
Practicing Scripture breaks new ground in the study of Chinese popular religion and Buddhist culture by focusing on the role of scriptures in the formation and evolution of one of the most influential new sectarian movements popular in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, namely the Non-Action Teaching (also known as the Luo sect, Great Vehicle, or Dragon Flower Gathering). Tracing the history of the sect from the mid-sixteenth century to the present and analyzing the use of its unique scriptural texts, Ter Haar argues that despite its common label as a popular religion, the Non-Action Teaching was basically a lay Buddhist movement that leaned heavily on the use of ideas, terminology, and liturgy from Buddhist scriptures and ritual manuals. Moreover, its major sectarian text, the so-called Five Books in Six Volumes, attributed to the founder Patriarch Luo Qing, remained essential in the later development of the sect and greatly influenced other sectarian movements. Unlike many other popular sects also active during the same period, the Non-Action Teaching lacked a clear messianic and millenarian orientation but instead was closely aligned with traditional Chan Buddhism and Pure Land teaching, with a strong commitment to vegetarianism.

The book follows a chronological order and is divided into eight chapters including an introduction and a conclusion.

After giving a succinct overview of the history of the sect and the current scholarship in chapter 1 (‘Introduction’), Ter Haar begins with the founder Patriarch Luo in chapter 2. The major source for reconstructing his imagined biography is the ‘precious scroll’ (baojuan 寶卷) of the Five Books in Six Volumes (dated to 1509) attributed to him. As a historical figure, Patriarch Luo was a hereditary soldier from Shandong but was assigned to a border garrison in Miyun, close to Beijing, where he practiced the Way and reached enlightenment. As his autobiographical writings in the Five Books in Six Volumes indicate, he was clearly influenced by Chan Buddhism and emphasized the enlightenment of the self regardless of one’s ecclesiastic status. Here, Ter Haar stresses the importance of this scriptural text, which is not only a spiritual self-confession but also serves as an anthology of the Buddhist canon, with numerous citations and references to popular Buddhist texts. Clearly, right from the beginning, its connection with traditional Buddhist teachings and practices cannot be denied. Moreover, in the later development of the sect, the physical form of the Five Books serves a ritual purpose, for it is displayed and recited in its entirety during the ritual of ‘Lighting the Candles.’ It must
be pointed out that the use of the *Five Books* in the mid- and late Ming was a legitimate practice supported by the court due to its creation of a nation-rescue story related to Patriarch Luo. Other later popular sects were also influenced by the *Five Books*.

Chapter 3 introduces a succession of charismatic teachers, such as Patriarch Ying Ji’nan (1527/1540–1582) and Yao Wenyu (1578–1646), who developed the sect in the peripheral southern Zhejiang and among workers of the indigo industry. Both rose from marginal social status and were converted to Patriarch Luo’s teaching. Claiming to be reincarnations of the previous leaders, they established their lineages in local communities. Yet both were persecuted by the local government. The sect’s textual repertoire continued to grow with important additions such as *Mingzong’s Precious Scroll of Filial Piety and Righteousness* (*Mingzong xiaoyi baojuan 明宗孝義寶卷*) and the *Overall Record of the Circumstances Under Which the Three Patriarchs On-high Traveled around and Taught* (*Taishang sanzu xingjiao yinyou zonglu 太上三祖行教因由總錄*).

Chapter 4 examines the religious life of the converts as reflected in a collection of conversion tales, *Causes and Fruits of the Seven Branches* (*Qizhi yinguo 七支因果*), which is dated to the late Ming by Ter Haar. Ter Haar demonstrates that this group of believers rejected certain popular practices such as burning paper money and worshipping icons of ghosts and spirits. However, they still held fast to traditional Buddhist ideas, such as belief in an underground world. What they emphasized was the purity of the mind and the simplicity of ritual. Patriarch Luo’s teaching in the *Five Books* remained essential for practice. The source also shows that the Non-Action Teaching was at that time a major social movement, attracting primarily low-status literati, quite a number of female followers, and people of military background, but relatively few people from agricultural professions.

Chapter 5 continues to explore religious beliefs and practices as illustrated by a series of ritual manuals dated to the late Ming and early Qing. Here, Ter Haar tends to use the term “iconophobia” to characterize a series of unconventional practices inspired by Chan Buddhism and practiced by early followers, including the rejection of “erecting Buddha statues, reading sutras, reciting the name of the Buddha, burning paper money, and converting donors,” and even ancestor veneration (119). In this chapter, the author rejects the application of the modern label “messianism” to this movement because it lacks an eschatological discourse centering on the mythical messianic figure of the Unborn Venerable Mother (*Wusheng laomu 無生老母*), who was commonly venerated in many popular movements such as the Lotus Teaching. Rather,