tells the background and some transitional plots of the story plot, and the verse part is mostly the dialogue and the concluding part of a section, occasionally for a brief transition. As for its functions, *baojuan* serves as a means to attract people to believe in Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucianism, sometimes these three beliefs are mixed into one, like *karma*. *Baojuan* is often performed in a solemn environment for special occasions like a funeral or a birthday for older people with family members, relatives, friends, and close neighbors gathering together in the family who invited the reciter, who is more often than not inherited the career from their forefathers. The ritual may last from one day to seven or more days, depending on the length of the story recited. All people who came to join the ceremony would sing a few lines called Buddhist’s chant or hymn with the reciter. There are also some instruments the reciter often uses, like a bell and a wooden knocker or a wooden fish. All in all, *baojuan* has some unique features that are different from what Gützlaff believes is purely a “Story”.or a “Buddhist novel.” Gützlaff’s misinterpreting of this *baojuan*, to some extent, veiled the value of *baojuan* and made *baojuan* lose its chance to be closely studied in the English world.

Besides the mistake mentioned above, there are other objects concerning Buddhist belief that are mistranslated, for instance, “期堂,” “紫磨金相,” “净瓶” and “颠僧.” Those terms are translated as “hall,” “pale gold,” “clean pitcher,” and “priest,” while their exact counterparts should be “retreating hall,” “gold of the best quality or violet gold,” “kalasa,” and “monk.”

Gützlaff’s translation and misinterpretation are influenced by subjective factors like his identity as a Christian preacher and mission as an overseas priest as well as by some objective factors, including his capacity as a Chinese-to-English translator as well as the value and tendency of the society at the time whether Gützlaff consulted his Chinese.

As a priest, he was sent to China, where the government astricted the practice of Christianity preaching, including receiving formal Chinese language education. The only illegal Chinese teacher he could find was not elite but someone who only passed the imperial examination at the county level, which had some impact on his Chinese proficiency in the early days. As for *baojuan*, the kind of vernacular literature often performed for illiterates and scorned by elite literati, less educated intellectuals would not know it so well. However, whether Gützlaff consulted his Chinese teacher in his translation will remain a mystery.

Unlike what was popular in the 19th century, the novel was not a popular literature form among literati. On the contrary, it is regarded as a form of literature only for entertainment, not for an academic honor or official rank in feudal times. While at the time when Gützlaff was translating *baojuan*, novels and drama were still very welcomed back in Europe. He was deeply shocked by the popularity of *baojuan* on Putuo Island, and when he got a copy of it, he was eager to know its contents and what lies under the lines of the words. Judging only from the form of *baojuan* without any background knowledge, one can easily conclude that the words alone did the magic of attracting so many people into believing in it.

His idea that a novel or story could be used to influence Chinese lay people's thought and even his efforts to write or adapt novels in Chinese to preach Christianity was much a result of his misinterpretation of *bojuan* genre.

As a translator who served on the invader's side, it is in his interest to praise his own belief and value and devalue other cultures and thoughts of the victim of aggression. His intention to depict China as a place that needs to be "saved" by the Christian world was reinforced by his ambition to collect funds for his mission and his struggle in preaching work. Therefore, faithful translation was not such an urgent and important need. Still, one thing that needs to be mentioned is that there were some kinds of translation studies published around 1833, but the translation itself, as a principle, was not developed fully.

The study of *baojuan* developed in the second half of the 20th century when European and American scholars extensively researched Chinese folk belief culture, novels, and prosimetric and verse narratives. More in-depth *baojuan* research and translation showed up in the collected works in European and American history of Chinese literature since the 21st century. Specifically and from a historical perspective, it can be seen from the group images of European and American scholars that German missionary, Gützlaff, is the first scholar who studied, translated, and introduced *baojuan* to the English world; Jakob Maria-Groot, a Dutch scholar, was the first scholar who studied the religious *baojuan* in depth; Dudlebridge, a British scholar, was the first scholar who intensively studied story *baojuan*; American scholar Overmyer is the key scholar to push the religious *baojuan* to the field of world religious study, while Dutch scholar Idema, is the critical scholar in the English translation of *baojuan*; Russian scholar, Berezkin, is a new and significant force in *baojuan* field research at present. From the perspective of research media, the novel *Jin Ping Mei* has played an essential role in the history of European and American *baojuan* research. Finally, more text research on *baojuan* has been done than field research till the present.

Except for the Dutch scholar Idema's English review articles, little research has been done on the studies of Chinese *baojuan* by European and American

scholars. The overall research status, the important European and American *baojuan* researchers' interest origins, paths, methods, characteristics, and achievements have not been fully studied.

Through a diachronic study of the English research literature on *baojuan*, involving the literature in Japanese, German, Dutch, and French, deep into the overall context and evolution of the research of European and American *baojuan* researchers, it is found that the *baojuan* research in Europe and America in recent 300 years is influenced by the social background and academic traditions the scholars are in, as well as their interests in certain times. Furthermore, there are some macro and micro characteristics. From a macro point of view, the identity of the scholars switched from missionaries to religious scholars and then to literary scholars; the research centers underwent a series of shifts from Germany to Dutch, from Dutch to Britain, and from Britain to America. From a microscopic point of view and quite different from Chinese scholars who classified *baojuan* into the domain of literary research from the beginning, European and American *baojuan* researchers first focused on the religious study of *baojuan*, then the literary research, and then the comprehensive research on both its religious and literary aspects; The research perspective of these *baojuan* researchers follows the order of first studying the *baojuan* text, such as its story and version, and then studying the characteristics outside the text, such as the music, ceremony, and function accompanying *baojuan* text, which is similar to those of the Chinese scholars.

The research vision, position, and aesthetics of European and American *baojuan* researchers have shaped the cognition of European and American and even the world's readers to China's *baojuan* through their research papers, monographs, and translations, published and distributed by essential research institutions, as well as the reviews and promotions of famous scholars. These scholars' unexpected new ideas not only widely influenced western literary and sinological circles, expanded the popularity of *baojuan*, and attracted more scholars to study *baojuan* but also provided a unique comparative perspective for Chinese *baojuan* researchers. Affected by the multi-center cultural concept in the Internet era, human beings no longer pursue a single explanation for the three central questions of self-existence. Literary concepts also show the trend of the coexistence of pluralism and multi-centralism. Through elliptical refraction in the European and American world, namely collecting, circulation, reading, research, and translation, Chinese *baojuan* has become a focus of world literature.

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