

**FORMATION, EFFICACY AND WORDLESS SCRIPTURES:
THE TALES OF THE ‘GREAT CANON’
IN THE NOVELS OF LATE IMPERIAL CHINA**

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Abstract: The cult of the ‘Great Canon’ penetrates many aspects of Chinese culture. However, compared to its great importance, we actually know very little about this cult, especially how ordinary people perceived the ‘Great Canon’ in ancient times. To address this topic, the study focuses on the tales (plots) of the ‘Great Canon’ in the novels produced in late imperial China. First, I examine the literary discourse on the formation of the ‘Great Canon’ in the Ming-Qing (1368–1911) novels. Second, by studying the tales (plots) related to the efficacy of the ‘Great Canon’, I uncover the shared imagination on its function during the Ming-Qing periods. Third, I narrow down the scope of the investigation to Chapter 98 of *The Journey to the West* and reinterpret the plot of the ‘wordless scriptures’.

Keywords: Ming-Qing novels, the cult of the ‘Great Canon’, tales of formation, tales of efficacy, wordless scriptures

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1. Introduction

The ‘Great Canon’ (Dazang 大藏) is an obscure title referring to the collection of the Chinese Buddhist classics and related literature organized according to certain structures and with some external identification markers.¹ In the context of Chinese

¹ For a detailed discussion on the definition of the Chinese Buddhist canon, please see Fang Guangchang 方廣錫 (2006: 10), *Zhongguo xieben dazangjing yanjiu* 中國寫本大藏經研究. For a comprehensive study of the definition of the canon, see Smith 1982: 36–52.

Buddhism, it is also called ‘Internal Classics’ (nei dian 內典), ‘Myriad of Scriptures’ (zhongjing 眾經), and ‘All Scriptures’ (yiqie jing 一切經), or is referred to by the more standardized name ‘The Great Storage of Scriptures’ (dazang jing 大藏經) (Wu and Chia 2016: 18-19). In the literary works (especially novels), it usually has similar connotation to that in Buddhist texts, but in some cases, it is mistakenly regarded as a certain scripture.²

Due to the differences between written and oral cultures of ancient Chinese and Indian civilizations, when Buddhism arrived in China, despite strong early Buddhist oral tradition, the idea of a canon was impressed upon the Chinese minds through numerous references to the existence of an actual ‘Tripitaka’ in India (Wu and Chia 2016: 17). At the same time, in the premodern era, the creation and distribution of the Chinese Buddhist canon (manuscript, stone carving, and printing editions) was both a work of faith and a project that was symbolically tied to state power due to the immense human, material, and financial resources involved,³ both of which endowed the canon with ultimate authority. Thus, the ‘exotic origin’ and the ultimate authority of the ‘Great Canon’ stimulate not only Buddhist monks’ but also ordinary people’s imagination and unique discourse.⁴

Interest in the cult of the ‘Great Canon’ began to build in the twentieth century. Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911) and Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 (1917–2005) found a mysterious number (five thousand and forty-eight) and an apocryphal text (*General Catalog of the Great Canon Spoken by the Buddha* 佛說大藏經總目) associated with the ‘Great Canon’ (Fang 2000), which prompted the discussion on whether Chinese Buddhist Canon is open or closed (Wu and Chia 2016: 36-38). Later, Fang Guangchang 方廣錫 and Jiang Wu expanded upon the work of Yang and Zhou by delving into the number and the text under a broader framework (Wu and Chia 2016: 63-64). Wu (2013) also paid special attention to the ‘Imagining Tripitaka’ in Buddhist literature, aiming to reveal how this fictional canon gave rise to fervor among Chinese Buddhists, prompting them to embark on journeys to India.

While it is meaningful to explore how Chinese Buddhists perceived and imagined the ‘Great Canon’, studying ordinary people’s discourse also helps us acquire a clearer picture of the cult of the ‘Great Canon’ in ancient China. Among the various ways of gaining insight into commoners’ thoughts, reading novels might be the most interesting but challenging one. In general, as E. M. Forster (1955) suggested, the serious writing of history is based on evidence, while the novel is based on evidence “+” or “-”x, the unknown quantity being the invention of the novelist which always

² See Baoweng Laoren 抱甕老人, ed. (1991: vol. 3, J. 4, 63), “Jingu qiguan” 今古奇觀, in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成; Lanling xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生 (1975: J. 4, 48), *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 8 juan.

³ In *The Sequel to the Journey to the West* (Xu xiyouji 續西遊記), the royal seal became a mark of the intervention of the state power. See Zhenfu Jushi 貞復居士, “Xu xiyouji” 續西遊記 (1994: vol. 3, J. 122, 406), in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成.

⁴ Another possible reason might be that, in ancient times, ordinary people had limited access to the entire canon. Their curiosity and scant knowledge of the ‘Great Canon’ also stimulated imagination and unique discourse. For instance, in Chapter 23 of *The Sequel to the Journey to the West*, the canon was depicted as an encyclopedia. See Zhenfu Jushi (1994: vol. 3, J. 122, 406).

modifies the effect of the evidence and sometimes transforms it entirely. However, this invention could not be achieved in the magic land outside the real world. That is why even the greatest writers in the history of literature are simply skillful 'copyists' (Barthes 1977). Therefore, to study the plots, characters, and narratives of novels is not only to reveal the historical facts themselves, but also to teach us about the world, show us how it works, enable us – through the devices of focalization – to see things from other vantage points, and to understand others' motives that in general are opaque to us. In this sense, novels are of great importance both to the material history of particular events or economic trends and the history of mentalities that aimed at describing and analyzing the ways in which people of a given time period thought about, interacted with, and classified the world around them, which is especially valuable in understanding Chinese history or religious phenomena because Chinese historians always find it difficult to do justice to the lives of common people, ordinary men and women whose worldly concerns are generally limited to their own livelihood and happiness – sources are few and data often unreliable (Spencer 1979).

To be specific, on the one hand, like *The Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji 西遊記) and *The Investiture of the Gods* (Fengshen yanyi 封神演義), many novels produced in late imperial China are not works of a single author, but an accumulation of tales compiled by editors at different stages of their development (Liang 2008). Thus, to some extent, these compilations could vividly reflect the thoughts and activities of people in the Ming-Qing or even earlier periods. On the other hand, as Xiaofei Kang (2005) pointed out, any form of writing is a process of re-creation; hence, personal tastes, individual writing styles and agendas, and different contexts in which the tales were recounted would all influence the works. In other words, the Ming-Qing novel is never simply a mirror of popular thoughts and activities.

Therefore, the goal of this study is not to ascertain whether and to what extent stories recounted in the Ming-Qing novels are fictional inventions, and to what degree they convey the original information, but to reveal various ideas related to the 'Great Canon' hidden in those old or new stories and establish why such ideas are shared by these novels. To address this topic, I first examine the literary discourse on the formation of the 'Great Canon' in the Ming-Qing novels. Next, by studying the tales (plots) about the efficacy of the 'Great Canon', I uncover its imagined function. Finally, I narrow down the scope of the investigation to Chapter 98 of *The Journey to the West* and decipher the plot of the 'wordless scriptures'.

2. Tales of formation

The formation of the Chinese Buddhist canon is a complex and evolutionary process, also considered a phenomenon with religious, social, and textual significance in Buddhist history (Wu and Chia 2016: 15). However, outside the Buddhist communities, due to a scarcity of knowledge about the Chinese Buddhist canon, commoners or non-Buddhists often create their own discourse on the formation of the 'Great Canon' based on imagination and hearsay, which is especially evident in

the novels. In the *Heartening Stories*, a novel of worldly affairs (Shiqing xiaoshuo 世情小說) penned by an anonymous author during the Kangxi 康熙 period (1654–1722) of the Qing Dynasty,⁵ the writer fabricated a story about the formation of the ‘Great Canon’ and created the fictional character Jianxing 見性, a forthright monk, to whom he ascribed the following views:

Foreign monks brought the sutra into China, but no one understood them at that time. It was not until the Jin Dynasty that Kumarajiva, who was familiar with Chinese culture and had a good command of Chinese language, expounded and translated all these scriptures. Then the “Great Canon” took form (Anonymous 1991).

番僧將經入中國，人皆不識，至晉有鳩摩羅什，頗知斯文，能通中國語，遂大闡其意，盡將以前佛書無不翻譯，方有大藏諸經。

The excerpt above raises two important points. First, the author was aware that the main content of the Chinese Buddhist canon centers on translated Buddhist works. This is in line with the argument put forth by Fang, who posited that the translated Buddhist scriptures of past ages were at the core of the of Chinese Buddhist canon. Second, in *Heartening Stories*, Kumarajiva is depicted as the only contributor to the formation of the canon, highlighting Kumarajiva’s long-lasting reputation as one of the greatest translators in Chinese history, and confirming the huge influence of his translations on Chinese culture.

A more interesting example derives from *The Sorcerer’s Revolt*, a Ming god-evil novel (Shenmo xiaoshuo 神魔小說) attributed to Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646). It pertains to a dialogue between Egg Monk (Danzi Heshang 蛋子和尚) and Holy Auntie (Sheng Gugu 聖姑姑):

The old woman then boasted of her meeting with that supernatural figure and of receiving the Sixteen Heavenly Writings. She explained that nobody could read the elaborate script because it was a book from holiest India, the very gateway to the faith. She recalled how the genuine sutras of the Tripitaka had all been written in Sanskrit, and how Chen Xuanzang commissioned the monk Jiumaluoshen and others to translate them into Chinese according to the Tang pronunciation, bringing the existing editions into being, although on holy mountains and in ancient monasteries the original Sanskrit writings had been passed down through generations and have thus survived (Feng 2020).

婆子自誇曾遇異人，受過一十六樣天書。龍章鳳篆，無有不識。那梵書出自天竺，是佛門中之一體。當先大藏真經都是梵書，陳玄奘與鳩摩羅什等譯過，換了唐字唐音，方有今本。至今名山古剎，還有梵本留傳得在。

While this version of the story recognizes the importance of the translated texts and the role of Kumarajiva (Jiumaluoshen in Nathan Sturman’s translation), it also singles out Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) as another protagonist.

⁵ For a discussion on the problem of authorship, see Liu Xiaolian (1992: 326-342).

As Wu points out, various legends that had emerged during the medieval period promoted the idea of the existence of a sacred canon in India, which was not only written down but also physically stored in mythical and imaginative places such as Dragon King's Palace under the sea (Longgong 龍宮) (Wu and Chia 2016: 16). I am inclined to take this line of argument one step further and claim that the tales of the 'Imagining Tripitaka' were not only widespread during the medieval period but also had a lasting influence until the Ming-Qing period. I further posit that the mention of the original Sanskrit writings in this novel is the literary remnant of such influence with slight changes in its setting – not in India, but on holy mountains and in ancient monasteries of China.

It is also worth noting that the tales of the 'Imagining Canon' had existed in the early history of Daoism. Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛 (2013) noted that during the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589), confronted with the attacks from Buddhists, Daoists often fabricated faked catalogues of scriptures and declared that many scriptures that were listed in the catalogues but had never been seen were still in the 'Heaven Palace' (Tiangong 天宮).

3. Tales of efficacy

Due to the prevalent belief that devotion to the entire canon would bring considerable blessing and merit, elites and common people alike were motivated to participate in the production and distribution of the entire canon (Wu and Chia 2016: 70). Based on divergent purposes, Fang Guangchang (2006) also divided Buddhist canons into the 'Canon of Doctrine' (Yilixing dazangjing 義理型大藏經) and the 'Canon of Worship' (Xinyangxing dazangjing 信仰型大藏經), with the latter founded on the pursuit of religious merit and efficacy.

The fundamental efficacy of the devotion to the 'Great Canon' is always associated with the rhetoric of repaying 'Four Kindnesses' (Si'en 四恩, i.e., the kindness of the Buddha, the rulers, the parents, and all sentient beings) and benefiting the 'Three Realms' (Sanyou 三有, i.e., the desire, form, and formless realms) (Wu and Chia 2016: 3). Later, the abstract rhetoric of repaying the kindness of the parents was transformed into a specific idea of the deliverance of the souls of the deceased (especially the souls of deceased parents) as an expression of filial piety.⁶ The strong connection between the devotion to the canon (mainly through the act of reading) and the deliverance of the souls of the deceased is particularly clear in *The Journey to the West*.

In Chapter 98, when the four pilgrims arrived at the Spirit Mountain and begged Buddha for the true scriptures, Buddha told them:

"Now, I have here three baskets of scriptures which can deliver humanity from its afflictions and dispel its calamities. There is one basket of vinaya, which speak of Heaven; a basket of śāstras, which tell of the Earth; and a basket of sūtras, which redeem the damned" (Wu 2012: 349).

⁶ See the newly discovered stele in Chongqing (Wu and Chi 2016: 60-61).

我今有经三藏，可以超脱苦恼，解释灾愆。三藏，有法一藏，谈天；有论一藏，说地；有经一藏，度鬼。

Here, it is evident that the basket of sūtras (Jingzang 經藏) served as a religious device that could redeem the damned. In the final chapter, after the sage monk and his three disciples took the ‘Great Canon’ back to the Tang nation, Emperor Taizong 太宗 (598–649) and his officials showed extreme zeal for this set of true scriptures:

After Taizong and many officials had finished their worship, they immediately proceeded with the selection of high priests so that a Grand Mass of Land and Water could be held right in that Wild-Goose Pagoda Temple. Furthermore, they were to read and recite the true scriptures from the Great Canon so that the damned spirits would be delivered from nether darkness and the celebration of good works would be multiplied. The copies of transcribed scriptures would also be promulgated throughout the empire (Wu 2012: 381).

太宗與多官拜畢，即選高僧，就于雁塔寺裡，修建水陸大會，看誦大藏真經，超脫幽冥孽鬼，普施善慶，將謄錄過經文，傳佈天下。

Again, the acts of reading and reciting the true scriptures from the ‘Great Canon’ are tied to the efficacy of delivering the damned spirits from nether darkness.

Compared to the single efficacy of the devotion to the ‘Great Canon’ described in *The Journey to the West*, in its sequels and some other Ming-Qing novels, the ‘Great Canon’ is depicted as a multifunctional device. For example, the main theme of *The Sequel to the Journey to the West* is protecting the Buddhist canon that Xuanzang and his disciples acquired at the Spirit Mountain because the demons yearned for its possession due to its magical efficacies (Chen 1988). In Chapter 15 of *The Sequel to the Journey to the West*, upon hearing that the four pilgrims have obtained the true ‘Great Canon’, the elder told his disciples:

“This canon has marvelous efficacies: generally speaking, it helps one to illuminate his heart, see his true nature, and awaken to the Way through meditation; specifically, it helps to save underworld beings, eradicate one’s sins, and prevent calamities. Kind men and faithful women should also recite them, let alone our monks. Reciting scriptures is our duty. Thus, we should ask for scriptures to review, transcribe, and keep as the treasure of our temple” (Zhenfu 1994).

此經功德不可思議：大則見性明心，參禪悟道；小則濟幽拔苦，釋罪消災。善男信女，也當誦持。況我等出家人，經乃本領，安可不請求檢閱，或是抄寫，或是留貯，永為一寺之寶。

The marvelous efficacies described by the elder could be divided into two categories, one of which is illuminating one’s heart, seeing one’s true nature, and awakening to the Way through meditation, aimed at spiritual attainment. The second

one – saving underworld beings, eradicating one's sins, and preventing calamities – is the pursuit of merit and salvation. The second category, as discussed above, did not appear in the novel out of nowhere, but was ingrained in Buddhist texts and social practices. The same applies to the efficacy related to spiritual attainment, the origins of which could also be traced to Buddhist texts. For instance, Foguo Weibai 佛國惟白 (n.d.), an orthodox Chan monk of the Song Dynasty, in his *Essential Guide and Checklist of the Great Canon* (Dazangjing gangmu zhiyao lu 大藏經綱目指要錄), promoted reading the Buddhist canon, as it could have 'Five Benefits' (Wuli 五利) and repay 'Five Kindnesses' (Wubao 五報) (Wu and Chia 2016: 67). The last two of the 'Five Benefits' refer to understanding the core of Buddhist teachings (Jian dazhi 見大旨), developing the wisdom of enlightenment (Zi zhongzhi 資種智), and jumping out of the circle of life and death (Tuohu shengsi 脫乎生死) (1995).

Some other novels produced in the later period, such as *The Drunken Ascetic* (Qutoutuo zhuan 麴頭陀傳), even associated the efficacy of the devotion to the 'Great Canon' with fertility, purporting that, by zealously worshipping the canon, one could be granted sons.

4. Tale of 'wordless scriptures'

As the state entities, elite groups, and common people all aspired to support the production and distribution of the 'Great Canon' (Wu and Chia 2016: 3), some devotional activities became increasingly lucrative, and others incurred lavish expenditures. Turning the revolving repository (Zhuanlun zang 轉輪藏), an abbreviated form of ritual reading of the entire canon, was particularly popular during the Song Dynasty, especially after the twelfth century, because it became a significant source of income for Buddhist monasteries (Wu and Chia 2016: 54). According to some legends, the cost of turning the revolving repository just once was usually prohibitively expensive for poor but devout believers (Wu and Chia 2016: 57-58). In his *Survey of Scenic Sights in Beijing* (Dijing jingwulue 帝京景物略), Liu Dong 劉侗 (1593–1637) recorded that the fee for turning the device amounted to 5,048 coins, corresponding to the total number of scriptures in a standard canon, as contained in Zhisheng's 智昇 (n.d.) *Catalogue of the Buddhist Teachings in the Kaiyuan Era* (Kaiyuan shijiao lu 開元釋教錄) (2003).

Copying scriptures was another important and commonly practiced devotional activity related to the 'Cult of the Canon'. Usually, wealthy donors would commission others to copy manuscripts by hand in gold and silver, or even sponsored the carving of the entire canon in stone blocks. On the other hand, poor but zealous devotees could only afford the carving of one block or the printing of one fascicle in the canon. According to the legends, some devotees even went to such extremes as using their blood as ink and peeling off their skin to serve as paper (Wu and Chia 2016: 59).

These extremely lucrative and lavish devotional activities pertaining to the Buddhist canon would undoubtedly attract criticism from Confucian literati. In fact,

during the Song Dynasty, when the cult of the revolving repository was most popular, Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148) – a Southern Song scholar, poet, and government minister – in his ‘Inscription of the Revolving Repository at the Baoning Temple in Jiankang’ (‘Jiankgufu baoningsi lonzang ji’ 建康府保寧寺輪藏記), expressed his contempt for building revolving repositories to accumulate merit and pursue financial benefits:

(Devotees) do not necessarily understand Buddha’s words and respect his teachings. Donors only hope to accumulate merit by financing creation of the revolving repositories, and their builders (temples) merely see the opportunity for financial gains obtained by charging for their turning. Both of these aims mark a considerable departure from the original intention (of the inventor) (Ye 2004).

未必皆達其言，尊其教也。施者假之以邀福，造者因之以求利，浸浸日遠其本。

Also, during the reign of the Emperor Yingzong 英宗 (Gegeen Khan) (1302–1323), when the Superior Grand Master of the Palace (Taizhong dafu 太中大夫) Wu Cheng 吳澄 (1249–1333) – one of the most influential Neo-Confucian thinkers in the Song and Yuan dynasties⁷ – was ordered to write a preface for the newly completed manuscript canon written in gold, he sent a memorial to the throne:

It is a magnificent undertaking that Your Majesty has copied Buddhist scriptures for the welfare of your people. However, I never heard that copying scriptures could help deliver the souls of the deceased. People probably like merits and blessings, but even those cognizant of Buddhist teachings seldom talk about the rebirth. The hearsay of rebirth is that those who do good deeds could ascend into Heaven after death, and in most extreme cases, one would share luminosity with the moon and the sun; those who do bad deeds would fall down to filthy places, and would in the most extreme cases turn into a worm. Therefore, people with ulterior motives have fabricated the fable of the deliverance of the souls of the deceased to induce others (Song 1976).

主上寫經，為民祈福，甚盛舉也。若用以追薦，臣所未知。蓋福田利益，雖人所樂聞，而輪回之事，彼習其學者，猶或不言。不過謂為善之人，死則上通高明，其極品則與日月齊光；為惡之人，死則下淪污穢，其極下則與沙蟲同類。其徒遂為薦拔之說，以惑世人。

For Wu Cheng, as a Confucian literatus, copying scriptures for the sake of the masses might be an acceptable rhetoric to rationalize the emperor’s involvement in the devotional activity. Still, he claimed that, purporting this would lead to the deliverance of the souls of the deceased is completely against the ideology of orthodox Confucianism.

⁷ On the life and thoughts of Wu Cheng, see David Gedalecia 1999.

Naturally, the Ming-Qing novels incorporated this criticism and transformed it into penetrating satires. In Chapter 98 of *The Journey to the West*, after Ānanda and Kāśyapa, the most famous and venerated disciples of Buddha, had shown all the volumes to the Tang Monk, they said to him:

“Sage Monk, having come all this way from the Land of the East, what sort of small gifts have you brought for us? Take them out quickly! We’ll be pleased to hand over the scriptures to you” (Wu 2012: 351).

“聖僧東土到此，有些什麼人事送我們？快拿出來，好傳經與你去。”

As the Tripitaka refused to bribe them, they retorted:

“If we imparted the scriptures to you gratis, our posterity would starve to death” (Wu 2012: 351).

“白手傳經繼世，後人當餓死矣！”

Here, the personas of those two most venerated disciples remind us of the avaricious monks in the story of the self-turning revolving repository of Huili Monastery 惠曆寺 in Linjiang Military Commandate 臨江軍, superciliously standing in front of the revolving repository and charging believers thousands of coins for a single turn (Fei 1990).

Later, upon discovering that what they have just obtained from the two disciples are wordless texts, the four pilgrims returned to Buddha and charged Ānanda and Kāśyapa with fraud, due to deliberately handing over wordless texts to them. They must have believed that Buddha would certainly uphold justice and punish his disciples. Hence, the following speech delivered by Buddha would astonish not only the four pilgrims but also the readers:

“I knew already that the two of them would ask you for a little present. After all, the holy scriptures are not to be given lightly, nor are they to be received gratis. Some time ago, in fact, a few of our sage priests went down the mountain and recited these scriptures in the house of one Elder Zhao in the Kingdom of Śrāvastī, so that the living in his family would all be protected from harm and the deceased redeemed from perdition. For all that service, they managed to charge him only three pecks and three pints of rice. I told them that they had made far too cheap a sale and that their posterity would have no money to spend. Since you people came with empty hands to acquire scriptures, blank texts were handed over to you. But these blank texts, despite being wordless scriptures, are just as good as those with words. However, those creatures in your Land of the East are so foolish and unenlightened that I have no choice but to impart to you now the texts with words” (Wu 2012: 353-354).

他兩個問你要人事之情，我已知矣。但只是經不可輕傳，亦不可以空取，向時眾比丘聖僧下山，曾將此經在舍衛國趙長者家與他誦了一遍，保他家生者安全，亡者超脫，只討得他三鬥三升米粒黃金回來，我還說他們

忒賣賤了，教後代兒孫沒錢使用。你如今空手來取，是以傳了白本。白本者，乃無字真經，倒也是好的。因你那東土眾生，愚迷不悟，只可以此傳之耳。

Here, Buddha is depicted as a father trying his best to rationalize his son's bullying of other kids at school by some chicanery. Following Buddha's logic, no matter what kinds of hardship the four pilgrims went through during their journey to the west, acquiring scriptures is forever a barter trade – as those that came with empty hands to acquire scriptures could only receive blank texts. The example of the Elder Zhao in the Kingdom of Śrāvastī – who obtained the greatest blessing and benefits by inviting the sage priests from the mountain to recite these scriptures in his house but only paid three pecks and three pints of rice – should thus never be followed.

Although both scholars treated the novel as an allegorical text, Andrew Plaks (2016) and Anthony Yu (2012) reached a point of divergence when interpreting the implication of the 'wordless scriptures'. Plaks claimed that the final irony of the 'wordless scriptures' is a rather transparent joke, because the final restoration of the 'real' scriptures itself further diminishes the ultimate attainment of the request – emptiness or enlightenment. However, Yu insisted on the religious meaning and contended that the novel uses it to mock the monks of the Land of the East as being too blind and stupid to recognize its true worth, and this connotation may echo the Chan view of language. Nonetheless, rather than a transparent joke or the Chan view of language, taking all the foregoing materials into consideration, I argue that the plot of the 'wordless scriptures' is actually a satire on the lucrative and fetishistic activities surrounding the 'Great Canon'. A couplet in the poem following the plot of the 'wordless scriptures' provides direct evidence in support of this assertion:

*Note how Xuanzang has climbed the mount with pain.
Pity Ānanda who has but love of gain (Wu 2012: 355).*
須知玄奘登山苦，
可笑阿難卻愛錢。

The contrast between the devout Xuanzang and the avaricious Ānanda might well be a projection of the pious but poor devotees against the greedy and merciless monks portrayed in many stories about the self-turning revolving repositories.

A more direct critique of the devotion to the 'Great Canon' is given in *The Later Journey to the West* (Hou xiyouji 後西遊記), where it is blamed for causing lavish spending and moral corruption:

After (Xuanzang) succeeded in acquiring the true scriptures of the 'Great Canon' in the Zhenguan period of the Tang Dynasty, everyone believed in Buddhist teachings, temples were built everywhere, and scriptures were chanted in every household. They said that giving up fortune could bring blessing and making donations could extend lifespan. Thus, the ethics and rituals that the former kings used to rule our country became alienated and neglected (Anonymous 2000).

原來唐朝自貞觀年間求取大藏真經回來之後，人情便崇信佛法，處處創立寺宇，家家誦念經文，皆謂舍財可以獲福，佈施得能增壽。遂將先王治世的君臣父子、仁義禮樂，都看得冷冷淡淡，不甚親切。

The message underlying the author's critique is that the devotional practice to the 'Great Canon' goes against the orthodox ideologies, which is also emphasized by the above-mentioned literati.

5. Concluding remarks

The cult of the 'Great Canon' penetrates many aspects of Chinese culture. Chinese literature, especially the Ming-Qing novels, is also influenced by this cult. Therefore, studying the tales (plots) of the 'Great Canon' in the Ming-Qing novels helps us gain a better understanding of this cult, especially how ordinary people understood the 'Great Canon' in ancient times. In this study, the first detailed examination of the literary discourse on the formation of the 'Great Canon' in *Heartening Stories* and *The Sorcerer's Revolt* reveals (1) the awareness of the crucial role of the translated texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon, (2) the tendency to attribute the formation of the 'Great Canon' to a single or some well-known translators, and (3) the literary remnants of the influence of the "Imagining Tripitaka." Second, by investigating *The Journey to the West*, its sequels, and *The Drunken Ascetic*, I argue that, during the Ming-Qing periods, the 'Great Canon' might well be imagined as a multifunctional religious device associated with the deliverance of the souls of the deceased and even some other efficacies. In the final case, setting the traditional allegorical interpretation which regards the plot of the 'wordless scriptures' as a transparent joke or the Chan view of language aside, I reinterpret it as a penetrating satire on the lucrative and fetishistic activities surrounding the 'Great Canon'.

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