
*T’ien-fei hsien-sheng lu* 天妃顯聖錄 (TF) is a Qing collection of official enfeoffment documents and miracle tales involving the Empress of Heaven (*tianhou* 天后), also known as Mazu. This hagiographical collection has been reprinted several times during the Qing dynasty, each edition with substantial and interesting differences. As demonstrated first of all by Li Xianzhang, the collection probably is based on a now lost late Ming version. The German sinologist Gerd Wadow has now translated one of the extant Qing editions, with a long introduction concerning the deity and this particular hagiographical collection. He also includes the specific text which he has used for his translation, namely the reset and edited version of an 1870 edition of the TF, published as number 77 in the *Taiwan wenxian congkan* 臺灣文獻叢刊 (Taiwan yinhang, Taibei, 1960). In fact, judging from the contents on p. 33, the author has not consulted the original 1870 woodblock edition during his translation work, but solely relied on the 1960 reprint.

At the end of Wadow’s book is a black-and-white reproduction of the important set of hagiographic paintings (originally in colour; kept in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) depicting the miracles performed by the Empress in support of the Qing armies in their conquest of Taiwan, as well as the miracle that first brought her to the attention of the imperial court in 1122.

The Empress of Heaven cult has been studied by many scholars from a variety of perspectives. Especially important are the exhaustive articles by Li Xianzhang 李獻璋 on the history of the cult and its mythology, which have been published in Li’s *Maso shinkô no kenkyû* 媽祖信仰の研究 (Taisan bunbutussha, Tôkyô, 1979), with a lengthy Appendix that reproduces virtually all early source materials on the cult’s history. Li’s masterpiece has been almost completely ignored by fellow Chinese scholars, one suspects because it is largely in Japanese.¹ Wadow does mention Li Xianzhang’s book in his bibliography and refers to some of the source materials in Li’s Appendix (Wadow, p. 32, n.4 and p. 34, n.10), but otherwise ignores his findings completely. Judging from his footnotes, Wadow draws largely on Taiwanese and Western studies for his
analysis of the Empress of Heaven cult.²

Not using Li Xianzhang’s research has resulted in major weaknesses in Wadow’s book that reduce its value for serious scholars. In addition to discussing the history of the Empress of Heaven cult itself, Li Xianzhang (Li [1979] pp. 93–152) also analyses the textual history of the TF and its influence. This analysis surpasses by far the quality of the postscript to the Taiwanese reprint, which is Wadow’s principal source (pp. 31–37, with a full translation on pp. 256–270). For instance, Li Xianzhang is able to date the various authors of the prefaces and provides biographical information. None of this precious information is used by Wadow.

I have seen three other editions besides the one used by Wadow, from 1725, 1778, and 1843, all of them in Japanese libraries (where they could have been obtained without much effort in microfilm form).³ However, I presently only have access to a microfilm of the 1843 edition. Although this edition discusses the same miracles – apart from some additional information at the end of the book added in different characters – as the edition used by Wadow, the language of the anecdotes has sometimes been simplified and the stories are provided with illustrations. These changes and additions are important phenomena in themselves, no doubt intended to facilitate comprehension by the presumed uneducated audience of this text. The illustrations include the view on Meizhou that was too damaged to be included in the reprint edition used by Wadow (p. 32). Wadow does not discuss these three texts in his survey (except for short remarks on the 1725 edition, based on one secondary reference, see Wadow, p. 37), even when they could have helped to fill lacunae in his edition or solve problems of interpretation.

The TF belongs to the genre of hagiographical collections concerning local deities unrelated in their origins to canonical Daoist or Buddhist traditions, which seems to have appeared first during the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties.⁴ An analysis of this genre is long overdue. Such an analysis should also include the printing and editorial history of the various editions of the TF and similar works, the influence (or its absence) of such hagiographies on people’s perceptions, and so forth. This kind of study could contribute considerably to a better understanding of the relationship between local (regional) and elite culture, since all of these texts have been produced by members of the examination elite. With these writings we have a much more representative set of materi-