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**THE TRANSFORMATION OF POPULAR
RELIGIONS MOVEMENTS OF THE
MING AND QING DYNASTIES:
A RATIONAL CHOICE INTERPRETATION**

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1. Introduction

No field in the study of Chinese religion is more indebted to the work of Daniel Overmyer than the history of popular sects during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. It is, therefore, appropriate to pay homage to him by adding a few strokes to the picture that has been outlined by this outstanding scholar. The emergence of new religious movements during the Ming dynasty and their development during the Qing attracted the increased attention of contemporary Western scholars only after the publication of Daniel Overmyer's ground-breaking study *Folk Buddhist Religion* in 1976.¹ While popular religious sects at the margins of Buddhism and Daoism have a long history in China that goes back to the early middle ages, the popular religious movements of the Ming added a new and significant element to this tradition with the large-scale production of sectarian writings. It was again Daniel Overmyer who in 1999 offered the first comprehensive study of sectarian *baojuan* in a Western language.²

In this contribution I will analyze and interpret certain aspects of sectarian movements of the Ming and Qing, applying some elements of the ra-

* I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their corrections and critical comments. While I have gratefully accepted the corrections, I decided not to change significantly my argument to respond to the criticism of one reviewer. I take these comments very seriously, but to defend my argument would be the beginning of a discussion about theory, which I would enjoy but which need not be public.

¹ This is not to deny the merits of Susan Naquin's work, whose pioneering study *Mil-lenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976) appeared in the same year as Overmyer's book, and of the early work of Jan Maria de Groot (*Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China*, Amsterdam 1902).

² Daniel L. Overmyer, *Precious Volumes. An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

tional choice theory of religion as presented by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge.³ The focus is, therefore, not on historical description but on interpretation and explanation.⁴ It is an attempt to apply a sociological theory to the study of Chinese religions.

I am aware that this theoretical approach is not uncontroversial in the study of religions and has so far not been applied to the history of Chinese religions. I also admit that I personally do not subscribe to this theory if it is meant to explain all aspects of religion and religious behaviour. But it would not be reasonable to expect any theory to explain all aspects of religion and religious behaviour. I nevertheless think that even in the study of Chinese religions it is useful and interesting to occasionally change the perspective and look for new types of answers. The new perspective of this approach is the supposition that most people act rationally even if they are religious. This, of course, contradicts the view that religion is something basically irrational and that religious behaviour cannot be understood rationally. On the other side, to suppose that religious people usually act rationally does not contradict or ignore the fact that there also are other factors influencing their behaviour, such as emotions; nor does it imply that their behaviour is not restricted and conditioned by external factors, such as economic and political developments, as well as cultural traditions. This is true for any behaviour, and religious behaviour is no exception. However, the role of cultural traditions and social structures, as well as of economic and political conditions has long been observed in studies of Chinese religions, while the aspect of rational choice among religious options did not receive much attention. It is against this background that the present paper attempts to interpret some religious developments in Ming and Qing China from a new perspective. I do not claim that this interpretation explains every aspect of these developments. I do think, however, that it is worthwhile to consider a new theoretical approach that may inspire more detailed historical research and possibly theoretical controversies.

To illustrate the approach, it is sufficient to select certain aspects of Ming and Qing sectarianism without attempting to give a comprehensive historical description. The new religious movements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as the Luo movement (Luojiao), the Huangtian Jiao (Yellow Heaven Teaching), and the Hongyang Jiao (Vast Yang Teaching), had lasting influence primarily because they produced scriptures that were printed

³ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Lang, 1987; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

⁴ Most of the historical material referred to in this article is documented and described in more detail in my *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

and became the core of an evolving sectarian literature. Despite severe persecutions during the Qing dynasty and the proscription and destruction of sectarian scriptures, many of these writings have been preserved, which proves their wide distribution and continued use in sectarian milieus. It is above all the transmission of certain scriptures and the reverence for patriarchs connected with them that allow us to trace the history of later sectarian groups to their origins during the Ming. Historical continuity from the Ming to the Qing sects is in many ways obvious, but at the same time it should not be overlooked that there also were significant changes. One of them is the proliferation of sectarian groups that had a common ancestry. A good example is the development of the Luo movement, that is, sectarian groups tracing their origin to Patriarch Luo (Luo zu, 1443–1527) and transmitting his scriptures.⁵ Within a century after Patriarch Luo's death, a variety of independent groups related to this movement had developed. Part of the Luo movement were congregations consisting mainly of canal boatmen, sectarian groups in villages in Zhejiang and Fujian, communities in big cities such as Beijing and Nanjing, and sectarian networks in Shandong. While they all shared reverence for Patriarch Luo and his scriptures as a common point of reference they did not form a unified organization, and their religious beliefs and practices, as well as their internal structure, diverged at many points. During the Qing dynasty, the number of sects growing out of the Luo tradition further increased, and many of these groups adopted beliefs that originally were not part of Luo's teaching. Thus, there was a tendency of internal differentiation of sectarian traditions deriving from a common origin, and at the same time a tendency towards homogenization that brought teachings of different traditions closer to each other.

Another point concerns changes that caused increasing tensions between the new sectarian movements and their social and political environment. As an indicator of this development we may take the number and intensity of persecutions and rebellions. While during the early phase in the sixteenth century the new religious movements were not involved in any rebellion and do not seem to have suffered from systematic persecution, the situation was markedly different during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To be sure, already during the last decades of the Ming dynasty, state officials warned against the activities of heterodox sects and, after the founding of the Qing dynasty, laws against heterodoxy were reinforced. It was, however, only during the eighteenth century that the Qing government adopted a policy of systematic and large-scale persecution of popular religious sects. Religious groups that were outside the state-controlled structures of official

⁵ Patriarch Luo's personal name was Luo Menghong, but he is better known in Western literature as Luo Qing.

Buddhism and Daoism were perceived as threatening the political stability and the autocratic power of the ruling dynasty. It does not seem that persecutions were always prompted by rebellion, although the number of rebellions increased during the same period. In many cases, though, membership in a religious group considered heterodox was sufficient to warrant punishment, even if no political activities were involved.

Persecutions and rebellions are symptoms of escalating tension between these sects and their social and political environment. While the new religious movements of the sixteenth century were apparently not regarded as heterodox—in any case, the existing laws against heterodoxy were not applied to them—their successors during the Qing dynasty clearly bore the label of heterodoxy. It seems that these changes were not due to a different perception by the authorities alone; there were also certain developments within the sects themselves that made them suspect to the government. One aspect was millenarian expectations connected with the figure of Maitreya, the future Buddha. The expectation of Maitreya's advent had a long history in Chinese popular culture. As it had often been part of rebel ideologies, it was considered heterodox, and the authorities therefore paid particular attention to sects propagating these beliefs. Although Maitreya appears also in *baojuan* of the sixteenth century, the context there is not millenarian. Only during the Qing dynasty did millenarianism gain some prominence so that the expectation of Maitreya's appearance came to be used as propaganda during rebellions. Thus, it appears that the degree of heterodoxy increased in the course of time. Another internal change was the formation of extended sectarian networks whose leadership was often hereditary. While this development started as early as the Ming dynasty, sect networks proliferated during the Qing. They were a cause of concern for the government, as they formed large underground organizations that could be used by ambitious leaders to prepare rebellions.

These changes in the development of sectarian movements, from the late Ming to the early nineteenth century, are evident even if we cannot exclude the fact that the character of the sources distorts the actual situation to some extent. We can rely on a great number of official reports concerning the Qing sects that, quite naturally, paid more attention to those perceived as politically subversive than to the many inconspicuous religious groups that without doubt existed at the same time. The Ming sects, in contrast, are known primarily through their scriptures, sources that provide a different kind of information than that generated by the investigations of officials. However, even if we take into account a certain bias in the sources when comparing Ming and Qing sects, it is evident that the traditions founded in the sixteenth century underwent considerable changes during their further development. It is, therefore, worth trying to explain some of these changes.

2. Rewards and Costs of Sect Membership

The following considerations make use of the rational choice theory of religion, which has been made popular by Stark and Bainbridge. While I do not subscribe to some of their central assumptions concerning the nature of religious beliefs, I do think that their theory is useful for explaining some mechanisms in the development of religious movements. Here, it is neither possible nor necessary to present their theory in detail. Instead, I shall concentrate on the core of the theory, which proposes that humans as a rule behave rationally in that they seek to obtain rewards and to avoid costs,⁶ and that this rule also applies to the field of religion. Thus, human behaviour is central to the development of religious movements, and so to explain such developments demands considering the factors influencing human behaviour. While behaviour obviously depends on many factors, including values and beliefs on the one hand and external factors such as political or economic constraints on the other, in most cases there is an element of choice. Some people choose to join a religious community, while others do not. Thus, to explain the growth and expansion of a religious movement means to understand why people join and support it. According to rational choice theory, the general answer would be that they join it to obtain certain rewards from membership that they either cannot obtain otherwise or only at higher costs. The theory postulates that they would make another choice if they were able to gain the same overall reward at lower costs. Rewards provided by membership in religious communities can be of various kinds such as opportunities for social exchange, mutual support, and entertainment. As these are rewards that are not specific to religious groups but can in principle be obtained from any social community, I shall call them mundane rewards. There is, however, another kind of reward that is only provided by religion: salvation from the misery of endless rebirths in a world of suffering, faith in the love and compassion of a deity, or the promise of attaining a future life in a heavenly paradise. These I shall refer to as religious rewards.⁷

⁶ Compare Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 27. I do not want here to enter into a theoretical discussion of these concepts, as the aim of this paper is not to criticize this theory—which would be a different article—but to illustrate it.

⁷ The notion of “religious rewards” roughly corresponds to what Stark and Bainbridge call “compensators” (*A Theory of Religion*, 36). However, the concept of “compensator” is theoretically ill-founded since it implies that it is only a “postulation” of reward and not a real reward. However, to be relieved of the fear of rebirth in hell does not compensate for any tangible rewards that cannot be obtained, but is itself a most real reward for someone who lives in fear of hell. I should add that in later publications Rodney Stark seems to have dropped the concept of “compensator” and replaced it by “otherworldly rewards.” See Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of*

Turning to the new religious movements of the Ming, we can ask what kind of reward they had to offer that induced people to join them. As to religious rewards, it appears that they were fairly similar to what other religions—Chan and Pure Land Buddhism, and Daoism—had to offer. Patriarch Luo claimed that following his teachings would bring liberation from the cycle of birth and death. It was a promise of salvation described as returning to the “Native Place” where the original unity with the Absolute—variously called “Emptiness” (*zhenkong*), “Mother” (*mu*), or “Limitless” (*wuji*)—would be realized. Although the symbols used differ, to some extent, from traditional Buddhism the religious goals were strongly influenced by Buddhist ideas. Enlightenment through realization of one’s unity with the Absolute was very similar to enlightenment by realizing one’s own Buddha Nature and abandoning all distinctions, as taught in Chan Buddhism. Accordingly, Daniel Overmyer summarized that “in general his [Patriarch Luo’s] teachings are a popularization of lay-based Ch’an Buddhism with a strong emphasis on the human mind as the source of all because it is equated with the emptiness that is the primordial nature of all things.”⁸ If this was the case then why would people turn to Patriarch Luo’s teaching? Chan Buddhism combined with Pure Land teachings was available everywhere. Why should one prefer Patriarch Luo’s promise of returning to the “Native Place” to the prospect of reaching Amitābha’s Pure Land?

Lack of historical sources, of course, does not permit us to answer these questions on an individual basis. We simply have no information about the motivations of individuals for joining Luo Menghong’s community. However, on the basis of rational choice theory it is possible to make some suggestions. If Luo’s teachings and those of conventional Buddhism offered similar religious rewards, then the choice between them may well have depended on other aspects. Perhaps there were additional rewards not equally available from both; perhaps there were also differences in the costs to be incurred.

First, some of the mundane rewards that could be obtained by joining either a conventional Buddhist community or a sectarian community will be considered. Entering the Buddhist *saṅgha* certainly brought some material benefits. Under normal conditions monks and nuns could expect to be materially sustained by the order and by the contributions of lay believers which secured them food and shelter without hard labour, while enjoying tax-exemption and a certain degree of respect from the populace, even if the so-

cial status of the common clergy was not very high. For the brighter and more ambitious among them, there was also the chance to get a classical education and to gain some status and power as leaders of the *saṅgha*. These were mundane rewards that could make clerical life highly attractive. It is, therefore, easy to understand why during the Ming dynasty—as in earlier dynasties—the number of people who wanted to become monks was so great that the government attempted to restrict ordination and to limit the number of clerics. The policy was not very successful because during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the government was forced to sell additional ordination certificates to fill the empty coffers of the state. In any case, the fact that people were prepared to pay money in order to gain the status of a monk shows that this status was much sought after. In other words we may suppose that it was not just the prospects of gaining religious rewards that attracted people to a clerical life.

The mundane rewards that could be obtained from the new religious movements were less obvious. In some cases, however, we have clear evidence that membership in sectarian groups did provide more than religious contemplation and the hope for salvation after death. During the Wanli era (1573–1619), a sectarian group belonging to the Luo tradition gained thousands of members in Shandong. Its leader was Hou Biao, who transmitted the scriptures of Patriarch Luo. The local congregations of his sect were said to amount to three thousand. The source further relates that each member of the sect “contributed one *fen* of money that was sent to the congregation head. When there was a mishap in any congregation that could not be handled, they helped with the congregation money. Countless people relied on the teachings of the Luo sect because of such benefits.”⁹

From this account we see that people were attracted not only by the religious teachings of the sect but also by the material support that the congregations provided in case of need. Some sects seem to have acted as mutual help associations. This is quite obvious in the communities of canal boatmen, mentioned in sources of the eighteenth century, who also belonged to the Luo tradition and whose origins can be traced back to the Ming dynasty. These congregations maintained cloisters for ritual purposes that also functioned as hostels. As most of the members were sailors who had no family to return to when they were out of work during the winter season, the cloisters provided accommodation to them as well as to the old and sick who could not work any more. The congregations usually owned a piece of land,

Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 88.

⁸ Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 92.

⁹ Qu Jiusi 瞿九思, *Wanli wugong lu* 萬曆武功錄 [Record of military exploits of the Wanli era], vol. 1; quoted in Ma Xisha 馬西沙, *Qingdai Bagua Jiao* 清代八卦教 [Eight Trigram Teaching of the Qing] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue chubanshe, 1989), 19.

which secured some income and was also used as burial ground for deceased members.¹⁰ These material rewards certainly contributed to making the religious communities attractive to boatmen who in this way found a substitute for the family support they were often lacking. It should of course be kept in mind that the religious aspects of the sect were also rewarding. These men belonged to the very lowest level of society and the misery of this life was not just a metaphor; the promise of betterment in a future life could at least provide spiritual consolation. Thus, both the mundane and the religious rewards made it a rational choice for them to join one of these congregations.

Evidently the value of these and other rewards that could be obtained from sect membership was not the same for everyone. Persons who lived in better conditions than the canal boatmen, who were wealthy and could rely on the support of their families and extended social relationships, had little reason to join a sectarian community to secure material support; nor would they choose a clerical career to earn a livelihood. People belonging to the middle class of merchants, low officials, or land owning peasants would usually not join a religious community primarily for material reasons. If some of them became monks, the religious rewards were probably more important than the mundane ones.

As has been mentioned, the teachings of Patriarch Luo were, in some respects, similar to those of official Buddhism and offered the same kind of religious rewards. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries many members of the Luo movement, and other scripture-producing sects, belonged to the middle classes. We shall, therefore, now reconsider the question of why some people turned to the Luo teaching instead of joining the Buddhist *sangha*. One reason, of course, was the restriction of the number of monks imposed by the government. Not everyone who wanted to be a monk was allowed to enter the order, and not everyone was prepared to pay for an ordination certificate. Still, there were other costs connected with the status of monk. They had to live a celibate life and observe the rules of the *vinaya*, to forsake wealth and many worldly pleasures. If it was only the religious rewards offered by Buddhism, then more or less the same could be obtained at lower costs by turning to religious teachings such as those of the Luo movement. The new religions of the Ming dynasty were lay movements that offered an opportunity to live a religious life without submitting to the restrictions imposed by clerical precepts. To some extent this explains why

¹⁰ Memorial by Cui Yingjie 崔應階, Qianlong 33/11/30 (1768), in: *Shiliao xunkan* 史料旬刊 [Historical materials published every ten days], Beijing 1930–1931, no. 12, 407a–410b. On the Luo jiao among the canal boatmen, see Daniel L. Overmyer, “Boatmen and Buddhas: The Lo Chiao in Ming Dynasty China,” *History of Religions* 17 (1978): 284–302.

they were attractive to members of the middle and occasionally even the higher classes looking for religious rewards.

There was, of course, still the possibility of joining a conventional Buddhist lay community instead of one of the new religious movements. Without any doubt, most middle class people who wanted to obtain religious rewards from Buddhism without paying the costs of a monastic life in fact turned to common Buddhist lay communities. But others preferred one of the new religious movements. There was certainly some competition for members between them and the lay Buddhists. What could have made the new religions more appealing than the existing lay communities? The answer has to take into account that not all people made the same choice. Rewards and costs did not have the same value for everyone. For some, the new religious movements offered rewards that for others may have been of little value. This is most evident in the case of religious teachers. People such as Luo Menghong, Li Bin (alias Puming, died 1562), or Han Taihu (alias Piaogao, 1570–1598), the founders of the Yellow Heaven Teaching and the Vast Yang Teaching, succeeded in establishing themselves as leaders of religious communities. Within their communities they had an exalted status as teachers revealing the extraordinary insight they had attained through their enlightenment. Had they been members of Buddhist lay communities, they would have been ritually subordinated to monks and hardly been accepted as teachers. Hence, sectarian communities offered opportunities to religiously active laypersons that were not available in Buddhist lay communities. This not only applies to the famous founders of new religious movements but also to the leaders of the countless small religious groups that existed and proliferated all over the country.

Also, for common members, the sects may have been more attractive than lay Buddhist communities—for they could obtain religious rewards more easily, that is, at lower costs. Patriarch Luo stressed this point in his teaching when he remarked:

These scriptures in five books of mine contain the marvellous law in countless sentences, but only two sentences or four sentences suffice to return home. These scriptures in five books of mine contain countless sentences. [However] salvation [lit. “to return home”] is easy to attain without wasting energy and time. If the wise men listen [to these sentences] one single time, their heart will be thoroughly enlightened and they will never stumble. Foolish men may listen to them even thousands of times but they will only regard it as idle talk.¹¹

¹¹ *Weiwei budong Taishan shen'gen jieguo baojuan buzhu Kaixin fayao* 巍巍不動太山深根結果寶卷補註開心法要 [Precious Scroll about Deeply Rooted Karmic Fruits, Majestic and Unmoved like Mount Taishan, Enlarged and Explained to Open the

Here it is clearly stated how easy it is to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths and the threatening horrors of hell. Everyone can “return home” by simply applying the essence of his teaching, which is contained in only two or four sentences. This remark probably refers to a mantra or *dhāraṇī* to be ritually recited although there is no unambiguous evidence for this practice during the early phase of the movement. In any case Patriarch Luo insisted that his way to salvation is easy to follow as there is no need for common Buddhist practices:

Whether one is a monk or layperson: meditation, observing *vinaya* rules, reciting sūtras, vegetarianism, pilgrimage to sacred mountains, repairing monasteries, erecting pagodas and Buddha statues, offerings to the Buddha, melting the images of demons in fire, printing sūtras, making images: such practices are like playing with puppets.¹²

That is, all conventional Buddhist practices are without any effect. It is only Luo’s teaching of Non-Action (*wuwei*)—which abandons such outer religious actions—that can bring liberation from the wheel of birth and death. In this way, salvation “is easy to obtain, without wasting energy and time.” We could add here: “and without wasting money.” Compared with conventional lay Buddhism these were, in fact, lower costs although—as we shall see—sect membership was not for free. However, all things being equal, it would certainly have been a rational choice to follow this teaching if one wished to attain salvation.

This explanation does not mean that in every single case the choice was made on exactly these grounds. We have no information about individual motives for joining Luo’s community. Still, the example illustrates that religious choices do not need to remain completely unexplained. So far, we have observed that joining a sectarian community could offer some rewards that were either not available in conventional religious groups or only available at higher costs. These included mundane rewards, such as material support of fellow members or social recognition as teacher or master, and religious rewards, such as methods of reaching spiritual liberation for sect members, who were assured of their salvation.

Mind to the Essence of the Dharma], *Wubu liuce jingjuan* 五部六冊經卷 [Five Books in Six Volumes] 13–16 (Taizhong: Minde Tang, 1980), *juan* 1, ch. 1, 45f. Compare Randall Nadeau’s translation in “Popular Sectarianism in the Ming: Lo Ch’ing and his Religion of Non-Action” (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1990), 146.

¹² *Poxie xianzheng baojing* 破邪顯正寶經 [Precious Scripture about the Refutation of Heterodoxy and Manifestation of Orthodoxy], in *Baojuan chujī* 寶卷初集 [A first collection of *baojuan*], ed. Zhang Xishun 張希舜 *et al.* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1994), 2:248f.

Though in some respects the costs for such religious rewards were lower than within conventional Buddhism, they were higher in some other respects. Sectarian communities were in a questionable legal position. Ming legislation threatened membership in popular religious communities with severe punishment. During the sixteenth century this law does not seem to have been applied to the new religious movements but, nevertheless, it made them objectionable. We know from Patriarch Luo’s writings that he had to face opposition from his surroundings, in particular from official Buddhism.¹³ Not everyone would have been prepared to join a community that was easily suspected of heterodoxy. Opposition from the Buddhist clergy, officials, and literati clearly increased the costs of membership and also affected the development of sectarian movements, as will be explained below.

The mundane rewards that could be gained in sectarian groups were of various kinds and not equally distributed among all members. For sect leaders, their position could be—and often was—a source of income. Religious teachers usually received money from their followers; some of them explicitly demanded financial contributions, and others may have been voluntarily supported by their followers. Patriarch Luo had been an ordinary soldier before he started his religious career. After his enlightenment, he became a professional teacher who died as the leader of an extended community. His followers honoured him with a thirteen-storied pagoda after his death, which suggests that he did not die as a poor man. Later sectarian leaders, such as Wang Sen and Yao Wenyu, who were of humble origin, succeeded in amassing enormous wealth. At the same time, their position secured them power and status within their organizations. During the Qing dynasty the wealth of some sect heads was such that they could gain officially recognized status by purchasing official titles and government offices.¹⁴ These clearly were rewards that made the profession of sect leader highly attractive.

The fact that religious teachers were professionals who made a living as sect leaders does not necessarily imply that they were impostors. Though there were charlatans among them, there is no reason to doubt that most of them believed in their message. To note that religious professions and organizations also have economic interests does not call into question their religious beliefs. Economic interests are a factor in most religions, including

¹³ Compare *Poxie xianzheng baojing*, 75–78, translated in Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 113. For later criticism of the Luo movement by Buddhist monks, such as Mizang Daokai, Hanshan Deqing, and Yunqi Zhuhong, see Overmyer: “Boatmen and Buddhas,” 287–289.

¹⁴ Purchase of offices was common for members of the Liu family and other leaders of the Eight Trigrams (*bagua*) network during the eighteenth century; see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 414–422.

conventional Buddhism and Christian Churches. We cannot ignore the economic aspects if we are to understand the dynamics of religions. Ming and Qing sectarianism is a good example because the economic dimension of sect activities is quite obvious and it was, above all, sect leaders who controlled the material resources.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that quite a number of individuals attempted to enter this profession and became religious entrepreneurs.¹⁵ Usually, the founders of new sects had previously been disciples of other teachers. If they were successful in proselytizing there was a certain temptation to establish themselves as leaders of independent sectarian groups. This not only enhanced their religious prestige and power but also gave them a greater share in the financial contributions of sect members. Instead of channelling most of the contributions through the sect hierarchy to the principal leader, independent teachers could maintain control of these financial resources. Patriarch Luo's writings already provide indications of disciples starting their own business as is evidenced by his complaints that some former disciples propagated his teachings outside his school to seek worldly profit.¹⁶ Schismatic tendencies were common in most sectarian traditions. Splits within a founding sect frequently occurred after the death of a sect founder or charismatic leader when senior disciples competed for succession as leader resulting in numerous independent groups. Another factor contributing to the splitting of sects was geographical distance. Thus, the groups belonging to the Luo tradition in the south seem to have abandoned all formal bonds with those in the north.

The mundane rewards sect leaders could gain depended to a large extent on the number of their followers. Thus, these religious entrepreneurs competed to gain new members from a limited pool of potential converts. In particular among the middle classes, from where the new religious movements of the sixteenth century recruited quite a number of their followers, they had to compete not only with each other but also with conventional Buddhism and Daoism. Since only a small number of people would be willing to join any religious community, competition for them restricted the possibilities of attracting converts. Therefore it was difficult for religious teachers who established new communities to gain a sizable share in the market. It was still more difficult to gain a large following from the middle classes as

¹⁵ For religious entrepreneurs, see Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 168-178.

¹⁶ *Zhengxin chuyi wuxiu zheng zizai baojuan* 正信除疑無修証自在寶卷 [The Precious Scroll about the Realization of Self-Reliance without Cultivation, Which Rectifies Belief and Removes Doubts], ch. 25, in *Baojuan chujì*, 3:321-323, translated in Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 234f.

the limited demand for religious goods was sufficiently satisfied by traditional religions and sects that were already established in the market. To attract great numbers of followers was much easier for sect leaders who responded to the religious expectations of the lower classes representing the majority of the population. As early as the sixteenth century some sectarian groups that derived from the Luo tradition consisted mainly of members who belonged to the lower ranks of artisans, peddlers, peasants, and unskilled workers. Thus, the new religious movements became socially diversified. Not surprisingly the expansion into different social milieus also brought about a diversification of sectarian teachings as they had to respond to different religious demands.

3. Changing Social Composition of Sects

Some of the changes the new religious movements were undergoing from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries may be attributed to the different social milieus from which they recruited their members. I shall, therefore, briefly consider the social composition of the sectarian movements. In their formative period, the new religions of the sixteenth century were addressing an audience that evidently had some degree of education. Unlike most earlier sects, the new religious movements such as the Luo Teaching, the Yellow Heaven Teaching, and the Vast Yang Teaching, strongly relied on scriptures and produced their own scriptural traditions. Most successful in this regard was Patriarch Luo whose writings, summarily known as "Five Books in Six Volumes" (*Wubu liuce*), became very popular and were widely distributed. Even during his lifetime they were printed thrice (1509, 1514, 1518), and until the end of the Ming dynasty there were at least twenty-four more printings and new editions.¹⁷ This shows that Luo's scriptures were in high demand in social milieus where reading books was common. People who printed and bought books certainly did not belong to the lowest level of society. These scriptures circulated widely and were read not only by the members of closed sectarian communities but also had a broader impact on religious life more generally. Thus the famous Buddhist monk, Zhuhong (1535-1615), found it necessary to prohibit his followers from reading Patriarch Luo's "Five Books in Six Volumes."¹⁸ Evidently Luo's writings were popular in

¹⁷ For a list of known editions of the *Wubu liuce*, see Wang Jianchuan 王見川, "Wubu liuce kanke lüebiao" 《五部六冊》刊刻略表 [An overview of editions of the Five Books in Six Volumes], *Minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教 1 (1995): 161-172.

¹⁸ *Yunqi gongzhu guiyue* 雲棲共住規約 (Rules and Agreements for Communal Living at Yunqi), quoted in Chün-fang Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 203.

certain religious milieus that belonged to mainstream late Ming society. They significantly influenced the evolving sectarian literature that circulated openly in the capital and was not confined to marginalized or clandestine communities. The scriptures of the Vast Yang Teaching, some of which copied the titles of Luo's writings,¹⁹ were printed in the Imperial printing office and supported by members of the aristocracy and high officials.²⁰ There is no doubt that these new religious movements had followers who belonged to the middle and occasionally even the upper classes.

In these social milieus religious teachings suspected of heterodoxy would not have been very appealing. People who lived in easy circumstances had little reason to join religious groups propagating millenarian teachings about the coming of a new era when the present social conditions would be completely changed. To be sure, millenarian beliefs were part of popular religious traditions; but they seem to have been attractive mainly to the less privileged who were dissatisfied with the prevailing conditions. As millenarianism, that is, the expectation of a complete change brought about by supernatural forces, implied the end of the present social and political order, it was always considered a heterodox teaching and, accordingly, repressed by the authorities. Members of the middle classes would usually keep their distance from teachings associated with the risk of being persecuted with its attendant loss of wealth, status, or even life. It is to be expected that the new religious movements attracting this type of audience did not promote beliefs regarded as heterodox.

Judging from sixteenth century *baojuan*, the new teachings did in fact contain little that was objectionable to the authorities. Patriarch Luo in his scriptures explicitly castigates some popular sects that he considers heterodox, such as the White Lotus and the Maitreya Teachings. These were sectarian traditions mentioned in the Ming legislation against heterodoxy and Luo Menghong evidently did not want to be in any way connected with them. It is true that in other early *baojuan*, including scriptures of the Yellow Heaven Teaching, the figure of Maitreya, commonly associated with millenarian beliefs, plays a certain role. However, in Yellow Heaven scriptures

¹⁹ The title *Hongyang kugong wudao jing* (The Vast Yang Scripture on Awakening to the Way through Bitter Toil) is almost identical with Luo's autobiography *Kugong wudao juan* (Scroll on Awakening to the Way through Bitter Toil), and the *Hongyang tanshi jing* (The Vast Yang Scripture on Sorrow for the World) is clearly modelled after Luo's *Tanshi wuwei baojuan* (The Precious Scroll on Non-Action and Sorrow for the World). There are even verbatim quotations from Luo's writings; see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 321f.

²⁰ Support by high officials is reported in the opening sections of all early Hongyang scriptures, which are translated in Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 323f.

his position is not very prominent and, more importantly, the context is not millenarian. Maitreya is used as a common symbol connected with the third cosmic period, but he is not expected as a future saviour or ruler of the empirical world.²¹ As Daniel Overmyer has observed, the ethical values of the early *baojuan* are conventional and reflect popular understandings of Confucian and Buddhist teachings.²² Had these teachings been perceived as subversive the authorities would not have tolerated them.

Even in the sixteenth century, however, the developing sectarian traditions were not homogeneous. Not all sectarian groups recruited their members from the middle classes. As the new religious movements grew in membership some teachers turned to the large reservoir of the lower ranks of society. In these milieus they did not compete with orthodox Buddhism but with various forms of popular religious traditions. The latter included sects that continued millenarian and eschatological beliefs deeply rooted in popular religious culture since antiquity. Other competitors were cults with a preference for personal deities and rituals securing worldly benefits such as health and prosperity. Sectarian teachers belonging to and working in these milieus had to respond to the existing beliefs and expectations shaped by these popular religious traditions.

We may illustrate this development with one of the sects connected with the Luo movement. During the sixteenth century Yin Ji'nan (1527-1582) became the leader of a sect in Zhejiang called Wuwei Zhengjiao (Orthodox Teaching of Non-Action). Yin Ji'nan not only used Luo Menghong's "Five Books in Six Volumes," he was also declared to be a reincarnation of Patriarch Luo. Thus, the connection of his sect with the Luo movement is quite obvious. On the other hand, Yin Ji'nan's teachings also show the influence of other religious traditions. While in Luo's writings we find polemics against the Maitreya teaching, Yin Ji'nan adopted prevailing beliefs in the sequence of three cosmic periods ruled by Dīpamkara, Śākyamuni, and Maitreya. He also used the popular symbol of the Unborn Venerable Mother

²¹ For a discussion of the role of Maitreya in the *Puming rulai wuwei liaoyi baojuan* (Precious Scroll of the Tathāgata Puming on the Understanding of Non-Action) and the *Pujing rulai yaoshi baojuan* (Precious Scroll of the Tathāgata Pujing about the Key [to Salvation]), two sixteenth century scriptures of the Yellow Heaven Teaching, see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 300-311. For a different interpretation compare Richard Shek, "Millenarianism Without Rebellion: The Huangtian Dao in North China," *Modern China* 8 (1982): 305-336.

²² Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 206. See also Daniel L. Overmyer, "Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature: Ming and Ch'ing Pao-ch'uan," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 219-254.

(Wusheng Laomu), which does not appear in Luo's scriptures.²³ Although this sect saw itself as the "orthodox" continuation of Patriarch Luo's *wuwei* Teaching, it in fact enriched this teaching with symbols and ideas current in popular religious milieus.

Yin Ji'nan's sect is not the only case where the transformation of Luo's teachings under the influence of other popular traditions can be observed. A scripture of the early seventeenth century lists a line of seven patriarchs as successors of Patriarch Luo.²⁴ One of them is Sun Zhenkong to whom the *Xiaoshi Zhenkong saoxin baojuan* (Precious Scroll on Zhenkong's Cleaning of the Mind) is attributed. The scripture emphasizes belief in Amitābha and conventional Buddhist practices such as reciting the Buddha's name, vegetarianism, and moral behaviour, and employs the symbols of the Unborn Mother and the Dragon-Flower Assembly; the latter originally belongs to the Maitreya tradition.²⁵ It appears that the figure of Maitreya and symbols connected with it were so widespread in popular religious milieus that even sects that traced their origin to Patriarch Luo could not avoid using them. This does not imply that the interpretation of these symbols was always the same. In some cases the symbol of Maitreya may have stood for the expectation of the near advent of Maitreya and millenarian hopes, while in others Maitreya could be understood in a more orthodox way as the future Buddha and successor to Śākyamuni. And yet, since Maitreya beliefs had been prominent in past rebellions, including the so-called White Lotus uprising at the end of the Yuan dynasty, sects promoting belief in Maitreya were always suspected of heterodoxy and outlawed by Ming legislation. The more prominent the figure of Maitreya was in sectarian teachings, the less acceptable they were to a middle-class audience. It appears, therefore, that the adoption of Maitreya symbolism by some sects of the Luo tradition reflects a certain shift in their social composition.

²³ *Taishang zushi sanshi yinyou zonglu* 太上祖師三世因由總錄 [Combined Account of the Vitae of the Most Exalted Patriarchs in Three Generations], *juan* 2, 29a-30b (edition of 1875, preface dated 1682). For details about Yin Ji'nan, see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 251-255.

²⁴ *Foshuo sanhuang chufen tiandi tanshi baojuan* 佛說三皇初分天地嘆世寶卷 (Precious Scroll Preached by the Buddha on the Three August Ones' Sorrow for the World when Heaven and Earth First Parted), quoted by Sawada Mizuho 澤田瑞穂, *Zōho hōkan no kenkyū* 增補寶卷の研究 [A study on precious volumes, revised and enlarged] (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1975), 330-332.

²⁵ *Xiaoshi Zhenkong saoxin baojuan* 銷釋真空掃心寶卷, *juan* 1, in *Baojuan chuiji*, vol. 18, 522. For Sun Zhenkong and this scripture, see Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 313-315, and Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 243-245.

It should be observed that this development was not uniform but accounted for an increasing diversification of sectarian movements. While single groups tended socially to be rather homogeneous there could be considerable differences between them even if they belonged to the same tradition. The social and cultural background of the respective audiences clearly influenced the way in which the teachings were understood. Still in the seventeenth century, there were also branches of the Luo movement that interpreted the scriptures of the Patriarch in a fairly "orthodox" way and understood them in terms of Chan Buddhism. This understanding is attested in the *Kaixin fayao* (Essentials of the Dharma to Open the Mind) edition of his scriptures, which contains a commentary by the Chan monk Lanfeng.

Incidentally, the 1652 printing of the *Kaixin fayao* allows us to observe that people could shift to more orthodox interpretations if their social conditions changed. This edition was published by a certain Pushen. Pushen was, by family tradition, connected with the sect of Yin Ji'nan,²⁶ who, as we have seen, had combined Luo's teachings with Maitreya and Unborn Mother symbolism. Yin Ji'nan had been executed in 1582 and his sect was certainly prone to be regarded as heterodox. That Pushen nevertheless preferred Lanfeng's "orthodox" Chan interpretation and supported its printing can be understood if we consider his social background. Already his father Pubang had belonged to one of the branches of Yin Ji'nan's sect. Being very poor in his youth, Pubang later became a successful and wealthy merchant and leader of the branch in Anhui.²⁷ Since Pubang and his son Pushen had acquired wealth and social status they probably were not interested in being associated with sectarian teachings that were easily regarded as heterodox. In other words: As they had risen to the middle class they also supported the more orthodox interpretations of Luo's teaching prevailing in this milieu.

Although there is no evidence that Yin Ji'nan's use of symbols, such as Maitreya, was part of messianic or millenarian teachings, it is clear that by the seventeenth century the Luo tradition and other new religious movements had in part merged with older sectarian traditions of more heterodox character. In 1606 there was an attempted rebellion in Jiangsu led by Liu Tianxu. Liu called himself "Master of the Non-Action Teaching" (*Wuwei*

²⁶ *Kugong wudao baojuan buzhu Kaixin fayao* 苦功悟道寶卷補註開心法要 [The Precious Scroll on Attaining Enlightenment through Bitter Practice, Enlarged and Explained to Open the Mind to the Essence of the Dharma], *Wubu liuce jingjuan* 1-2, *juan* 1, Introduction, 8-10.

²⁷ "Chongkan buzhu jing houba" 重刊補註經後跋 [Postscript to the reprinted, enlarged and explained edition], appended to the 1652 *Kaixin fayao* 開心法要, ed. Pushen 普伸, in *Weiwei budong Taishan shen'gen jieguo baojuan buzhu Kaixin fayao*, *juan* 4, 137f.

Jiaozhu) and preached a message of impending catastrophes, which could only be avoided by those who follow his teaching. He attracted a substantial following including almost a thousand government soldiers. After the attempted uprising he was finally tortured to death in early 1607.²⁸ The reference to the “Non-Action Teaching,” of course, suggests a connection with the Luo movement. However, the evidence is inconclusive since the expression *wuwei* was rather common in sectarian milieus. Be that as it may, Liu Tianxu’s case shows the close interaction between older sectarian traditions on the one hand and the new *baojuan*-producing sects on the other. When Liu started his rebellion he declared that “King Li will appear” (*Li wang chushi*),²⁹ an obvious reference to the popular expectation of a saviour, surnamed Li, which had been transmitted down the ages since antiquity.³⁰ Liu Tianxu did not rely solely on oral lore, he also used a book with the title *Huangji shouyuan baojuan* (Precious Scroll about Returning to the Origin in the [Period of the] August Ultimate).³¹ This text was probably similar to or identical with the *Huangji jieguo baojuan* (Precious Scroll on the August Ultimate and [Karmic] Result), which was also known as *Shouyuan baojuan*,³² or with the *Jiulian baojuan* (Precious Scroll on the Nine-[Petalled]

²⁸ The case of Liu Tianxu is described in Richard Shek, “Religion and Society in Late Ming: Sectarianism and Popular Thought in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century China” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1980), 245-248. See also Overmyer, “Boatmen and Buddhas,” 290f.

²⁹ Shek, “Religion and Society,” 247.

³⁰ The expectation of a sage surnamed Li is attested as early as the Han Dynasty. During the fourth and fifth centuries the figure of Li Hong was prominent in Daoist messianism. See Anna Seidel, “The Image of the Perfect Ruler in Early Taoism: Lao-tzu and Li Hung,” *History of Religions* 9 (1969/1970): 216-247. The name Li was still important in messianic traditions during the eighteenth century. See Barend J. ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 253-260, 268-270. It should be noted that since Han times the expectation of the saviour Li was often combined with a sage emperor surnamed Liu. It may be that Liu Tianxu was alluding to this tradition when presenting himself as the future ruler.

³¹ Yu Songqing 喻松青, *Ming Qing Bailian Jiao yanjiu* 明清白蓮教研究 [Research into the White Lotus Teaching of the Ming and Qing] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1987), 10.

³² For this scripture, see Daniel L. Overmyer and Li Shiyu, “The oldest Chinese sectarian scripture, ‘The Precious Volume, Expounded by the Buddha, on the Results of [the Teaching of] the Imperial Ultimate [Period]’” (Fo Shuo Huang-Chi Chieh-Kuo Pao-Chüan, Pub. 1430),” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (1992): 17-31; and Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 273-281.

Lotus), whose alternative title was *Huangji juan*.³³ In any case, it is obvious that Liu Tianxu made use of sectarian *baojuan* when he declared himself to be a manifestation of the Huangji Fo (Buddha of the August Ultimate).³⁴ He interpreted these scriptures in a messianic or millenarian sense, which was one way to understand them. In this context, the Buddha of the August Ultimate was a synonym for Maitreya who would come down to rule the world. However, in other contexts the same symbols could be understood differently and the mentioned texts were read as teachings of inner cultivation in the tradition of *neidan* Daoism.³⁵ Of course, these were more esoteric meanings transmitted within sectarian circles from master to disciple. They were, therefore, not well-suited to attracting large numbers of followers. More appealing to the masses of underprivileged and uneducated were teachings that promised them supernatural intervention and betterment of their concrete conditions. To the degree that sectarian *baojuan* penetrated into lower-class milieus, their interpretation was thus affected by pre-existing beliefs and expectations prevailing in popular sectarian traditions.

4. Diversification and Homogenization

With the spread of the new religious movements, and their *baojuan* literature, an ever increasing number of followers belonged to the lower ranks of society while members of the middle classes became a minority. This process started as early as the sixteenth century. In the years after 1684, several memorials were presented to the throne warning against the evil influence of such groups as White Lotus, Non-Action Teaching, and Luo Teaching.³⁶ These critics probably had in mind sects associated with the likes of Yin Ji’nan and Liu Tianxu that mobilized large followings rather than middle class people preoccupied with studying and editing scriptures. Officials were particularly sensitive to religious sects suspected of millenarian or messianic teachings as history taught them that such beliefs could be used to fuel re-

³³ The full title of the *Jiulian baojuan* is *Huangji jindan jiulian zhengxin guizhen huanxiang baojuan* (Precious Scroll of the Golden Elixir and Nine-[Petalled] Lotus of the August Ultimate on Correct Belief to Revert to the Truth and Return to the Native Place). For this scripture, see Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 136-177, and Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 281-293, 502-505.

³⁴ Yu Songqing, *Ming Qing Bailian Jiao yanjiu*, 10.

³⁵ For different understandings of the same scriptures and the hermeneutical problems of interpreting them, see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 273-293, 297-311.

³⁶ Cf. *Ming shilu* 明實錄 [Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty], *Shenzong shilu* 神宗實錄 (Reprint Beijing: Zhongwen chubanshe, 1984), *juan* 157, 3b-4a (Wanli 13/1 [1585]), *juan* 165, 4b-5a (Wanli 13/9 [1585]), *juan* 176, 7b (Wanli 14/7 [1586]) *juan* 182, 2b-3a (Wanli 15/1 [1587]).

bellion. References to the Yellow Turban rebellion at the end of the Han and the Han Shantong uprising at the end of the Yuan dynasty were common. In a famous memorial of 1597, Lü Kun identified the influence of heterodox sects as one of four major causes of rebellion and complained about the spread of such groups.³⁷

That such warnings were not completely unjustified became obvious when twenty-five years later a major rebellion erupted which, in the words of the official charged with its suppression, was the “most serious crisis in the dynasty’s two-hundred and sixty-year history.”³⁸ The leader of this rebellion was a former disciple of Wang Sen who had built a huge sectarian network with a membership of over two million in north China that extended as far as Sichuan.³⁹ The enormous growth of Wang Sen’s sect was only possible by integrating already existing groups into his network. Although the organization was destroyed during the persecutions following the rebellion, its remnants reorganized and descendants of Wang Sen inherited his position as sect leader.⁴⁰

There cannot be any doubt that sects with tens or hundreds of thousands of members had to recruit their following mainly from the lower class of peasants and workers. In these milieus, the more subtle teachings of *baojuan* scriptures were of little appeal and they could hardly be used as a means of political propaganda. Although most members of such sects were illiterate, scriptures, often copied out by hand, continued to be used and produced.⁴¹ One of the most influential sectarian *baojuan*, the *Longhua jing* (Dragon-Flower Scripture), originated in a sect that derived from Wang Sen’s tradition. It presents a teaching of salvation as a mythological narrative of divine beings rescuing humankind, while at the same time promoting meth-

³⁷ *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming dynasty], *juan* 226, 5937 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974).

³⁸ Memorial by Zhao Yan quoted in Shek, “Religion and Society,” 352. For details about this rebellion, see *ibid.*, 352–367.

³⁹ For Wang Sen’s sect, which is known under different names including Dachengjiao (Great Vehicle Teaching), see Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 376–382.

⁴⁰ In the early nineteenth century, members of the Wang family were still the leaders of a large sectarian network in north China. See Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion*, 21f.

⁴¹ It is an open question as to how sectarian scriptures were actually used. Books seem to have been prestigious in sectarian milieus, but the possession of books does not necessarily imply that they were read and studied. Some were certainly used for ritual purposes. It appears that only a minority of sect members seriously studied scriptures (as in most religions), while the majority only knew the teachings that were communicated orally.

ods of *neidan* meditation.⁴² It thus allowed a wide range of interpretations that suited the understanding of different audiences and readerships. While practices of inner alchemy remained confined to narrow circles of initiates, the message of the loving mother, Wusheng Laomu, and the descent of divine messengers and saviours had lasting attraction for an audience accustomed to popular beliefs.

The diversification of religious traditions that grow and gain members of various social and cultural backgrounds is a common phenomenon. Buddhism and Daoism as well were not understood in the same way by erudite monks and common folk. Ordinary believers usually preferred concrete symbols of divine beings and celestial paradises, while those with more sophisticated understandings stressed spiritual cultivation to attain enlightenment. In this respect there was no big difference between the new religious movements and the established religions. Reaching the Western Paradise of the Unborn Mother or the Western Paradise of Amitābha were rather similar aims. Patriarch Luo’s understanding of the unity of all that exists had its parallel in Chan Buddhism, and other sects such as the Yellow Heaven Teaching were very close to Quanzhen Daoism. Why did the new religious movements emerging during the second half of the Ming dynasty not develop into full-fledged religions? To some extent they did. They produced their own corpus of literature and created structures of organization. They were also successful in attracting followers. In some regions of the empire they became part of the popular religious culture. They failed, though, to be recognized by the authorities and, from the seventeenth century on, they were increasingly persecuted as heterodox. During the Qing dynasty they were finally thrown back to a position that was similar to the older popular sects of former dynasties—scattered religious groups under the constant pressure of persecution. Although the number of these groups even seems to have increased during the Qing, persecution prevented the formation of lasting and recognized organizations. To be sure, there existed some extended sectarian networks, which were often under the hereditary leadership of certain families, but the pressure of persecution forced them to act clandestinely and brought them closer to the milieu of secret societies. Most important, however, were changes in the social composition. During the Qing dynasty most sects continuing the traditions of the new religious movements of the Ming were primarily a lower-class phenomenon; the main exception being the families of sect leaders who had attained wealth. Other members of the middle classes, the educated and wealthy who during the sixteenth century had promoted the printing of *baojuan*, rarely supported and influenced

⁴² For the *Longhua jing*, see Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 248–271 and Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*, 266–294.

the activities of the sects in the eighteenth century. The almost complete lack of educated members also affected their intellectual development. While scriptures continued to be transmitted and copied, and even new *baojuan* were composed in some sects, there were no intellectual resources to further elaborate the teachings in ways that were appealing to the literati and could compete with the intellectual traditions of Buddhism and Daoism. In short the maturing of new religions was aborted after the Ming dynasty.

If it is true, as I argue, that the changed social composition of the sectarian movements was one of the main reasons for their failure to grow into recognized religions, we may ask what accounted for these changes. Why did members of the middle classes, the well-to-do with social status, influence, wealth, and education, gradually withdraw from these religious groups? The answer is probably that the costs of membership significantly increased in the seventeenth and particularly during the eighteenth centuries. As has been described, by the end of the sixteenth century officials became alarmed by the activities of the new sects. Their concern was certainly caused by the expansion of these movements into the milieus of traditional sects that were commonly regarded as heterodox. At the latest after the rebellion of 1622, the heterodox nature of the new religious movements was beyond doubt and persecution began. The Qing government continued this policy, though during the first decades persecution does not seem to have been severe. However, during the seventeenth century it became systematic and brutal, aiming at the complete eradication of popular sects.

Under these conditions, the balance of costs and rewards connected with sect membership changed considerably though it did not change for all members to the same extent. Those who had much to lose—status and wealth—were more inclined to forsake membership than others who had neither status nor wealth. Furthermore, those who interpreted the teachings in a more orthodox way as reformed varieties of Buddhism or Daoism could easily find suitable alternatives that did not incur the costs of persecution. On the other hand, for underprivileged people who gained high mundane rewards from sect membership, such as social and financial support, the risk of persecution could be the lesser evil. Thus, persecution had a selective effect on the social composition of sects.

As persecution became more intense and brutal during the eighteenth century, the costs became even higher. They were tolerable only if they were balanced by equally high rewards. This again had a selective effect, since it advanced sects offering high and exclusive religious rewards that could not be obtained elsewhere. One such religious reward was the promise and expectation of coming changes that would bring prosperity and fortune to the believers and destroy all who did not belong to the community of faithful sect members. Evidently such millenarian hopes were attractive above

all to individuals and groups who lived at the lower end of the social ladder. There were many whose living conditions could hardly worsen, and for them the promise of future betterment outweighed the risk of persecution.

The pressure of persecution thus affected not only the social composition of sectarian groups but also had a selective effect on their teachings. To be assured a place among the elect who would survive impending catastrophes was rewarding only to those who shared apocalyptic fears. Such fears were less absurd and irrational than it might appear given that many people had difficulties surviving in normal times, and natural or man-made disasters that cost the lives of tens of thousands were not the invention of religious fanatics but part of the collective memory. The fear of approaching calamities was, therefore, not without plausibility in popular culture, and those who maintained such a fear naturally concentrated in sects promising rescue from menacing catastrophes. For them their fears could be more threatening than possible persecution. As the members of such communities mutually confirmed their beliefs, apocalyptic or millenarian teachings could become dominant there. The more extremist the teachings of a sectarian group were, the more homogeneous it became. People who did not fully share such beliefs had no reason to join or remain in a group that could incur such high costs as torture, exile, and even execution. It was rational for them to withdraw or look for other sects that were less extremist and, therefore, implied lower risks of being persecuted. If they were looking for conventional religious rewards, they would often prefer lay Buddhist communities or sectarian groups that were very similar to them.⁴³ This might explain why lay Buddhism apparently experienced an upsurge during the Qing dynasty.⁴⁴

Hence the homogenization of sectarian teachings in certain milieus simultaneously engendered the diversification of sectarian groups and their teachings. There was a wide range of religious choices, with sects propagating millenarian beliefs and militant actions at the one end of the scale, and Buddhist lay communities or sectarian groups whose teachings and practices were very close to them at the other end. Choices made depended on the circumstances, both personal and social; but it seems unlikely that anyone joined a sectarian community without believing that the rewards to be ob-

⁴³ Such sects usually belonged to what Susan Naquin called “sūtra-reciting sects;” see Susan Naquin, “The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China,” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, 255-291.

⁴⁴ That during the Qing dynasty lay Buddhism was stronger than in any former dynasty is suggested by the appearance of two collections with biographies of the Buddhist laity, the *Jushi zhuan* 居士傳 (Biographies of Lay Buddhists) (in *Wanzi Xuzangjing* 卍續藏經, vol. 149) and the *Shan nüren zhuan* 善女人傳 (Biographies of Virtuous Women) (in *Wanzi Xuzangjing*, vol. 150).

tained where higher than the costs. While people differed in estimating the value of specific rewards and costs, be they religious or mundane, they probably were alike in choosing the option that, under the given circumstances, promised them the best overall balance. In this sense, they acted rationally.

**THE PRECIOUS VOLUME OF BODHISATVA
ZHENWU ATTAINING THE WAY**

**A CASE STUDY OF THE WORSHIP OF ZHENWU (PERFECTED
WARRIOR) IN MING-QING SECTARIAN GROUPS¹**

SHIN-YI CHAO

1. Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a new wave of popular religious movements, which the government declared to be heretical, surfaced in China.² While placing a characteristically sectarian creator goddess at the centre of their worship, the members of the movements in addition constructed a hybrid pantheon by incorporating “orthodox deities” (*zhengshen*) of Buddhist and Daoist origins. Zhenwu, an exalted authority in Daoism by the time, was one of the deities so honoured.

In late imperial China, Zhenwu was among the handful deities who could justifiably be described as being worshipped throughout the Empire. A cursory survey of gazetteers from Ming-Qing times would leave no doubt as to his popularity among ordinary villagers and town-dwellers. Emperors, as a result, included Zhenwu in the list of officially approved cults and some of them enthusiastically promoted his worship.³ Hagiographic accounts of Zhenwu were in circulation by the eleventh century.

¹ I would like to thank Drs. Dan Overmyer, Kevin Clark, Philip Clart, Paul Crowe, and the anonymous reader for their suggestions and corrections. *The Precious Volume of Bodhisattva Zhenwu Attaining the Way* is from Professor Overmyer’s personal collection.

² Daniel Overmyer, “Boatmen and Buddhas: The Lo Chiao in Ming Dynasty China.” *History of Religions* 17.3&4 (1978): 284-302.

³ Zhenwu’s worship received royal support from the Song (960–1279) emperors; see, for example, Hung-I Chuang, “Les Croyances concernant la divinité taoïste Xuanwu (Xème–XIIIème siècles)” (Ph.D. diss., École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1994). Yet, it was not until the period of Mongol rule that the sovereigns claimed dynastic legitimacy in Zhenwu’s myth; see John Lagerwey, “The Pilgrimage to Wu-Tang shan,” in *Pilgrimage and Sacred Sites in China*, ed. Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 293-332; see esp. 297. During Ming times, Emperor Ming Taizu (r. 1368–1398) ordered his princely vassals to offer sacrifices to Zhenwu upon their return to their feudatories from the capital (*Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming dynasty], 49.1277). Successive Ming