

The Taizhou Movement

Being Mindful in Sixteenth Century China

Johanna Lidén

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History of Religion at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Saturday 8 December 2018 at 10.00 in hörsal 7, Universitetsvägen 10 D.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to define and analyze the religious ideas, praxis and organizations of the Taizhou movement using the earliest sources from the Ming dynasty. The Taizhou movement originated with a salt merchant named Wang Gen (1483–1541), who became a disciple of the well-known Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529). Wang Gen's thoughts were similar to his, but Wang Gen's ideas about protecting and respecting the self were new. These ideas and the pursuit of making one's mind calm inspired his followers who, like Wang Gen, tried to put them into practice. The thesis contextualizes Wang Gen and some of his followers who were active in the sixteenth century such as Yan Jun, Luo Rufang and He Xinyin. It contains texts which have not been translated into English before.

Contrary to previous research, the thesis proposes that the Taizhou practitioners did not form a "school" in the strict sense of the word but became a "movement". The reason was that their ideas corresponded to the anxieties and concerns of people from all levels of society and that they engaged in social and religious activities on the local level. Their ideas and praxis are heterogeneous, a result of the free discussions that were held in private academies. The religious praxis of the Taizhou movement included singing, reciting, individual and communal meditation, discussions and ethical commitments. Another claim of the thesis is that the Taizhou practitioners did not regard meditation in isolation as contradictory to social activism but as two complementary pursuits. Furthermore, the thesis argues that Huang Zongxi's criticism of Wang Gen for adding Chan Buddhism to the philosophy of Wang Yangming was reasonable, contrary to what some researchers claim, but that the problem with his criticism is that it pertains to Wang Yangming himself as well.

The demarcation lines between Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism as well as those between "schools" within each tradition were porous, which is exemplified by the Taizhou practitioners. Sometimes they manifest Buddhist and Daoist influences, but their framework is Confucian. In general, they were not concerned with which tradition they belonged to but with transforming the individual and society. The Taizhou practitioners did not worship any Buddhist or Daoist deities, but they were engaged in reaching a specific state of mind and rendering the secular world sacred. Awakened understanding should be experienced personally. The Taizhou practitioners can be regarded as 'religious' using definitions of religion which affirm such experiential aspects, but their movement cannot be defined as a religion if the definition requires an institution. Officials and literati scholars criticized the Taizhou practitioners and some of them were persecuted. Luo Rufang experienced administrative persecution; Yan Jun was imprisoned for a period; He Xinyin was killed in prison in 1579, the same year as the Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng prohibited free discussions in the private academies. The thesis claims that it was their ideas and actions perceived as dangerous to men of power which resulted in their persecution. The fact of belonging to a certain social segment had less importance.

Keywords: *Taizhou movement, Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Wang Gen, religious ideas, religious praxis, self-respect, self-protection, calming the mind, Wang Yangming, Buddhism, Yan Jun, Daoism, He Xinyin, Luo Rufang, religious persecution.*

Stockholm 2018

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-161354>

ISBN 978-91-7797-502-1
ISBN 978-91-7797-503-8

Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and
Gender Studies

Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm



Stockholm
University