Finding Hope in Narrative Chaos: *Yuying baojuan* and Women’s Redemption

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# **Introduction**

For this project, I have taken on the study of *Yuying baojuan* 玉英寶卷 (*The Precious Scroll of Yuying*). The date *Yuying baojuan* was originally published is unknown but the earliest edition we have, dated 1877, says *congkan* 重刊 “republished” on its final page. From its publication history, we can tell that *Yuying baojuan* was not a super popular story, with only five extant reprints from the years 1877- 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1) This number would seem to imply that *Yuying baojuan* was not a beloved story in the nineteenth-century literary world. This is a safe assumption to make because, for example, we can compare *Yuying baojuan* to the very popular *Liu Xiang baojuan* 劉香寶卷, which has left us with forty-four printed editions and manuscripts from 1774 to the middle of the twentieth century.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though this lack of popularity in its own time may explain why there also has not been a significant amount of scholarship on the *baojuan* in either Chinese or English language, my close reading of this text in the thesis below suggests that it deserves more attention. Not only is *Yuying baojuan* an exciting story, but it also provides a story of unexpected hope through the lens of a dysfunctional family unit.

In regard to English language studies of *Yuying baojuan,* the only mention of the story is in *baojuan* expert Rostislav Berezkin’s article, co-written with Victor Mair, titled “The *Precious Scroll On Bodhisattva Guanshiyin* from Jingjiang, and Confucian Morality”. In this piece, Berezkin notes a scene that does not overlap with the focus of my project, in which Yuying helps her husband defeat an army of foreigners, and how Yuying’s magical abilities may connect with sectarian religion.[[3]](#footnote-3)This article entry appears to be the only mention of *Yuying baojuan* in English language scholarship. In regard to Chinese language scholarship of *Yuying baojuan* there are three recent Chinese master’s theses which include *Yuying baojuan*, though none of the theses are focused on it. Each thesis writer briefly quotes the *baojuan* to further answer their questions surrounding topics such as music in *baojuan*, linguistics, as well as Guanyin’s role in *baojuan.[[4]](#footnote-4)* There is also one *PhD thesis in Taiwan* that similarly briefly quotes *Yuying baojuan* in order to support the author’s argument about four *baojuan* and their place in culture, though it does not overlap with the work of this project.[[5]](#footnote-5) The lack of overall scholarship is one aspect that significantly fueled my interest in *Yuying baojuan*.

One of my primary interests in studying Chinese literature has been my curiosity about how female experiences are addressed and reflected in literature. This led me to focus my reading on the relationship and the characters of Yuying and Yuying’s mother, and how they as people align with the common patterns of female protagonists in *baojuan*. As the whole text is rather long for a *baojuan*, coming in at 90 folio pages, which created a need to narrow the focus of this analysis. I chose three major scenes in the story. This was done to focus on a specific story arc within the *baojuan* that aligned with the female experience in religious texts. In this analysis, I have named the three scenes to provide clarity when referencing. Throughout this paper, I refer to these scenes as the banquet scene, the garden scene, and the temple scene. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Beata Grant’s “Patterns of Female Religious Experience in Qing Dynasty Popular Literature”, was essential in shaping my understanding of the themes within *Yuying baojuan* along with the greater genre of *baojuan*.[[7]](#footnote-7) I use what Grant outlined to show the seemingly perfect life of Yuying within this particular framework, while contrasting her mother’s ability to work outside the rules and patterns set out by many characters before her, while managing to still come to the same ideal life-ending. This focus will be analyzed throughout the entirety of the three scenes selected for this project, though it is important to keep in mind that Yuying as the main character will be called into question. There are two distinct ways to read and understand this story, though I will challenge the obvious, Yuying.Before getting into my summary and analysis of the key scenes I identified, some background on the *baojuan* genre and its study will provide context for my own reading.

# ***Baojuan* and Their History**

*Baojuan* (寶卷), often translated into English as “precious scrolls,” make up their own genre of literature. The earliest confirmed *baojuan* dates back to about 1430[[8]](#footnote-8), though there is some conflicting evidence that could even date *baojuan* back to thirteenth-century China.[[9]](#footnote-9) Daniel Overmyer describes the earliest *baojuan* as follows. “It is called a *pao-chüan* (‘precious volume’) and expounds a mythology of three stages of cosmic time presided over by successive buddhas, culminating in Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, a theme common in these books in the sixteenth century.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This genre expanded a significant amount to allow for different kinds of narration and religious commentary. Some scholars, including Overmeyer, choose to refer to *baojuan* as precious volumes in English because these pieces of literature are never actually transmitted in the form of a scroll, rather just a multivolume work.[[11]](#footnote-11) By the early to the mid-sixteenth century, two different types of *baojuan* had developed.

One variety of early *baojuan* followed Maitreya mythology; and another tradition of sectarian female deities, referred to as Mother, Matriarch, and Venerable Mother emerged alongside this.[[12]](#footnote-12) It can be seen that *baojuan* were used to spread fresh religious perspectives and were quite influential to later groups; this can especially be seen in the case of the author Luo Qing’s work 羅清. Luo Qing, a Buddhist author, represented a rise in a different variation of baojuan. Luo Qing’s work often addressed the religious premise of discovering “true emptiness” which allowed for more spiritual freedom for the practitioner. Luo Qing also pushed against the idea of the mother or matriarch being a tangible goddess; instead he pushed the concept of a more symbolic mother.[[13]](#footnote-13) These were new concepts that proved to be very popular and influential in the early to the mid-sixteenth century. Due to the popularity of sectarian religious groups at this time, Luo Qing was a primary instigator of the idea of many mother goddesses being then perceived as one primordial mother symbol.[[14]](#footnote-14) This proceeded to blend the two popularized varieties of baojuan in the early sixteenth century—this created room for even more variations of baojuan to be produced.

The origins of *baojuan* are a little complicated as it would be difficult to track where exactly the literature morphed into what is formally acknowledged as a *baojuan*. Tang dynasty *pien-wen* could have been an earlier influence on the sectarian genre of *baojuan*, though there is a significant time gap between the two forms of literature. There could also be a way to lump “strum-lyric” or “medley” style literature with *baojuan* as well.[[15]](#footnote-15) These literary styles do not contain a sectarian element and that provides a considerable distance between them and *baojuan* as they are known. There was little consistency across time within the genre when it came to citing outside sources. The earliest variety of *baojuan* from 1430 does not source from any external materials, though Luo Qing quoted many Buddhist religious texts. Later sectarian authors of baojuan did not cite much of anything external; though when they did, they chose to use mostly what had been mentioned previously by Luo Qing.[[16]](#footnote-16) Though not consistent over time, these citation trends provide scholars with context clues to determine what kind of *baojuan* they might be or to what time they were dated.

Though there is significant variation of *baojuan* topics, Rostislav Berezkin summarizes them under three large waves of development. The first wave was popular from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, and these *baojuan* mainly discussed and promoted already popular Buddhist thought. The second of these waves was popularized in the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, and the *baojuan* incorporated a lot of sectarian scripture. The third wave of *baojuan* existed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they consisted of popular morality stories.[[17]](#footnote-17) These waves are all distinctly different and have had other lasting impacts. There may have been an element of accessibility as the waves proceeded to the least blatantly religious variant of the *baojuan* due to increased hostility towards sectarian religion and popular religions.

To help visualize what many *baojuan* look like if one was to never have seen one, *baojuan* do not appear in the format of an actual scroll; in fact, they were either folded or bound. In the Ming dynasty; *baojuan* were bound in “the sutra-folded form”.[[18]](#footnote-18) The *baojuan* would be folded, and the text would be divided into up to two volumes, with chapters or another additional form of text divisions. Throughout the *baojuan*, there would be intricate drawings of deities or the buddha, especially before the text starts. There was a potential for the title within the baojuan to be different from the one that would be on the cover, otherwise known as an alternate title. At the end of each of the chapters of the *baojuan*, there would often be a song to be sung, and this song would be titled to differentiate it from the greater text.[[19]](#footnote-19) Many sectarian *baojuan* had these song portions with the intent for them to be sung during religious settings; this can be seen as often occurring after the burning of incense. Much of the history available about *baojuan* can be accredited to religious groups.[[20]](#footnote-20)

*Yuying baojuan,* first published before 1877, falls under the category of *baojuan* that became popularized in the nineteenth century. This genre of *baojuan* can often be seen as morality stories, which follow the lives of young men and women who are aspiring to cultivate themselves. These characters often break cultural norms along the way, though ultimately they are validated spiritually.[[21]](#footnote-21) These stories did not have the same sectarian solid undertones or scriptures, so much of their spread was based on popularity, word of mouth, or performance. This style of *baojuan* became particularly important in the south, and within the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces where *Yuying baojuan* was published, there was a rise in the career of “masters of scroll recitation.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This profession would be paid to recite *baojuan* in public places and in private for people who could afford this in their homes.[[23]](#footnote-23) This allowed for a system of what remained popular. People were most commonly exposed to what has been performed repeatedly; people could promote their favorites outside of a religious circle.

These texts were essential and powerful in their time due to the messages *baojuan* portrayed, especially the moralistic stories that rose to popularity in the nineteenth century. One of the major lessons learned was that the average person could have buddha within, they can pursue to align their lives with the teaching of the Buddha, therefore when they die, they will be saved from Hell and go to Heaven.[[24]](#footnote-24) This message is inspiring for the everyday person and creates a space or a conversation about cultivation and pursuing a more religious path. These *baojuan* are also often a story of hope, showing people that if they make active choices to live a life more aligned with religion, there will be salvation from Hell, and sometimes characters can come back from evil deeds.

Due to the ties to various religious sects and prevalent religions, there was no official governmental support for this genre. The higher-up elites in the Ming dynasty were less opposed to such texts. They supported expensive, beautiful, illustrated copies of *baojuan*, many done with woodblock printing methods, making them much easier to read. During the early to mid Qing dynasty, there was a movement towards the crackdown on religious sects and popular religion, so many *baojuan* were gathered and potentially destroyed. There was a remarkable decrease in the beautiful copies of the *baojuan*, and many more handwritten and copies of baojuan were made.[[25]](#footnote-25) There were presumably many beautiful stories or editions of beloved stories lost in the seizing of these texts, and it is unfortunate to think of all that is lost. However, no matter what was lost, over a thousand different baojuan titles remain, and in the past century there has been an immense amount of scholarship on *baojuan*. Even so, there is also so much room and so many more *baojuan* left for us to study.

# **Prior Scholarship until the Present**

Chinese language scholarship of baojuan first appeared in the early nineteen-thirties in academic journals at the time [[26]](#footnote-26) There was not an incredible amount of consistency in the volume of study, especially once the country transitioned to the People’s Republic of China. There was a near-complete lack of baojuan scholarship for the first thirty years of the People’s Republic of China due to the connection that baojuan had to popular religion; during this period, much of the scholarship occurred in Japan.[[27]](#footnote-27) Throughout this period and with a strong revival in the nineteen-eighties, *baojuan* performances predominantly occurred in the south, though in a few northern provinces.[[28]](#footnote-28) This could have helped keep people interested in the genre and helped preserve the stories.

The earliest known Western scholarship was in 1903; Dutch scholar J.J.M. De Groot provided summaries of several *baojuan* that he got his hands on, though there was a great break in Western scholarship after this.[[29]](#footnote-29) *Baojuan* expert Wilt Idema has published an extraordinary amount of critical translations. His work includes a beautiful edition of *The Story of the Western Wing* alongside Stephen H. West, a story I reference later in my analysis of *Yuying baojuan.[[30]](#footnote-30)* In China, Che Xilun compiled an invaluable catalogue of *baojuan* and the available data about these stories, along with many books and articles.[[31]](#footnote-31) This catalogue was critical in the information about the re-publications of *Yuying baojuan* used in this project. Rostislav Berezkin also has done an incredible amount in the field of *baojuan* research, two of his works are also cited here in this analysis, with significant research done on the Ming and Qing dynasty and the performance of *baojuan*.[[32]](#footnote-32) There is an increasing amount of accessibility thanks to the work of scholars around the world. There are now extensive collections of *baojuan* available to researchers in libraries, reprint collections, and digital scans.

Over the Summer of 2020, three other students from the University of Colorado Boulder and I were offered the opportunity to be student researchers for the Chinese Religious Text Authority project. We worked with Professor Katherine Alexander to learn how to use and contribute to building this database of religious texts. We specifically worked with *baojuan* on the project, combing through *baojuan* from the late Ming and Qing dynasties, determining factors such as when and where the *baojuan* was published, who was the author if that information was present, as well as any notable text feature. Features included prefaces and postfaces, acknowledgments of multiple volumes, as well as chapter titles. We would catalog this information and build web pages within the database, with room to allow other scholars to fill out these pages from their experiences further studying the texts.

Taking part in this project sparked my interest in *baojuan* as a whole and introduced me to *Yuying baojuan*. Daniel Overmyer at the end of *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, reminded scholars that there is still space in scholarship to study more narrative style *baojuan*.[[33]](#footnote-33) *Yuying baojuan* is one of those stories, which I turn towards analysing below.

# **The Banquet Scene**

The banquet scene is the first scene that I will be going in depth with, and there are a few points within this scene that I advise readers to keep a close eye on as they read my summary. It is important to watch the dynamic between Yuying and the rest of her family, as their allegiances are defined quite clearly within this scene. It is also helpful to recognize the meaning behind Yuying’s stance on not serving meat not only to herself and her family but to the public as well. The final thing that I recommend paying extra mind to, is the behavior of Yuying’s brother Zhang Qiao 張巧, particularly the way he treats his family as well as an upstanding religious woman from the community.

## Scene Summary

The “Banquet Scene” opens up the entire *Yuying baojuan* in a way that allows for a fabulous amount of insight into the characters lives, interactions, and setting. The scene begins with the buzzing about party planning occurring ahead of a Yuying’s mother, Zhang Po 張婆’s fiftieth birthday party that they are inviting all the family and neighbors to. The core members of Yuying’s household all appear, trying to plan out the details of the birthday banquet and what exactly will be happening. Yuying’s mother and her twenty-year-old brother, Zhang Qiao, want Yuying and her sister in law, Ms. Jin 金氏, to cook an extraordinary amount of meat to be served at the banquet, this then sparks a large scale argument about the implications of the consumption of meat as a social activity as well as the religious practice of abstaining from meat and living by the principles of vegetarianism. This argument takes up an incredible amount of space at the beginning of the story. The high drama of this argument pits the family members against each other, dividing them into two major camps, the meat-eaters versus the vegetarians, and establishes the conflict which will play out in the rest of the story.

The argument opens, contemplating what the family will be serving their guests at this birthday banquet. Will the main food be an excess of meats and wines, which would be expected of such an event, or will the more devoutly religious female family members make the entire banquet be vegetarian without alcohol? This goes on for a few pages in an intense back and forth between the two groups. The only concession that her mother will make is to agree to take a short vegetarian fast and a monk-led prayer service before the meat and wine filled party for all. As Yuying and Ms. Jin refuse to cook meat, the household manager Zhang Mao 張茂 takes care of all the details instead and the birthday banquet commences. This birthday banquet had many guests visiting the family, where eating, and celebrating life happened at the expense of many animal lives. Shortly after the banquet, a Buddhist nun visits the family to admonish Yuying’s mother about practicing Buddhism. When Fazhen 法真 arrives, she begins to lecture the family about Buddhism and the proper practice of religion. This continues the conversation from before the banquet about the value of Buddhist practice, and Yuying’s mother has a bone to pick with the nun Fazhen. Yuying’s mother picks up essentially the same argument about vegetarianism as she was having with Yuying, but now with a woman of religious authority. This goes back and forth, without any sort of resolution as the mother of Yuying takes a strict stance on the serving of meat being positive, and of course, the nun believes the true way to respect Buddhism and live a proper spiritual life is to maintain vegetarianism. The argument between Yuying’s mother and the nun takes a sharp turn when the topic of Yuying and marriage comes up. Yuying has taken the stand that she would not like to get married ever, to the horror of her mother.

The nun Fazhen throughout the argument is standing with Yuying in every aspect as Yuying is a devoted religious woman with an interest in cultivating herself. The nun disagrees with the outward display of such anti-religious behavior and agrees that the family never should have served meat at the birthday banquet. She tells Yuying’s family that they should have listened to Yuying herself. She is also defending Yuying’s decision not to get married. This further emphasizes Yuying’s position as being in opposition to the rest of her family. Zhang Qiao then begins to argue with Fazhen and he attempts to discredit her and her authority. He even goes as far as to use derogatory sexist language toward the nun, confirming he is the worst kind of character within this story. Yuying’s mother and brother proceed to kick out Fazhen, finally putting an end to the argument about vegetarianism and social obligations that began eighteen folio pages earlier.

## Analysis

I specifically chose the banquet scene due to its significance in the overall arc of Yuying’s story within the greater narrative threads of *Yuying baojuan.* The story begins here in a very convenient way, it introduces all of the major players within this story in one swing, while also providing valuable information about the way the characters interact with one another. Yuying is introduced as the main character, her religious ideals are made abundantly clear, as well as her position as an outlier in her family dynamic. It becomes apparent that Yuying’s mother is quite exasperated with her. Her mother does not understand why she would so devoutly practice Buddhism, or have a desire to cultivate herself at all. Her mother is also beyond horrified by her intentions or wishes never to marry, as this is a major societal expectation for a woman of Yuying’s status and position.

This scene also solidifies that Yuying’s brother Zhang Qiao takes the side of their mother over Yuying in every regard. This furthers the divide between Yuying and her family and sets up what can be seen as the main conflict within *Yuying baojuan*. This conflict is most specifically between Yuying and her mother and brother, as they are against everything Yuying stands for. Yuying’s brother is shown to be a horrible person through degrading Fazhen, a nun several times throughout this conversation, as well as frequent mentions in the text of his love of drunkenness, gambling, and visiting prostitutes. Later in the *baojuan* we also learnt that he regularly beats his wife. In every way, he is established as Yuying’s opposite in the story. We will see Fazhen come back later in the story as well.

The introductory banquet scene sets the tone for the rest of the story through a chaotic though accurate introduction of the cast list while establishing the main characters’ central conflicts. Throughout religious texts in the Qing period, it is common to see a pattern of leading female characters set up against their fathers as enemies. This conflict design is seen explicitly in the story of Princess Miaoshan, whose father brutally strangled her before her spiritual training truly began.[[34]](#footnote-34) Yuying’s father has died before the story opens, but the banquet shows that Yuying still has others to worry about throughout the story. In this scene, it became clear that this conflict is two on one, Yuying versus her mother and her brother. This family conflict is not a trope that is unfamiliar in stories like *Yuying baojuan*, showing *Yuying baojuan*’s roots to the greater genre, while providing a fresh and creative reimagining casting the conflict from a new perspective. Despite this unique framework, this conflict does remain one of the significant themes throughout *Yuying baojuan*, while also providing major plot catalysts.

Yuying also further aligns herself to another of the main themes that women throughout religious texts have experienced in their lives, by rejecting the promise of marriage in her lifetime. Princess Miaoshan, otherwise later known as the bodhisattva Guanyin is likely the most notable woman in a religious text to refuse marriage.[[35]](#footnote-35) This ultimately leads to many other problems for the goddess Guanyin as well as Yuying moving forward, though I will leave an in depth discussion of marriage resistance to the following section, where that argument comes to a climax.

Most importantly, in this section, Yuying, by standing up to her mother before the banquet in order to persuade the family to serve a vegetarian menu, does not simply mark her as a good Buddhist, it also further fulfilled the patterns laid out by other female religious figures. Beata Grant writes, “A related phenomenon is that, as soon as the child is born she expresses an aversion to wine and meat. In fact, in one version of the Miaoshan story, this aversion begins before birth: Although the mother suffers a painless pregnancy, she feels nausea at the sight or smell of wine and meat.” [[36]](#footnote-36) Though the reader has no context for Yuying’s life before the birthday banquet preparations, it is clear that this aversion and moral value was long-standing before the banquet preparations. Yuying has been devoted to Buddhism outwardly long enough for her family to expect such a seemingly ridiculous argument ahead of a public party. In the banquet scene it becomes clear that in the same way Yuying aligns herself with the greater theme of religious motifs, her family sets themselves as far away from religion as they possibly can.

Yuying’s brother represents the anti-religion, opposing force to Yuying in *Yuying Baojuan*. This first becomes apparent in the banquet scene, though it remains very obvious throughout the entire time he is active in the story. He is not only fighting with his sister Yuying during the banquet but also with his wife, who is also vegetarian for religious reasons. Zhang Qiao fought alongside their mother to ensure there would be meat served at this birthday banquet rather forcefully. His true character showed through in two major moments in this argument. Fazhen the nun came to the birthday banquet to speak about religion and basically came to the defense of Yuying against her brother and mother. Zhang Qiao confirmed just how disrespectful he was willing to be when he used the extremely derogatory term “*sangu liupo* 三姑六婆” (“three aunts and six grandmothers'') to Fazhen’s face.[[37]](#footnote-37) This term refers to women who moved freely in society because of their identities as religious authorities or medical practitioners, but who conservatives deemed as a threat to the patriarchal structure of Chinese society at that time.[[38]](#footnote-38) This is a horrifying behavior to exhibit towards the moral Fazhen, who is just trying to help this family towards a more religious path.

Another instance of Zhang Qiao's anti-religious behavior in the banquet scene is yet another quote of him describing the actions of Fazhen in strong and negative words. Zhang Qiao warns the room, “She goes to thousands upon thousands of homes, vomiting up white lotus flowers. This woman’s heart is like a poisonous snake, do not let her harass you” “走千踏萬家口吐白運花。心中如毒蛇。休得來纏擾” [[39]](#footnote-39)With this comment, Yuying’s brother is trying to manipulate the family into believing that Fazhen genuinely poses a threat to their family and way of life. The brother’s intentions and morals are shown clear as day in the banquet scene, he stands against all religious morals, he detests the idea of someone defending Yuying and religion as a whole, and he believes religious women to be a legitimate threat. Of course, this nasty commentary only comes moments before they kick the nun Fazhen out of their home, essentially rejecting all she has to offer. This anti-religious behavior did not end with Yuying’s brother.

Yuying’s mother, though not as outward in the nastiness of her commentary, stands between her daughter and the pursuit of cultivation, as seen in the banquet scene. Their relationship is tumultuous, though it is integral to the entire shape of this narrative. Yuying’s mother contributes to the initial argument and pushes to serve meat at the birthday banquet, she is pushing herself as far away from Yuying’s cultivation as possible, as it makes her gravely uncomfortable and presumably embarrassed. While she makes a mild concession to Yuying by agreeing to a simple religious service before the banquet, it is clear she does not agree with her daughter’s points about why vegetarianism is key to a good religious life. She stands as an opposing force, but we can still see that she is not Yuying’s true opposite, as that role is left for Zhang Qiao to fulfil. Yuying’s mother also is irritated by the presence of Fazhen and her words promoting the religious path and way of living. Yuying’s mother is disinterested in this at best and begins to provoke a fight after Fazhen’s defense of Yuying’s vegetarian stance. The mother may feel as if religion is to blame for her daughter’s opposition to societal expectation and rejection of marriage, she shows her disapproving nature by also fighting with Fazhen about the expectation for Yuying to marry in the not-so-distant future.

Yuying’s mother also creates an allegiance with Yuying’s brother by condoning his even more offensive behavior throughout the banquet scene. She allows her son to open fight his wife and sister and they combine their energy to try and force them to prepare meat for the birthday banquet. She stands quiet as her son makes sexist, derogatory comments about Fazhen. Fazhen is a woman who stands for everything Yuying’s mother does not. She proceeds to kick Fazhen out after her son completes his offensive commentary rampage so that there will be no more ridiculous talk about religion in their home.

The argument being had at this banquet is whether or not meat should be served and or consumed. In the practice of Buddhism, some close followers may choose not to consume meat to abstain from harming other living beings. Throughout this religious text, Yuying is constantly challenged with the desire to pursue a more spiritual life than what was expected or accepted for a woman in late imperial China. Religious historian of popular Chinese Buddhism Barend ter Haar defines Buddhist vegetarianism as the omission of meat and alcohol, and the ultimate goal is to avoid harming living beings and losing control of oneself. [[40]](#footnote-40) He also notes that people who practiced vegetarianism would have been seen as outside of the normal and potentially excluded from social events.[[41]](#footnote-41) This practice was outside of the cultural norm, creating somewhat of a friction, as could be seen in the case of Yuying and her family.

There is also an added element for women practicing vegetarianism, as there are different expectations and duties that women face in their everyday lives. While it could be hard for men who wanted to be vegetarian to participate in local non-Buddhist religious festivals, private religious devotion did not make vegetarianism easier for women either. Barend ter Haar writes, “Conceivably, the less intense participation of women in the local liturgical community might have made this problem less acute for them, but they still had to cook the communal meals at social and religious occasions.” [[42]](#footnote-42) This is very reflective of Yuying’s experience as well as the experience, and the greater experience of women in Chinese banquet society. There is also a greater gender divide in experience when it comes to banquet culture. Gender inequity was often seen at mealtime, though this is not surprising, considering the widespread inequity in all aspects of life in this time. At the minimum even at family-only banquets and even just during regular meals men and women ate apart.[[43]](#footnote-43) This could have been put in place to keep women out of earshot of many “important” conversations that would have been taking place over the course of a meal. Outside of the family home, things became even less equal and more separated. Women were often excluded from any formal banquet or informal meal that included other people from outside the home and were essentially always excluded from any sort of political banquet.[[44]](#footnote-44) Yuying, though able to attend her family’s birthday banquet, had little to no say in the activities nor the respect of her family to provide vegetarian fare.

The argument in the banquet scene runs much deeper than the ethical and religious dilemma of serving meat and alcohol to themselves and others. Yuying’s family is filled with people who have wronged the world around them, this mass harming of other living beings as well as promoting the consumption of meat could just seal their fate in purgatory. As we can see from ter Haar’s descriptions, this debate over vegetarianism comes up often in popular religious texts from the Ming and Qing. In the extremely popular *baojuan*, *Liu Xiang baojuan* (劉香寶卷), mentioned in my introduction, this argument is divided over two parts of the story. Early on in the *baojuan*, the main character Xiangnü argues with her mother-in-law about the implications of offering meat as a sacrifice to their ancestors.[[45]](#footnote-45) Later on in the *baojuan,* whilst celebrating Lady Ma’s sixtieth birthday, the young men in the family proceed to go hunt for the most delicious animal they could possibly find. They bring back a turtle, that is then prepared for the banquet, little do they know the Jade Emperor has cast a curse on the family in a style of karmic revenge and this turtle is poisoned. The entire family dies in their sleep and there is a sense of justice having been served.[[46]](#footnote-46) This strikes a chord akin to *Yuying baojuan*, as there is an irony of fighting to promote the killing and eating of living beings while celebrating the long life of another living being. Yuying and her sister-in-law know the benefits of abstaining from meat, as well as Fazhen who comes to remind the family that they should have listened to the young women, foreshadowing a possibility of karmic revenge ahead.

# **The Garden Scene**

As the analysis changes from the banquet scene to the garden scene, there are a few key issues that are recommended to consider through the summary of the plot. The bodhisattva Guanyin meddles in the lives of this family for the first time in the garden scene and she does so in an extremely creative manner. Guanyin uses a tactful disguise not only in an attempt seemingly to speed up the fate at hand in the story, but also to take an opportunity to tell the story of her own life. This is an extremely clever moment that does not have a clear motive.

It would be helpful to keep close attention to the building conflict between Yuying as well as her mother and brother. The tension ultimately rises and bubbles over in the garden scene, though the true instigator of this tension and drama in this scene is left in question. The drama in this scene as well as its range is incredible. There is comedy, suspense, as well as tragedy within the garden scene and all of these are indicative in the way the story reads. Moreover, there is a very unique formatting change that only occurs within the garden scene. It will also be important to acknowledge the difference between what Yuying’s mother and brother were doing before they ended up in the garden interacting with Yuying, especially when it comes time to think about karmic revenge.

## Scene Summary

The Garden Scene is a pivotal point in the story, as it is full of twists and turns and sets the tone for the chaos that is to continue throughout *Yuying baojuan*. The scene opens with Yuying going out alone to the garden to light incense and pray. Yuying has a visitor in the garden that she was entirely unaware of listening to these prayers. As it would turn out, the visitor was the bodhisattva Guanyin all along. She has been watching Yuying and once Guanyin knows she is alone and hearing Yuying’s less than positive feelings on the idea of marrying someone, Guanyin decides to disguise herself as the scholar Fang Zheng 方正. This is the man whose proposal to marry Yuying had previously been rejected. Appearing as Fang Zheng, Guanyin scales the garden walls to talk to Yuying. Guanyin will attempt to seduce Yuying, perhaps to warm her up to the idea of marrying Fang Zheng. Guanyin is doing this despite the fact she is also aware of Yuying's desire to devote herself to Buddhism, though this does not change the fact that the narrative is also clear about how it is fated for Yuying to marry Fang Zheng. This attempt is not met with a sweet face from the strong-willed Yuying. She and Guanyin proceed to argue pettily about Confucius and Mencius in a comedic exchange where each of these Buddhist women attempt to prove they know the Classics better than the other. This is, of course, pointless, as it proves impossible to convince Yuying that Fang Zheng is her future life partner.

Disguised as Fang Zheng, Guanyin tells Yuying things like they are fated to be together, and he already loves her. Yuying is shocked by Fang Zheng’s behavior and lack of logic; he is a scholar after all. After they argue about philosophy, Yuying ends the foolishness by reminding Fang Zheng she has no intent to marry anyone. He might as well just get out quickly. Still disguised as Fang Zheng, Guanyin proceeds to tell Yuying a story from her own past incarnation as Princess Miaoshan, the very story Yuying’s life draws so many parallels from. This moment ends with Guanyin leaving Yuying, with the question, “Little Miss, could it be possible that you won’t be able to be just like Guanyin?” “小姐你莫非學觀音大士不成庅” [[47]](#footnote-47) Then the narrative leaves Yuying and Fang Zheng/Guanyin talking in the garden and flashes to the horrendous big brother of Yuying.

Yuying’s awful brother had been out all night drinking and sleeping around with prostitutes when he returned home heavily intoxicated. He was walking past the garden when he heard the voices of a man and a woman. Of course, being the nosey character, he had to go see what the commotion was about, and this is when he saw Yuying with Fang Zheng. Yuying’s virtue is perceived to be threatened for the first time in the story. Zhang Qiao starts screaming to get their mother’s attention and get her to the garden, after which he then proceeds to berate Yuying, telling her she is a fake Buddhist, as well as sleeping around. He accuses her of pretending to pursue religion while still sneaking her little boyfriend into the garden at night. This ultimately leads to Yuying’s mother and brother demanding she get married to Fang Zheng, and if she does not, she will be thrown out to live on the streets.

This is where the genuine cleverness of Yuying is revealed when she recounts her side of the story in the garden. She insists she was just in the garden to light incense and pray when she was accosted by a god who had clearly transformed into Fang Zheng to trick her into speaking with them and acting differently than she usually would. Her mother and brother murder Yuying for refusing to marry, and they take her body to the woods. Her spirits then follow the Golden Boy and Jade Maiden down to the underworld where she proceeds to go on a tour. She begins her tour by speaking to King Yama. On her tour, hell reads her fate, which includes when she is nineteen years of age, she is fated to go on this hell tour. After she tours hell, she is meant to return to the world of the living and marry Fang Zheng, the scholar and become a lady. After this, Yuying will live to the ripe old age of seventy-two. When her soul is returned to her body, however, before finding Fang Zheng, she first is sent to receive magical training from a mysterious mountain goddess.

## Analysis

I have selected the Garden Scene because it encapsulates much of what I find to be so integral and unique about *Yuying Baojuan,* through its use of disguising the bodhisattva Guanyin as the male interest in an attempt to trick Yuying, as well as its high drama. The garden scene is filled with attempted romance, deceit, murder, as well as many tropes that are aligned with the female experience in religious texts. Several moments throughout this scene raise more questions or stray off the expected patterns for a female character who has vowed to follow a sacred path in a *baojuan* such as *Yuying Baojuan*. The Garden Scene also finds itself solidifying the readers’ suspicions that Yuying has not one but two powerful enemies within this story; these enemies are her own mother and brother, who are teamed up in a union specifically against her.

Yuying’s mother and brother represent everything that she is opposed to, as they constantly spout anti-religious views. However, the way this scene is structured also makes it clear that they are not equally responsible for the lead up to Yuying’s death or the murder itself, given that Yuying’s brother is the one who started the conflict in the first place. My analysis of the scene below focuses on the escalation of the family’s drama, but we cannot forget that the story will leave a way for Yuying’s mother to be saved. I will dive deeper into views in defense of Yuying’s mother in the next scene of focus.

There is an element of the garden scene that stands out among all of the other reasons; the format of the *baojuan* changes entirely. It leaves the simple prosimetric style the rest of the baojuan follows and adopts a theatrical form, one with cues for “sing” or “speak” and dramatic dialogue. During the speaking portions of the theatrical part of this scene, it is interesting to see how intentional these dialogues are between the characters. It seems to be done in a way that accentuates the incredible amount of drama that exists within this scene alone. This dramatic, play-like formatting only occurs within this one scene, minus one “sing” cue in the last quarter of the play which does not play a central role in that instance. By changing the formatting just in one scene, it solidified its need to be looked into on a deeper level.

*Yuying baojuan* like many other *baojuan* pulls from a multitude of sources, particularly religious texts throughout its text. A sensitive reader may already have noticed the classic literary parallel that the garden scene borrows from: the Chinese romance drama *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (*The Story of the Western Wing*). In the particular scene that the *baojuan* refers to, Ying Ying, the leading woman in *The Story of the Western Wing,* and Crimson, her maid, are in their garden lighting incense with the leading male Student Zhang listening in. Ying Ying proceeds to say, “With this first stick of incense, I pray for my deceased father’s rebirth in heaven’s realm. With this second stick of incense, I pray that my old mother will stay healthy. And with this third incense.” [[48]](#footnote-48) Ying Ying proceeds to become silent as she cannot bear to finish her prayer. Her maid Crimson continues, “Sister, don’t utter a prayer with this stick of incense; I’ll do it for you - I pray that my sister will soon find a husband who will take Crimson along too.”[[49]](#footnote-49) This scene, famous on the stage and in visual media of the Ming and Qing symbolizes much of what *The Story of the Western Wing* often represents in later literature, an obsessive love of love, more like a love of the idea of love.[[50]](#footnote-50) *The Story of the Western Wing* is a highly romanticized plotline, pushed by a couple who was willing to waste away in love sickness for their love when they were being kept from each other. This could not be farther from Yuying’s perception of love and the idea of marriage.

The garden scene is clearly a nod to this scene *The Story of the Western Wing*, but with an extremely important twist: no lover is welcome here.Yuying enters the garden to go light incense and say prayer though this time the leading female character is confident and able to say everything she needs to speak for herself. Yuying is no Ying Ying, she will not be blinded by the mere idea of love. Yuying proceeds to light incense and say, “At first I pray for my father, I then pray for the health of my mother, I am not praying for a husband, I *am* praying that I can one day meet the Buddha.” [[51]](#footnote-51) This rephrasing and ode to *The Story of the Western Wing* are crucial to the story, as it once again resolidifies that Yuying is a woman of religion, she is a woman of great devotion, one who will go on to be robust and live a life aligning with the religious experience. Hearing these lines also emphasizes that ideas of passions and romantic love will not blind Yuying, as they blinded her literary counterpart Ying Ying. She chose a different path for herself right from the beginning, which is acknowledged once again in the garden. Yuying will not be finding herself with the student Fang Zheng without knowing that this is predestined on her path. This setting differed because the scholar suitor was not listening to Yuying, and her maid out in the garden, it was the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Overhearing this prayer made her transform herself into Fang Zheng, the scholar to speak to Yuying.

This scene, in overturning Yuying’s parallel with a romantic heroine, then perpetuates the parallels between Yuying and the greater pattern of females’ experience in religious texts. Yuying from the start of the *baojuan* was different. She took a stand against the materialistic nature of her family, and her family did not understand her stance and even ridiculed her for it. According to Grant, this is a ubiquitous trope in the female religious experience of heroines in such narratives in late imperial China. Women are steered away from the spiritual path of life, whether it be a study or a religious performance. Women who break this role are often thought to be weird outliers in society. [[52]](#footnote-52) This can explain the tension between Yuying and her mother and brother as it is clear both of them feel shame and resentment towards Yuying for her desire to live a more religious life. The garden scene also clearly sets Yuying on one of the three significant tropes in the female spiritual experience. Grant writes that women either follow the life’s plan of resisting marriage to pursue a more spiritual life, or they get married and remain chaste or have children, fulfill their filial duty and then follow a religious life after.[[53]](#footnote-53) Yuying was solidified as one of the women in religious literature who could not resist marriage, because on her tour, she discovered she was fated to marry Fang Zheng, and this must fit into her religious path.

Being murdered or going on a hell tour is another familiar trope related to the female experience in religious texts; many of these patterns are also shown in the story of the bodhisattva’s life as Princess Miaoshan. The story of princess Miaoshan is believed to be an origin story for the goddess Guanyin. *The Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain* is a scroll that tells this story. Scholar Li Yuhang wrote about how in popular literature, Guanyin, while still known as Miaoshan, goes to hell once she is killed. Once she is killed, she sees hardship being experienced by the residents of hell; she sees pain as well. She vows to save all beings from suffering, and after her goodness causes too many souls trapped in hell to achieve salvation, she is returned to life to prevent the whole system from breaking down. Eventually, she transforms into the bodhisattva Guanyin, dedicated to saving everyone. [[54]](#footnote-54) This parallels Yuying’s story nicely, as once Yuying is murdered, her spirit goes down to hell and learns her true fate and purpose for her life. A few questions arise as the goddess Guanyin, as Fang Zheng, tried to seduce Yuying so she would want to marry him. Was she trying to allow Yuying to skip hell and go straight to her fate? It is unclear, but it is a running theory of interest. The goddess Guanyin is also familiar with a life cut too short in retaliation for a desire for a more religious path than what is expected of women. Wilt Idema, reflects on the story of Princess Miaoshan, and her desire to cultivate herself despite the wishes of her father not to do so. In response her father burns the convent Miaoshan is residing in, then her father has her murdered by suffocation.[[55]](#footnote-55) This was the catalyst that sent the goddess Guanyin to hell in the first place, for her to begin to carry out her very significant role in Buddhism and Chinese literature as a whole. Though Yuying was not murdered at the hands of her late father nor troops called at the voice of her father, she was still betrayed and murdered by the closest family she had, which sparked her fate deciding hell tour.

The Bodhisattva Guanyin is one of the major plot movers in *Yuying baojuan*, and she becomes the most deeply entwined in Yuying’s life during the Garden Scene. Her importance in literature does not begin with *Yuying baojuan*, in fact, she is a very important character in a broad range of *baojuan* and in Buddhism overall. One of the earliest Qing dynasty era *baojuan* was *Xiangshan baojuan* (香山寶卷) known in English as the *Precious Scroll of Incense Mountain*, was about the Bodhisattva Guanyin, though at that time she was known as Princess Miaoshan.[[56]](#footnote-56) *Xiangshan baojuan* played a significant role in the creation and propagating of patterns in the experience of women in religious texts, and I have used many of these themes to analyze the lives of the women in *Yuying Baojuan.* The Bodhisattva Guanyin is trying to be very helpful to Yuying and her mother in this story, and does a significant amount to try and keep the fate of Yuying on track as well as help her mother change the fate she had created for herself.

When the Bodhisattva Guanyin arrives in the garden disguised in the form of Fang Zheng she proceeds to attempt to seduce Yuying. This is important as the Bodhisattva Guanyin knows Yuying’s fate. Yuying is so set on her path to cultivate herself and presumes that avoiding marriage is the best way to go about this, though she is not remembering that she may be fated differently and this is unavoidable. Guanyin is extremely clever and uses this opportunity to tell Yuying the story of her life and path to cultivation while disguised as Fang Zheng, with hopes of reminding Yuying that you can stray from your path of cultivation, bad things can and will happen along the way, though you can still make it to salvation.

# **The Temple Scene**

As my analysis moves from the garden scene to the temple scene, there is a sense of resolve in many aspects of the story. *Yuying baojuan* opens with an argument that on the surface appears to be a conversation about meat eating versus vegetarianism at the basic religious level, though it shows a deeper conflict within the family, religion versus anti-religion. In the temple scene, this all comes to completion as Yuying’s mother finds herself on the path of atonement and ultimately cultivation. The actions of the bodhisattva Guanyin once again run really deep throughout this scene, and they are important to watch and think about. This scene furthers questions like: why Yuying’s mother? Why does she get a second chance, or even a third? It is particularly striking when set against the undeniable perfection of Yuying throughout the story.

Scene Summary

This scene, the “temple scene”, opens after Yuying and Fang Zheng’s marriage. Fang Zheng is expecting to consummate their marriage to fulfill the filial duty, though Yuying has to remind Fang Zheng that this does not align with her desire for cultivation After agreeing to a marriage that prioritizes Buddhist cultivation over Confucian social norms, they proceed to travel to a temple where they hear Yuying’s sister-in-law has been living since Yuying’s brother beat her severely and kicked her out of the house. Shortly after this, the evil brother died when the family house burned down as heavenly punishment. At the same time that Yuying and Fang Zheng arrive at the temple the reader discovers Yuying's mother did not die in the same fire and has been a beggar at this temple this entire time. This is unexpected as Yuying’s brother was punished for his atrocious behavior and the murder of Yuying, so it would have been an easy assumption to make that the mother of Yuying would suffer a similar fate. We learn that it was in fact that this is thanks to Fazhen, the nun from the banquet scene, who allowed Yuying’s mother to beg at the temple in an act of mercy. Though before Yuying and Fang Zheng learn of Yuying’s mother, there is much to be talked through between Yuying and her sister-in-law.

Throughout much of the story, Yuying and her sister-in-law were on the same side, as the sister-in-law also believed in the vegetarian diet and stood with Yuying in the banquet scene, as well as she was a victim of violence from her husband. They proceed to talk about their fates after Yuying’s murder parted them. Yuying discovers that after her untimely murder, her mother treated her sister-in-law even worse than she did before. Even when her sister-in-law was trying to be filial and care for her mother-in-law, the mother accused her of attempting to kill her using poison. Yuying’s mother used this as a justification to finally get rid of her daughter-in-law, so she threw her out of their home. While this conversation was occurring, Yuying’s mother was actually there, but unrecognizable as a beggar. Watching the girls reunite, and listening to their hardships, proved to be a great moment of realization for her. She realized just how horrendous things had been for these girls in their time under her roof, she felt stabbing guilt for her actions and behavior. She is unsure how she could possibly come forward, but Fang Zheng spots this beggar and realizes she looks quite familiar.

Upon the reunion of Yuying, Yuying’s sister-in-law, as well as her mother there is an extraordinary emotional release. Yuying’s mother is nearly inconsolable as she weeps at the sight of her daughter she so cruelly helped to murder in the garden scene. It is clear Yuying’s mother has learned from her previous mistakes, as she has a moment of repentance. She admits she was evil and horrible before, and this confessional is clearly paining her. This reunion goes on over the course of many pages, as there is so much to apologize for as well as catch up on. Yuying’s mother has unexpectedly been a beggar at Fazhen’s temple, since she was last seen after the fire that left her half-burnt alive. Fang Zheng offers to let her come home and live with him and Yuying, as he now has a career in the capital and could support her. Yuying’s mother actually ends up rejecting this offer, as she does not feel as if she has been punished enough and she believes she really ought to stay at the temple and continue to be a beggar. Fang Zheng offers to give the temple thousands of taels of silver if they are willing to keep looking after Yuying’s mother as another gesture of their forgiveness.

Yuying’s mother staying at this temple, now living like a nun instead of as a beggar, has found herself living a life so different than when the story first introduced her. At the beginning of this story, she could not have been any farther from Buddhism or the practice of religion. In her new life at the temple, she is dedicated to reciting the Buddha’s name and cultivating goodness. According to the book of heaven, soon Yuying’s mother’s allotted lifetime is up, and she has been set to die. The King of the underworld Yama put out the ticket to send a bureaucrat to go collect Yuying’s mother’s soul. Wuchang prepares to collect Yuying’s mother’s soul, though is intercepted by a letter from the goddess Guanyin, asking Wuchang to spare Yuying’s mother so she has more time to cultivate herself and amend her debts to those around her and her community, allowing her the opportunity to avoid hell. This is highly unusual, though this concludes the temple scene.

## Analysis

The temple scene is the last major scene within the story that I will be covering as it completes a very important story arc within *Yuying* *baojuan*. The major conflict within the story is between Yuying and her mother and brother, though the brother stops being of concern once he is killed off in the house fire, the same fire that his mother was spared from. Not much is to be said of Yuying’s mother for the rest of the story until we meet her again here at the temple. Yuying was not the only one to receive closure from this scene, her mother had wronged two other major characters within this story, Yuying’s sister and law as well as Fazhen from the banquet scene. Fazhen’s kindness and compassion towards Yuying’s mother was extraordinarily unneeded, considering the hostility she had displayed towards Fazhen in the banquet scene. We also see how much Yuying’s mother has grown and changed as she was given a second chance to cultivate herself and make amends. By going through all of these she was able to provide closure for Yuying as well as other characters, and likely even the readers/listeners of the *baojuan*. The temple scene is the last climactic moment within the story, and it provided the end to the conflict that drove much of the plot within the story.

The relationship between mothers and daughters will always be complex, no matter if it is positive or negative and that goes for the set of expectations that comes along with this type of relationship as well. This is important to note as Yuying and her mother did not just have a bad relationship, it was quite possibly the worst as it contributed to the demise of Yuying. In Confucian society, children should be filial to both their mother and father, and respect their mother to an extent while under her roof. An aspect of their relationship that was particularly unusual was Yuying’s path to cultivation on her own without any guidance from her mother. Grant noted research about how often religious, Buddhist mothers would expect their children to follow a more religious path than the expected Confucian path. This would sometimes require their children to go against the societally expected path that was laid out for them.[[57]](#footnote-57) This dynamic is quite the opposite of that faced by Yuying and her mother, as her mother expected the Confucian path and shunned the religious path for Yuying. This dynamic remained flipped until Yuying’s mother’s reawakening in life.

Returning to filial piety, there is a give and take, it was not meant to be a one-way relationship. Yuying did not have an obligation to her mother, as her mother failed in her duties to Yuying. As written in the “Essay on the Hall of Motherly Nurturance and Chaste Widowhood at Linchuan, Jiangxi”, “A mother nurtures her child with affection [*ci*] and a child serves his mother with filaty [*xiao*]. This is the normal capacity of every human being.”[[58]](#footnote-58) This line stands out as this is not the capacity of every person or every mother. Yuying’s mother is the perfect example of this. She was unable to nurture her daughter, she never took a nurturing position at any point within *Yuying baojuan*. Yuying had been clear with her intent to never marry, up until she was tricked in the garden by the disguised Guanyin, she presumably never paid much attention to males outside of the family. Yuying’s mother upon the first assumed transgression teamed up with Yuying’s brother and they murdered Yuying out of resentment towards Yuying’s consistent straying from the socially accepted Confucian path. Even in the end, when everyone was reunited and Fang Zheng offered her complete forgiveness and the sort of place an honored mother-in-law would deserve in his house, Yuying’s mother knew that she had not yet atoned enough for her misdeeds against the women in her family, she could not accept Yuying’s kindness or the filial duties she offered to her mother. In this very same essay, the author writes, “In times of hardship a mother may suffer greatly even while she tries to sustain her affection for her child, which will in turn invoke the child’s filiality. But by the same token, hardship will make it difficult for a child to behave in a filial manner to repay his mother’s nurturance [*ci*].” [[59]](#footnote-59) This passage describes the relationship between Yuying and her mother as the mother clearly brought pain to their relationship and created hardships that pushed Yuying to be unable to do everything she could for her mother. Not to mention Yuying’s mother killed Yuying.

Finally, the way that Yuying’s mother’s death is delayed at the request of Guanyin herself, is significant because of how it shows Guanyin’s mercy is available to everyone willing to change their ways and dedicate themselves to goodness. When Yuying’s mother is fated to die, the underworld dispatches Wuchang to collect her. Wuchang is a sort of underworld bureaucrat whose main role is to come to the world of the living when it is a person’s time to die and deliver them back down to the underworld. He belongs to a tradition that resembles something like a Western grim reaper. In *Yuying baojuan,* Wuchang is sent to collect the soul of Yuying’s mother when her time is up. However, Bodhisattva Guanyin intercepts him with a letter, which is unusual, and it gives Yuying’s mother even more chances to right her wrongs and to cultivate herself. In general, Wuchang is supposed to perform his job no matter what, and collect souls no matter what excuses they give him. Early 20th century writer Lu Xun expresses a feeling almost like comfort in Wuchang’s consistency in his famed essay on the deity, one that includes never granting mercy to the souls he is collecting. [[60]](#footnote-60) So when he breaks his duty in *Yuying baojuan* at the word of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the gesture is all the more impactful within the story and on the audience.

The contrast between the characters met at the banquet scene versus the characters seen in the temple scene feel like an entirely different cast. The temple scene imparts a feeling of coming full circle as the story enters yet another family gathering, though this gathering feels symbolic to the journey the family has been on. The banquet scene took place inside a private house that represented the nature of the family’s anti-religious stance, with both Zhang Qiao as well as Yuying’s mother in charge. Zhang Qiao is now dead, and there is a seemingly perfect son-in-law Fang Zheng waiting to take over as man of the house, a man who respects his wife’s desire for cultivation. This stands in stark opposition to the behavior previously seen from Zhang Qiao who abused his religious wife, killed his sister who was pursuing cultivation, as well as kicked Fazhen out of their banquet and home. The end of the mother-daughter conflict in this story gives *Yuying baojuan* a true sense of resolve, as it is a coming together of two worlds. There was so much distance between the two female characters in the banquet scene, as Yuying’s mother aligned herself with the incorrect child initially. The banquet scene is a representation of what the mother has done to make it possible for the family to reunite again in the temple scene.

**Re-thinking the true heroine of *Yuying Baojuan***

A question I would like to leave the reader with is, who is *Yuying baojuan* really about? The easiest answer would be to say that it is about Yuying. It is about Yuying growing up in a home that puts societal standards before the pursuit and practice of Buddhism, which fundamentally went against what Yuying wanted from her life. Yuying was in great conflict with her family, had a run-in with the disguised goddess Guanyin, and then was ultimately brutally murdered by this very family that rejected her desire to cultivate herself. The reader watches every aspect of Yuying’s journey from her hell tour, discovering her fate, to the gods getting revenge on both her mother and brother for their crimes against her. The story also ends with Yuying, long after everyone else is gone. With all of this being said, is the story about her?

As a conclusion to my analysis, I would like to propose a very different reading about *Yuying baojuan,* one that remains in the background of the story. There is one character aside from Yuying who truly goes on a journey of self-discovery and growth, her mother. Yuying’s mother at the beginning of the story is a horrendous woman full of hate, who cares more for the outward appearance her family was showing the world than anyone inside of it. She rejected the very institution of religion, as seen in the banquet scene. Yuying’s mother fought Yuying tooth and nail against serving vegetarian fare at this birthday banquet, and insisted that her celebration of life come at the cost of many animal deaths. After this banquet, she fought with Fazhen and allowed her son to angrily kick her out of their home just because she was tired of hearing the religious recommendations. After Yuying’s mother teamed up with her son, to kill Yuying because she did not want to marry Fang Zheng this is where readers could have assumed Yuying’s mother deserved to be punished just as much as Zhang Qiao.

Therefore, when we see Yuying’s brother get burned to death in the god’s revenge house fire, it is surprising that Yuying’s mother is saved. The text describes her condition after the fire as, “Then Zhang Po was badly burned about the head. Although her life was not hurt. Show mercy, she wants to be alive but cannot be alive. She wants to die but cannot die.” “再表張婆炮得焦頭爛額。雖然性命不傷。可憐求生不得生。求死不得死”。[[61]](#footnote-61) She is only half-burned alive, basically to be put in a liminal state. She is given this second chance at doing something more positive with her life. She then wanders and begs and finds herself at the door of Fazhen’s temple, when Fazhen sees this woman that was once so seemingly powerful she allows her to stay at the temple as a beggar. Yuying’s prideful mother then lives out her days like this, with a nun she was so awful to be the person to thank for her life and lodging. She stays here until Yuying arrives later as a married woman trying to talk to her sister in law who was also sheltering at the temple. Yuying’s mother is forced to reflect on her life and her actions and see the pain she caused her daughter and her daughter-in-law. She has to reveal her half-burnt, beggar self to these women who knew her in what seemed like a different life. She makes her verbal amends, though she shows growth through realizing that words are not enough and she must stay at this temple and live this life through to atone for her atrocities. When it comes time for her to die and go to hell something incredible happens. The goddess Guanyin personally sends a letter to Wuchang telling him not to collect the soul of Yuying’s mother when it was in fact her time to die. This is so extremely unlikely as she had already been given this amazing second chance at life when she was not also burned to death in the far that killed her son. Guanyin believed that Yuying’s mother needed more time to cultivate herself and make reparations for the damages she had caused previously in her life.

If we think about the story from Yuying’s mother’s point of view, it creates room for sympathy for one of the perceived villains. The villain just might be the main character, and her redemption arc is one of the most important storylines.

After all, at the end of the story, Yuying fulfills her predestined fate, of living to the ripe old age of seventy-two, having never left the path of goodness she decided to follow from childhood. She dies in front of all who love her, as well as a crowd of people. Right before she passes the room is enveloped with a beautiful smell. Yuying announces to the room that she is able to see all of the gods around her, though no one else in the room can see who or what she is referring to. Yuying has to remind everyone else in the room, that they cannot see the gods as they are not holy enough, she is being rewarded for dedicating her life to religion. Yuying peacefully passes and goes to heaven, fulfilling her fate. Yuying’s life is a picture perfect example of what it means to devote oneself to religion and live life in order to cultivate, though is by no means realistic or inspirational. Yuying’s mother went from living an anti-religious life and wronging family, to being personally saved by the bodhisattva Guanyin personally, that in itself is the miracle of the story.

# **Conclusion**

*Yuying baojuan* is not a classic that has been rewritten or re-adapted time after time since its publication. The *baojuan* is also not artfully written nor is it a poetic story. Even though these factors do not define *Yuying baojuan’s* worth in my view, they are often used to measure literary value*.* However, this story is an important piece of literature to read and appreciate perhaps exactly because of its extraordinarily chaotic nature. *Yuying baojuan* has multiple significant plotlines, as well as a diverse cast of both well known and new characters. It fulfils important tropes seen in *baojuan* that came before and after *Yuying baojuan*, while also breaking patterns and bringing something unique to genre. Though the story can feel choppy or smashed together, though if the plotlines are deconstructed and read almost as stand-alone or related pieces, clarity can be gained. For instance one of the major lessons to be learned in this moralistic story is the lesson of hope.

Hope can be complicated in that it does not always come from the source that makes the most sense. It can be messy. This is why it tooks months of reading *Yuying baojuan* and sitting with it, to see something beyond Yuying’s story. Yuying as a main character is so perfect that it is nearly impossible to feel motivated or moved by her story. It was difficult to find pity when Yuying is murdered for seemingly following her religious path by rejecting marriage. It came as no surprise that she was able to find salvation at the story’s conclusion, and see the gods no one else around her could. Therefore, Yuying’s mother provides an opportunity for the reader to have hope for themselves when consuming *Yuying baojuan*. Her story is a redemption arc, she opens the story actively rejecting religion and the people with a religious presence in her life, and goes as far as murdering her own child due to Yuying’s wishes to cultivate herself. Even after all this, Yuying’s mother is given a miraculous second chance in an effort to allow her to amend the damage she had done in her life and cultivate herself so that she could go to Heaven. The story reminds the reader that no matter what they had done, there was a woman who had done worse and was saved personally by the bodhisattva Gunayin, which created a beautiful reminder that it is never too late to look towards the religious path.

*Yuying baojuan* is a complex story, and this thesis has only addressed one aspect of many which could be explored in future analysis. For my project, I selected three scenes that stood out to me and followed Yuying and her mother’s journeys to cultivation, because I began reading with curiosity about how this religious text would describe female characters. But there are many other characters to follow, besides these two heroines. Another major character that would provide fascinating insight would be Yuying’s sister-in-law, Ms. Jin, because she also lives through unique struggles against her husband and her mother-in-law, all while desiring to pursue a religious life. Fazhen’s role as a religious authority and positive example in contrast to the negative stereotypes about the *sangu liupo* could also uncover an interesting element within this story. Scholars focusing on the history of popular religion may wish to analyze how the bodhisattva Guanyin is represented here, in comparison with her more mainstream representations, and may also be interested in the old female deity who teaches Yuying magic after she returns from the dead.

*Yuying baojuan*, though historically overlooked, is a story that takes an important place in the genre of narrative *baojuan*. The *baojuan* follows patterns set forth by others in the genre, through giving nods to both popular religious works and literature before it, as well as keeping up a performative element in the garden scene. *Yuying baojuan* also confirms important tropes of the female religious experience, while also breaking up some of these life trends to provide a sense of relatability to its reader. *Yuying baojuan* is an incredible story with intense drama, comedy, and tragedy. Even with every plotline seemingly working against a happy ending, particularly one of the leading heroines being murdered in the first third of the *baojuan*, *Yuying baojuan* finds itself unexpectedly overcoming those plot barriers. This baojuan allows each reader to experience hope, reminding us that at least we started off better than Yuying’s mother.

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