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Old Scripture in New Language:
A Study of Discourse in Modern Yuli Baochao

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Introduction

Morality books (*shanshu* 善書) are a genre of Chinese literatures which aims to encourage its readers to do good and avoid doing evil. The history of morality books is often traced to *The Tract of Taishang on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇) first published in 1164. Morality books became notably popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when numerous morality books of various forms like the ledgers of merit and demerit (*gongguoge* 功過格), spirit-writings and others, were published. In many morality books, the narration revolves around a basic principle of "you sow what you reap," and often possesses a religious connotation.

In present studies on morality books, there exists a consensus among scholars that morality books are a response to the specific historical context they are produced in.[1] However, some morality books, composed hundreds of years ago, are still being reprinted even up to the present

1. Some of the works include Tadao Sakai, *Chugoku zensho no kenkyu* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1960); Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Zi'an You, *Golden Admonitions for Instilling Goodness: A Study of Morality Books in Qing dynasty* (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 1999), which study morality books in late imperial China, and Philip Clart, "Chinese Tradition and Taiwanese Modernity: Morality Books as Social Commentary and Critique," in *Religion in Modern Taiwan*, ed. Philip Clart and Charles Jones (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 84–97; Paul Katz, "Morality Books and Taiwanese Identity: The Texts of the Palace of Guidance," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 27 (1999): 69–92, which study morality books produced in more recent times.

day. One such example is the subject of this paper, *Yuli baochao* (玉歷寶鈔).[2] If it is true that morality books are a response to the specific historical context that the writer faces, it is natural to question why this book is still being accepted by modern readers. Chi-shiang Ling, from his survey conducted in Taiwan, concludes that morality books are effective in maintaining the moral order, if and only if the reader believes in the religious ideas of karma that form their basis. However, morality books are not effective in spreading the ideas of karma.[3] This may be true to a certain extent, but Ling's study overlooks the effort of the editors to make the morality books more relevant to a modern reader. The re-publishing of older morality books can be found in two forms: (1) a direct reprint of the original book; (2) an edited version of the original texts, in which the editing can come in the form of translating the original text into modern Chinese, adding in related content, and others. In the second case, it is obvious that the editors try to make these older morality books more relevant to the readers.

In view of this, this paper aims to examine the methods through which an old morality book, *Yuli baochao* has been appropriated into a modern context. This is done by comparing four different versions of *Yuli Baochao*. Two of the versions, entitled *Copy of Yuli to Warn the World* (*Yuli chaochuan jingshi* 玉歷鈔傳警世) and *Precious Copy of Yuli with Illustrations to Persuade the World* (*Huitu yuli baochao quanshiwen* 繪圖玉歷寶鈔勸世文), are in classical Chinese. They were published in 1830 and 1940[4] respectively in mainland China. The other two versions, entitled *Yuli Baochao* and *Precious Copy of Yuli with Illustrations to Persuade the World* (*Yuli baochao quanshiwen* 繪圖玉歷寶鈔勸世文), are in modern Chinese. The former was published in Singapore not earlier than 2002 by the Amitabha Buddhist Society (*Xinjiapo Jingzong Xuehui*

2. *Yuli baochao* is not the standard name of this morality book which describes the Chinese hell. There exist many versions of this book, each with a different name, like *Yuli zhibaochao* (玉歷至寶鈔), *Yuli chaochuan jingshi* (玉歷鈔傳警世). I have chosen *Yuli baochao* as the collective term of the different versions.
3. Chi-shiang Ling, "Morality Books and the Moral Order: A Study of the moral sustaining Function of Morality Books in Taiwan," in *State, Market and Religions in Chinese Societies*, ed. Fenggang Yang and Joseph Tamney (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 203–228.
4. Year of publication of the two versions in classical Chinese is based on the latest date recorded in the preface.

新加坡淨宗學會);[5] whereas the latter is published in Penang, Malaysia in 2009 by Cityhom Services (*Xidi yinwu chuban zhongxin* 悉地印務出版中心). The focus of comparison would be on the differences between the older and newer versions, as well as that between the two newer versions. Two older versions of *Yuli baochao* are used to determine the basic content in most versions. This is to identify additional content included in the main text in the newer versions, as the original text they are based on is not available in this study. It is hoped that this study would be able to shed some light on why *Yuli baochao*, this old scripture, has been able to survive in the modern day.

The Publishers and Possible Readers

As mentioned above, the publishers of the two newer versions are Amitabha Buddhist Society and Cityhom Services. In this section, I would discuss the background information of the publishers, as well as the readers they might face.

The Amitabha Buddhist Society is a society that aims to educate people and benefit society through Buddhist teachings.[6] Some of its regular activities include the publishing and distribution of Buddhist scriptures, as well as CDs and DVDs of Buddhist music, and other content related to Buddhism. They also conduct regular lecture and reading sessions of Buddhist teachings.[7] The public may obtain a copy of their publications by approaching them directly, or pick up one from related associations.

On the other hand, Cityhoms Services aims to provide materials that are beneficial to mental wellness of people, and also to facilitate the distribution of various morality books.[8] Its main activity is publishing and

5. The year of publish is not recorded in the book. However, as the telephone number printed on the book starts with a "6," which is a measure implemented in early 2002, this book should be printed after 2002.
6. Gao Weizhi transcribed, "Speech by founder Master Jingkong in the opening of Amitabah Buddhist Society (Singapore)," Collected Talks of Venerable Master Chin Kung, http://www.amtb.org.tw/pdf/21-03jiangji.pdf (accessed January 6, 2010).
7. Amitabah Buddhist Society (Singapore) Home Page, Amitabah Buddhist Society (Singapore), http://www.amtb.org.sg/ (accessed January 8, 2010).
8. Cityhoms Services, "Profile of Cityhoms Services," Cityhoms Services, http://

distributing various morality books with donated funds. The morality books that it has published include the original Classical Chinese versions, modern Chinese versions, and comic versions.[9] The public may obtain a copy of their publications by approaching them directly, or picking up one from temples.

As the place of distribution is mainly restricted to the urban areas of Penang and Singapore, it is most likely that the audience of both versions is made up of mainly urban dwellers. However, for the Amitabah Buddhist Society, the religious inclination of most of its readers is most likely Buddhism, because the distribution points are more oriented toward Buddhism. On the other hand, that for Cityhoms Services could be Taoism, Buddhism or Chinese popular religion. There is also a possibility of reaching non-devotees of these Chinese religions because some temples which act as the distribution points are also tourist attractions.

Adapting Yuli Baochao

When facing different readers, it is likely that the text would be composed in such a way that it would be easier for the intended readers to understand. In his study of the words used in liturgical texts in Taiwan, Chinfa Lien points out that there is an incorporation of the Min colloquial languages in the liturgical texts intended for Min-speaking readers.[10] A similar comparison between older and newer versions of *Yuli baochao* is made in the following section. In addition, further analysis on the difference in writing style, annotations and additional materials inserted when the book is re-published in modern Chinese are also made.

cityhomservices.blogspot.com/ (accessed January 6, 2010).

9. "Publishing details with list of donors," *Yuli baochao quanshiwen* (Penang: Cityhom Services, 2009), last page.
10. Chinfa Lien, "Language Adaptation in Taoist Liturgical Texts," in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 219–246.

The Main Text

Both versions published in the recent decades use identical text, thus it is possible that both publishers used a common translated version done by an unknown translator. However, the adoption of this text may not be a coincidence. There are some adaptations in the text that fit the readers of both publishers. The techniques in the adaption of language and content made to the translated text can be classified into three categories, namely: "Modernisation" of terminology, Change in writing style and Use of Annotations.

(1) "Modernisation" of terminology

When translating texts from classical to modern Chinese, some of the expressions have been changed to fit the grammar of modern Chinese. Hence, my focus would not be on those changes, but on changes that also add new meaning to the text.

One example of this case would be the translation of the word "taxes". In the older versions, the first crime listed for the Fourth Hall of Hell was recorded as "evading taxes and did not pay the grains" (*loushui kanliang* 漏稅抗糧). However, in the newer texts, the term was changed to "did not pay taxes" (*loushui bujiao* 漏稅不繳). It is clear that the sentence has been changed to fit the present day, as the people no longer pay their taxes in the form of grain. Thus, the meaning of "paying the grains" is eliminated and replaced with the word "pay" (*jiao* 繳) that has a meaning of "paying cash".

Another similar form would be that while the original terminologies like "silver" (*yin* 銀) and "road" (*lu* 路) are retained, words like "money" (*qian* 錢) and "transportation" (*che* 車), which are more suited to the present day world, are added in brackets after the original text. Similarly, this is so that the modern readers would be able to make sense of the text, and to relate the situation described better to their everyday life. Other adaptations with similar functions would be the adding in of "pornographic videos" (*huangse de yingpian* 黃色的影片) in the list of materials that would make people stray away from correct behaviour.[11] In other

11. *Yuli baochao*, (Singapore: Amitabah Buddhist Society, unknown), 435; *Yuli baochao quanshiwen*, 86.

words, the purpose of these additions is to extend the list of crimes to include modern practices, so as to firstly, enable the readers to better make sense of it, and secondly, cover up "loop holes" created due to different living conditions in the present day.

(2) Change in writing style

In the older versions, the crimes are listed without any elaboration why these acts are harmful to the public, and punishable by the divine laws. The older versions, in other words, "command" the readers not to do these crimes with the authority it inherited from the Jade Emperor. On the other hand, the newer versions contain large amount of elaboration to each crime listed. With these elaborations, they seem to be granting some degree of autonomy to the reader. Instead of "commanding" the readers, explanations are given to show the negative effects of these actions, thus encouraging the readers to avoid them for an abstract idea of "common good".

The difference between the writing style of the newer and older versions discussed above may be classified using what Mary Douglas terms as "elaborated codes" and "restricted codes". In her book *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, she notes from Basil Bernstein's work that "elaborated code is a product of the division of labour. The more highly differentiated the social system, the more specialised the decision-making roles—then the more the pressure for explicit channels of communication concerning a wide range of policies and their consequences."[12] The change in codes used in the newer versions of *Yuli baochao* may reflect the fact that the intended readers are urban dwellers of Penang and Singapore, who are most likely accustomed to elaborated codes, similar to what Douglas has noted. However, elaborated codes often indicate a higher degree of individual autonomy.[13] Thus, the adoption of elaborated codes may also reflect the competitive religious marketplace that the editors face. For morality books like *Yuli baochao*, though they contain religious connotations, their main aim is not to spread the religious ideas, but to encourage readers to do good. Thus, the adoption of elaborated

12. Mary Douglas, *Natural symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, The Cresset Press, 1970), 23.

13. Douglas, *Natural symbols*, 23.

codes in the newer versions of *Yuli baochao* seems to be enabling non-believers of the Chinese hell to accept its behaviour code.

(3) Use of Annotations

Annotations may be used to extend the crimes described into a modern context, as mentioned earlier. Most other annotations are used to explain a particular word, or to indicate the pronunciation, as these words are rarely used in modern Chinese. However, annotations are also used to provide a "modern solution" to the crimes listed. For example, in item number 17 of the list of crimes due for punishment in the Fourth Hall of Hell, which talks about the negative effects of discarding rubbish improperly, the editors added "It is better to classify the rubbish."[14] The practice of classifying rubbish is a recent practice which is prevalent in some countries so that it would be easier to differentiate the rubbish for disposal and recycling. In other words, these annotations are guidelines for proper behaviour in the present day that the editors would like their readers to follow.

The Insertions

Adaptations comes not only in the form of minute changes made to the main content of *Yuli baochao*, it also appears in the form of sections added to the book. This is more evident in the version published in Singapore, as a large compilation of accounts of rebirth, the existence of hell and karmic returns and retributions have been added before the main text. These accounts are recent reports gathered from various printed sources, such as newspapers, journals published by religious groups and others. Most of the accounts take place either in mainland China or Taiwan, but there are a few which take place in other places like Singapore and America. These accounts serve to prove the authenticity of *Yuli baochao* through empirical methods. They are not necessarily accounts connected with *Yuli baochao*, but they prove the existence of reincarnation, hell and karmic returns and retributions, which are the basic ideas embedded in *Yuli baochao*.

14. *Yuli baochao*, 405; *Yuli baochao quanshiwen*, 64.

What is more interesting in these accounts is there are protagonists who are not devotees of Chinese religions. For example, the account titled "A four-year-old boy who is the reincarnation of his uncle" (*Sisuinanhai shuochu qiansheng shi ta jiufu* 四歲男孩說出前生是他舅父). This account is about a boy named Jeremy Anderson living in Oklahoma. He possesses the memory of his uncle, James Houser, who died nine years before his birth.[15] Another example would be the account titled "Xu Yingnan asking for revenge in dreams" (*Xuyingnan rumeng qiu shenyuan* 徐應男入夢求伸冤). Xu Yingnan who has been murdered came back as ghost in the dream of a Catholic, Zhu Zhonghua (諸仲華), and asked him to avenge for her death. The author of this account commented that many have reduced supernatural accounts to belief, that is to say one would encounter it if one believes in it. However, in this account, a Catholic, who is supposing to be sceptical about the existence of ghosts, encountered a ghost in his dream. Thus, this is not a matter of belief.[16] As shown in this comment, it is clear that the inclusion of accounts that extend beyond the devotees of Chinese religions is to prove that the existence of hell, retribution and reincarnation is an ultimate truth applicable to all. It can be said that this measure is an attempt of the editors to appeal to wider audiences, and not just the devotees of Chinese religions who would accept the teachings of the book more readily.

The version published in Penang also attempts to appeal to the non-devotees, but by using another method: the inclusion of an article by Lu Shengyan (盧勝彥).[17] In this article, he commented that "many educated people (who do not believe in religion) see religion as fallacies of the ignorant. However, they have overlooked that doing good deeds help people to achieve inner peace, while doing evil would make people feel uneasy. This inner peace achieved (by doing good) is Heaven; and this uneasiness felt (by doing evil) is Hell."[18] From this act of including Lu Shengyan's comment, it is reasonable to deduce that the intended readers

15. *Yuli baochao*, 11–14.
16. *Ibid*, 137.
17. Lu Shengyan is the founder of the school of True Tradition of Buddhism (*Zhenfozong* 真佛宗) in Taiwan. The connection of him with the publishing of this version of *Yuli baochao* is not clear.
18. *Yuli baochao quanshiwen*, 4–5.

in the mind of the editor extend beyond the devotees. This echoes with their objective, as the appeal is not on whether the reader really believes in rebirth, hell or retribution, but whether the reader would be influenced to do good after reading this book.

Besides the insertions at the front of the book, the version published in Singapore also includes the *Heart Sutra* at the back of the book. Similarly, the version published in Penang includes the *The Tract of Taisheng on Action and Response, the True Sutra of Guanyin, the High King* (*Gaowang guanshiyin zhenjing* 高王觀世音真經) and the *Laws of the King of Hades* (*Mingwang lüling* 冥王律令). Instead of appearing as translated versions as the main text, they are in their classical forms. Taking the order of the arrangement in mind, it seems that though the editors are trying to appeal to non-devotees initially, they would also like to eventually promote their religious idea of karmic retribution to both devotees and non-devotees.

Conclusion: Adaptations for a new audience

While the newer version of *Yuli baochao* is a translation of the original text from classical to modern Chinese, it is also a response to the historical context it evolves from. From the discussion above, we can see that various changes have been made to the newer versions. These changes include using modern terminology, eliminating words not applicable in the present day, extending the code to modern practices and using elaborated codes instead of restricted codes as in the older versions. On top of that, recent accounts of rebirth, retribution and hell that transcend space and belief have also been added to serve as empirical proof for the authenticity of *Yuli baochao*. Reference to non-believers indicates that these newer versions of *Yuli baochao* are targeting readers who are exposed to modern practices and may not necessary believe the core ideas that *Yuli baochao* is based on. However, scriptures are also inserted at the back of both versions, which show that the editors would like to push forward ideas of karmic retribution to the public.

The main concern of these morality books is not so much of spreading the core ideas which *Yuli baochao* is based on, instead it is to encourage

people to do good. This motivation to encourage the doing of good deeds may sometimes undermine the religiosity of the book, but it is a way for religious ideas of rebirth, retribution and hell to be passed on to the future generation. As shown, *Yuli Baochao*, though limited by its original content, adapts to appeal to a new group of readers. This, together with the piety of the devotees, may partly explain their continuance in the modern society.

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