

Modern Daoist Eschatology: Spirit-Writing and Elite Soteriology in Late Imperial China*

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Abstract

This article explores a corpus of 18th and 19th-century scriptures revealed by spirit-writing and published by members of the elite. These scriptures propose a soteriology where the threat of an apocalyptic “turning of the kalpa” plays an important role, and enjoins on elites a duty to usher in a moral reform that alone can avert the advent of the apocalypse. It first shows the close relationship between spirit-written revelations, the Wenchang cult and eschatology in the earliest such texts, produced during the Song dynasty, and then shows that this relationship continued, and even intensified during the Qing. After discussing several bodies of revelations linked to Wenchang, Lüzu and other cults, it explores to what extent this discourse can really be categorized as eschatological. It

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* This article is dedicated to the memory of two great scholars who have left us

argues that this discourse should be understood as a transformation of, and possibly a counter-discourse to earlier and contemporary apocalyptic messianism that maintains the apocalyptic vision but routinizes the messiah and thus de-politicizes its vision of social change.

Keywords: eschatology, Daoism, Qing period, spirit-writing, Wenchang