Book Reviews

***Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China*.** By Barend J. ter Haar. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014. Pp. x + 298. $50.00.

This is an excellent book, the most detailed study ever in a Western language of the history and teachings of a Chinese popular religious sect, the Wu-wei jiao 無為教 (Non-action Teachings), based on the writings of a pious lay Buddhist from Shandong named Luo Qing 羅清 (*c.* 1443–1527). Luo wrote five books based on his own interpretation of Buddhist scriptures titled the *Wu bu liu ce* 五部六冊 (*Five Books in Six Volumes*). Woodblock prints of these books were first published in 1509 and 1518, and continued to be republished until deep into the twentieth century. Luo was deeply influenced by Pure Land and Chan Buddhism. He radically internalized their teachings by emphasizing that the Pure Land was in the self, so that external rituals were unnecessary. This led him to teach that traditional practices of ancestor veneration, the worship of popular deities, and elaborate funerals were unnecessary, including the use of food offerings and ritual paper money offered to images. Since such offerings and images were basic aspects of local religion, devout followers of Patriarch Luo and his successors could not participate in such common traditions, so formed their own types of worship based on the recitation of the Patriarch's texts.

Shandong is on the north China coast, but the first reliable evidence that Luo Qing's teachings had begun to form the basis of a new sectarian tradition is further south, in southern Zhejiang province. There is no firm evidence for how this happened, but later there were some Luo sect groups among boatmen on the Grand Canal that ran south from Beijing, and it was not difficult to travel to Beijing from Shandong, so perhaps that is how the Patriarch's teachings reached Zhejiang. This is a big gap in the story, because the whole province of Jiangsu is between these other two provinces. Professor ter Haar is aware of this problem, but does not mention it here, except by implication. Luo Qing clearly had supporters who cared for his writings, but how and why did they take them south? In any case, the first evidence we have of the Wu-wei sect in Zhejiang is the activities of a man named Ying Ji'nan 應繼南 (1527/1540–1582), who was an itinerant seller of chicken baskets, from Jinyun county 縉雲縣 in Chuzhou prefecture 處州府. He studied for a time in a monastery, then apprenticed to a silversmith, who apparently was a sect member, for he had the religious term Pu 普 in his name, a mark of allegiance. (The term for female members was Miao 妙.) Ying Ji'nan was taught and initiated by a teacher named Lu 盧, and given the membership name Ying Puneng 應普能. At that point he immediately

claimed to all present that he was the reincarnation of Patriarch Luo! He became an itinerant teacher, venerated as a true Patriarch, until in 1576 he went to Mt. Tiantai and preached in front of the county office. His claims to religious authority enraged local magistrates, one of whom in 1582 had him arrested, put in prison and beaten to death.

The next patriarch of the sect was Yao Wenyu 姚文宇 (1578–1646), who was born in a county a bit further south. "He kept a vegetarian diet and was poor, and he herded ducks for a living" (p. 66). He was converted by a "Person of the Way" (*daozhe* 道者), and given the religious name Pushan 普善. Since his livelihood involved the daily killing of ducks, he instead became the proprietor of a small food stall on a busy street. Some years later a sect leader convinced Pushan that he was the incarnation of Patriarch Ying, and so the tradition continued.

Professor ter Haar's study has benefitted from the excellent work of a Taiwan scholar named Wang Jianchuan 王見川, who has collected and reprinted a large number of popular religious texts extant in Taiwan, including those from local descendants of the Non-action Teachings. Wang, formerly with the Academia Sinica, is now associated with Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Some of these books I did not encounter in my searches for popular scriptures from China mainland scholars and libraries. In the Taiwan sources there is good evidence of such themes as the importance of women in the Wu-wei tradition, its avoidance of popular practices such as burning ritual money for the dead, and the use of meat and alcohol in rituals. Members practised simple funerals. The sect accepted the existence of ancestors, but did not worship them. The group's rituals consisted essentially of the reading and recitation of Patriarch Luo's texts.[1] Ter Haar calls the sect "a self-conscious community" (p. 85), "a missionary movement," and "[a network] of teachers and pupils"—"every member would ideally gather seven converts" (p. 89).

Since Luo Qing had taught that all beings have the Buddha nature, ". . . illiterate women are just as capable of attaining insight as literate men" (p. 97). Given this teaching, it is no wonder that women leaders and members played an important role in the movement. So, in Shanghai Patriarch Yao gave the high rank of "Overall Command" (*zongchi* 總敕) to a pious young female member, despite some local opposition (p. 79). In a section entitled "Women in the movement" ter Haar notes that marriage of members could be "a partnership between near equals," with wives referred to as "Companion[s] in the Way." Women "were seen as significant persons

[1] For a detailed discussion of these books, with long translated passages, see my *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), pp. 92–135.

in religious terms and could actively engage in discussions in their own right" (pp. 109–13). In a nineteenth-century group, "Everybody looked at each other as brothers and sisters, calling one another Vegetarian Friends (*caiyou* 菜友), Vegetarian Lords (*caigong* 菜公), Vegetarian Aunts (*caigu* 菜姑), and their leaders Vegetarian Heads (*caitou* 菜頭)" (p. 178).

Professor ter Haar is at pains to emphasize that the Wu-wei sect did not specifically venerate the "Buddha yet to come (Maitreya)," who was a figure in the teachings of some groups involved in armed uprisings, which re-enforces his view that this sect had no seditious political views.

The author notes several mentions of the sect in nineteenth-century Christian reports in a section titled "Christianity and the Non-Action Teachings" (pp. 201–4), as well as elsewhere in this book. Because of similarities in their organization and teachings, at first some magistrates treated them in similar ways, and some Wu-wei sect members converted to Christianity.

Under the heading "Repression on the mainland" Professor ter Haar discusses the fate of the sect after 1949, "the most devastating religious persecution ever to take place in the entire course of Chinese history" (pp. 212–17). Here he notes several references to continuing sect activity despite attempts to suppress it, particularly in Jiangxi province. In Xunwu county 尋烏縣 there was a ritual lasting ten days that attracted some four hundred people in 1955, and in Gaoan 高安, a group that was first repressed in 1959, revived itself, and by 1964 still had 371 volumes of texts and other ritual items that were confiscated by the police (p. 216). On p. 217 the author notes that in 2012 "Taiwanese followers . . . visited [a Luo sect temple in Xianyou 仙遊, Fujian, and observed] a three-day ritual held . . . to recite the *Five Books in Six Volumes*." Wang Jianchuan is in contact with some Luo sect halls in Taiwan, so the sect continues there as well, some 480 years after its founding!

At the end of this book, ter Haar briefly compares this Chinese tradition with similar groups in Reformation Europe, and notes that it lasted deep into the twentieth century.

In sum, this is a fine study, richly documented, in which I found only one error: on p. 169 he says that the Sixteen Maxims of the Kangxi Emperor "were one of this emperor's most famous oral exultations," by which word I presume he means "exhortations."

Daniel L. Overmyer
University of British Columbia