

Rumblings From the Past: Old Chinese New Religions Echo Down to the Present

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Abstract

Religious movements are not new in Chinese history. Chinese history is full of organized religious groups of all varieties, from Daoist quasi-states to intellectual currents that took root in popular culture. Although they are often overshadowed by the Big Three traditions, the constant presence of these movements in Chinese history are a constant reminder of the power of religious fervor. This paper considers three movements that had important impact on Chinese society. The first, the Way of the Celestial Masters, was one of the first organized Daoist religious groups. The second, the Teachings of Patriarch Luo, is a strain of religious thought that left a powerful mark on later popular religions. And the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was a militant uprising based on Christianity that nearly toppled the imperial regime in the mid-1800s.

Keywords: new religions, NRM, China, lineage, teachings, movements

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Introduction

This essay surveys three significant and well-known new religious movements from different periods of Chinese history. The purpose is two-fold: First, to illustrate the variety and significance of new religious formations in China, and second, to propel questions about the study of new religions as a discipline. My interest is in applying the perspective of new religious movement (NRM) studies, to see what we can find.

The Study of New Religious Movements

What is meant by the NRM perspective? It means first of all studying religious organizations that are new, from the moment they form into a discreet religious unit. In that sense all religions were at one point new religions, just as all living people were at one point infants. The point is to study every example, even those from the past, as newly formed religious entities. The NRM scholar then follows the group's development as far as it can be traced. From start to finish the group is studied *in toto*; the perspective is holistic. Thus a number of academic disciplines come into play, including, for contemporary groups, ethnographic observation.

The Celestial Masters 天師道

The Celestial Masters are one of the earliest religious institution to appear in rounded form in Chinese history. They were not the first. In the waning years of the Han empire (206BCE-220CE), and the 400 years of disunity that followed, dozens of movements rose up, each similarly centered around a charismatic leader. The most prominent of these was the Yellow Turbans, or the Way of Great Peace 太平道 (*taiping dao*). This was a revolutionary and religious movement seeking to overthrow the Han dynasty. The Yellow Turbans shared several traits with the Celestial Masters, including a reverence for the Sutra of Heavenly Peace 太平經 (*taipingjing*), an apocalyptic work that dates from the early Han. Both groups similarly saw disease as a reflection of immoral conduct. And both focused on the confession of sins.¹

The Historical Narrative

Based solely on internal evidence from Celestial Master writings, the Celestial Masters were founded by Zhang Daoling. Originally from Jiangsu, Zhang Daoling moved to the Sichuan region in in the first half of the second century. Speaking through a revealed text, Zhang Daoling states that he had received his first revelation from the spirit of Qin Shihuang 秦始皇, first emperor of the Qin dynasty, in the year 142. He was later given a covenant 盟威 (*mengwei*) by Laozi, and instructed to start the Celestial Masters.

There is no corroborating evidence of Zhang Daoling's existence anywhere except in Celestial Master and later Daoist sources. In contrast, we have multiple confirmations

¹ Terry F. Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 13.

for the existence of his grandson, Zhang Lu 張魯. In Chen Shou's 陳壽 *Book of Wei* 魏書, part of the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* 三國志 (*sanguozhi*, c. 280), Lu is described as a marshal 司馬 (*sima*) and eventual ruler of a territory in the southwest. In 191 the regional governor of the southwest dispatched Lu and another Marshal, Zhang Xiu 張脩, to attack Hanzhong 漢中. Hanzhong was a strategically important city straddling the pass between Sichuan and the northern China plains. After Hanzhong was taken Lu ambushed and killed Xiu, then made himself sole ruler of Hanzhong. The weakened Han court, instead of attacking Zhang Lu, treated it as a *fait accompli*. With the imminent disintegration of the Han state Lu became, in effect, a warlord.

One intriguing theory is that Zhang Xiu was the true religious leader, and that the armed forces he led were all religious believers. He is introduced in one source as “the wicked spirit medium... of Ba commanderie 巴郡妖巫 (*bajun yaowu*).” He was also called the master of the five pecks of rice 五斗米師 (*wudoumishi*), a clear reference to the Celestial Master practice of requiring all follower to donate five pecks of rice annually. In this version of events, when Zhang Lu merged his forces with those of Zhang Xiu; he inherited the religious organization of Zhang Xiu's movement wholesale. The same source further states that Zhang Xiu may even have been a Yellow Turban leader.²

What we know for certain is that between 191 and 215 Zhang Lu established his rule over the region around Hanzhong. The two most powerful military powers of the time, Cao Cao 曹操 and Liu Bei 劉備, both had designs on Hanzhong. In 215 Cao Cao's forces attacked. Instead of resisting, Zhang Lu came to an expedient political arrangement with Cao. For this reason, Zhang Lu has been criticized by later historians. Whether or not Zhang Lu was traitorous, Terry Kleeman confirms that the deal was highly attractive for Zhang Lu. He was enfeoffed with the title of Marquis. His daughter was given in marriage to Cao's son. Overall, these were lenient terms and amounted to no less than the intermeshing of the Zhang household into the Wei empire's ruling family.³

At the same time Cao Cao in 215 made the fateful decision to disperse the Celestial Master believers. His reasons are unknown, but it is reasonable to assume he feared the continued existence of a unified polity that had functioned as an independent state. While this forced relocation marked the end of the Celestial Masters state, it also meant Celestial Master practitioners were now spread over a large swath of northern China, where they continued their religious practices. Later, when non-Chinese invaders conquered the north during the chaotic period of the Sixteen Kingdoms (304-439), many Celestial Master believers moved south, to the Yangtze river valley and beyond, thus spreading Celestial Master beliefs into the south. The dispersal was, in Kleeman's words, “...a key development in its transformation into China's first national religion.”⁴

² Kleeman, 31.

³ Kleeman, 49.

⁴ Kleeman, 111.

An NRM Methodological Question

Celestial Masters followers continued to practice their teachings after the dispersal. Yet inevitably many regional practices and beliefs were absorbed on top of the original Celestial Master foundation. The dispersal thus serves as a clear marker of a historical new phase, one that would extend for over a thousand years as Daoism developed into a broad religious tradition.

This situation brings up a relevant question for new religion studies: Is it meaningful to speak of the movement's earliest stage as being *essentially the same* as the later religion itself? What makes up this essentialness? To mention one analogous situation, is Christianity as it became a world religion in the 100s and 200s the same as the small group that surrounded the Jewish prophet from Nazareth? The Christian tradition is based largely on many instructions and teachings believed to have been left by Jesus. But just as clearly Christianity became something utterly different, and it continues to evolve some 2000 years later. So where do we draw the line?

Later Developments

Kleeman notes that unlike political uprisings like the Yellow Turbans, the Celestial Masters were never antagonistic to the state. The church sought "an accommodation of existing religious authority within a new framework," not something radically new. So the expulsion saw the Celestial Masters followers move on, continuing their practices. Over time, however, the system of appointing parish leaders broke down. Individuals began to claim direct revelations of their own, and to claim authority based on these statements from the deities.⁵

Inferences: The Theocratic State

The picture we have of the Celestial Masters is of a clearly delineated civil-religious group, one founded on an original covenant received by the founder, Zhang Daoling. Members practiced common rites. Confession was key, and each family was expected to build a quiet room 靜室 (*jingshi*) for individual reflection on sins. All members made donations, the five pecks of rice. Finally, this same group spread throughout China, and became the foundation for Daoism.

As an NRM the group's holding civil power, however briefly, was unusual. Celestial Master doctrine and ritual no doubt helped in the process of spreading. Nevertheless, few religious groups in Chinese history established theocratic states.

Non-Action Teachings 無為教

The second religious movement, the Non-Action Teaching, is less well-known than the Celestial Masters. Nevertheless, the Non-Action Teachings is an enduring example of Chinese religious creativity. The tradition is a form of lay Buddhism, and can fruitfully be analyzed alongside Buddhism's own long development in China. For by the Ming period (1368-1644) Buddhism had become well-integrated at all

⁵ Kleeman 138.

levels of Chinese society, resulting in a number of lay Buddhist organizations. Yet we cannot simply reduce Non-Action Teachings to a “branch” of Buddhism. In fact, one constant over the history of Non-Action Teachings has been persistent criticism and outright hostility from the Buddhist establishment. Hostility from different segments of civil society, be it the state, other religions, or “anti-cult” organizations, is a well-recognized phenomenon in the NRM literature.⁶ For this and other reasons, Non-Action Teachings certainly belongs to be classed as an NRM, and it is certainly one of China’s most successful.

The Ming was a period of relative stability following the dramatic end of Mongol rule (1279-1368). Never strong militarily, the Ming empire nevertheless saw crucial social developments. Foremost of these was the spread of printing and reading. Ming society was increasingly urban, capitalist, and wealthy. It was in many ways a renaissance moment. Along with the flourishing of new ideas came new religious movements. With increased literacy the ideas of Buddhist sutras became increasingly familiar to many. Most importantly, a new religious sensibility arose, in both Buddhism and well as Daoism: the idea that it was possible to cultivate and interact with the supernatural directly.

This is the principle idea powering the Non-Action Movement. It’s putative founder, Luo Qing 羅清 (1443-1527), bequeathed to the world a written account of his own life intermixed with the an explication of Buddhist principles. This in English is he Five Books in Six Volumes 五部六冊 (*wubu liuce*). The Five Books play a unique role in Non-Action Teachings, for they are valued not simply for the ideas contained inside, but as a single object of worship. The bundle of communal practice, ritual, and doctrine that grew around the Five Books has made Non-Action Teachings a long-lasting tradition, one still practiced today, nearly 500 years after Luo’s age.

The Historical Narrative

Non-Action sources emphasize a common line of succession covering Three Patriarchs. Luo Qing, the first patriarch, was the founder. He was followed by Patriarch Ying (Ying Ji’nan 應繼南 1527/1540-1582), who claimed to be the Luo Qing’s reincarnation. Patriarch Ying in turn incarnated as Patriarch Yao (Yao Wenyu 姚文宇 1578-1646). Thus the tradition has created a powerful discourse of unassailable descent covering its first 150+ years.

Berend ter Haar takes a nuanced approach to Non-Action historiography. He essentially sees Ying and Yao as influential founders of new religions in their own rights. For Luo Qing he leaves the question open. In fact we have nearly no material on Luo Qing’s life except the account contained in the Five Books. Thus we do not know if he actually founded a religious institution at all. Patriarch Ying, on the other hand, clearly led an organized group. Yet ter Haar does not conclude that Ying was the Non-Action Teachings founder. He states that Ying joined an *existing* group, one that was already active.⁷ The actual founder of this group is unknown to us. What we

⁶ Hubert Michael Seiwert, in Collaboration with Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 439-40.

⁷ Ter Haar, 51.

do know is that there is no proof of a connection between Luo and Ying beyond use of Luo's books in Ying's group.

We have a wealth of information on Patriarch Ying. He was active in Chuzhou 滁州 prefecture, in today's eastern Anhui province. He later established a worship center in Wenzhou 温州, in south-eastern Zhejiang province. Ying's group spread and became prominent. However there were also competing Non-Action branches, or "lineages."

There is no evidence that Patriarch Yao was associated with any of these organized groups active during Ying's time. We are told Yao was a duck herder who later had a roadside stall. He was converted, and in 1613 had an enlightenment experience. But he was not successful in attracting adherents. It was only he moved to the Wuyi Mountains 武夷山 in western Fujian, in 1620, that he began to attract converts. Yao founded his own lineage, which he "imposed" on another existing movement. After his death in 1646 leadership passed to his biological son Yao Duo 姚鐸 (1645-1683). By this point his movement had spread to southern Zhejiang, northern Fujian, and Jiangxi province.⁸

Ter Haar calls this early time in Non-Action teaching the period of charismatic leaders. The second period, during the Qing (1644-1911), Republican (1911-1949), and Taiwan (1895-1945) eras, did not feature larger-than-life leaders with direct claims to legitimacy. However it was in this period that the ritual corpus was defined and transmission practices were routinized.

Activity continued through the Qing dynasty, a period of over 260 years. Non-Action groups were not free from persecution, since the Qing state became increasingly fearful of all such religious, "heterodox" groups practicing rituals and holding beliefs outside the mainstream. As ter Haar makes clear, though, Non-Action Teachings groups were usually arrested only as part of general prosecutions of such groups. During the Republican period (1911-1949) period it became well-established in Taiwan, under the generic label "vegetarian hall." By 1939, according to Japanese colonial data, there were some 233 vegetarian halls, many of which were Non-Action. In China, with the advent of the communist era (1949-), Non-Action Teachings were targets of the mass persecution unleashed in the new government's anti-superstition and heterodox movement of the early 1950s. This lasted well into the 1970s.⁹

NRM Methodological Questions

Non-Action Teachings epitomize the tangle of networks and lineages that made up the late Ming-early Qing religious milieu. This very complexity makes it difficult to construct a coherent narrative of the evolution of one religious institution. Instead we see discontinuities, ellipses, competing lineages and spinoffs. The leaders, certainly to some extent gifted speakers and thinkers, seem to struggle mightily to maintain their visions. And against the odds, with the help of ritual practice and a fixed canon, a religious tradition forms. Viewing the Non-Action Teachings from the perspective

⁸ Ter Haar, 69.

⁹ Ter Haar, 216-7.

of NRM studies reveals the vagaries of a long-lived religion that at many turns faced the danger of extinction.

Inferences: The Invention of Lineage

We can conclude that the idea of a lineage is important for establishing legitimacy. But continuity does not *depend* on a lineage. This is relevant for a host of other Chinese NRM groups who have lost their founders or a direct link to them. Non-Action Teachings appears to be a series of NRMs connected by adherence to a common liturgy, as well as a founding lineage. We could call this common root the Non-Action *tradition*, in the same way the traditions of Buddhism and Christianity allow for the development of multiple NRMs within their broad streams.

The Non-Action example thus suggests a typology of religious entities, a hierarchy of organizational types: a *new religious movement* for a movement in its early phase of establishing its form, and rapid growth; a *new religion* for the fully formed religious entity; a *tradition* for the movement that has become a widely dispersed social factor, a symbol and meme; a *network* for the linked connections surrounding a leader; and a *hall* for the physical building and its congregation.

The Non-Action Teachings example, then, both illustrates the tendency to fragment into lineage networks, as well as the possibility of long-term survival.

The God Worshipping Society 拜上帝會

The third NRM example is the God Worshipping Society. This movement rose up from the hinterlands of southeastern China in the 1840s and spread quickly over major sections of Central China, as far north as the Yangtze River valley. Like the Heavenly Masters, the group actually held political power for a brief period. And like the Non-Action teachings the God Worshippers recruited members from the marginal sectors of society. But unlike the first two NRMs, the God Worshipping Society's development has been meticulously traced, and like any other controversial topics, fresh approaches continue to appear.

I speak of the group more popularly known as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. This movement, starting off as a religious group, soon morphed into an armed rebellion with its own laws and a radical vision of an ideal society. Its effect was catastrophic. 20 million died, and the empire was traumatized. The Taiping movement was also the first to be based on Christian concepts, which were combined with elements taken from popular belief. Many other forms of Christianity would appear in our era, so in a sense the God Worshippers are a precursor.

The Mid-Qing Era

The God Worshipping Society arose in the chaotic environment of the Pearl River Delta in China's southeast. First there was a massive population increase throughout the southeast, spurred on mainly by the introduction of such new world foods. This increase brought on famine and land shortages. Second was an increase in illegal groups such as secret societies and local forces. Smuggling in particular became a profitable occupation. Thirdly the existing Qing bureaucratic structures proved

unable to cope with the frequent civil unrest. Finally, there were economic strains. The 1820-1850 period is called the Daoguang Depression due to rising silver prices, which was exported in exchange for opium.¹⁰

On top of this came the European imperialists. The foreigners, most loudly the British, clamored for trading stations along China's coast, as well as a loosening of the restrictions placed on missionaries. When the tensions broke out in real fighting in 1840, British naval forces easily dominated the Chinese defenders.¹¹ As a result of the ensuing Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 the British were given significant concessions, including the right for missionaries to reside in Chinese cities.

Such a volatile mixture also created sparks in the religious realm. One of these involved a poor Hakka scholar from the hinterlands beyond Canton, Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全.

The Historical Narrative

Ethnic Hakka migrants had been moving into the region around Canton in large numbers due to the demographic pressures already mentioned. Hong was born into destitution. He was a local school teacher studying to pass the regional licentiate examination. When he failed to pass he returned home to recuperate from the strain. All told Hong failed the examination four times. Hong was a failed scholar.

During his first breakdown, in 1837, he had a vision. In the vision he meets the Heavenly Father, who tells him:

How can the people of the world enjoy my blessings and yet have their original nature so obscured? Have they not the slightest thought of awe or respect for me? They have been greatly deluded and misled by evil demons, and they waste those things which I have bestowed upon them as offerings to these evil demons, as if the demons had given birth to them and nourished them. .¹²

The Heavenly Father tells Hong to “do battle with the evil demons and drive them out.”

Before Hong returns to earth, the Heavenly Father makes an ambiguous statement:

¹⁰ Richard von Glahn, R. “Economic Depression and the Silver Question in Nineteenth-Century China.” In Perez Garcia M., De Sousa L., eds. *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches*. Palgrave Studies in Comparative Global History. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Available online https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-10-4053-5_5#citeas.

¹¹ Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1966), 48; also see Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*. Fifth Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 185-190.

¹² Franz Michael, in collaboration with Chung-li Chang, *The Taiping Rebellion, History and Documents. Volume II: documents and Comments* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1971), 55.

When you descend into the world there will still be several years before you awaken. But you need have no fear about not awakening. Later a book will be given to you which will explain to you all of these things.¹³

On his first trip to take the examination, in 1836, Hong had in fact picked up a Christian tract written by Liang Afa 梁發, “Good Words for Exhorting the Age” 勸世良言 (*quanshi liangyan*).

“Good Words,” a simple primer in essential Christianity, sat forgotten in Hong’s room until 1843 when a relative happened to notice it. Once Hong read it he felt a thousand mysteries had been resolved. Here was the explanation for the origin of evil. Here was the true identity of the Father he had met in his vision. This was the Yehuo-hua 爺火華 (Jehovah) mentioned in Good Words. And since it was his Father, he must be the son of God. He was God’s second son.

Hong and his friend Feng Yunshan 馮雲山 began preaching on this vision and its implications. They wandered throughout the impoverished, hilly eastern part of Guangxi province. They attracted a following. These were mainly people at the margins of society.¹⁴ At some point between 1844 and 1847, when Feng Yunshan was preaching on his own, he and his followers decided to give their group a name: the God Worshipping Society.

The society grew in influence, generally in the area around Thistle Mountain 紫金山 in eastern Guangxi. Devotees were also attacked and criticized, first by the Confucian gentry establishment, but also by bandit and secret society groups rampant throughout the area. Eventually, in 1850, the God Worshipping Society decided to form armed forces of their own.

From this point on the story is no longer about how a new religion developed. It now takes the shape of a high-stakes revolutionary narrative. The Taiping Heavenly Realm movement is both religious and civil at the same time. And it wreaks havoc in the heartland of China.

In 1850 the Taiping forces broke out of their place of origin in Guangxi and moved north. Their forces surged to up to 500,000 soldiers. They found impressive success as well as failures along the way. Reaching the Yangtze River, the Taiping army quickly claimed a major prize, the city of Wuchang 武昌. They did not remain there long. Instead they moved east, towards their real prize, the richest city in China, Nanjing 南京. Against the odds, the Taiping Heavenly Army took Nanjing in 1853. Between that point and 1864 Nanjing would be their Heavenly Capital 天京 (*tianjing*).

The Taiping’s rapid success was a shock to the Qing dynasty. The regime responded by enlisting its most gifted leaders, Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章. They methodically took back territory, and maintained a blockade around Nanjing.

¹³ Michael, 62.

¹⁴ Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1996), 80-1.

Hong Xiuquan, the Heavenly King, died there in May of 1864, and the Qing forces broke through the city walls not long after.

NRM Methodological Question: The Religious and the Political

The Taiping story is a dramatic narrative, one that continues to fascinate scholars. From the perspective of new religion studies, three points stand out, for which I will borrow the Buddhist term “turning.”¹⁵ The first turning is the point in 1843 when Hong Xiuquan unites the Biblical stories he reads about in Leung Afa with his own vision of meeting the Father. Through this Hong gains a powerful explanatory framework which gives deep meaning to his own visionary experience. This meaning then propels him forward, with absolute conviction in his role as God’s son.

The second turning is the point sometime between 1844 and 1847 that the new group was named. Naming is a key step in NRM development. An identity is created, boundary lines are drawn. . Insiders and outsiders alike now have a social object around which associations of meaning begin to accrete. This step separates the religious group from what could be a broadly amorphous movement, one that no matter how powerful lacks identity as a social unit.

The third turning in the Taiping saga is the decision to militarize. Taken in 1849 or 1850, this decision is an act of organizational leadership. While Spence spells out some precipitating events, we know little of the process by which the decision was reached. By 1849 the God-worshippers identified the Manchus, and by extension the entire Qing governmental structure, as being identical with the demons they were sworn to exterminate.¹⁶ And by February of 1850 the group’s missives start to mention an army.¹⁷ Regardless of the reason, the decision set what had been a religious group on a new trajectory.

New religions can become political, and some can become violent.¹⁸ The Taipings were both. This nexus between organized religion, political activity and violence is an evolving area of NRM study. It involves understand the NRM’s perception of threat and the degree of estrangement from society. As Catherine Wessinger notes, there is also the real possibility of a group consciously committing acts of terrorism to attract recruits and spark revolution. Similar mixing of the revolutionary with the religious is also a frequent trope in Chinese history, which again explains why so many imperial regimes monitored popular religions closely.¹⁹

¹⁵ By “turning of the wheel of the dharma” the Buddha established a framework for understanding the evolution of his sutra teachings. The first turning was his exposition of the four noble truths. The second was the development of Mahayana. And the third was exposition of Buddha Nature.

¹⁶ Spence, 115.

¹⁷ Spence, 116.

¹⁸ The number of new religions involved in violence is most likely very low. See Catherine Wessinger. “New Religious Movements and Violence.” In *New and Alternative Religious Movements in America*, ed. Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft. Vol 1: History and Controversies (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 165-205.

¹⁹ Palmer, David and Vincent Goosaert, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 28.

Inferences: NRMs and Violence

The Taiping Rebellion is often assumed to be an exclusive specialization reserved for historians. Taiping Christianity has often been ignored, or dismissed as “warmed-over Protestantism...”²⁰ This is beginning to change, with numerous studies on liturgy, theology, and ideology appearing. Thomas Reilly sees the movement’s significance in its complete repudiation of the entire Qing system—governance, thought, practice, and worldview. This meant it rejected all other teachings, most importantly the Confucianism at the core of the imperial system. It was in this sense unforgivingly radical. It would not be the first such movement in China’s modern period.

Conclusion

All three of these groups functioned in an environment dominated by the official ideology, on the one hand, and, at the street level, popular belief. And both of these cultural systems were essentially religious. Generally, the state did not see the popular system as a threat, since it rarely led to coordinated, intra-regional social action. The state system itself, in contrast, was a rigidly managed system of ritual offerings to specific deities. Maintenance of this system of offerings was necessary for the functioning of the entire empire, because atop this system sat the emperor, the linchpin joining Heaven and Earth.

Any new entry onto the religious scene in China—in other words, any new religion, whether indigenous or imported—had to come to an accommodation with this religious backdrop. The Celestial Masters chose to establish its own social and ideological system, yet did not challenge the ruling order. The various Non-Action lineages never, as far we know, took an *adversarial* stance to secular authority. At the popular level, however, Non-Action members did not use meat or alcohol. Nor did they worship images. This made them socially distinct. And the God Worshipping Society, as we have seen, quickly developed into a movement that was radically opposed to the very existence of both imperial and popular systems.

The three movements described here all used revealed texts, had unique ideologies, and developed attractive soteriologies. Yet their differences are stark. They stemmed from different core traditions—Laozi belief, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity. And they had different ideas on political action. These resulted in vastly different fates. The Taipings flamed out in a true cataclysmic struggle. The Non-Action groups continued to exist for centuries, in a remarkable show of resilience. But the Celestial Masters, starting as a new religion, were dispersed over a vast area and in turn lay down layer after layer of meaning upon the Chinese religious imagination, creating in turn the foundation of a great world religion, Daoism.

²⁰ Thomas Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and Blasphemy of Empire* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004), 12.

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