

## THE WHITE LOTUS TEACHINGS

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Review of B[AREND] J. TER HAAR, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*. Sinica Leidensia 26. Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992., xiv, 343 pp. 7 maps. Gld. 170. US\$ 97.25. ISSN 0169-9563. ISBN 90-04-09414-8 (cloth)

During the last two decades the study of Chinese popular religion and sectarianism has become a major subject of Western scholars in Chinese religion. While before the 1970s the field has been more or less a domain of Japanese and – to a lesser degree – Chinese scholars, the works of Richard Chu and particularly of Daniel Overmyer and Susan Naquin have directed the attention of Western readers and researchers to this subject.<sup>1</sup> Above all the study of Ming and Qing sectarianism has made tremendous progress through the opening of two kinds of formerly neglected sources, i.e., the official documents stored in archives in Taiwan and mainland China, and the *baojuan* 寶卷 (Precious Scrolls) scriptures used by the various sects. Many valuable studies on certain aspects of Ming and Qing popular religions have been published since, but Overmyer's study of 1976 still remained the only monograph trying to put these phenomena into the larger context of Chinese religious history since the Song. Time seems ripe, therefore, for a new synthesis based on the state of the art.

Ter Haar's study on *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* only partly fills this gap. The title is somewhat misleading, since actually the author does not want to write a history of the White Lotus Teachings, but rather a history of their perception by the Chinese literati and officials (and, in a certain sense, by modern scholars). The main thesis of the author is that the name "White Lotus Teachings" (*Bailian jiao* 白蓮教) during the Ming and Qing dynasties was not an autonym used by the religious groups themselves, but rather a label used by the literati and officials to stigmatize these religious groups as heterodox. He shows that many instances of so-called White Lotus rebellions in the late Yuan and early Ming received this label only in much later sources (after 1525), while contemporary sources did not mention the name White Lotus (p. 168).

1 Yung-deh Richard Chu, "An Introductory Study of the White Lotus Sect in Chinese History with Special Reference to Peasant Movements." Ph. D. diss., Columbia University, 1967. Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion. Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*. (Harvard East Asian Series 83.) Cambridge, Mass. 1976. Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China. The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*. New Haven/London 1976.

Ter Haar's second thesis is that the "old-style" White Lotus movement, which was founded by the monk Mao Ziyuan 茅子元 (1086/88–1160), should be regarded as being part of the wider Buddhist lay movement, which is well documented for the Lower Yangzi region during the Song dynasty (Chapter II). From the point of doctrine these lay groups were more or less in accord with officially recognized Buddhist teachings, although they were occasionally criticized by Buddhist writers and government officials. The White Lotus Society represented one important element within this lay Buddhist tradition, which can be easily identified by the use of certain religious affiliation characters that were part of the religious names of its members (pp. 39–41). The White Lotus lay Buddhists were active also during the Yuan dynasty, they had their own temples and were usually respected by the rest of the society (Chapter III).

The third thesis concerns the fate of the White Lotus movement after the fall of the Yuan. Ter Haar shows that the name "White Lotus" was turned into a label applied to groups regarded as heterodox, while the lay Buddhist groups which actually stood in the tradition of the old-style White Lotus stopped using this name as an autonym. However, the author argues, the tradition of White Lotus lay Buddhism was continued by other groups with different names, particularly by what he calls the "Non-Action movement" founded by Luo Qing 羅清 (1443–1527).

Besides these points, which in my view are the most important theses of Ter Haar's book, the author deals with a great variety of other questions which cannot easily be summarized. There is a significant shift in the emphasis given to certain aspects throughout the book. While the chapters two, three, and partly also chapter four give much importance to the reconstruction and description of religious groups and movements which in some way or another are related to the White Lotus movement from the Song to the early Ming, in chapters five to eight the sectarian groups of the Ming and Qing dynasties which are commonly regarded as representing the "new-style" White Lotus are not treated in detail. Instead, the author illustrates with some cases how the label "White Lotus Teachings" was applied to religious groups which had nothing at all in common with the old-style White Lotus movement and which, by the way, did not belong to the historically more important sectarian traditions of the Ming and Qing.

Ter Haar uses an impressive amount of Chinese sources, including local gazetteers and epigraphical materials. This is especially true for his treatment of the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, while he seems to be less familiar with the sources for Qing sectarianism. He makes good use of the Japanese, Chinese and Western secondary literature and offers an extensive bibliography. This is certainly a work of profound scholarship which significantly contributes to the history of Chinese religions since the Song.

In a work of such a broad scope, which includes many new interpretations and hypotheses, it is unavoidable that some of the arguments will be disputed by other

students of the field. I shall concentrate on three points which to me seem open to discussion.

### 1

The first point concerns ter Haar's interpretation of the White Lotus movement prior to the Ming. He makes some efforts to show that the White Lotus movement of the Song and Yuan was a clearly identifiable Buddhist lay movement. He is probably right in opposing the traditional view held by many scholars that during the Yuan-Ming transition this White Lotus society, as founded by Mao Ziyuan, changed from a devotionalist passive movement with the autonym White Lotus Society into a millenarian rebellious movement with the autonym White Lotus Teachings (p. 114). He does not consider, however, a further possibility, namely that there existed religious groups which did not have much in common with Mao Ziyuan's White Lotus Society, but nevertheless used the name White Lotus as an autonym. Ter Haar himself mentions two cases. One is Han Shantong's 韓山童 grandfather who, during the Yuan dynasty, was banished "on the basis [of membership] of the *Bailian hui*, burning incense and bringing people in confusion" (p. 118). The other dates from the early Ming, when the monk Peng Yulin 彭玉琳 called himself Patriarch Buddha Maitreya and organized a *Bailian hui* (p. 136). Both cases seem to have had nothing in common with the old White Lotus Society except for the name White Lotus. In both cases belief in Maitreya is evident. Religious groups of this kind represent exactly the type of sects which were later labelled *Bailian jiao*. What prevents us from assuming that it was this kind of groups Luo Qing and other writers had in mind when they criticized the White Lotus Teaching?

Maybe ter Haar has not gone far enough in his removing of traditionally held conceptions about the White Lotus Movement. Maybe he is too much captivated by the idea that the White Lotus Society founded by Mao Ziyuan was a more or less orthodox Buddhist lay movement and remained so until the early Ming. To be sure, there certainly was a kind of White Lotus movement in the sense ter Haar describes it, at least until the 14th century. But does that really imply that all cases, where the name White Lotus is used, refer to the same kind of religious groups? The author makes an effort to explain why during the Yuan dynasty the monk Pudu 普渡, as a defender of the "orthodox" White Lotus movement, opposes certain practices of religious leaders "who fraudulently call themselves by the name White Lotus" (p. 100).<sup>2</sup> Obviously Pudu wanted to draw a sharp line between the kind of religious groups he was criticizing and his own understanding of the White Lotus movement.

2 Cf. Pudu, "Lushan fujiao ji" 廬山復教集, in: Yang Ne 楊訥 (ed.), *Yuandai Bailian jiao ziliao huibian* 元代白蓮教資料彙編 (Beijing 1989), p. 184.

But why should we not believe him that there actually existed other groups which used the same name? Is that not much more probable than ter Haar's hypothesis that Pudu had introduced the religious leaders he was going to castigate for rhetorical reasons (p. 99f.)?

I do not think the evidence provided is sufficient to suppose that after Mao Ziyuan there was only one tradition which used the name White Lotus as an autonym. If the White Lotus Society enjoyed some reputation among the populace, would that not tempt some other religious leaders to use the same name in order to boost their own teachings? After all, the name White Lotus had not been invented by Mao Ziyuan and could be adopted by anyone who wanted to do so. Furthermore, the White Lotus movement, as described by ter Haar, was no centralized organization, but in the 13th and 14th centuries continued in a number of cloisters which were hereditarily owned by certain families. That is certainly not the kind of organization Mao Ziyuan had founded, although it is very similar to some of the sect organizations in the same geographical area during the Qing. That is, even before the Ming dynasty the White Lotus movement and the various groups belonging to it underwent some changes which allowed for disparate developments in some of the groups. Pudu may also have referred to some of the results of these (in his view) distorted developments.

I am, therefore, not totally convinced that until the early Ming the autonym "White Lotus" was applied exclusively by "orthodox" Buddhist lay groups. What ter Haar calls "new style White Lotus" may in fact be traditions which already existed prior to the Ming, even if the name White Lotus was used only occasionally.

The point can be illustrated with the famous rebellion of Han Shantong at the end of the Yuan, which later came to be regarded as the earliest example of "new style White Lotus." Ter Haar demonstrates convincingly that the name "White Lotus" was not used by the members of the group, nor does it occur in the sources before the sixteenth century (pp. 115–123). Furthermore, the Maitreyan messianism, which was part of Han Shantong's teachings, shows clearly that they derived from other traditions than the "old style White Lotus." I fully agree with ter Haar's conclusion that the Han Shantong uprising can, therefore, not be regarded as a case of White Lotus rebellion. This is without any doubt an important statement. But it does not allow us to conclude that prior to the Ming the White Lotus movement as a whole was unaffected by Maitreyan messianism. Ter Haar himself notes that among the generals of Xu Shouhui 徐壽輝, who revolted at the same time as Han Shantong, there were many generals who used the religious affiliation characters that were characteristic of the White Lotus Society (p. 126), and he admits that this movement derived much of its attraction from Maitreyism (p. 128). It is difficult not to conclude that by the late Yuan the original White Lotus society had already lost its homogeneity and developed into a variety of groups many of which had adopted beliefs and practices which were not present in Mao Ziyuan's original teachings. Ter

Haar seems to overemphasize the continuity and unity of the tradition and to neglect the changes and diversities.

## 2

This brings me to my second point, the alleged continuance of the White Lotus lay Buddhist movement until the Qing dynasty under a new name. One of the main assumptions of ter Haar's study concerns what he calls the "Non-Action movement"<sup>3</sup> (*Wuwei jiao* 無為教) of Luo Qing. The author remarks, that "there are several indications that adherents of the earlier [White Lotus] movement (in whatever form it had survived) may indeed have been absorbed by this new movement. Adherents of Luo Qing's teachings, in the Lower Yangzi region, used the same religious affiliation characters and personal autonyms as the adherents of the old style White Lotus movement" (p. 204). After discussing some further aspects of the "Non-Action movement," ter Haar concludes: "The Non-Action movement of Luo Qing and his lay followers can, therefore, be seen as further development in the lay Buddhist tradition, rather than as a radical break with it" (p. 208).

The Non-Action movement is the main argument for the author's thesis, that there was a considerable degree of continuity between the Buddhist lay movement of the Song and Yuan on the one hand and of the Ming and Qing on the other. In his final chapter he even asserts that "many aspects of the White Lotus movement [...] were actually continued by the Non-Action movement, which can be traced back as an independent tradition to the *Five Books in Six Volumes* by Luo Qing. It has been asserted that the later Non-Action movement also incorporated the Maitreyist Eternal Venerable Mother mythology, but this is by no means clear from the sources. *If true, it would seriously weaken my claim that there were any continuities* [italics mine, H.S.]. As late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, we can find many groups in this tradition which did not share this Maitreyan mythology and still used the *Five Books in Six Volumes*" (p. 291).

I do not know why ter Haar gives that much weight to this point. The matter is rather intricate, but I am afraid that the author's conclusions concerning the Non-Action movement cannot be sustained. First of all, what exactly does he mean by the "Non-Action movement"? Of course, it should be the English translation of *Wuwei jiao*, which was the name of the religious group founded by Luo Qing. The name also occurs in later sources at least until the 19th century. However, in most if not all of the cases mentioned by ter Haar to support his point that the Non-Action movement was a continuation of the White Lotus lay Buddhist tradition, the

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3 Ter Haar usually refers to religious groups and to sources by using English translations of the names. This makes it sometimes difficult to identify the Chinese original, which is given only when first mentioning it. I would have preferred the other way around.

name *Wuwei jiao* is not reported. Ter Haar considers them as belonging to the Non-Action movement probably because they made use of the *Wubu liuce* 五部六册 (*Five Books in Six Volumes*) and regarded Luo Qing as their patriarch. Obviously the author assumes that all religious groups with these features continued the teachings of Luo Qing and can, therefore, be taken to illustrate the characteristics of the *Wuwei jiao*. The “Non-Action movement” would then be another term for what other authors have called the “Luo-sects.”

It may well be that after the Ming dynasty there were some sects which continued the original teachings of Luo Qing as they were written down in the *Wubu liuce*. In that case they could hardly be considered as a continuation of the “old-style” White Lotus lay Buddhists, since these stood in the Pure Land tradition and advocated among others the recitation of the name of the Buddha Amitābha, a practice which Luo Qing in his scriptures explicitly repudiates as useless. After all, his teachings were called *Wuwei jiao* because he advocated a kind of religious cultivation that did not rely on (ritual) action.

However, all Qing cases of the “Non-Action movement” referred to by ter Haar do not belong to this “pure” tradition of Luo Qing’s teachings, even if they revered Luo Qing and his writings. Without realizing it, ter Haar consecutively refers only to one particular sectarian tradition whose connection with Luo Qing’s original *Wuwei jiao* is rather obscure. The tradition in question is the one founded by Yao Wenyu 姚文于 (1578–1646) which in the early 18th century came to be known by the name *Laoguan zhajiao* 老官齋教 (Old Officials Vegetarian Teaching). Later it was simply called *Yao men* 姚門 (Yao sect), because the leadership was handed down among members of the Yao family. The sect originated in the Zhejiang, Fujian, and Jiangxi regions, but in the 19th century was known also in other provinces.

Since the hagiography of the sect founder, Yao Wenyu, and his two alleged precursors, Luo Qing and Yin Ji’nan 殷繼南, has been transmitted, we know for certain that the teachings of the Yao sect included the belief in Maitreya and in *Wusheng Laomu* 無生老母.<sup>4</sup> It is this same sectarian tradition of the Yao family to which the *Chongming manlu* 蟲鳴漫錄, a text of the late 19th century, refers. Thus, ter Haar is not right in citing the *Chongming manlu* as a proof for his claim, that “as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [...] we can find many groups in this tradition which did not share this Maitreyan mythology” (p. 291).<sup>5</sup>

4 The text in question is the *Taishang zushi sanshi yinyou* 太上祖師三世因由 (Origins of the Most Exalted Patriarchs of Three Generations), first printed in 1682. Reference to *Wusheng Laomu*, the three *kalpas* and Maitreya in part two, pp. 29a–30a. For details on the sect founded by Yao Wenyu, see my article, “Popular Religious Sects in South-East China: Sect Connections and the Problem of the Luo Jiao/Bailian Jiao Dichotomy,” in: *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (Fall 1992), pp. 33–60, esp. pp. 34–42.

5 Ter Haar fails to realize that the “Non-Action movement” which flourished in the Lower Yangzi

However, not only the Yao family's version of the *Luo zu jiao* 羅祖教 (Teaching of Patriarch Luo) or "Non-Action movement" had adopted the belief in Maitreya and *Wusheng Laomu*, but also other sects which in the early nineteenth century still used the autonym *Wuwei jiao*. In a memorial reporting the case of a *Qing jing Wuwei jiao* 清靜無為教 (Pure and Serene Teaching of Non-Action), which can clearly be identified as belonging to the tradition of Luo Qing, two scriptures are mentioned that contained, among others, teachings about *Wusheng Laomu*, the White *yang* 白陽 and the Red *yang* 紅陽 (i.e., the last two *kalpas*) and about Maitreya, "who will hold the apex and (has been? will be?) secretly born."<sup>6</sup> Here we have all the elements which were characteristic for most of the Maitreya sects during the Qing, which shows that ter Haar's interpretation of the Non-Action movement as basically a continuation of pre-Ming lay Buddhism can hardly be maintained.

## 3

My third point also concerns ter Haar's interpretation of Ming and Qing sectarianism and the question of their place in Chinese religious history. The author is right in pointing out that there are no clear-cut lines which allow us to distinguish between "heterodox" and "orthodox" religious groups. It is true that in many cases religious groups which belonged to traditions considered as heterodox by the authorities not only conceived themselves as being devout Buddhists, but were also regarded by outsiders as such. And I agree "that for a sociological interpretation of meditation and sutra-recitation groups, it is necessary to look outside the confines of the traditional White Lotus interpretation" (p. 298).

However, the author seems to be somewhat biased in his interpretations by laying the emphasis exclusively on the affinities, that indubitably existed between

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region in the 17th and 18th centuries was headed by the Yao family and is therefore the same as the *Luo zu jiao* 羅祖教 mentioned in the *Chongming manlu*. Incidentally, this lapse derives from a misprint in an article of Susan Naquin's on which ter Haar relies ("The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China," in: David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, Evelyn S. Rawski [eds.]: *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* [Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1985], pp. 255–291, p. 264 and note 24 where Patriarch Yao [i.e., Yao Wenyu] is twice misprinted as "Patriarch Chao" [c.f. ter Haar, p. 204 note 17]). By the way, two other references which are cited by ter Haar in note 2 on page 291 to support his statement that as late as the nineteenth century many groups of the Non-Action movement did not share the Maitreyan mythology (Overmyer, pp. 124–127, and Shek, pp. 225–226) do not really support this view. The fourth reference (Luo 1962) I was not able to check.

6 *Zhupi zouzhe* 硃批奏折, Jiaqing 嘉慶 21-5-27 (1816), memorial by Bai Ling 白齡 and Yang Hu 楊護 (China First Historical Archives, Beijing). The two texts referred to are called *Huangji jing* 皇極經 (Sutra of the Imperial Apex) and *Huanxiang juan* 還鄉卷 (Scroll of the Returning to the Native Place).

the groups which were regarded as heterodox and those which were not. And he underestimates the differences. Take for example the teaching of the three *kalpas*, which was prominent in most of the "heterodox" Qing sects. The whole complex has no complement in "orthodox" Buddhism nor in the "old style" White Lotus movement, although it did have forerunners in "heterodox" apocryphical texts even before the Song dynasty.

Thus, if we are to draw a line of historical continuity which leads to the Ming and Qing sects, lay Buddhism of the kind of Mao Ziyuan's White Lotus Society would just be one historical source of them. There were other strands which reach back to the unofficial Buddhist and Daoist millenarian traditions of the Tang and early medieval ages.

The distinction between "orthodox" and "heterodox" is admittedly not appropriate as the base for a typology of religious groups. However, the terms are useful if we describe how religious groups were perceived by the literati and the authorities. It is a worthwhile question to ask, why certain religious groups came to be regarded as heterodox, even if their teachings do not seem to have differed much from those forms of Buddhism which were regarded as orthodox.

Usually the Qing officials did not care too much for finding out whether the teachings of groups were in accord with "orthodox" Buddhism. It is true, in the memorials of the Qing officials reporting the confiscation of scriptures it is often noted that they did not contain any unlawful elements. However, that did not prevent them from suppressing the groups and punishing their leaders. Obviously there were other elements which made the groups suspect, above all their sheer existence as organizations which were possibly part of larger networks and intellectual traditions uncontrolled by the state. This applies already to the old-style White Lotus movement of the late Song and Yuan dynasties, with their own temples and religious leaders outside the system of officially ordained monks and registered temples. It applies even more to many of the groups during the Ming and Qing.

We certainly have to admit that many and probably most of the religious groups which were active in China during the past six hundred years did not belong to any organizational structure with more than local significance. This corresponds to the fact that most of these groups also never occurred in any official document. However, we have also to admit that many of the groups which were mentioned in the documents actually had connections which extended not rarely over several provinces. Thus, it was not completely baseless when the officials suspected underground networks, even if these networks were not built for political reasons. The historical lessons which the officials had learned taught them that in times of unrest such structures could easily be converted into the core of a revolt. For the Chinese officials, whose most important duty it was to prevent social disorder, it did not matter whether these revolts basically had religious or economical or whatever causes, but it did matter that religious groups with a network of supra-local commu-

nication could play a role in them. What is more, religious teachings had often proved their potency to provide the propaganda which was needed to incite the masses.

From the point of view of the authorities the religious sects were therefore not quite the same as any group of lay Buddhists. Ter Haar is completely right, however, in pointing out that their conception of a nation-wide religious conspiracy led by a unified White Lotus Sect was not in accord with the actual situation. But he seems to underestimate the differences between ordinary lay Buddhist congregations and sects conceived as heterodox, some of which had an established leadership with considerable local power and organizational structures which persisted for decades and even centuries.

There are a few other points which could be remarked on, as the weight ter Haar gives to the religious affiliation characters as a sign for membership in the White Lotus tradition, or his assertion that the religious groups he deals with rejected ancestor worship and disregarded the lineage. However, these are details which would not much affect his general conclusions. I should rather stress that the objections to some of his interpretations, which I have articulated, are intended to show that ter Haar's book is a substantial and stimulating work which deserves earnest review. It is a study full of well documented historical informations and full of inspiring interpretations. Even if some of these interpretations may be challenged by other scholars, his main thesis is well founded and will give this study its place in the annals of the history of the discipline: Ter Haar is the one who has finally proved that after the sixteenth century there did not exist any significant sectarian tradition which called itself White Lotus Teachings (*Bailian jiao*). The "White Lotus sect," which has so much attracted the attention of officials and historians, is a phantom produced by the perception of the authorities and literati, and of their endeavour to find an explanation for the upsurge of religious groups which escaped all efforts of political control. This is the message of ter Haar's study, and he is right with it.