

THE EMERGENCE OF LIGHT: A RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE PAINTING OF MANI'S BIRTH IN A JAPANESE COLLECTION

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In 2012, the 124th issue of *Journal of the Yamato Bunkakan* published two papers (respectively authored by Prof. Yoshida Yutaka and Prof. Furukawa Setsuichi) on an ancient Chinese painting discovered in Japan [Fig. below] (Furukawa 2012; Yoshida 2012). The authors included a plate of the painting and its brief introduction: "Painting of Mani's birth, dated to the Late Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), one painting, pigment for Chinese silk painting, L. 35.6 cm and W. 57.0 cm, personal collection. Mounting: paper/brocade with patterns of red lattice and stringed beads (Shujiang 蜀江 brocade)." Since the painting is in a private collection, it was not available for me to examine. Judging from the garments and headdresses

of the figures in the painting, it should undoubtedly be dated later than the Song Dynasty (960–1279). The title, "Painting of Mani's Birth," was given by the researchers. This silk painting depicts such a scene with many figures. Obviously, it's not a religious icon for worshipping, but would have been used for exhibition and appreciation or hanging at some ritual occasion.

By way of introduction here, as a matter of convenience, the scene of the painting will be divided into two fields: "the World" and "the Heaven". The former part has a green background, while the background of the latter changes from blue to white as it moves down from the top. Let us look first at



the scene of “the World,” the designations “left” and “right” referring to the vantage point of the viewer. On the left is a traditional Chinese hall in which nine women stand. The woman standing in the middle appears a bit larger, suggesting she is the dominant figure. A red cloud emerges out of her left ribs, on which is a naked baby whose left hand points to the sky and right hand seems to droop and point to the ground. On the ground under the cloud are six golden lotus flowers. At the middle of the ground in front of the great hall is a trapezoid-shaped object, which Yoshida believed is a bookcase containing religious classics. Four persons, who might be minstrels, flank the object and stand in front of it. The one wearing a brown gown on the left seems to be dancing, while the one wearing a red gown seems to be holding a musical instrument. At some distance on the right side of the object stand four men. Among them, one holds a canopy while the other three put their palms together devoutly facing the object. In a symmetrical position, at some distance on the left side of the object are two women putting their palms together, with one of them leaning to one side to face the object, while the other seems to face outward from the painting. A red halo hangs in the air above the object, judging from what remains here of the original image, it seems that a possibly naked figure sits in the halo with legs crossed. Under the halo is a lotus throne, flanked by two women holding trays. It’s noteworthy that a mass of dark clouds is painted in the air on the right side of the halo, in which are three half-naked monsters facing the halo and the unidentified object. “The Heaven” mainly consists of three groups of deities. In the cloud cluster right above the red halo stand ten women with haloes on their heads, probably musical deities. On their left and right sides are respectively a mass of red and white clouds, in which stand four men dressed like warriors. They are riding clouds; so they must be deities too.

On the left of the scene, the naked baby born riding a cloud from the left ribs of the woman clearly indicates that this is a birth scene of some saint. Yoshida and Furukawa have expounded and proved the Manichaeism nature of this painting from historical and artistic perspectives and argued that the painting depicts Mani’s birth. I agree that this painting is related to the birth legend of Mani. However, a comparison between the painting and some historical documents on Mani’s birth reveals it is difficult to correlate the visual material with the written records. That is to say, the textual basis for this painting may not be the Manichaeism classics, but might be some other documents.

I. Written Materials about the Birth of Mani

Though the birth of Mani was touched upon by the earlier religious text, the *Kephalaia*, it does not contain any specific depiction of the birth scene. When the disciples posted questions regarding his mission and birth, Mani only explained by means of a comparison: All the apostles who are on occasion sent to the world resemble farmers. They established churches again and again, just as in sowing and harvesting (Gardner 1995, p. 16). A specific account regarding Mani’s birth was recorded in the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadim. When Mani’s mother got pregnant, his father had joined the Elchasaite community. “Once she [Mani’s mother – WY] gave birth (to him) [Mani – WY], they claimed that she had had lovely dreams about him. And (once) she gained consciousness she had a vision of him being taken up into air by a force which then returned him, after perhaps a day or two (aloft). And then, having returned, his father came forth and took him to his place of residence to raise him and care for his community” (Gardner and Lieu 2004, p. 47). The *Kitāb al-Fihrist* was compiled around the end of the 10th century; its information originated from the work of Abū ‘Isā al-Warraḡ around the 9th century. The latter had consulted the true Manichaeism classics. Therefore, at least until the 9th century, what was spread extensively in West Asia regarding Mani’s birth was the above mythology.

However, after Manichaeism was officially introduced into China, another version of the birth legend was recorded in the *Compendium of the Teaching of Mani the Buddha of Light* 摩尼光佛教法儀略 (hereafter referred to as the *Compendium*) compiled by a Manichaeism bishop in 731:

The (date of) birth (as recorded) in the P’o(sa?)-p’i calendar is equivalent to the 8th day of the 2nd month of the 13th year of the period Chien-an of emperor Hsien of the (Later) Han dynasty [12 March 208], (the two systems of time-reckoning) wholly (?) corresponding. That, the natural endowments and the heavenly omens (being appropriate), (His mother) conceived; and that, keeping the rules of abstinence and strictly purifying (herself, she) became pregnant; (that) was because of His own pureness. That, having entered existence from (His mother’s) chest, He surpassed His age and excelled everyone; and that He evidenced the spiritual verifications ninefold and answered to the supernatural auspices five-fold; (that) was because His birth was beyond the ordinary. 婆毗長曆，當漢獻帝建安十三年二月八日而生，泯然懸合矣。至若資稟天符而受胎，齋戒嚴潔而懷孕者，本清淨也；自胸前化誕，卓世殊倫，神驗九徵，靈瑞五應者，生非凡也。¹

To facilitate its spread to the East, Manichaeism borrowed a lot of Buddhist elements (Klimkeit 1998). “The birth from the chest” is apparently a copy from the story of Buddha’s birth.² The *Compendium* was composed under an imperial edict by a bishop at the Jixian Academy 集賢院. Therefore, this birth story should embody Manichaean orthodoxy in China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Besides, this version continued to be spread in Mingjiao 明教³ in southeast China after the Tang Dynasty. The *Minshu* (閩書, *The Historical Annals of Fujian*) by He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠 (1558–1631) preserved a precious record of Mingjiao in the region of present Fujian province, which included the birth story of Mani:

It is said that more than 500 years after Lao Tsu entered the West, in the Wu-zi year of the Jian’an era of the Emperor Xiandi of the Han dynasty [i.e., 208 CE], he was transformed into a Nai-yun. The wife of King Ba-di ate it and got pregnant. The time came and the child emerged from her breast. Nai-yun is a pomegranate of the imperial garden. 云老子西入流沙五百餘歲，當漢獻帝建安之戊子，寄形棗暈，國王拔帝之后食而甘之，遂有孕。及期，擘胸而出。棗暈者，禁苑石榴也。 [He 1994, 171.]

We can see from a comparison with the *Compendium* of the Tang Dynasty that the two stories are essentially consistent in plot. For example, Mani was born in the royal palace of Su-lin 蘇鄰 (i.e. Northern Syria) and he was born from the chest of his mother. The single difference is that the way for his mother to get pregnant was changed into eating a pomegranate. In Mingjiao in southeast China during the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties, this new version replaced the old one and spread widely. In recent years, a ritual manuscript titled “Mani the Buddha of Light” has been discovered in Xiapu 霞浦 of Fujian,⁴ wherein the description of Mani’s birth is consistent with that in the *Minshu*:

The immortal Amrita-raja came to Ba-di’s Kingdom of Su-lin in the West from the Region of Truth, when nine auspicious signs appeared. He was born from the chest of Mo-yan and had no equal in the world. He was enlightened at 13 years old and began to preach. He then enlightened all living beings and was called King of the Law. 長生甘露王，從真實境，下西方跋帝蘇鄰國，九種現靈祥；末豔氏，胸前誕，世無雙。十三登正覺，成道大闡揚，化諸群品稱法王。 [lines 224–27 on p. 28 of the manuscript.]

A more detailed description can be found in the same manuscript:

Mani the Buddha was born in the Su-lin Kingdom. There was a pomegranate tree in the imperial garden. The palace servants picked the pomegranate and presented it to the queen Mo-yan, who found

it tasteful. Ten months later, Mani was born from the chest of Mo-yan. At that moment, golden lotus flowers emerged out of the earth, dew fell from the sky, all deities were happy, while the devils were worried and annoyed. The image of Mani found no equal in the world. The imperial concubines admired him and all came to welcome their prince back to the palace. 下生贊 摩尼佛下生時，托蔭於蘇鄰，石榴樹枝呈瑞園。官詣丹墀，表奏希奇，阿師健氏命宮官摘捧盤，殷勤奉獻。末豔氏喜食，花顏喜歡，神人誠責別宮安。十月滿，將花誕出，詣嬌培湧化胸間。地湧金蓮，捧天灑甘露。十方諸佛盡歡忻，三毒魔王悲煩惱。巍巍寶相，凡間難比。嬪妃仰止，咸迎太子歸宮裏。 [lines 294–303, pp. 37–38 in the same manuscript.]

Though the exact meaning of this Chinese text is not very clear and there might be some characters left out, we can still see that its plot is consistent with what is recorded in the *Minshu*: namely, Mani was born in the royal family of Su-lin; His mother, after eating a pomegranate, gave birth to him from her chest. According to the textual research conducted by Prof. Lin Wushu 林悟殊, the earlier or original version of this ritual manuscript, “Mani the Buddha of Light,” was from Xiapu and was created no earlier than the Ming Dynasty (Lin 2014, p. 489). This indicates that the birth story of Mani accepted by most of the believers of Mingjiao in the Song-Yuan period should be the one recorded in the *Minshu*.

As mentioned above, the main difference between the version of the *Compendium* and the version of the *Minshu* lies in the additional plot of eating a pomegranate. Paul Pelliot believed this plot was not completely fabricated in China, since, according to *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, Mani’s mother was an undetermined plant or tree.⁵ The pomegranate was native to the cradle of Manichaeism — Persia. For the people of West Asia, this fruit would have been known to all households, but they still called it “an undetermined plant,” which is enough to prove that the pregnancy story of eating pomegranate was not created in West Asia. I believe that the plot of getting pregnant after eating a pomegranate must have originated in China after the Tang Dynasty when the *Compendium* spread. Though mention of the pomegranate appeared earlier in works written after the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), after the fruit was introduced into China, it soon became familiar to the Chinese people. By the Song Dynasty, the pomegranate could be found everywhere (Laufer 1919, pp. 279–80). A good many myths concerning birth had been spread since ancient China, such as getting pregnant after eating something by mistake or following the deities’ footprints. So it also makes sense that Chinese Manichaeans adapted such myths in their texts concerning Mani. It is also

possible, as He Qiaoyuan indicated, that the account about Mani was inspired by the story of Lao Tsu's mother climbing a plum tree before giving birth to Lao Tsu. The pomegranate originated from Persia, which happens to be the birthplace of Mingjiao. After the queen of Su-lin ate a pomegranate — the specialty of Su-lin — she became pregnant. This story is obviously more vivid and more consistent with the way Chinese might have thought about such matters than the vague pregnancy legend recorded in the *Compendium*.

Having examined the evolution of myths regarding Mani's birth since the Tang Dynasty, let us now look again at the silk painting. The painting has been identified as an artwork dating to the late Yuan Dynasty. Considering that in the Song Dynasty prior to the Yuan period, Mingjiao was prevalent in the coastal regions of southeast China, the most likely textual basis for this painting should be the birth story spread among the believers of Mingjiao in southeast China, namely, the one recorded in the *Minshu* (as Prof. Yoshida suggested in his paper) or the above-mentioned ritual manuscript from Xiapu. The latter in particular, when compared with the silk painting, reveals similarities. For instance, the women holding a tray in the painting might be viewed as "the palace officials holding a tray and presenting it with all respect 宮官摘捧盤，殷勤奉獻"; right under the naked baby is a "golden lotus emerging from the earth 地湧金蓮"; the ten music deities in the air correspond closely with "Buddhas from ten directions were all happy 十方諸佛盡歡忻"; the three monsters in the dark clouds might be interpreted as "the devils were sad and worried 三毒魔王悲煩惱". From all these parallels, I suspect this painting is an artwork related with Mingjiao. But it is noteworthy that some important details in the painting do not correspond completely to the records in the *Compendium* or *Minshu*. Therefore, this painting is probably inspired by other documents.

II. The Taoist Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians 老子化胡經 and the Silk Painting

As mentioned above, Mani was born in the royal palace of Su-lin. After his mother ate a pomegranate, he was born from her chest. This should be the main plot acknowledged by the believers in China. However, two important elements, birth from the chest and the pomegranate were not reflected in this painting. The naked baby flew from the left ribs of the woman instead of her chest. The maids standing in front of the hall held a tray containing unidentified objects, but the objects seem to be flat, not shaped like a pomegranate. Perhaps some people might argue that not all details would be reflected in the painting. However, the pomegranate has important symbolic significance for the believers of Mingjiao in southeast China right until

the present. In recent years, a Jingzhu Palace Temple (境主宮, i.e. a temple for local patron) at Sunei Village 蘇內村 in Jinjiang 晉江 of Fujian has been studied by scholars. Five deities are painted on its front wall. The deity at the middle is Mani whose image is as same as the statue of Mani in neighboring Cao'an Temple. Local villagers devote particular care to the offerings. It's said that all deities enshrined in the temple were "vegetarian Buddha"; so the offerings on the altar should be vegetables, fruits and sweetmeats. But the fruit guava⁶ (called Nai-ba 柘拔 by the villagers) was believed to be the reincarnation of Mani the Buddha of Light; so it cannot be offered up as a sacrifice (Nian 2004, pp. 24-26). Today, the villagers of Sunei already cannot explain the origin of Mani, but they still consider the pomegranate to be taboo, which then suggests that the pomegranate has an extraordinary and far-reaching significance to Mingjiao in southeast China dating back to the Song and Yuan dynasties. Such being the case, is it not strange that pomegranate is absent from the birth scene of Mani?

What is more perplexing is that after the naked baby was born, his left hand points to the sky, while his right hand droops towards the earth. This gesture cannot be found in any versions of Mani's birth legend. Actually, it should be a portrayal of Sakyamuni who, after being born, "walked seven steps, pointing his hands and saying, in the heaven and the earth, I am supreme over all." (*Cārya-nidāna*, *Taishō Tripiṭaka* (3), 463). Moreover, Taoism imitated the Buddhist legend, indicating that Lao Tsu also made the same gesture and said the same words after being born:

The holy mother of Lao Tsu climbed a plum tree and gave birth to Lao Tsu from her left ribs... After Lao Tsu was born, he walked nine steps, with a lotus flower coming out at each step. He was illuminated by the sun and moon and guarded by all living things...Walking nine steps, his left hand pointed to the heaven and right hand pointed to the earth, saying, in the heaven and earth, I am supreme over all. [*Yongcheng Jixianlu* 壩城集仙錄 (Biography of the Female Immortals), Vol. 1, *Taoist Canon* 道藏 (18), 165.]

Lao Tsu's words, "I am supreme over all," possibly reflects the struggle and conflict between Buddhism and Taoism, showing the resolution of Taoists to compete against the Buddhists.

The Buddhists and the Taoists could make their founders say such brave words, but the Manichaeans could not and dared not. First of all, we note that the birth legends of saints might be similar, but generally would not be completely identical. Even if the birth legend of Lao Tsu imitated that of Sakyamuni, they still had small differences: Sakyamuni was born

from his mother's right ribs, while Lao Tsu was born from his mother's left ribs; Sakyamuni walked seven steps, while Lao Tsu walked nine. Therefore, the Manichaeans in China would not borrow all the elements of Buddhist and Taoist tales in creating Mani's story, but would surely make some innovation. The plot of Mani's birth from the chest could be taken as a modification. Secondly, Mani called himself a prophet coming to the world for salvation following Sakyamuni, Zoroaster and Jesus Christ,⁷ and never dared to claim himself as supreme over all. Moreover, considering the religious tension the Manichaeans faced in China during the Tang and Song dynasties, they would surely not have been so bold as to brag like this. Starting in the Tang Dynasty, Manichaeism was illegal most of the time; so how could it contend with Buddhism and Taoism? Besides, emperors of the Tang Dynasty had worshipped Lao Tsu as their ancestor; so how dare the Manichaean preachers coming to China put their founder above Lao Tsu? In the Song Dynasty though, some formal monasteries of Mingjiao in southeast China were accepted by the government, such official recognition mainly due to their attaching themselves to Taoism. What is more important, the believers of Mingjiao in the Song Dynasty called Mani "the fifth Buddha" (Lin 2012, p. 386). As the *Fozu tongji* (佛祖統紀, *Chronicle of the Buddha and the Patriarchs*), quoted in the *Yi jian zhi* (夷堅志, *Record of the Listener: Selections of Chinese Supernatural Stories*), says:

The "vegetarian demon worshippers" are numerous in San Shan [i.e., present-day Fujian]. The headman wears a purple hat and a loose garment, while women wear a black hat and a white garment. They call themselves Mingjiao. The Buddha whom they worship is in white, and they quote from scripture: "The Buddha in white [is] also called Shi Zun [i.e., the Lord]." They cite from the Diamond Sutra, "the first Buddha, the second Buddha, the third, the fourth and the fifth Buddha," regarding their Buddha as the fifth Buddha. 吃菜事魔，三山尤熾。為首者紫帽寬衫，婦人黑冠白服。稱為明教會。所事佛衣白，引經中所謂“白佛，言世尊”。取《金剛經》一佛，二佛，三、四、五佛，以為第五佛。[*Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 (*Chronicle of the Buddha and the Patriarchs*), Vol. 48, *Taishō Tripitaka* (49), 431.]

In the Song Dynasty, believers of Mingjiao regarded their founder as the "fifth Buddha". In the *Compendium* and *Minshu*, also, there is no description of Mani pointing to the heaven and earth and claiming to be the Supreme one. In conclusion, no textual evidence can be found in Manichaean documents during the Tang-Song period to support the image of the naked baby in this silk painting. Then, if the painting is a Manichaean work of the Yuan Dynasty and the naked

baby is Mani himself, we should search for another reference for this image. Considering its close relation with Mingjiao, the present author believes the clue may be found in Taoist scriptures, especially the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*, which was directly related to Manichaeism.

Wang Fu 王浮 of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420) wrote a volume of the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*, on the basis of which the Taoists of later generations successively enlarged. The original scripture was destroyed in the Yuan Dynasty. Luckily, some volumes of it were found in Dunhuang in the early 20th century. It recorded that Lao Tsu was grey-haired when he was born in the place of Bo 亳. He could walk at once, with lotus flowers growing from every step. He pointed his left hand to the heaven, and right hand to the earth, saying: "In heaven and on earth, I am supreme over all." After 450 years, He rode on the vapor of the Tao of spontaneous light flying into the Su-lin kingdom of the precious realm of Xina. He descended into the royal family and be born as the prince. He would then leave the family and enter the religion and be called as Mār Mani.⁸

Manichaeans of the Tang Dynasty were familiar with this Taoist scripture. In the Song Dynasty, Taoism and Manichaeism were more closely related. As is evident from the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*, the birth story of Lao Tsu is consistent with what is depicted on the silk painting.

Note though that the naked baby is on the left of the scene rather than the center of the whole painting. Instead, the musicians in the cloud, the red halo in the air and the trapezoid-like object on the ground are painted on the central axis; so they are the objects highlighted by the painter. As to the figure in the red halo, Yoshida believed it reflected the passage in the *Compendium* that when Mani "was about to be born, the two radiant-ones sent their own spiritual power to lighten each part of the trikāya. 當欲出世，二耀降靈，分光三體" (Chinese text: Lin 2011, p. 429; English tr.: Haloun and Henning 1952, p. 189). Even if the damaged image of the figure in the halo is Mani, it is still difficult to explain how a single halo can symbolize "trikāya" (i.e., three bodies). According to the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*, Lao Tsu "rode on the vapor of the Tao of spontaneous light and flew into the Su-lin kingdom of the precious realm of Xina." In the Taoist context, "the vapor of the Tao" is colorless and intangible, as is recorded in the *Lao Tsu Xiang'er Zhu* (老子想爾注, *Commentary on Tao Te Ching*): "The vapor of the Tao is subtle and invisible." However, the Supernatural being "travelled around the universe with the vapor of the Tao, now called as Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊, or called as Laojun 老

君, or Taishang Laojun 太上老君, or the mentor for the world, all of which being his unmanifested body [Dharmakāya in the Buddhist context]" (*Daojiao Yishu* 道教義樞 [Religious Doctrine of Taoism]," Fashen Yi [Doctrine of the unmanifested body], part II, 法身義第二," *Dao Zang* 道藏 (24), 805). That is, the Supreme one achieved the Dharmakāya with the vapor of the Tao. Alternatively, we may perhaps interpret the halo and the light beam shining from the sky in the painting as concretized "vapor of the Tao."

Besides the halo, on the central axis of this painting on the ground is a trapezoid-like object. Since the painting is damaged, it's indeed difficult to identify what the object is. Yoshida guessed it is a case containing religious classics. However, judging from its appearance, it is not a case. The lower part of the object is painted with a white circular pattern on a red background. Such a pattern is also to be seen on the garment of the second musician on the right of the object and the lower hem of the robes worn by the four deities in the cloud on the left and right sides. Perhaps what the painter wanted to express is that the lower part of the object is covered by some kind of red cloth. A patch is missing at the middle of the red cloth, and it seems that there's something white in the middle of the unidentified object, resembling a person sitting with legs crossed. It is easy to associate the object with the "throne" of Taoism. As required by Taoism, wherever the Supernatural being is enshrined and worshipped, a throne must be set. According to the rites, there are eight kinds of thrones for the Supernatural being of Taoism, which are all ornamented with various kinds of jewels, jade and brocade. Followers were required to set a throne for the Supernatural being as the way to accumulate merits (*Daoxuan lingbao sandong fengdao kejie yingshi* 洞玄靈寶三洞奉道科戒營始 [Regulations and Rites of Taoism], vol.3, *Dao Zang* (24), 752-53).

If the figure sitting with legs crossed were Mani, the incarnation of Lao Tsu, then the unidentified object covered by the red cloth might be his throne. The *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians* also depicts a scene Lao Tsu sitting on a throne in Khotan and meeting with all deities: Lao Tsu travelled westward via the desert and reached the Kingdom of Khotan. He held his wand and called together his followers; so deities gathered around him from all corners. At that time, Lao Tsu was sitting on a throne in a jade tabernacle, with incense being burned, flowers being scattered, music being played, while all deities were surrounding him (Dunhuang Manuscripts 1990, (3), p. 164). In this painting, we can also see several figures playing music and dancing and putting their palms together devoutly around the throne. Given the damage to the painting and thus the blurring of the image, of course my suggestion is rather speculative.

In a word, other than the *Compendium* and *Minshu* which recorded the birth legend of Mani, the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians* is more likely to have been an important textual basis for this painting. And what is shown on the painting might be the scene of Lao Tsu's incarnation as Mani.

III. The Prototype of the Silk Painting

While the painting has been designated a work of the Yuan Dynasty, it presumably is not the earliest or original depiction of the scene. Prior to the Yuan period, both the theory and the painting of Lao Tsu's incarnation as Mani had already appeared; so this silk painting might have an earlier prototype.

Taoist artworks with the theme of "Lao Tsu's conversion of barbarians" certainly existed no later than the Early Tang Dynasty. Such murals were often found in Taoist monasteries at that time. They were so popular that Emperor Zhongzong (656-710) once ordered that they be destroyed (Song 1987, 415). By the end of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), there were eighty-one paintings based on "the conversion of Barbarians". According to the *Bianwei Lu* 辨偽錄, Taoists imitated Buddhist practice to create the stories of eighty-one reincarnations of Lao Tsu, and such stories were made into paintings which were quite common (*Bianwei lu* 辨偽錄 [Records about the Debate between Buddhism and Taoism on the authenticity of Sutras in the Zhiyuan Era (1264-1294) of the Yuan Dynasty], Vol. 1, *Taishō Tripitaka* (52), 752). Among the paintings of eighty-one reincarnations, the 42nd one was the painting of Lao Tsu's reincarnation into Mani: "Lao Tsu visited the Kingdom of Maga, showing a rare laksana to enlighten the king. He founded the religion of Buddha and was named the Buddha of Tranquility, called Mār Mani" (*Bianwei lu*, Vol. 2, *Taishō Tripitaka* (52), 761). In *Tao Te Ching* collected by Ofuchi Ninji, there are also eighty-one reincarnation paintings of Lao Tsu, wherein the 42nd one is the reincarnation as Mani, with an annotation: "In the 42nd reincarnation story, Lao Tsu visited the Kingdom of Maga, showing a rare laksana with a calabash in hand to enlighten the king. He founded the religion of Buddha and was named the Buddha of Tranquility, called Mār Mani, which was worshipped by Kshatriya and Brahman there" (Noritada 1961, pp. 365-66). Therefore, as a part of the "conversion of Barbarians" series, the painting of Lao Tsu's reincarnation into Mani should have appeared in the Song Dynasty at the latest.

As a matter of fact, such paintings were created and were common during the Song Dynasty, which is consistent with the spread history of Manichaeism. The *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians* was accepted as legal by an imperial order, and the

theory of “Lao Tsu’s reincarnation as Mani” was viewed as orthodoxy in the Song Dynasty. What is more, Mingjiao was considered to be a branch of Taoism, while Manichaeism scriptures were collected into the *Taoist Canon*. In the above-mentioned ritual manuscript “Mani the Buddha of Light” from Xiapu, the name of “Immortal Amrita-raja” of Mani had appeared in the Song Dynasty. According to the records of Xie Shouhao 謝守灝, quoting the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*: “By the fourth year of Emperor Mu, Lao Tsu descended and travelled to the East Sea. He reached the regions of Fu Sang [i.e. present-day Japan] and met with the emperor. He called together the immortals and ranked them. He then visited the Su-lin Kingdom in the West Sea, with a name of Immortal Amrita-raja Supreme Healing King Light Messenger, converting humans, deities and ghosts. Wherever there was no Taoism, Lao Tsu would go there to preach and then flew into the heaven” (*Hunyuan shengji* 混元聖紀 [Biography of Lao Tsu], Vol.5, *Dao Zang* (17), 827). “Immortal Amrita-raja” was a name given by Taoism to Mani, while the “Supreme Healing King Light Messenger” was what the Manichaeism called their religion’s founder since the Tang and Song dynasties, because this title had been recorded in the *Compendium* as “insurpassable, bright, and all-wise Healing King 光明大慧無上醫王” (Chinese text: Lin 2011, p. 429; English tr.: Haloun and Henning 1952, p. 189). This indicates that during the Song Dynasty, the story of Lao Tsu’s reincarnation into Mani, or Mani’s name, identity and status were acknowledged by Taoism, Manichaeism, and even the government. Judging from the rites manuscript of Xiapu, this consensus extended into later generations. The compilers of the rites manuscript of Xiapu might have been referring to the theory of the conversion of barbarians and even the original version of the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*.

Though the most likely period for the creation and spread of “the painting of Lao Tsu’s reincarnation into Mani” was in the Song Dynasty, there is still no evidence to prove the silk painting discussed in this paper is “the painting of Lao Tsu’s reincarnation into Mani.” Since the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians* and the eighty-one paintings were destroyed, no comparison can be made at present. In the 18th year of the Yuan Dynasty (1281), Khubilai issued an injunction that other than *Tao Teh King*, all scriptures and printing blocks of Taoism must be burned. The eighty-one reincarnation paintings painted or engraved in Taoist monasteries must be all destroyed. If the officials do not make their best efforts to carry out this decree, they will be punished and the collectors found guilty (*Fozu lidai tongzai* 佛祖歷代通載 [Annalistic History of Buddhism], vol.21, *Taishō Tripitaka* (49), 707).

The harsh tone of the edict indicated a firm resolution of the rulers to ban the Taoist scriptures except for *Tao Teh King*. This order must have been strictly carried out at that time, for which the evidence is that today no complete version of the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians* can be found. The original version was destroyed, while other works relating to the theme were not banned. Even so, people at that time spoke and acted cautiously once this theory was touched upon. According to Zhao Daoyi 趙道一, a Taoist priest in the Yuan period, Lao Tsu, under the name of Master Gu 古, went to some kingdoms in the Western Regions to convert kings and people there. Then he descended to the West Sea for preaching in Su-lin Kingdom, and then flew into the heaven.⁹ Zhao’s book can be dated to around 1294 CE, its contents derived from the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*. But its wording is simple and vague. Compared with the above-quoted paragraph in Xie’s *Hunyuan Shengji*, the sentence “he descended to the West Sea” is obviously a condensed version. Lao Tsu was called “Master Gu”, the character “Gu 古” (lit. “ancient”) might be the left half of the character “Hu 胡” (lit. “barbarian”). We can understand Zhao’s taking pains in order not to violate the ban. A manuscript titled *Leshantang Shenji* 樂山堂神記 from Xiapu (Chen and Wu 2009; Ma 2015; Chen and Lin 2010; Yang 2011; Huang 2013) honors two patriarchs of the so-called “religion of Lingyuan 靈源教”, Hu Tianzun 胡天尊 and Hu Guyue 胡古月.¹⁰ I guess these two names might be related to the title “Master Gu” (or “Master Hu”) in the story of converting the barbarians.

While the painting of Lao Tsu’s reincarnation into Mani had already appeared, given that the theory of “conversion of Barbarians” had become a sensitive topic in the Yuan Dynasty, people probably would not have risked creating a painting themed on “conversion of Barbarians.” Yet it would be unreasonable to assume that complete eradication of the earlier works would have been possible, despite the effort at rigorous enforcement. Someone must have secretly concealed the banned books, making possible the partial preservation of the *Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians*; so we cannot eliminate the possibility that the eighty-one conversion paintings might also have been passed down secretly. And when later followers painted the same type of work, the surviving paintings might have become a basis or reference for them. Both the background of the painting of Lao Tsu’s reincarnation into Mani and the religious situation in the Yuan Dynasty, would suggest that the painting under discussion was not the original version. It might have incorporated some changes on the basis of a prototype from the Song Dynasty. This painting includes complex cultural elements, referring

to different religious scriptures, which indicates it borrowed the elements of a multitude of religions.

In fact, the theory of Lao Tsu's reincarnation into Mani himself had almost become a consensus among the Taoists and Manichaeans during the Tang and Song dynasties. This painting can be regarded as an artwork of Taoism or Manichaeism, and even in the eyes of Buddhists, it might also have been regarded as but a slightly-changed depiction of Buddha's birth. Untangling the complex threads of all these religions is a challenge, especially in the case of Manichaeism, which could survive in China after the Huichang Persecution (840–845) only by attaching itself to Buddhism and Taoism and thus being strongly influenced by those religions. Mingjiao in the southeast coastal regions during the Song Dynasty was not what Manichaeism of the Tang Dynasty was like, and in fact embodied significant differences. Therefore, it will be rather difficult to identify clearly the elements of each religion in this silk painting and determine the exact sources in the texts. Rather than identifying its exact religious attribute, it's better to view it as a folk painting integrating elements of a multitude of religions such as Taoism, Mingjiao and local beliefs during the Song and Yuan dynasties.

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Notes

1. For the latest collated Chinese text of the *Compendium* see Lin 2011, pp. 429-30; for the English translation, see Haloun and Henning 1952, pp. 190-91.

2. The name of Mani's mother is Mays or Awtāhim or Mar Maryam in Arabic. "滿艷 (Man Yan)" is the Chinese transliteration of Maryam. However, it sounds similar to "Māyā", the mother of Buddha.

3. Mingjiao originated from Manichaeism in the Tang period. It was a highly-sinicized variant of Manichaeism, which prevailed mainly in the coastal regions of southeast China after the Tang Dynasty.

4. I am deeply grateful to Mr. Lin Yun 林鋈 for providing me a photograph of it.

5. See Pelliot 1923. Gustav Flügel (1862, p. 117) had earlier pointed out that the name of Mani's mother was a relic of myth, or related to the lotus flower or wild pepper.

6. The Chinese name of guava is "番石榴" which literally means foreign pomegranate. The coincidence makes me suspect that 番石榴, i.e., foreign pomegranate, is just a misrepresentation of pomegranate 石榴 after being passed from mouth to mouth for generations in China.

7. Jonas 1963, p. 207; see Sogdian manuscripts T III T 601 (Ch/U 6914), T III 2015 (So. 15000(5)) and T II D 2 (Ch5554) (Sundermann 1985, pp. 19-36).

8. The Chinese text:

是時，太上老君以殷王湯甲庚申之歲、建午之月，從常道境，駕三氣雲。乘於日精，垂於九耀。入於玉女玄妙口中，寄胎為人，庚辰年二月十五日誕生於亳。九龍吐水，灌洗其形，化為九井。爾時老君，鬚髮皓白，登即能行，步生蓮花，乃至於九。左手指天，右手指地，而告人曰：天上天下，唯我獨尊。我當開揚無上道法，普度一切動植眾生，周遍十方及幽牢地獄，應度未度，咸悉度之。……天神空裏，贊十號名。所言十者，太上老君、圓神智無上尊、帝王師、大丈夫、大仙尊、天人父、無為上人、大悲仁者、元始天尊。……後經四百五十餘年，我乘自然光明道氣，從真寂境飛入西那玉界蘇鄰國中。降誕王室，示為太子。舍家入道，號末摩尼。轉大法輪，說經誡律定慧等法，乃至三際及二宗門。教化天人，令知本際。上至明界，下及幽塗。所有眾生，皆由此度。[*Laozi huahu jing* 老子化胡經 (The Scripture of the Conversion of Barbarians), Vol. 1, *Taishō Tripitaka* (54), 1266-67.]

For Manuscript S.1857, see *Dunhuang Manuscripts* 1990, (3), pp. 164-66; for Manuscript P.2007, see *Dunhuang-Turfan Manuscripts* 1995, (1), pp. 68-72.

9. The Chinese text:

初，老君去周，嘗西化大秦、安息、月氏、烏弋、竺乾等國，號“古先生”，其國王及臣民皆奉教戒，乃還中國。復與無上真人尹喜至罽賓國行化，次及條支、于闐等國行化，且降伏九十五種外道焉。至穆王四年甲申，老君降遊東海，至博桑會大帝，校集諸仙名位高下。復分身降於西海，至蘇鄰國行化，俄復升天。[*Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* 曆世真仙體道通鑒 [The Taoist Immortal Biography], Vol. 8, *Dao Zang* (5), 155.]

10. There is still no scholarly consensus as to whether the two really existed or whether the two were one or two persons.