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Local Resistance in Early Medieval Chinese Historiography and the Problem of Religious Overinterpretation

Grégoire Espeset*

The official corpus of Chinese historiography contains a wealth of valuable information on what may be termed local resistance to the centralised empire in early medieval China (third to sixth century). Sinologists specialised in the study of Chinese religions commonly reconstruct the religious history of the era by interpreting some of these data. In the process, however, methodological mistakes often occur, such as disregard for the primary purpose of the historiography of local resistance, and 'overinterpretation'—that is, 'fabricating false intensity' and 'seeing intensity everywhere', as French historian Paul Veyne proposed to define the term. Focusing on a cluster of historical anecdotes collected in the standard histories of the four centuries under consideration, this study discusses how the supposedly 'religious' data therein should, and should not, be dealt with.

Overinterpretation consists in fabricating false intensity ... The interpreter who overinterprets believes he sees intensity everywhere, when in fact, intensity is sporadic, or misleading.

Paul Veyne¹

¹ Veyne, 'L'interprétation et l'interprète': 251 ('la surinterprétation consiste à fabriquer de fausses intensités') and 263 ('L'interprète qui surinterprète croit voir partout des intensités, alors que celles-ci sont sporadiques, ou trompeuses'). Veyne did not himself coin the term 'overinterpretation', which, according to him, first appeared among historians in Roma around 1956.

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A comprehensive investigation of the complex array of issues pertaining to the ideological load of Western Sinology since the Jesuit missions of the sixteenth century,² the academic manifestations of ‘Orientalism’ as defined by Edward W. Said (1935–2003),³ the implications of the concept of area studies,⁴ methodology in the field of humanities and disciplinary compartmentalisation, would be a fascinating but time-consuming project.⁵ More modestly, this article proposes to discuss some general questions related to methodology in the study of history. How can anyone research any facet of a bygone era without relying on, consciously or not and to a varying degree of efficiency, some of the methodological tools of history? By ‘methodological tools’, I am not referring to anything on the theoretical or abstract level, but rather, to the practical tools of the historian’s trade. Historical interpretation is one of these tools.⁶ With respect to historical interpretation, any fledgling historian would be well advised to guard against the dangers highlighted by the French historian cited in the epigraph above. The advice could be extended to the scholars in the field of Chinese studies—those in training and full professionals alike—who often seem to misunderstand ‘history’ as meaning ‘stories’, and to take ‘methodology’ as vaguely referring to the use of online databases or library catalogues.

Before proceeding to the crux of the matter, I would like to stress that my position is far from an isolated outcry symptomatic of delusional views. For example, an eye-opening conference paper published recently criticises the misuse of three key religious concepts—‘transmission’, ‘lineage’ and ‘affiliation’—in scholarly publications that ‘hopelessly’ mix history and hagiography.⁷ The author lists the names of a dozen or so

² The historical development of Western Sinology is covered in Mungello, *Curious Land*, and Honey, *Incense at the Altar*.

³ In his 1978 eponymous work, Said deconstructed ‘Orientalism’ primarily in the realm of nineteenth-century English literature, but convincingly suggested that Orientalist representations had a much broader cultural impact.

⁴ How ‘area studies’ reflect colonial representations is discussed in Harootunian, ‘Postcoloniality’s Unconscious/Area Studies’ Desire’.

⁵ Some of these issues were dealt with in a review article published some 25 years ago by Zurndorfer, ‘La sinologie immobile’.

⁶ By ‘historical interpretation’, I mean the retrospective understanding of data found in sources from past eras and the various representations—including as ‘hypothesis’, ‘theory’ and ‘established fact’—resulting from this understanding in the writings of a body of intellectual workers conventionally referred to as ‘historians’.

⁷ Hsieh, ‘Lineage, Hagiography and Teaching’: 123–58.

scholars who, in his eyes, belong to the very few who treat hagiographical material properly—in other words, those who actually work as historians. But the question is not who we are and what institutional environment we work in, but rather *how* we work and *what* we publish concerning various facets of humankind's past. The problem is that the heterogeneous mixture of historical data, intellectual speculation and, often, mere intuition, is often absorbed uncritically and wholly as established facts by an unprepared audience.

The starting point of these reflections was research I conducted for a chapter on the development of communitarian religion at the end of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that was published in a collective work on Chinese religion.⁸ In that study, I questioned the widespread and conformist view that Zhang Lu's 張魯 (?–216/217) rule in Hanning 漢寧 (Hanzhong 漢中, in present-day Shaanxi) had been 'theocratic'. My arguments were twofold. First, the available sources show clearly that contemporary historiographers did not condemn Zhang Lu for being at the head of a 'religious' polity. Rather, they criticised him for remaining an independent cliquish leader once his takeover had been recognised by the throne instead of becoming the docile local representative of a centralised imperial state, as he had been expected to do. Second, it seemed irrelevant to single out as 'theocratic' a polity that was located in a cultural area where political power had long been understood as being of transcendental origin.⁹ Therefore, even though Zhang Lu's leadership and the Emperor's rule obviously differed in a number of respects (territorial expanse, lineage and prestige, to name the most obvious ones), they certainly were not different in nature, and the old 'Zhang Lu = theocrat' Pavlovian reflex was just another case of 'overinterpretation'.¹⁰

More recently, my study of a cluster of fragments from a textual corpus more or less contemporaneous with the Later Han dynasty and known in Western academia as Weft (*wei* 緯) writings or 'Confucian Apocrypha'

⁸ After the short-lived Qin 秦 dynasty (221–206 BCE), the Han dynasty ruled large parts of what is now central and eastern China for nearly four and a half centuries. To some extent, it may be compared to the Roman Empire. After Wang Mang's 王莽 (46 BCE–23 CE) failed attempt at founding a new dynasty at the beginning of our era (9–23), the second half of that period is known as the Later Han 後漢 dynasty (25–220).

⁹ See Espeset, 'Latter Han Religious Mass Movements': 1070–71.

¹⁰ As a side remark to be further discussed elsewhere, one may argue that 'ecclesiocracy' would have been perhaps more appropriate than 'theocracy' here.

provided further evidence in support of the latter argument. In Han times, debates on dynastic legitimacy, the narratives shaping the origin of supreme authority in the human realm, and the propaganda used by contestants for imperial power, all revolved around a shared assumption that the roots and nature of sovereignty transcend the sphere of human agency.¹¹ Not only Zhang Lu, whose venture met with some success, but also any would-be emperor had to partake of the same ideological background, regardless of variations in the paraphernalia exhibited to sustain his contention, from pseudo-imperial personal titles to pompous reign names and counterfeit regalia. Naturally, unsuccessful candidates ended up being ‘executed’ (*zhu* 誅)—in most cases ‘beheaded’ (*zhan* 斬)—either for lese-majesty or disruption of public order, if not both. Such was certainly the case with a certain Dai Yi 戴異 from the principdom of Pei 沛 (in present-day Anhui), who was executed in 166.¹² Dai Yi met a judicial death not because the ‘symbolic writings’ (*fushu* 符書) engraved on the gold seal he had found proved to be of his own fabrication, but first and foremost because he had proclaimed himself Most High August One (*taishang huang* 太上皇), evidently a pseudo-imperial title, for which he was immediately charged with the crime of high treason.¹³

This second case of overinterpretation concerning the cause of Dai Yi’s execution brings us back to the first one above (Zhang Lu). Both cases exemplify how some contemporary publications on Chinese history easily misinterpret ‘religious’ data documented in primary sources by overstressing them. I place the adjective between quotation marks, because the meaning and use of the Western concept of ‘religion’ in a Chinese setting seems to be a pending issue, which cannot be satisfyingly

¹¹ Espeset, ‘Epiphanies of Sovereignty’.

¹² This is according to the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han), completed in 445 by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), 7.316. That source postdates Dai Yi’s execution by about three centuries. Present-day publications commonly disregard such a diachronic distance and treat standard histories as if they were contemporaneous with the events they report. (Nevertheless, standard histories do also contain many citations of supposedly original material, such as edicts, policy proposals, responses to the throne and so forth.) In addition, standard histories are known to be biased, and the political background to their compilation should be kept in mind; see Gardiner, ‘Standard Histories, Han to Sui’: 42–52. For a case study falling within the scope of this article, see Chaussende, ‘Un historien sur le banc des accusés’.

¹³ As I argued in my ‘Review of Gil Raz’: 137–38.

dealt with here.¹⁴ Most scholars' tacit understanding of 'religion' seems to allow for a very wide array of human activities to be thus qualified, without realising that any criterion loses pertinence in proportion to the broadening of its application, only to disappear the very moment it becomes universal.

Resistance in the Historiography of Early Medieval China

This article endeavours to further document my position by surveying a cluster of what may tentatively be called instances of 'local resistance' to the centralised imperial authorities of early medieval China.¹⁵ The common feature of the following anecdotes is that most of the agents of 'resistance' described—whether individual leaders, unnamed subordinates, anonymous masses of followers, or even speech, teachings and practices—were characterised by the Chinese historiographers as being 'deviant' (*yao* 妖). This term, to which the last section of this essay will return, covers quite a wide semantic field, but is usually assumed by contemporary scholars to point to 'religious' motives at the basis of the social phenomena under consideration.¹⁶ Each anecdote will be concluded by a short summing-up of the data relevant for our purpose.

¹⁴ The interesting discussion in Campany, 'On the Very Idea of Religions (In Modern West and in Early Medieval China)', *History of Religions*, 2003, provides no concrete solutions to the problem beyond the exhortation to find 'new metaphors' for speaking about 'religions in cultures that lack an analogous vocabulary': 319. To my knowledge, and as far as Taoism is concerned, only Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*: 18–21, has attempted to construct, with reference to other fields in the humanities, a 'polythetic' definition of Taoism based on a variable combination of criteria and acknowledging diversity, in contrast to the fixed, dogmatic or formulaic definitions others have proposed before him.

¹⁵ Due to space constraints, I have included only a selection of anecdotes covering, conventionally, the third to sixth centuries. (Borrowing from Western terminology, Chinese historiography now distinguishes an 'early medieval era', third to sixth centuries, and a 'medieval era', seventh to thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. The definition of these eras is still debated, as well as the relevance of this terminology to Chinese history.) The innumerable instances of 'rebellion' (*fan* 反) and 'disorder' (*luan* 亂) recorded in the relevant standard histories would require book-length coverage.

¹⁶ Such seems to be the assumption behind the series of papers by Miyakawa Hisayuki 宮川尚志 (1913–2006) on 'Collected Source Materials Concerning Buddhism and Taoism in the Official Histories of the Six Dynasties' published in the *Bulletin of the Faculty of Literature of Tōkai University*, Tokyo, from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. For translations of the compounds *yaoshu* 妖術 and *yaozei* 妖賊 as 'sorcery' and 'wizard bandit', respectively, see Miura, 'Zuodao 左道 "Left Ways"': 1307–8.

Case 1: *Sima Lun and Sun Xiu*

Our survey begins during the Disorder of the Eight Princes (*bawang zhi luan* 八王之亂), a civil war involving prominent members of the ruling Sima 司馬 clan, empresses and a consort clan. One of the main contenders, the illiterate Sima Lun 司馬倫 (before 249–301) was the uncle of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 265–90), founder of the Western Jin 西晉 dynasty (265–316) and the great-uncle of Wu's successor Emperor Hui 惠帝 (r. 290–306). In 301, Sima Lun usurped the throne and ruled for four months before being defeated by the allied forces of three other Sima princes.¹⁷

When Sima Lun was still prince of Langye 琅邪 (in present-day Shandong), he noticed Sun Xiu 孫秀, personal name Junzhong 俊忠, a local 'minor official' (*xiaoli* 小吏) of some talent and an artful flatterer. Enfeoffed as Prince of Zhao 趙王 in 277, Sima Lun made Sun Xiu his closest advisor and, during his brief usurpation, promoted him to Secretariat Director (*zhongshu ling* 中書令), among several other civil and military offices.¹⁸ Traditional historiography describes Sun Xiu and his accomplices as improvident and brutal ruffians, blaming the former for most of Sima Lun's wrongdoings. Historiographical sources further depict Sun Xiu as the *de facto* holder of power during Lun's takeover; he allegedly massacred scores of high dignitaries and worthy officials and replaced them with his own men.

Historiography also relates that both Sima Lun and Sun Xiu believed in 'spirit-mediums' (*wugui* 巫鬼) and listened to 'deviant and perverse' (*yaoxie* 妖邪) talk.¹⁹ Sun Xiu staged a necromantic encounter with the manes (*shen* 神) of Sima Lun's father Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179–251) and claimed that auspicious stellar phenomena (*furui tianwen* 符瑞天文) announced Lun's accession to the throne. When the three princes launched

¹⁷ Namely, the princes Ying 穎 (279–306) of Chengdu 成都, Jiong 冏 (?–302) of Qi 齊 and Yong 顗 (?–306) of Hejian 河間. For operational details, see Dreyer, 'Military Aspects of the War': 112–42.

¹⁸ The Secretariat Director was at the head of 'the most influential policy-formulating agency in the government', citing Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles*: 193, no. 1616. My English renderings of official titles mainly derive from Hucker's *Dictionary* and de Crespigny, *A Biographical Dictionary*: 1216–41.

¹⁹ Lun had an excrescence (*liu* 瘤) above his eye, which contemporaries also regarded as *yao* 妖, here denoting something ominous or weird. See *Jin shu* 晉書 (Book of the Jin), completed in 644 under the editorship of Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648), 59.1602.

their campaign for the restoration of Emperor Hui, Sima Lun and Sun Xiu appointed a ‘man of the Way’ (*daoshi* 道士) named Hu Wo 胡沃 to the rank of ‘General of Great Peace’ (*taiping jiangjun* 太平將軍), in the hope of securing good fortune. Sun Xiu was involved in unorthodox cults (*yinsi* 淫祀) and asked diviners (*wuzhu* 巫祝) to select auspicious days for warfare. He even instructed a relative in Mount Song 嵩山 (in present-day Henan) to wear ‘feather clothes’ (*yuyi* 羽衣) so as to pose as the immortal Wang Qiao 王喬 and produce fake ‘divine writings’ (*shenshu* 神書) supposedly securing good fortune for Sima Lun. The whole faction was eventually executed, including Sun Xiu and his son Hui 會.²⁰

In this first case, the relevant data are usurpation, supreme power falling into the hands of a perceived scoundrel and the nomination of accomplices to key governmental positions.

Case 2: Liu Bogen

In 306, Liu Bogen 劉柏根 or Liu Gen 劉根, Magistrate (*ling* 令) of Jian District 幘縣 (alt. 幘縣) in Donglai 東萊 (present-day Shandong), raised troops and rebelled. Wang Mi, a powerful warlord and compatriot of Liu Bogen, joined him together with his relatives and entire household. Proclaiming himself Duke of Jian 幘公, the ‘deviant bandit’ (*yaozei* 妖賊) Liu Bogen appointed Wang Mi 王彌 (?–311) as Chief Clerk (*changshi* 長史). Liu Bogen, who reportedly ‘deceived’ (*kuanghuo* 誑惑) tens of thousands of people, died in action on the same year.²¹

Relevant data in that second case are rebellion, self-nomination to the second highest title of nobility²² and the appointment of an accomplice to official rank.

²⁰ Fang, *Jin shu*, 4.97–98, 36.1073–74, 1076, 46.1308, 53.1461–62, 55.1506, 59.1597–1612. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is nearly 350 years.

²¹ Fang, *Jin shu*, 4.106, 37.1095, 45.1281, 61.1666, 100.2609. Here too the diachronic distance between the events and their account is approximately 350 years. After Liu’s death, Wang Mi took up leadership and led the group to a mountainous area where, more prosaically, all engaged in brigandage. In 307, he entered the army of the Han-Zhao 漢趙 state (304–329), ruled by an ethnically Xiongnu 匈奴 house, and resumed his operational activities. He was among the generals who captured Luoyang 洛陽 in 311, but was assassinated by a rival general the same year. See *ibid.*, 100.2609–12.

²² Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles*: 290, no. 3388.

Case 3: Li Tuo

During the early years of the Eastern Jin 東晉 dynasty (317–420), a ‘man of the arts’ (*shuren* 術人) or a ‘man of the Way’ (*daoshi*) named Li Tuo 李脱 ‘deluded’ (*huo* 惑) the masses with ‘deviant’ (*yao*) writings of his own making or ‘deviant’ arts, performed healings through spiritualism (*guidao* 鬼道, literally ‘way of spirits’) and appointed people to official ranks. He claimed to be 800 years old and called himself ‘Li Eight-Hundred’ 李八百. His area of influence extended from the central regions to the capital, Jianye 建邺 (present-day Nanjing). One of his disciples, named Li Hong 李弘 (see also case 4 below), wanted Li Tuo to claim kingship in answer to a prophecy (*chen* 讖).²³ In 324, Li Tuo was arrested by the powerful warlord Wang Dun 王敦 (266–324) on the pretence that he had plotted with two of the warlord’s advisors. Li Tuo was subsequently beheaded at the capital.²⁴

Relevant data in this third case are the appointment of officials not sanctioned by the central government and the temptation of usurpation.

Case 4: Li Hong Homonyms

The cruel rule of Shi Hu 石虎 (295–349), more commonly known as Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 334–49) of the Jie 羯 ethnic Later Zhao 後趙 state (319–51), increasingly provoked people’s dissatisfaction. In early 343, taking advantage of the situation, a certain Li Hong 李弘 from Beiqiu 貝丘 (in present-day Shandong) claimed that his name responded to a prophecy (*chen*), formed a ‘villainous faction’ (*jiandang* 姦黨) and appointed his own bureaucracy.²⁵ He was soon denounced and executed, together with several thousand clans that were involved.²⁶

²³ To our frustration perhaps, the relevant historiographical source does not specify the contents of that prophecy.

²⁴ Fang, *Jin shu*, 6.160, 58.1575, 61.1661–62. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is 320 years.

²⁵ Here again, the historiographical source does not report the contents of that prophecy.

²⁶ Fang, *Jin shu*, 106.2772. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is more than three centuries. The date of these events is supplied by a much later source, the *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government), dated to 1084, compiled by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–86); see Sima, *Zizhi tongjian*, 97.3052. In Chinese historiography, this source is the earliest known chronological rewriting of historical data drawn from a wide array of sources; see Pulleyblank, ‘Chinese Historical Criticism’: 135–66.

In 356, another ‘deviant bandit’ named Li Hong was crushed by the combined forces of Liu Hu 劉伧, Administrator (*xiang* 相) of Jiangxia 江夏 (in present-day Hubei) and Hu Ji 胡驥, Governor (*taishou* 太守) of Yiyang 義陽 (in present-day Henan), upon orders from the warlord Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–73). Li Hong’s head was sent to the capital.²⁷

In 370, yet another ‘deviant bandit’ named Li Hong, from Guanghan 廣漢 and Li Jingen 李金根 (or Jinyin 金銀), a ‘bandit’ (*zei* 賊) from Yi Prefecture 益州 (both in present-day Sichuan), rebelled together with more than 10,000 partisans, claiming to follow the ‘Saintly Way’ (*shengdao* 聖道).²⁸ Li Hong called himself Saintly King (*shengwang* 聖王) and inaugurated the regnal era Fenghuang 鳳皇 (literally ‘Phoenix’, though the component *huang* may suggest a paronomasia with ‘August’, an attribute of sovereignty).²⁹ Zhou Xiao 周虓 (?–after 382), Governor of Zitong 梓潼 (in present-day Sichuan), dispatched forces to repress them.³⁰

In 414, a ‘deviant bandit’ named Li Hong rebelled in Eryuan 貳原 (in present-day Shaanxi) and was joined by a chief of the Di 氐 ethnicity, Qiu Chang 仇常. Both were defeated by an ailing Yao Xing 姚興 (368–416), ruler (394–416) of the ethnically Qiang 羌 Later Qin 後秦 state (384–417). Li Hong was captured; Qiu Chang was beheaded and 500 families from his tribe were relocated to Xuchang 許昌 (in present-day Henan).³¹

In 446, during the Northern Wei 北魏 dynasty (386–534) headed by Tuoba 拓拔 (Tabgach) rulers, a Li Hong 李洪 (note the variant

²⁷ Fang, *Jin shu*, 98.2572. The date of 356 is deduced from the general sequence of events. The diachronic distance is here nearly three centuries.

²⁸ Li Hong and Li Jingen claimed to be the sons of Li Shi 李勢 (?–361), who had ruled in Chengdu 成都 (in present-day Sichuan) as the last emperor (r. 343–47) of the ‘illegitimate’ Cheng-Han 成漢 state (304–347) and had been made a Marquis (*hou* 侯) after his surrender to the Jin dynasty. For a religious ‘overinterpretation’—as Verellen’s review published in *T’oung Pao*, 2000, makes clear—of the meagre historical data concerning that state, see Kleeman, *Great Perfection*.

²⁹ During the Chinese imperial age, many regnal eras bore the names of auspicious animals forming what I have called elsewhere an ‘epiphanic bestiary’ (see Espeset, ‘Epiphanies of Sovereignty’). The function of these ‘epiphanic agents’ was to convey to each new emperor the transcendent sanction of his legitimacy.

³⁰ Fang, *Jin shu*, 8.213, 58.1583. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is here 278 years.

³¹ Fang, *Jin shu*, 118.2998–99. The diachronic distance is here approximately 230 years. The year 414 is given in Sima, *Zizhi tongjian*, 116.3664.

orthography³²) from Chouchi 仇池 (in present-day Gansu), an area controlled by the Di ethnicity, called himself King Ying 應王 (literally ‘king in response’). He claimed to have received from heaven an ‘imperial jade seal’ (*yuxi* 玉璽) and fabricated ‘symbolic writings’ (*fushu*) to deceive (*kuanghuo*) people. He was lured into a trap and beheaded by Liang Hui 梁會 from Tianshui 天水 (also in present-day Gansu), another rebel who saw in him a potential rival.³³

In 500, during the waning years of the Southern Qi 南齊 dynasty (479–502), a certain Zhao Xubo 趙續伯 from Baxi 巴西 (in present-day Sichuan) rebelled and supported his compatriot, the Saintly Ruler (*shengzhu* 聖主) Li Hong 李弘. Li Hong paraded in a ‘Buddha chariot’ (*foyu* 佛輿) and ‘fooled’ (*kuang* 誑) the masses with a green stone he claimed to be a ‘jade seal’ (*yuyin* 玉印) sent by heaven to grant him kingship over Shu 蜀.³⁴ The Inspector (*cishi* 刺史) of Yi Prefecture Liu Jilian 劉季連 ordered the general Li Fengbo 李奉伯 to capture him. On the verge of being beheaded, Li Hong told the executioner that he was about ‘to fly off’ (*fei qu* 飛去), and added that killing him would be in vain, for he would reappear ‘on the third day of the third month’ (*sanyue sanri* 三月三日).³⁵

³² There is a possibility that the name of this Li Hong originally read 弘. During a part of Northern Wei rule, this character was to be replaced with *hong* 洪 in deferential avoidance of Emperor Xianwen’s 獻文 (r. 465–71) personal name; see *Lidai huizi pu* 歷代諱字譜 (Table of Avoided Characters through the Ages), compiled by Zhang Weixiang 張惟驤 (1883–1948), 1.15b–16a. Although *hong* 弘 does occur in the received *Wei shu* 魏書 (Book of the Wei), completed in 554—after the end of the Northern Wei—by Wei Shou 魏收 (506–72), earlier documents observing the avoidance must have been used in compiling that dynastic history.

³³ Wei, *Wei shu*, 51.1135. The diachronic distance is here a century. The year 446 is given in Sima, *Zizhi tongjian*, 124.3926.

³⁴ Name of an ancient state located in the area corresponding to the Chengdu plain in present-day Sichuan, later used in reference to this area.

³⁵ *Nanshi* 南史 (Southern Histories), completed in 659 by Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. 618–76), 13.362. The diachronic distance is 150 years. A less detailed account wherein Li Hong does not appear is contained in the slightly earlier *Liang shu* 梁書 (Book of the Liang), undertaken in 589 by Yao Cha 姚察 (503–606) and completed in 636 by his son Yao Silian 姚思廉 (?–637), 20.309. The diachronic distance is there 130 years. The *Nanshi* is a transcription of edited selections from four southern official histories spanning the years 420–589—those of the Song 宋 (420–79), Southern Qi, Liang 梁 (502–57) and Chen 陳 (557–89) dynasties. The ‘third day of the third month’ is a significant juncture in the Chinese calendar. In Taoist sources, it is prescribed as the proper date for various practices and observances, sometimes

In 528, a local leader or ‘deviant bandit’ named Li Hong 李洪 was rebuffed south of the Yangcheng Pass 陽城關 by a Commander-in-Chief (*dudu* 都督), either Li Shengui 李神軌 (?–528) or Fei Mu 費穆 (477–529). In Yangcheng 陽城 (in present-day Shanxi), he had rebelled and allied himself with members of the Man 蠻 ethnicity,³⁶ whom he had incited to attack villages between Yique 伊闕, a mountain range near Luoyang and Gong District 鞏縣 (both in present-day Henan).³⁷

Relevant data in these Li Hong cases are banditry, open rebellion, self-proclaimed kingship, the production of forged regalia, the unilateral inauguration of a regnal era and official appointments not sanctioned by the central government.

Case 5: Lu Song

In 372, Lu Song 盧悚 (alt. 盧竦), a ‘minor official’ (*xiaoli*) from Xu Prefecture 徐州 (in present-day Jiangsu), claimed to have been secretly summoned by the empress dowager to reinstate the then Duke of Haixi 海西公, Sima Yi 司馬奕 (342–86), on the throne.³⁸ With ‘deviant masses’ (*yaozhong* 妖眾) totalling 200 men and women, Lu Song caught the palace personnel off-guard and seized arsenal storehouses. The Mobile Corps Commander (*youji jiangjun* 遊擊將軍) Mao Anzhi 毛安之 soon

within sets including other ‘double dates’—the first day of the first month, the seventh day of the seventh month and so on. In apocalyptic literature, it is the date the Way (*dao* 道) will dispatch a supernatural host (*guibing* 鬼兵, literally ‘spirit troops’) to annihilate evildoers. See the early fifth-century (with Tang 唐 era [618–907] additions) *Taishang dongxuan shenzhou jing* 太上洞玄神咒經 (Scripture of Divine Incantations of Most High Pervading Mystery), CT 335, 13.4b, 7a; for the date of the received version, I rely on Schipper and Verellen (eds), *The Taoist Canon*: 269–72.

³⁶ Manzuo 蠻左, as people of Man ethnicity were then called.

³⁷ Wei, *Wei shu*, 44.1004, 57.1269, 66.1475. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is 25 years. This last Li Hong’s original name may also have been Hong 弘 (see n. 32 above). The location of his defeat derives from the discussion provided by the twentieth-century editors of the *Beishi* 北史 (Northern Histories), also completed in 659 by Li Yanshou, 66.2341, n. 9. The *Beishi* is a transcription of edited selections from four northern official histories spanning the years 386–618—those of the Wei, Northern Qi 北齊 (550–77), Zhou 周 (557–81) and Sui 隋 (581–618) dynasties.

³⁸ Sima Yi had previously ruled (365–72) the Jin empire and was thereafter known as Emperor Fei 廢帝, literally ‘the Deposed Emperor’.

uncovered the treachery, rallied loyalist troops and arrested Lu Song, leading to disciplinary measures and hundreds of executions.³⁹

The relevant data in this fifth case is treason on the part of a civil servant.

Case 6: Sun En

Sun En 孫恩 belonged to a clan from Langye (in present-day Shandong) noted for its adherence to the 'Taoist' Way of the Five Bushels of Grain (*wudoumi dao* 五斗米道).⁴⁰ In 399, he fled with his uncle's followers and attacked Shangyu 上虞, then Kuaiji 會稽 (both in present-day Zhejiang).⁴¹ The local Chancellor (*neishi* 內史), Wang Ningzhi 王凝之 (?–399), also an adherent of the Way of the Five Bushels of Grain, delayed military reaction, retiring in his oratory (*daoshi* 道室 or *jingshi* 靖室) and praying the 'Major Way' (*dadao* 大道) to dispatch a supernatural host (*guibing*).⁴² By the time Wang Ningzhi gave orders

³⁹ *Song shu* 宋書 (Book of the Song), earliest draft submitted in 488 by Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), 25.721–22, 33.955. The diachronic distance is here slightly over a century. For later accounts, see Wei, *Wei shu*, 96.2103; Fang, *Jin shu*, 9.224, 13.378, 27.816, 74.1947, 81.2128. Lu Song had commissioned the Director of the Palace (*dianzhong jian* 殿中監) Xu Long 許龍, his accomplice, to convince the deposed emperor to return to the capital, but the former ruler wisely avoided the trap; see *ibid.*, 8.215.

⁴⁰ His prestigious ancestry included the warlord Sun Ce 孫策 (175–200) and his brother Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252), who founded the Wu 吳 kingdom (222–80) and ruled as its first sovereign, the Grand August Emperor 大皇帝 (r. 222–52). Sun En was the nephew of Sun Tai 孫泰 (?–399), an official who had learned 'secrets arts' (*mishu* 祕術) from his master Du Zigong 杜子恭. Sun Tai's career had peaked as Governor of Xin'an 新安 (in present-day Zhejiang), when his popularity was such that he was recommended to Emperor Xiaowu 孝武帝 (r. 373–96) for his 'recipes to nurture life' (*yangxing zhi fang* 養性之方). Sensing the end of Jin rule, he gathered a private army of people deluded (*huo*) by his 'sinister way' (*zuodao* 左道) or 'arts of the Way' (*daoshu* 道術), but was denounced and executed. Some believed he had become an immortal (*xian* 仙). See Wei, *Wei shu*, 96.2106–8; Fang, *Jin shu*, 100.2631–32.

⁴¹ Kuaiji was the fief of Jin prince Sima Daozi 司馬道子 (364–403), younger brother of Emperor Xiaowu and regent of Emperor An 安帝 (r. 397–418), his nephew. Before Sun En's rebellion began, Sima Daozi, erected an artificial mountain, Mount Lingxiu 靈秀山, in his luxurious estate, the Eastern Residence (Dongfu 東府). Lingxiu turned out to be Sun En's personal name. See Shen, *Song shu*, 31.918; Fang, *Jin shu*, 27.847–48.

⁴² 'Way of the Five Bushels of Grain' was an exonym, probably pejorative, of the early religious communities that came to be known collectively as Way of the Heavenly Master (*tianshi dao* 天師道), often found in Western publications as 'Celestial Master Taoism'

to this-worldly soldiers, it was too late: Kuaji was captured and Wang Ningzhi murdered.⁴³

In less than two and a half years (late 399 to early 402), Sun and his followers lay devastation in eight eastern commanderies (*jun* 郡) of the empire, in turn inspiring several local uprisings, thus directly or indirectly causing thousands of violent deaths and threatening the capital, Jiankang 建康 (present-day Nanjing). His 'deviant faction' (*yaodang* 妖黨), now amounting to tens of thousands of 'deviant and deluded' (*yaohuo* 妖惑) men and women, slaughtered officials and anyone refusing to join their ranks. Some atrocities were reported.⁴⁴ The 'deviant bandit' Sun En called himself General Pacifying the East (*pingdong jiangjun* 平東將軍) and his partisans 'long-living persons' (*changsheng ren* 長生人). He appointed his own administration, boasting of how he would soon enter the capital. From the summer of 400 to the spring of 402, sailing along the shore of present-day Fujian, Zhejiang and Jiangsu, he alternated between surprise invasions, the looting of coastal areas, battles against legalist troops (mostly resulting in defeats) and repeated flights back to the sea. His worthiest opponent may have been the warlord Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422) who, after a lifetime spent defending Jin rule, would eventually found the Song dynasty and ascend to the throne (Emperor Wu 武帝, r. 420–22).⁴⁵

Two official versions of Sun En's death (402) have come down to us. The principal account has him throwing himself into the sea, in despair at

or 'Celestial Master Church'. It referred to an annual contribution made by the adepts, which superseded a local tax levied by the Han administration, thus constituting a breach of the state's prerogative to taxation. See Zhang, 'Wudoumi dao mingming de youlai'. The phrase *wudoumi* 五斗米 occurs about a dozen times in the whole historiography of the period while 'rice bandits' (*mizei* 米賊), openly depreciatory, is even less frequent (four occurrences).

⁴³ Wei, *Wei shu*, 96.2106–7; Fang, *Jin shu*, 80.2103, 96.2516.

⁴⁴ Fanaticised female adepts threw their children into water, congratulating them for first reaching the abode of the immortals and promising to join them soon. Local officials were killed and their wives forced to eat their cooked bodies; those who refused were dismembered. See Wei, *Wei shu*, 96.2107; Fang, *Jin shu*, 100.2633.

⁴⁵ Shen, *Song shu*, 1.1–4, 25.727–28, 47.1410, 81.22078, 91.2248. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is about 90 years. For later accounts, see Wei, *Wei shu*, 96.2106–8; Fang, *Jin shu*, 10.252–55, 100.2631–34. Transcription in Li, *Nanshi*, 1.2–3. Some of these passages were translated or paraphrased in Eichhorn, 'Description of the Rebellion'; Lai, 'Daoism and Political Rebellion': 77–100; Martin, 'La rébellion de Sun En et Lu Hsün (396–412)'.

the disintegration of his army. One hundred of his partisans exalt him as ‘water immortal’ (*shuixian* 水仙) and follow him to their death.⁴⁶ A later isolated variant has him vanquished and beheaded by Xin Jing 辛景, Governor of Linhai 臨海 (in present-day Zhejiang).⁴⁷

The relevant data in this sixth case are open rebellion, self-appointment to a high military command, the constitution of a parallel government and a reported Taoist affiliation.

Case 7: Wang Shi

A ‘deviant bandit’ named Wang Shi 王始 gathered masses on Mount Tai 太山 (most likely Mount Tai 泰山, in present-day Shandong). He called himself August Emperor of Great Peace (*taiping huangdi* 太平皇帝), his father, Most High August One (*taishang huang* 太上皇), his brothers Generals Subduing the East and the West (*zhengdong jiangjun* 征東將軍 and *zhengxi jiangjun* 征西將軍) and he addressed his wife as Imperial Consort (*huanghou* 皇后). In 403, he was captured on orders from Murong De 慕容德 (336–405), also known as Emperor Xianwu 獻武帝 (r. 398–405), ruler of the ethnically Xianbei 鮮卑 state of Southern Yan 南燕 (398–410). When Wang Shi was asked about his relatives’ whereabouts, he answered that his father was ‘in exile’ (*mengchen* 蒙塵) and his brothers had been killed during military troubles. He was publicly beheaded at the capital.⁴⁸

The relevant data in this seventh case is the illegitimate use of both imperial and military titles.

Case 8: Sima Xiaojun

In 471, under Northern Wei rule, a ‘deviant bandit’ named Sima Xiaojun 司馬小君 claimed to be a successor (*hou* 後) to the Jin 晉 dynasty

⁴⁶ Sun En’s transformation into an immortal is reminiscent of Sun Tai’s own death, as recounted above. Sun En’s brother-in-law took up leadership after En’s death as general Lu Xun 盧循. He was granted official positions twice (in 402 and 405), but would ultimately meet an end similar to Sun En’s in 411; however, his body would be fished out by authorities and beheaded, the head sent to the capital for public display. See Fang, *Jin shu*, 100.2634–36.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.255. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is nearly 250 years.

⁴⁸ Fang, *Jin shu*, 127.3170. Here too the diachronic distance is nearly 250 years. The year 403 is given in Sima, *Zizhi tongjian*, 113.3549–50.

(265–420).⁴⁹ Choosing the regnal title Shengjun 聖君 (literally ‘Saintly Lord’), he gathered a faction (*dang* 黨) of more than 3,000 men in Pingling 平陵 (in present-day Shaanxi).⁵⁰ Tuoba Pingyuan 拓拔平原 (?–487), Prince of Wuchang 武昌王, who was Inspector of Qi Prefecture 齊州 (in present-day Shandong) since 470, captured him and sent him to the capital, where he was beheaded.⁵¹

Relevant data in this eighth case are banditry and the illegitimate inauguration of a regnal era.

Case 9: Liu Ju Homonyms

Two years later, in 473, the same Tuoba Pingyuan captured and beheaded a ‘deviant person’ (*yaoren* 妖人) named Liu Ju 劉舉, who had called himself Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子).⁵²

In 528, another Liu Ju 劉舉 from Guang Prefecture 光州 (in present-day Henan) gathered thousands and rebelled in Puyang 濮陽 (in present-day Shandong). He called himself ‘Major General and August Warrior’ (*huangwu da jiangjun* 皇武大將軍). He was repressed a month later by the Commander-in-Chief Zheng Xianhu 鄭先護 (?–531).⁵³

Relevant data in this pair of Liu Ju cases are self-proclaimed emperorship, open rebellion and self-appointment to a high military command.

Case 10: Fa Qing and Li Guibo

In 515, a Buddhist monk (*shamen* 沙門) from Ji Prefecture 冀州 (in present-day Hebei), Faqing 法慶 accumulated adepts by performing ‘deviant magic’ (*yaohuan* 妖幻). His follower Li Guibo 李歸伯, member

⁴⁹ The Sima clan had ruled the two halves of the Jin dynasty, mentioned above.

⁵⁰ Pingling, on the northern bank of the Wei 渭 river, west of Chang’an 長安 (the present-day Xi’an), was the site of the mausoleum of Emperor Zhao 昭帝 (r. 87–74 BCE) of the Former Han 前漢 dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE). It was perhaps seen as a propitious rallying ground by the would-be emperor.

⁵¹ Wei, *Wei shu*, 7A.136, 16.396. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is slightly over 80 years. Transcribed in Li, *Beishi*, 16.593.

⁵² Wei, *Wei shu*, 7A.140. The diachronic distance is about 80 years. The Liu clan had ruled the two halves of the Han dynasty, mentioned above. Whatever their actual relationship with the prestigious Han house, both Liu Jus had perhaps in mind to reinstate the Liu clan on the throne, or at least to use the claim in support of their political action. However, nothing in the sources further sustains the hypothesis.

⁵³ Wei, *Wei shu*, 10.259–60. The diachronic distance is 25 years.

of an elite Bohai 勃海 (in present-day Hebei) clan, joined his entire clan and fellow countrymen to the group. Declaring the advent of a 'new Buddha' (*xin Fo* 新佛), Faqing called himself or his movement the 'Major Vehicle' (*dasheng* 大乘), that is, Mahāyāna, and granted Li Guibo the titles 'Tenth-Stage Bodhisattva' (*shizhu pusa* 十住菩薩), 'Māra-Pacifying Army Supervisor' (*pingmo jushi* 平魔軍司) and 'King Who Stabilises the Han' (*ding Han wang* 定漢王). In a murderous trance induced by drugs compounded by Faqing, his 50,000 adepts slaughtered officials, monks and nuns and destroyed Buddhist monasteries, cloisters and cultic objects. For each person that an adept killed, he or she would reach a new stage (*zhu* 住) towards the goal of Tenth-stage Bodhisattva. Despite an initial military victory, Faqing's marauders were crushed three months later by the 100,000-man army of Yuan Yao 元遙 (467–517), a high dignitary and member of the ruling clan who had been given full powers to resolve the crisis.⁵⁴ Faqing's head was sent to the Wei capital of Luoyang (in present-day Henan), together with those of his wife, a nun called Huihui 惠暉 and a hundred of his lieutenants. Li Guibo was subsequently captured and publicly executed.⁵⁵

Relevant data in this tenth case are open rebellion and unauthorised nominations to both civil and military positions.

Case 11: Liu Lingzhu

In 531, following the death of Emperor Zhuang 莊帝 (r. 528–30), Liu Lingzhu 劉靈助, a high-ranking civil and military official in charge of four Prefectures in the north-east of the Wei Empire, rebelled in Ji 薊 (present-day Beijing). He took the titles King of Yan (Yan wang 燕王),⁵⁶ General-in-Chief of Chariots and Cavalry (*juji da jiangjun* 車騎大將軍),

⁵⁴ In 496, Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (r. 471–99) had ordered his Xianbei clan name Tuoba to be changed to Yuan 元, a Chinese one. See Fang, *Jin shu*, 7B.179.

⁵⁵ Wei, *Wei shu*, 9.222–23, 19A.445–46, 72.1617, 89.1926. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is about 40 years. Later account in *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (Book of the Northern Qi), completed in 636, by Li Delin 李德林 (530–90) and Li Baiyao 李百藥 (565–648), 21.301. Transcriptions in Li, *Beishi*, 4.144, 17.634, 24.893. Some of these passages were translated and paraphrased in Demiéville, 'Buddhism and War': 24–25, and Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*: 111–12.

⁵⁶ Name of an ancient state located in the area corresponding to present-day Hebei and Liaoning provinces, and a northern part of Korea, later used in reference to an area corresponding to present-day Beijing. Prior to Liu Lingzhu, five states ruled by the Xianbei ethnic group had used the name between 337 and 436, including the Southern Yan state already mentioned.

Commander Unequaled in Honour (*kaifu yitong sansi* 開府儀同三司) and head of the Branch Department of State Affairs (*da xing tai* 大行臺). Relying on (unspecified) ‘charts and prophecies’ (*tuchen* 圖讖), he affirmed that the Liu 劉 clan should rule.⁵⁷ As a known expert in divination (*buzhan* 卜占), he won people over with ‘deviant arts’ (*yaoshu* 妖術) including bewitchment, human figures shaped out of felt (*zhan* 氈) and ‘symbolic writings’ (*fushu*) drawn on peach wood. The warlord Hou Yuan 侯淵 (?–535), Inspector of Ding Prefecture 定州 (in present-day Hebei) where Liu Lingzhu had encamped, attacked him by surprise with a squadron of elite horsemen, decapitated him and sent his head to the capital. His corpse was dismembered.⁵⁸

Relevant data in this eleventh case are open rebellion, self-proclaimed kingship and self-appointment to high civil and military positions.

Case 12: Zheng Zirao

In 574, under the Northern Qi dynasty, Zheng Zirao 鄭子饒 from Yangping 陽平 (in present-day Shandong), under the pretence of following the ‘Way of Buddha’ (Fo *dao* 佛道), organised so-called ‘fasting assemblies’ (*zhaihui* 齋會) to win people’s confidence.⁵⁹ News of his planned rebellion having leaked out, he fled and crossed the Yellow River with thousands of followers, then proclaimed himself King Changle 長樂王 (literally, ‘Perpetual Joy’) and began to foment trouble. The General Pi Jinghe 皮景和 (521–75) had him captured and 2,000 rebels were beheaded. Sent to the capital, Zheng Zirao was boiled alive (*peng* 烹).⁶⁰

In this concluding case, the relevant data are planned rebellion and self-proclaimed kingship.

⁵⁷ The Liu clan had ruled the Han dynasty; see n. 52 above.

⁵⁸ Wei, *Wei shu*, 11.274–76, 74.1648, 80.1771–72, 1787, 91.1958–60. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is 20 years. For later accounts, see Li and Li, *Bei Qi shu*, 20.267, 21.290, 299, 22.317, 320; Yao and Yao, *Liang shu*, 32.463. Transcriptions in Li, *Nanshi*, 61.1500 and Li, *Beishi*, 49.1784.

⁵⁹ The trick consisted in feeding the gullible large quantities of food seemingly cooked from small amounts of ingredients but in fact stealthily taken out of a cellar; see Li and Li, *Bei Qi shu*, 41.538, transcribed in Li, *Beishi*, 53.1925–26. In addition to the serving of vegetarian food, early Buddhist ‘fasting assemblies’ included confession and the chanting of scriptures; they may have prefigured later confession rituals. See Kuo, ‘La récitation des noms de “Buddha” en Chine et au Japon’: 252–53.

⁶⁰ Li and Li, *Bei Qi shu*, 8.108, 41.538. The diachronic distance between the events and their account is over 60 years. Transcribed in Li, *Beishi*, 8.296, 53.1925–26.

Religious Interpretation and Its Limits

It would be dishonest to deny that, as in the anecdotes above, the entire corpus of Chinese official historiography contains a wealth of information relevant to the study of Chinese religion and allowing for many transcultural comparisons. The problem is rather how we interpret some of these data to reconstruct early medieval religious history. As previously noted, all the anecdotes above are tagged by the occurrence of *yao* 妖. But in the light of the variety of cases reviewed—charismatic rebels, impostors and schemers, plus self-proclaimed dukes, kings, emperors, restorers and religious reformers—‘deviance’ appears to be the retrospective justification, on the rhetorical level, of the repressive measures taken by authorities against those thus qualified. Semantically, the word seems to denote the state of mind, induced by the pursuit of some superior end beyond looting or instigating disorder, of both the leader triggering social unrest and the body of people seduced into sharing that pursuit. It is doubtless that such a pursuit may have occasionally included ‘religious’ motives, but it is also doubtless that ‘religion’ covered only one facet of the relevant phenomena.⁶¹ Factors to be kept in mind (yet not to be dwelled upon here) include the notion of ‘opportunity’, either created or seized.⁶²

There seems to be wide consensus that most of the figures above somehow shared a ‘Taoist’ identity, to the point that, a few years ago, François Martin felt compelled to remark, not without some ingenuousness: ‘One is surprised in fact by the great number of revolts which broke out in China during the fourth and fifth centuries that displayed an openly Taoist

⁶¹ As an example, Crowell, ‘Social Unrest and Rebellion’, has proposed a sixfold taxonomy including a single religious category: (a) ‘rebellions caused by natural disaster and famine’; (b) ‘protest against government oppression’; (c) ‘religious rebellion’; (d) ‘localist and separatist rebellion’; (e) ‘ethnic disturbances’; and (f) ‘bandits and pirates’. Crowell defines a seventh category, ‘political rebellions’, but chooses not to deal with it on the grounds that such movements ‘were conflicts among members of the ruling elite instead of attacks upon the rulers by the ruled’ (p. 322). He adds that the purpose of these categories is to ‘clarify the most important forces that were at work’ (p. 343), thereby suggesting that other factors may have existed behind those ‘forces’.

⁶² Dull, ‘Anti-Qin Rebels’, shows the limits of the interpretation of the ‘evil’ Qin dynasty being overthrown by ‘peasants’, and proposes a convincing picture of the main contenders for the throne as political actors ‘creating’ or ‘stealing opportunities’, including for the purpose of ‘vengeance’, or trying to ‘gain political or socio-political redemption’.

character. This situation would later change with the progress of Buddhism, which did not provoke such movements'.⁶³ Quite the contrary, as some of the anecdotes suggest, Buddhists did inspire revolts, and perhaps more frequently than one would imagine.⁶⁴

With the messianic figure of Li Hong, we seem to be on safer ground. Anna Seidel (1938–91), chief among distinguished Sinologists, wrote inspiring pages on this deified avatar of the sixth-century BCE 'philosopher' Laozi 老子. His second coming, during which he would manifest as a god and inaugurate an era of Great Peace (*taiping* 太平), was announced in the Taoist eschatological literature of the period; some sources even describe him as descending in the company of the messianic Buddha Mile 彌勒 (Maitreya).⁶⁵ That the many Li Hong(s) recorded in medieval historiography were historical manifestations of ambient apocalyptic beliefs is a sound theory, but no historian would neglect to counterbalance the importance of this religious drive with other probable economic and socio-political factors. And there is no proof that any of these Li Hong(s) belonged to the Way of the Li Clan (*Li jia dao* 李家道), as Miyakawa presumed in the case of Li Tuo.⁶⁶ This tradition is too scarcely documented in primary sources to allow for anything more than conjectures, especially with respect to its possible relationship with other, better-known Taoist sects.⁶⁷

Taoist identity becomes even more blurred as we consider the other cases referred to in our survey. When not interpreted in Marxist-inspired terms by Chinese scholars as a 'peasant revolt' motivated by 'class struggle',

⁶³ Martin, 'La rébellion de Sun En et Lu Hsün': 50, n. 21 ('On est surpris en fait du grand nombre de révoltes qui ont éclaté en Chine au cours des IV^e et V^e siècles avec un caractère taoïste affiché. Cette situation changera avec les progrès du bouddhisme, qui n'a pas suscité de tels mouvements.').

⁶⁴ According to Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆 (1898–1980), quoted by Demiéville, 'Buddhism and War': 24–25, there were six such revolts between 402 and 517; a dozen between 337 and 524, according to Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements*: 106–16. Liu, 'Traces of Zoroastrian': 32–34, gives a list of 13 movements spanning the years 471–614 and containing Buddhist elements, some of which, in his view, could actually point to Manichaeism. Interestingly for our purpose, Liu concedes that, in some cases, 'the link between the rebels' activities and Manichaeism is rather vague and cannot be regarded as established' (p. 34).

⁶⁵ Seidel, 'The Image of the Perfect Ruler'. For 'Great Peace', see n. 81 below. On the messianic and millenarian facets of Maitreya, see the essays collected in Sponberg and Hardacre (eds), *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*.

⁶⁶ Miyakawa, '*Shin sho dōkyō shiryō kō*': 27–28, 36.

⁶⁷ See Yamada, 'Ibun no bunka-shi': 347–62.

Sun En's movement is usually presented as a 'Taoist rebellion'. In the sole exception to this representation that is known to me, Chi-tim Lai has analysed contemporaneous Taoist ideologies to conclude that the uprising 'was more likely provoked by the southerners' deeply felt grievances against the domineering northerners, than it was by [Taoist] messianic beliefs'.⁶⁸ In the anecdotes involving Sima Lun/Sun Xiu (case 1) and Li Tuo (case 3), isolated mentions of 'men of the Way' (*daoshi*) do not imply adherence to a denomination acknowledged by mainstream Taoism. In addition, the meaning of the compound *daoshi* evolved in the course of the period under consideration. It definitely pointed to 'Taoists' by the time the mid-seventh-century *Book of the Jin* was put together. But throughout the Jin era, which witnessed the events described in both anecdotes, the expression still referred, in a classical sense, to anyone mastering a 'Way'—a secret expertise, a set of techniques or practices—but was also used in reference to Buddhists.⁶⁹ The fact that elsewhere in the *Book of the Jin*, as we have seen, Li Tuo is called a 'man of the arts' (*shuren*) reflects the polysemy of the term and invites caution on the part of the interpreter. Citing a classic study by the Academia Sinica historian Chen Yingke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969),⁷⁰ Miyakawa noted that a Buddhist encyclopaedia completed in 668, the *Grove of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma* (Fayuan zhulin 法苑珠林), refers to Lu Song as a *daoshi*—unquestionably a 'Taoist' at that time and in this context.⁷¹ For one thing, the *Book of the Jin*, whose completion predates that source by 20 years, does not characterise Lu Song as such. Furthermore, far from being a secular historical source, the *Grove of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma* is the work of Daoshi 道世 (?–683), a Buddhist monk.⁷² It may be of primary importance for the study of seventh-century Buddhism, but, like most medieval Buddhist texts authored in China, it should not be used as an unprejudiced and historically reliable source, and even more so for the study of early medieval Taoism. Indeed, the mention of Lu Song

⁶⁸ Lai, 'Daoism and Political Rebellion': 79. Yet one may wonder if the hidden motivation of the paper is not to partake in the construction of an idealised Taoist history purged from any antisocial manifestation.

⁶⁹ Fukui, 'Dōshi to dōjin'.

⁷⁰ Chen, 'Tianshi dao yu binhai diyu zhi guanxi'.

⁷¹ Miyakawa, 'Shin sho dōkyō shiryō kō': 29–30. See Daoshi, *Fayuan zhulin*, T. 53, no. 2122, 55.704c. The diachronic distance between the events and that source is three centuries.

⁷² On the *Fayuan zhulin*, see Teiser, 'T'ang Buddhist Encyclopedias'.

appears in a polemical chapter devoted to ‘Confuting Perversity’ (*poxie* 破邪), in other words, to counter-attacking Taoism and anti-Buddhist propaganda.⁷³

Nonetheless, despite substantial grey areas and, in most cases, the paucity of our information, the anecdotes surveyed above do indeed provide the student of religions with a profusion of elements pointing to religious practices. It should be made clear, however, that none of these specifically and exclusively denote Taoism, as Miyakawa conceded with respect to Liu Lingzhu (case 11).⁷⁴ Mediums—in Chinese, *wu* 巫 and *xi* 覡, sometimes rendered as ‘shamans’ in Western publications (whether we can speak of shamanism in Chinese context or not is another pending issue)—and spiritualism existed in China since the earliest ages of civilisation, but they progressively declined in status from elite circles to the lowest social strata, where they remained the target of ceaseless attacks by Taoists, Buddhists and the state alike.⁷⁵ Divination, prophecy and the interpretation of various phenomena as auspicious or inauspicious omens often appear to share a common conceptual background with Taoism, but they cannot be reduced to it.⁷⁶ Cults to immortals, classically represented as feathered beings, and the quest for long or inextinguishable life certainly have historical and ideological connections with Taoism, but any such cultural manifestation does not necessarily imply an affiliation to a clearly identified ‘Taoist’ current, unless explicitly stated.⁷⁷ It is well-known that the designing and use of ‘symbols’ (*fu* 符)—as talismans are sometimes called in Chinese—and other forms of divine (*shen* 神) writing as well preceded Taoism, and continued to exist outside of it, particularly in Buddhism.⁷⁸

⁷³ For Buddhists’ controversial treatment of Taoism in medieval Buddhist sources, see Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao*.

⁷⁴ Miyakawa, ‘Hokuchō seishi dōkyō shiryō kō’: 49–50.

⁷⁵ The best synthesis yet on the topic is Lin, ‘The Image and Status of Shamans’: 397–458, and *idem.*, ‘Shamans and Politics’: 275–318.

⁷⁶ For divinatory practices, see Kalinowski (ed.), *Divination et société dans la Chine médiévale*. For the particular case of prophecy as a propaganda tool, see Lu, *Power of the Words*.

⁷⁷ For a general picture of the immortality lore as a cultural backdrop during the relevant period, see Yü, ‘Life and Immortality’. For a sociological approach of its relationship to Taoism, see Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*: 38–90.

⁷⁸ For comparative studies of Taoist and Buddhist symbolic artefacts, see Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*: 123–93; Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face*: 87–89 and 123–32. For divine writings, see Bumbacher, *Empowered Writing*. For ‘talisman’ as covering only a later development in the phenomenal history of ‘symbols’ (*fu*), see my introductory remarks in Espeset, ‘A Case Study’.

Of particular interest are the recurrent allegation of ‘deluding’ or ‘deceiving’ the people, which was tantamount to an accusation of public order disruption and thereby legitimated immediate repression, and such formulae as unorthodox (*yin* 淫, literally ‘wasteful’) cults, ‘sinister way’, ‘deviant magic’ and ‘deviant arts’, which would conveniently stigmatise any occult practice or cultic activity not recognised by the state—or by institutionalised Taoism and Buddhism themselves.⁷⁹ Similar discourse served comparable needs during later ages of Chinese history up the contemporary era—an example in point is the Falun Gong 法輪功 movement—as well as in the context of other cultural areas: for instance, in late Western antiquity, the concept of ‘magic’ arose from debates on the correctness of religious practice which, really, discussed ‘the appropriate wielding of power’.⁸⁰

Last, let us consider some of the titles claimed by our ‘deviants’. Two of them—‘General of Great Peace’ (case 1) and ‘August Emperor of Great Peace’ (case 7)—include the compound *taiping* (‘Great Peace’), which we have just encountered in the context of Taoist eschatology. At the time, it was a potent concept already with a long history, but this eschatological layer constituted only a secondary and comparably late development.⁸¹ No evidence definitively supports the claim that the titles were derived from notions of Taoist eschatology—or, for that matter, that they pointed to ideas from the eponymous scripture preserved in the mid-Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Taoist Canon, the notorious but still poorly understood *Great Peace Scripture* (Taiping jing 太平經).⁸² And if the English renderings ‘Saintly King’, ‘Saintly Ruler’ and ‘Saintly Lord’ translate as ‘theocracy’ in the mind of those scholars who ‘believe they see intensity everywhere’, as Veyne would put it, it should be underlined that all three titles were primarily, and they remained so throughout the

⁷⁹ See Stein, ‘Religious Taoism and Popular Religion’: 53–81.

⁸⁰ Citing Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*: 129, where a footnote refers the reader to Janowitz, *Icons of Power*: 1–17. For the Falun Gong—more properly Falun dafa 法輪大法 (Major Law of the Dharma-Wheel) or Falun Fo fa 法輪佛法 (Buddha-Law of the Dharma-Wheel)—movement, see Ownby, *Falun Gong*, and chapter 8 in Palmer, *Qigong Fever*.

⁸¹ On the origin of the notion of Great Peace, see Hendrichske, *The Scripture on Great Peace*: 4–13.

⁸² For a critical introduction to the received scripture and a review of Hendrichske’s book referred to in the preceding note, see Espeset, ‘Editing and Translating the *Taiping Jing*’.

Chinese imperial era, terms of both idealised reference or respectful address to the sovereign.⁸³

These titles in turn allow us to grasp directly, without the mediation of interpretative speculation, the logic at work behind the historiographical anecdotes. Most of the ‘deviants’ therein have in common an illegitimate claim to authority, and/or the unauthorised appointment of functionaries, and/or the inauguration of an illicit regnal era and/or the production of invalid regalia or forged official documents.⁸⁴ We are back to high treason and the legitimacy of power, as the late second- and early third-century cases of Dai Yi and Zhang Lu made clear. In sum, the purpose of the historiography of local resistance was not to provide an ethnographical account of the ‘religious’ traits of some social phenomena observed or to report how supposedly ‘theocratic’ outbursts were repressed, but to chronicle how legitimate authority reacted to disruptions of public order. As Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) wrote about the Jesuits Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and J.A. Schall von Bell (1592–1666) in his review of an essay by J.J.M. De Groot (1854–1921): ‘Since [Ricci and Schall] knew a great deal of curious things and did not trouble public order, they were tolerated, and even sought after’.⁸⁵ Despite the huge diachronic gap and all its heuristic implications, in pre-modern China the average official still had public order in mind and cared little for theology, dogma or orthopraxis, beyond those of the state he served.

Epilogue: Academic Resistance Today

History and all of its facets, including religious history, should be written by academics who are fully aware of the existence of a science called history and relying on its methodology, rather than by those engaged in

⁸³ Indeed *sheng* 聖 was used profusely in Taoist and Buddhist discourse. For instance, in the Buddhist Canon, there are thousands of occurrences of the compound ‘Saintly Way’ (mentioned in the third Li Hong anecdote above) in self-reference to Buddhism.

⁸⁴ We lack such pieces of information solely in the case of the second, fourth and seventh Li Hong, for which the available historical data remain scarce. All three of them, however, are equally called ‘deviant bandits’ in the relevant historiographical sources.

⁸⁵ Pelliot, ‘Review of J.J.M. De Groot’: 107. (‘Comme ils savaient une foule de choses curieuses et ne troublaient pas l’ordre public, on les toléra, on les rechercha même.’) De Groot’s essay appeared in *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen an der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin*, 1902.

a crusade to implement retrospectively some ‘politically correct’ trends of doubtful scientific value. Nor should there be room for any value judgement in historical works, however difficult the endeavour may seem in view of the central part that value judgements play in individual life experience. In the current context of what has come to be called ‘fast science’ and generalised competition for instant respectability and accelerated careers, we scholars, whatever the field—perhaps more so newly admitted doctors anxious to get a stable, paid position—are under constant pressure to publish and soon or later end up giving priority to the arithmetic quantity of our publications over their novelty, scientific value, reliability and importance to the field. Concomitantly, new discursive habits borrowed from other socio-professional milieus have appeared, such as laying an overemphasis on virtually any data regardless of its relative position within a given context—whether on book covers, in published papers or in research projects, any point in time becomes ‘crucial’, any phenomenon must have been ‘underestimated’ and any tiny detail proves to be ‘of staggering significance’. As detachment thus slowly gives way to the emotional language of news broadcasts and advertising, history is being insidiously replaced by storytelling. It is a well-known strategy of contemporary mainstream mass media covering any popular movement to continuously broadcast footage of the most violent action so as to convince public opinion of the radicality of the said movement. Similar ideological mechanisms are at work in the historiography of local resistance in early medieval China—indeed, all the anecdotes above, as recounted by medieval historiographers, are focused on aggressive action and often contain what would be called ‘graphic violence’ in the language of today’s mass media. For all that, the phenomenology depicted above certainly did not boil down to mobs of sanguinary zealots; it more likely comprised a minority of conspicuous extremists or religious fanatics—not necessarily including the leaders themselves—together with a majority of half-hearted followers, all responding to a variety of motives of greatly varying ‘intensity’ and more or less clearly conceived of at the individual level. It should be the duty of academics to resist overinterpretation and oversimplification and to maintain decent standards of intellectuality in their analyses and discourse. ‘Truth’ is not at stake, whether you spell it with an uppercase ‘t’ or not—pragmatically, it is historicity that comes under threat, along with a basic respect for our audience and for ourselves.

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