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Yaoqin Sanzang Xitian Qu Qing Jielun 姚秦三藏西天取清解論: A Study of a Sixteenth-Century Non-Action Teaching Baojuan

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Yaoqin Sanzang Xitian Qu Qing Jielun

姚秦三藏西天取清解論：

A Study of a Sixteenth-Century Non-Action Teaching *Baojuan*

by
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Abstract

This project examines and translates the Late Ming dynasty (1573-1620) *baojuan* 寶卷 *Yaoqin Sanzang Xitian qu qing jielun* 姚秦三藏西天取清解論 (Treatises on the Clear Explanation [retrieved] from the Western Heaven by Tripitaka of the Yao Qin Dynasty, Kumārajīva). Despite its significance within the Non-Action Teaching (*Wuwei jiao* 無為教), *Yaoqin* has been largely overlooked in scholarly work. This study explores how the themes of Non-Action Teaching are presented in *Yaoqin*, investigates the implications of Kumārajīva's (344-413; *Yaoqin Sanzang* 姚秦三藏) presence in the title, and analyses the creation myth that opens the work. Close reading is employed as the primary methodological approach to situate the text in its historical and religious context.

The research reveals that *Yaoqin* reflects the syncretic religious environment of the Late Ming period, which favoured the development and spread of Non-Action Teachings while sharing its core religious insights. Furthermore, the text demonstrates thematic connections with the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Graded Ritual*, offering a possible rationale for Kumārajīva's name appearing in the title. Lastly, the creation myth stands out for originality, synthesising elements from Buddhism, Daoism, and other Chinese popular beliefs. This study not only sheds light on an understudied *baojuan* but also contributes to a broader understanding of the religious syncretism of the Late Ming period.

Keywords: *Yaoqin Sanzang Xitian qu qing jielun* 姚秦三藏西天取清解論; Luo Qing; Non-Action Teachings; 無為教; *baojuan*; Late Ming Syncretism.

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1. Introduction

This project aims to examine and translate the understudied *baojuan* 寶卷 (lit. precious scroll) *Yaoqin Sanzang Xitian qu qing jielun* 姚秦三藏西天取清解論 (Treatises on the Clear Explanation [retrieved] from the Western Heaven by Tripitaka of the Yao Qin Dynasty, Kumārajīva, hereafter *Yaoqin*)¹. Despite its significance within the Luo Qing 羅清 (1442-1527) tradition – Non-Action Teaching (*Wuwei jiao* 無為教) – *Yaoqin* remains largely unexplored in scholarly work. This research focuses on the teachings and philosophy of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century doctrine of Non-Action Teaching found in the text. The version of the *baojuan* studied here comes from a yet uncatalogued section of the Special Collection of Leiden University Library (hereafter *Leiden version* when referring to this version in relation to other editions). This is a printed copy acquired by Professor Kristofer Schipper (1934-2021) for Leiden University Library. These *baojuan* are preserved in the Van Gulik Kamer.

Books that belong to the genre of *baojuan* appeared in China starting from the fifteenth century (Overmyer 1999, 1) and describe, with simple classical language, the cosmology, the philosophical perspective, and eschatology of sectarian religious movements of the Ming dynasty 明 (1368-1644) (Overmyer 1999, 3). *Baojuan*, a form of literature that derives from the Tang dynasty's 唐 (618-907) *bianwen* 變文 (transformation texts), were meant to be written aloud during a ritual performance (Overmyer 1999, 4-5). Non-Action Teaching *baojuan* were the foundation of sectarian tradition.

The Non-Action Teaching movement is the result of Luo Qing's philosophical and religious discourse, which is overarchingly presented in the work attributed to him, the *Wubu liuce* 五部六冊 (Five Books and Six Volumes, hereafter *WBLC*). The Non-Action movement is a lay tradition, bound to the historical figure of Luo Qing, about whom little is known. Historical knowledge is mixed with hagiographic insights, making him, in our eyes, a product of a myth (ter Haar 2014, 12). According to the hagiographic material in the *WBLC*, after many years spent seeking the correct practice to enlightenment, he shaped an original religious doctrine. This tradition spread throughout China from the south to the north through the medium of texts (ter Haar 2014, 29). Its themes draw inspiration from other Chinese traditions, such as Chan Buddhism, Pure Land Tradition (ter Haar 2014, 29), Daoist cosmology, and the Neo-Confucian Doctrine of Principle (*li* 理, Nadeau 1990, p. 233). These themes are reflected in the *Yaoqin*, for instance, the idea of the Buddha within oneself (*zifo* 自佛 in the text), the return to one's native place (*jiaxiang* 家鄉) and the rejection of many popular religious practices, for instance, the Pure Land *nianfo* 念佛 – where the practitioner recites the name of the Buddha Amitābha repeatedly – and the Buddhist Chan's meditation practice. Furthermore, this research explores the idea of cosmic emptiness (*xu* 虛) as presented in the text, as well as a method of self-cultivation that emerges from this emptiness,

¹ In the third chapter of this thesis, I will analyse the title and give reasons to the translation provided here. The structure of the title remains partially puzzling both from a meaning point of view, as well as from a more grammatical one.

namely the non-action (*wuwei fa* 無為法). Finally, this project examines the creation myth found at the beginning of the *baojuan*, along with its connection to Non-Action Teaching and other Chinese religious motifs.

In the development of this thesis, I will look at how the themes of Non-Action Teaching are presented in *Yaoqin*. This will not solely bring a major understanding to the text, but will also help to contextualise it in the Late Ming (1573-1620) religious and socio-historical milieu. Why is the name of the famous fourth-century translator Kumārajīva (*Yaoqin Sanzang* 姚秦三藏; 350-409) in the title, despite there being no further reference to him in the entire text? Che Xilun's mention of *Yaoqin* (entry 1412) in his comprehensive *Zhongguo baojuanzongmu* 中國寶卷總目 (Che 1998, 339) tells us that the text was first published during the tenth year of the Ming emperor Wanli 明萬曆 (r. 1572-1620), which corresponds to 1582. However, we do not know when it was actually produced. By thoroughly reading the text and comparing its content with other texts that belong to different moments in the development of the Non-Action Teaching, I hope to acquire this information. How is the creation myth that opens the work, clearly inspired by different Chinese traditions, such as Daoism and Buddhism, related to the cosmology described in Luo Qing's *Wubu liuce* and other Non-Action books? How can we compare the text with other *baojuan* previously studied by scholars such as Daniel Overmyer's *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1999)?

To answer these questions, I use close reading to understand the text's narrative structure and thematic elements. Furthermore, I draw inspiration from existing translations of other *baojuan* to produce the translation, having gained insight into the specific lexicon that previous scholars have employed to translate this genre.

Literary review

Currently, there is little scholarship on the *baojuan Yaoqin* 姚秦. One relatively short reference to the text is in the Japanese book *Shin Shokan Kyōhakei Hōkan nishu no Genten to Kaidai: 'Fufukushūryū Gojūsan Sanhōkan' to 'Yōshin Sanzō Seitenshuseikairon'* 清初刊教派系寶卷二種の原典と解題:『普覆週流五十三參寶卷』と『姚秦三藏西天取清解論』 (Original Texts and Explanatory Notes of Early Qing Dynasty's Sectarian *Baojuan* Volume 2: 'Baojuan of the Universal Circulation of the Fifty-three Wise Guides' and 'Treatises on the Clear Explanation [retrieved] from the Western Heaven by Tripitaka of the Yao Qin Dynasty, Kumārajīva', 2010). This book, written by Isobe Akira, contains a printed version of the *baojuan* and a brief introduction summarising its contents.

The *baojuan* draws inspiration from the idea of emptiness, a concept often stressed by Kumārajīva, translator of the *Diamond Sūtra* (Isobe 2010, 12). He suggests that the discussion on emptiness in the Sūtra might have inspired the author of *Yaoqin*. However, another reference to the text, Sawada Mizuho's *Zōhō Hōkan no kenkyū* 増補寶卷の研究 (Supplementary Edition: Research on Precious Scrolls), claims that the text is a commentary on the *Diamond Sūtra*. Since this matter is still unclear, one of the objectives of this thesis will be to assess the relation between

the *Diamond Sūtra* and this *baojuan*. In this regard, I will refer to Red Pine's exhaustive translation, *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom* (2001). Additionally, I will use the over-arching treaty on the *Diamond Sūtra* and other *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* composed by Stefano Zacchetti in Brill's *Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (2020). To understand the wide-ranging impact of the *Diamond Sūtra* on Chinese Buddhism and religious milieu, I will consult Yong You's *Diamond Sutra in Chinese Culture* (2010).

We find another mention of the *baojuan* in Che Xilun's *Zhongguo baojuan zongmu* 中國寶卷總目 (Catalogue of Chinese Precious Scrolls, 1998). However, the author only lists the dates of when the book was published. This gives insights into the text's impact on Late Ming and Qing society and provides a suggestion of a plausible timeframe of the book's composition.

Another printed version of the book can be found in the collection *Meiguo Hafo Daxue Hafo Yanjing tushuguan cang baojuan huikan* 美國哈佛大學哈佛燕京圖書館藏寶卷彙刊 (Collection's Compendium of Baojuan of Harvard University's Harvard-Yanqing Library, Huo 2013; hereafter *Harvard version* when referring to this version in relation to other editions). Unfortunately, in this volume, there is no information concerning the *baojuan* in the introductory articles. Therefore, it does not advance current understanding. However, this and the version in Isobe's book gave me many philological insights, as I could compare my version with them.²

Concerning *baojuan* in general, extensive scholarship has developed throughout the twentieth century in both the East and the West. To conduct this study, I refer to the vast literary review issued in 2012 by Wilt L. Idema, "English Language Studies on Precious Scrolls: A Bibliographical Survey". Idema thoroughly lists every publication on the subject from English language scholarship and provides an introduction to some of the most well-known publications from China and Japan. As for Western scholarship, Idema finds the roots of *baojuan* research in De Groot's *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China: A Page in the History of Religions* (1903).

However, for almost a century, sectarianism and *baojuan* were not primary interests of study for scholars with an interest in Chinese religions. The situation changed when Western researchers began fieldwork in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. For instance, Marjorie Topley discusses some sectarian writing still in use in some religious contexts in Singapore and Malaysia in her *The Great Way of Former Heaven: A Group of Chinese Religious Sects* (1963).

In the seventies and eighties, Daniel Overmyer started to work on *baojuan* and sectarianism of the Late Ming and Early Qing dynasties. His first monograph on the matter is *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (1976). This study discusses the characteristics of *baojuan* and presents religious sects that used the genre. While his second monograph deals more with contemporary sectarianism in China, it is his third book, *Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1999), that represents the real turning point in *baojuan* scholarship. Here, he introduces the genre with extensive quotations from many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts.

² This will be discussed in Chapter 3, pp. 27-30.

Overmyer explains that by the beginning of the sixteenth century, there were two streams of *baojuan*. One is represented by Luo Qing's texts, which are imbued with an abstract and mystical approach. These texts do not refer to the three-stage mythology, which is an eschatological interpretation of time that breaks cosmic time into three stages. However, they pertain to the philosophy of emptiness (*xu* 虛) and non-action (*wuwei* 無為), drawing inspiration from Chan Buddhist tradition and Daoism. This stream is represented by Luo Qing's *WULC*. The second sub-genre relates to the religious figure of Maitreya³ and entails the eschatological perspective of the three stages of cosmic time. In these *baojuan*, we find the divine figure of the Eternal Mother, who is associated with Maitreya. Overmyer suggests that these two different sub-genres eventually intertwined and merged. Later, *baojuans* contain both of these characteristics.

Another essential mention in Professor Idema's bibliography is the scholarship of Overmyer's student, Randall Nadeau. His research on *baojuan* is vast and insightful, especially in *Genre Classifications of Chinese Popular Religious Literature: Pao-chüan* (1993) and *The Domestication of Precious Scrolls: The Ssu-ming Tsao-jün pao-chüan* (1996). In the first paper, Nadeau points out that these texts were used and read aloud in ritual performances. In the 1996 paper, Nadeau delves into a subgenre of *baojuan* that emphasises popular deity by studying the text *Siming zaojun baojuan* 死命竈君寶卷 (*Baojuan* on the God of the Stove and the Ruler of Fates). Additionally, his doctoral dissertation, titled *Popular Sectarianism in the Ming: Lo Ch'ing and his 'Religion of Non-Action'* (1990), is of primary relevance. This study tackles the contents of *WBLC*, the historical figure of Patriarch Luo, the philosophical and religious influences that shaped the movement from different contemporary traditions, and the development of his teachings throughout the Late Ming and the Qing (1644-1911).

Richard Hon-Chun Shek is another scholar who contributed significantly to the field of *baojuan* and Ming sectarianism. In his *Eternal Mother Religion: Its History and Ethics* (2004), Shek describes the development of the divine figure of the Eternal Mother, which will become strongly connected to the Non-Action Teaching. Furthermore, another important piece of scholarship concerning Late Ming sectarianism is his PhD dissertation *Religion and Society in Late Ming: Sectarianism and Popular Thought in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century China* (1980).

In addition to the aforementioned studies, which will give me background knowledge on the genre, I also considered other studies that deal with specific texts, such as Glen Dudbridge's *The Legend of Miaoshan* (1978) and Wilt Idema's *Evil Parents and Filial Offspring: Some Comments on the Xiangshan baojuan and Related Texts* (2001).

On the topic of *Wuwei jiao*, I will rely on secondary sources, such as Barend ter Haar's extensive research in *Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China* (2014), which presents a social history of the Non-Action Teaching movement. Alongside this valuable material, I will also employ another insightful book by ter Haar concerning sectarianism, *The White Lotus*

³ Maitreya is in virtually all Buddhist traditions the Buddha of the future, who will succeed Śākyamuni Buddha. The devotion to the Buddha of the future has various forms. Cults that worship Maitreya promise the follower to achieve rebirth in Maitreya's heaven, Tuṣita (*doushuaitian* 兜率天), while other aspire to one's rebirth in the world when Maitreys will be alive. For a more detailed analysis of the figure, see Bowring, McBride II, Mayaji, Silk 2018.

Teaching in Chinese Religious History (1992). This will help me to broaden my understanding of the complicated environment of sectarianism in the Late Imperial period.

Another exhaustive study on Chinese sectarianism is Huber Seiwert's *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (2003). Seiwert delineates the history of the Luo Qing sect and its most relevant texts, describing the movement's focal teachings.

Moreover, another significant publication is *Luoqiao, Fojiao, Chanxue: Luoqiao yu "wubu liuce" jiemi* 羅教·佛教·禪學：羅教與《五部六冊》揭秘 (Luo teaching, Buddhism and Chan school: unveiling the mystery of Luo's *Wubu Liuce*, 1999), by Xu Xiaoyue. The author focuses on the focal role of Luo's main piece of writing, the *WBLC*, to break down Non-Action's cardinal ideas, as well as its cultural and religious milieu.

Furthermore, the divine figure of the Eternal Mother and the related topic of the original birthplace, which is vastly mentioned in the *Yaoqin*, are greatly studied. For instance, Yu Chunfang, in his *Venerable Mother: Kuan-yin and Sectarian Religions in Late Imperial China* (2001), draws a link between the Eternal Mother worshipped in *baojuan* and the figure of the bodhisattva Guanyin. Lastly, the extensive study on the Eternal Mother *Wusheng Laomu suyuan* 無聲老母信仰溯源 (Tracing back the Origin of the Eternal Mother) by Zheng Zhiming (1985) is a thorough discussion on Non-Action Teaching motifs, Luo Qing's religious experience and critique.

On the topic of the native place, I referred particularly to *Zhenkong Jiaxiang: Qingdai minjian mimi zongjiao shi yanjiu* 真空家鄉：清代民間秘密宗教史研究 (True Emptiness and Native Place: Investigation on the History of Qing dynasty's Secret Popular Religions), written by Zhuang Jifa (2002). In the study, the author engages with Qing dynasty sectarianism, giving a great deal of importance to *baojuan* and their content, thus reflecting on the matter of the Eternal Mother and the return to one's native place, often described as the goddess's womb.

Finally, *Mingdai Wuwei jiao* 明代無為教 by Pu Wenqi (2008) breaks down the history and the literature of Luo Qing's movement, showing also the development that occurred in the movement after Luo Qing's death. Similarly, Nan Bingwen's *Fodao mimi zongjiao yu Ming dai shehui* 佛道秘密宗教與明代社會 (Buddhist and Daoist Secret Religions and Ming's Society, 2001) explores Buddhist and Daoist sectarianism and its impact on Ming society.

Another insightful study on Late Ming society with a specific historical focus on the relationship between Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism is Timothy Brook's *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (1993). Alongside Brook's book, I used Richard Bowring and Zhang Dewei's entry in Brill's *Encyclopedia of Buddhism, China VI: Buddhism in the Ming and Early Qing Dynasties* (2023) on Ming Buddhism to acquire a broader understanding of the cultural and socio-historical environment.

Structure

As seen above, despite the large *baojuan* and Non-Action Teaching corpus, *Yaoqin* has not been tackled thoroughly. Thus, this vast array of research on Late Ming sectarianism and, specifically, Luo Qing's doctrine, was vital to the development of this thesis. From this understanding, I have read and translated *Yaoqin* and provided an analysis of it in this thesis.

The following thesis is divided into three chapters. After this introduction (chapter 1), the second chapter introduces and discusses Non-Action Teaching from socio-historical and literary perspectives. The section is developed drawing on the extensive secondary literature previously mentioned. I reorganise the knowledge on Non-Action Teaching, focusing on key motifs essential to understanding the *baojuan*. After a socio-historical introduction, I discuss Luo Qing's historical figure, tackling the conflicting information from historical documents and his supposed autobiography, which contains many hagiographic features we read in the *WBLC*. *WBLC* is the topic of the third section of the first chapter, where I discuss its content, sources, and impact on Late Ming and Qing society. The fourth section concerns the movement of Non-Action Teaching after Luo Qing's death and its branching development. Subsequently, the chapter closes with a discussion on the focal themes of Non-Action Teaching, which includes concepts such as the emptiness of things (*xu* 虛), the Buddha within oneself and the necessity of non-action (*wuwei* 無為) for achieving enlightenment, in contrast to a tradition full of different and complex meditation techniques. Additionally, I examine the theme of returning to one's native place and its connection to the figure of the Eternal Mother.

This second chapter serves as a springboard to establish the third one, in which I discuss the *baojuan* in question, the *Yaoqin*. Here, I tackle the text's contents in light of what was discussed in the second chapter. After a brief introductory remark, I delve into the text's contents. Firstly, I discuss the ambiguous title that bears resonance with the famous translator Kumārajīva. Here, I explore the Non-Action Teaching movement's relationship with the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Jingang banruo poluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經, T. 235) and the *Xiaoshi Jingang jing keyi* 銷釋金剛經科儀 (Graded Ritual of the *Diamond Sutra*, hereafter *Graded Ritual*), an important work that deeply shaped Luo Qing's thought (Nadeau 1990, 33). Subsequently, I discuss the creation myth that opens the *Yaoqin*, comparing it with the cosmology of the *WBLC*. The chapter then looks at each of the main topics presented in the *baojuan* one by one.

Finally, after the conclusions (chapter 4), I provide a translation of the *baojuan Yaoqin* in the appendix.

2. Non-Action Teachings

The popular religion of Non-Action Teachings (*wuwei jiao* 無為教) – otherwise known as Luo's Teachings (*Luo jiao* 羅教) – is traditionally associated with the historical figure of Luo Qing and his writings. This tradition, which originated in the second half of the Ming dynasty, acted with a domino effect, influencing and creating a wave of sectarian movements that developed in the following decades and, in some cases, are still practised in some parts of China and Taiwan. The state never recognised these traditions as orthodox religious forms, resulting in the persecution of the traditions throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Seiwert 2003, 209).

Before I discuss the main themes of the movement, I will briefly discuss the socio-historical and religious environment in the Ming between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

2.1 Ming socio-economic and religious context

The Non-Action Teachings movement developed and grew during an underlying religious development. Toward the final stages of the middle period of the dynasty (ca. 1424-1573), state support for Buddhism grew weaker and weaker. Despite the presence of a large number of Tibetan monks in Beijing, who influenced and, at the same time, created constant friction between the imperial family and Confucian scholars, Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1487-1505) showed little interest in Buddhism (Bowring, Zhang 2023, 261). His successor, Emperor Shizong 世宗 (r. 1521-1567), fundamentally did not sympathise with Buddhist monks and monasteries. In 1537, his intent became clear when he decided to close the monasteries and send all the monks to a secular life: “[s]uch rhetoric had the effect of creating a generally hostile environment which encouraged a number of officials to give full rein to their own anti-Buddhist sentiments” (Bowring, Zhang 2023, 261).

The situation changed drastically with Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (r. 1573-1620), whose patronage of Buddhism allowed what is commonly understood as a Buddhist revival (Bowring, Zhang 2023, 262). During his reign, while the emperor was still too young to govern, his mother, Cisheng 慈聖 (1545-1614), showed unprecedented support for Buddhist institutions, arranging the distribution of the Yongle canon and providing financial support for numerous monasteries (Bowring, Zhang 2023, 262).

From a socio-economic standpoint, China underwent considerable changes during the Late Ming dynasty. Firstly, after a long period of peace, agricultural support from the state, political stability, and a commercial revolution, the population grew tremendously, especially in the sixteenth century (Vogelsang 2014, 353). In this environment, national and international trade positively impacted the financial crisis that had occurred in the fifteenth century. Maritime trade, blocked by the state a decade after Emperor Yongle’s 永樂 death (1403–1425) (Vogelsang 2014, 349), contributed toward the economic growth between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries (Vogelsang 2014, 359).

Many other aspects of social life improved in that period. One aspect of Late Ming society that underwent considerable improvement was the media: in the last two centuries of the Ming rule, printing became extremely cheap. This allowed a widespread diffusion of the popular culture. Simultaneously, the language of these newly printed books became closer and closer to the vernacular, detaching from the language of the elite, allowing a larger readership to access literature (Vogelsang 2014, 363).⁴

This growth, however, had a negative impact on social classes. For instance, peasants were forced to leave traditional farming activities, and “the increasing exploitation by the gentry-landlord families led to the concentration of land ownership and rising of tenancy rates” (Shek 1980, 38). In this context of social instability, without strong leadership, corruption spread and tore the ruling class apart. Eunuchs, whose power grew stronger toward the end of the dynasty, were among the

⁴ This is developed in more details in the following chapter, when I discuss the importance of printing for the diffusion of the *Yaoqin* and other *baojians* of that time.

richest in the country, and some could eventually impose a strong influence on politics (Vogelsang 2014, 365-366). It is in this social environment that new intellectual and religious movements could develop and spread (Shek 1980, 39).

As analysed by Richard Shek, the examination system in the Ming was significant in shaping the intellectual and religious milieu of the time (Shek 1980, 39). The deep instability within the officials was intensified by examinations, which at the time were the sole means of becoming a magistrate and climbing the social ladder. Apart from creating a larger and alienated group of lower-degree holders, this system allowed people with humble origins to learn to read and write (Shek 1980, 41). The diffusion of literature – also and especially thanks to the influence of new printing technology – deeply shaped the intellectual society of the late Ming. For this reason, *baojians* and Non-Action Teachings scriptures could reach many levels of society, which facilitated the large expansion of the movement and its lasting presence in China.

In the Late Ming, the philosophical environment, despite still being bound to previous tenets, was thriving. For instance, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (given name Shouren 守仁; 1472-1529) greatly impacted sixteenth-century Ming society. Without going against Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-200) philosophy⁵, he initiated both a spiritualisation and a secularisation process in Neo-Confucianism. His core principle lay in the concept of innate knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知), which had to be “cultivated through thousands of difficulties” (Yang 2023, 262). Since every human possesses this quality, everyone could ascend to potential sagehood by simply realising and internalising this ideal (Shek 1980, 46). Thus, the mind is the centre of Wang Yangming's discourse, a mind that not only understands but also *is* the Principle of Heaven (*li* 理), which, in turn, is nowhere but inside the mind itself (Yang 2023, 263). As a result, morality is now objective and internalised and “no longer an artificial, rigid imposition by the sages” (Shek 1980, 50). As we will see below, Wang Yangming, who was Luo Qing's contemporary, greatly influenced the philosophy of his time. For instance, the notion that the *li* can be found only within oneself reflects Luo Qing's idea of the Buddha within (*zifo* 自佛).

Lin Zhaoen 林兆恩 (1517-1598) is another crucial Confucian thinker who lived in the Late Ming. While Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism had started to merge before the unification of China under the Sui dynasty (隋; 581-618; Liu 1967, 253), it was Lin Zhaoen who turned the Three Teachings (*san jiao* 三教) into a religious entity (Shek 1980, 72). From his point of view, taken by itself, none of the traditions was enough to solve the human condition of suffering. Addressing this issue, Lin elaborated the mind-cultivation method, which drew inspiration from Neo-Confucianist theories and Buddhist and Daoist practices (Berling 1980, 90). This syncretic idea was the basis for *san jiao* teachings. It was not only embraced by Confucian scholars like Lin

⁵ Zhu Xi's philosophy was the dominant framework for official examination in the Late Ming, and in general, throughout the entirety of the Ming dynasty. All philosophical approaches were within his theories, on the core of which we find the theme of the Supreme Polarity (*Taiji* 太極). In Zhu Xi's philosophy, *Taiji* is the principle (*li* 理), which is the foundation of the existence and movement of the *qi* 氣. To learn more about the topic, see Zhang 2021, Makeham 2018.

Zhaoen but also by Daoists and Buddhists who showed enthusiasm toward *san jiao* teachings. The three traditions shared commonalities (Shek 1980, 75). For instance, Richard Shek reports that in an essay written by one of Wang Yangming's disciples, Wang Ji, there is an interesting correlation drawn between Laozi and the Sages, who both referred to the concept of the void (*xu* 虛); similarly, the Sages, just like the Buddha had talked about the concept of quietude (*ji* 寂). These comparisons show that, despite their different origins, the three teachings all have common ground: they give different names to the same concepts (Shek 1980, 73).

San jiao deeply influenced Luo Qing's thought, as we find many themes from the three traditions in Luo's cosmology and philosophy. However, Luo also criticised the merging of the three traditions, objecting that, despite having similar origins – namely, Śākyamuni, Confucius and Laozi all lived in the same period⁶ – each religion developed a different tradition. Even though they merged in the Three Teachings, each still held its own characteristics, thus going against the primary principle of Luo Qing's thought, namely that the Dao 道⁷ could not be dualistic or even threefold (Zheng 1985, 95-96).

Regarding Daoism, Anna Seidel claims that it was a key aspect of Ming popular belief (1970, 483). Throughout the Ming, great relevance is given to the concept of immortality, which reached the royal family and influenced many emperors who became “so obsessed with the Daoist promise of longevity and sexual prowess that they went to great lengths to seek out Daoist adepts who could if only temporarily, satisfying their interest in these two things” (Shek 1980, 76). Under the patronage of the Ming emperors, the concepts of the Inner Alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) flourished (Burto-Rose 2009, 3). The general interest in alchemy culminated with the publication, in 1615, of the *Principles of the Innate Disposition and Lifespan* (*Xingming guizhi* 性命圭旨; Burto-Rose 2009, iii). The book is highly representative of Ming Daoism, and even though it was published after Luo Qing's death, its ideas are similar to those found in the book and have influenced his philosophy.

In the Late Ming, Buddhism saw a revival, especially in its social aspect. In this period, Buddhism became more laic (Shek 1980, 79), as fewer people were willing to join the *samgha*. Many started to practice Buddhism without being officially ordained. Some monks began to gather people around them in non-monastic communities, of which they were seen as religious leaders (Greenblatt 2019, 93). For this reason, we can imagine that many of these groups were – or became in time – syncretic. Yü Chün-fang's example of the monk Zhuhong 株宏 (1535-1615) is representative of this. He founded a brand-new monastic order that, even though grounded in Pure Land practice of *nianfo* 念佛, had original reinterpretations of Buddhist ideas. For instance, he strongly stressed the importance of moral action and disregarded doctrinal questions (Greenblatt 2019, 131).

⁶ Determining whether Laozi and Confucius were historical figures or fictionalized/deified personas, or both lies beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I take for granted that for a person alive in the late Ming period they were more than preachers lived in a distant past, but deities.

⁷ I give a brief explanation of *Dao* later in this chapter.

This lay environment favoured the expansion of movements such as Luo's Non-Action Teachings. Figures like Luo Qing, who had spent many years in a religious environment (see below), must have been intriguing and, despite their laic nature, have attracted many followers. This could happen because it was already the norm, and people were already accustomed to monks founding lay movements. Furthermore, Luo Qing's lay background might have been the springboard that inspired a mythological narrative around his persona (see below) out of a need for religious legitimation.

2.2 On Luo Qing

Despite the large scholarship surrounding him, the historical figure of Luo Qing is still largely wrapped in mystery. This is because of the scarce information about his persona that was passed down to us, the factuality of which we cannot be sure. Much of what we know derives from hagiographic biographies: our most reliable source about his life is the book attributed to him, the *WBLC* (Nadeau 1990, 13). As stated by Barend ter Haar (2014, 12; 2018, 707), we can study two Luo Qings: the historical figure, whom we know almost nothing about, and the sectarian leader, the direct successor of Patriarch Huineng 慧能⁸ (ter Haar 2014, 12) and supernatural being (Shek 1980, 213).

As for the historical Luo Qing, some considerations have to be made regarding his name. Despite Luo Qing being the name most Western scholars use to refer to him, this might not have been his personal name. According to two sect scriptures from the Ming, Patriarch Luo's name was sometimes written as Luo Jing 羅淨 or Luo Yin 羅因. In a different text from the Qing dynasty, it was given as Luo Ying 羅英 instead (Seiwert 2003, 216). Huber Seiwert points out that all these names sound familiar and might have resulted from a misunderstanding. However, Luo Delin 羅德林, a descendant of the patriarch who lived in the eighteenth century, claimed that his ancestor's name was Luo Menghong 羅夢鴻 (Seiwert 2003, 217). This is further proven by the presence of this name –written 孟洪– in an official document. The same name is written 孟鴻 in a preface of his own book from a 1613 edition (Seiwert 2003, 217). Despite Seiwert being rather positive that this was the patriarch's name, ter Haar claims that Luo Qing's simple social background would not have suited such a literary name (ter Haar 2014, 14). Pu Wenqi also provides a religious name, being Luo Puren 羅普仁 (Pu 2008, 69).⁹

The patriarch was originally from the Jimo county, in the Shandong region, but moved to the garrison at Miyun 密雲, by the Gubei Pass (ter Haar 2014, 13 and 15; Shek 1980, 204). Ter Haar stresses the crucial importance of the garrison as it was a significant trading centre, a factor that might have facilitated the spread of his teachings (ter Haar 2014, 15).

⁸ Huineng (638-713) is the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. His hagiography appears in *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 (Platform Sūtra of the Six Patriarch, T. 2007), where he is described as an uneducated man who reached awakening only after he heard monks reciting the Diamond Sūtra. See Jorgensen 2005, Jorgensen 2018 for more detailed studies on Huineng.

⁹ In his article, Pu Wenqi does not provide a reference to this name, and I was not able to confirm this information.

His presence at the Miyun garrison is explained by Nadeau (1990, 24 n. 22) as part of the Ming conscription programme for which every family had to provide a male son for military service. This military obligation was hereditary. Luo Qing himself confirms this piece of information in a few comments in the fifth book of the *WBLC*, the *Weiwei budong Taishan shengen jieguo baojuan* 巍巍不動太山深根結果寶卷 (Precious Scroll of Deep Roots and Concluding the Fruit as Firm as the Lofty and Unmovable Mount Tai; Huo 2013, pp. 329-410). There, he comments that he is a hereditary soldier. This is further proven by a few historical sources that do not belong to his writings or his disciples. Nadeau (1994, 15) explains that this information can be found in “diaries and travelogues of Buddhist contemporaries, publication records for the Wu-puliu-ts’e [*WBLC*], and brief references to Lo Ch’ing in historical documents of the state” (Nadeau 1994, 15). Apart from confirming that he served at Miyun, these sources provide little information about his hometown in Shandong and his date of birth and death.

Apparently, he never moved back to his hometown, and in Miyun, he began his religious career. Ter Haar reports two instances of two Buddhist monks who, towards the end of the sixteenth century and so after Luo’s death, discuss the figure of the patriarch. While the first instance confirms the varieties of his name (ter Haar 2014, 13), the second comments that Luo was a soldier on a cargo ship that travelled from the north to the Lower Yangzi region. Ter Haar discards this claim, suggesting that this might have been a Late Ming misconception derived from the figure of the boatmen (*shuishou* 水手) who worked in that region and were followers of Luo’s movement (ter Haar 2014, 14). Kelly’s (1982) research on boatmen in the seventeenth century suggests that many of them were followers of Non-Action Teachings. They would use the movement’s temples in south China, like Suzhou and Hangzhou, as resting places during their journeys (Kelly 1982, 367). Thanks to their constant movement throughout China, Luo’s teachings would have spread to the other southern regions of the empire and eventually to the north.

In the first book of *WBLC*, the *Kugong wudao* 苦功悟道 (Scroll on Bitter Practice and Enlightenment in the Way; Huo 2013, pp. 481/540)¹⁰, we find a biography that narrates the religious life of Luo Qing. The book presents itself as an autobiographical account written by Luo Qing himself, but it contains many hagiographical nuances that suggest a later edition. It is plausible that disciples – his contemporaries and those who lived after his death – might have edited his work, if not copied entirely from notes taken during Luo’s preaching. Furthermore, considering that he was a simple soldier, Zheng Zhiming suggests Luo Qing was illiterate (Zheng 1985, 15). According to ter Haar, this fact resonates with the story from *Liuzu Dashi fabao tanjing* 六祖大師法寶壇經 (Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch¹¹, T. 2008) of Chan Patriarch, Huineng, being an illiterate cook. The *WBLC* creates a parallel between the two patriarchs, both of whom

¹⁰ I use the translations of book titles of the *WBLC* provided by ter Haar (2014, 18).

¹¹ The *Platform Sūtra* is a significant text of the Chan school of Chinese Buddhism. It is attributed to Huineng himself and was likely composed between the seventh and eighth centuries. The text was likely written by later disciples to legitimate their school. To do so, the text draws a connection between Chan masters and Bodhidharma, the first patriarch. See “Platform Sutra”, *Britannica Academic* 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Platform-Sutra>.

reach enlightenment by listening to Buddhist recitation: Huineng listening to the *Diamond Sūtra* and Luo Qing to the *Graded Ritual* (ter Haar 2014, 34).¹²

WBLC was likely written by disciples or much later, but not by Luo Qing himself. For this reason, I follow ter Haar's claim that the *WBLC* is an unreliable historical source for accessing the patriarch's life (ter Haar 2014, 237 n. 9). Thus, everything that we read in the book attributed to him does not possess historical value but a mythological one.

Following the *WBLC* narrative, after the premature loss of Luo Qing's parents when he was still a child, he began a thirteen-year-long spiritual journey towards enlightenment and ultimate liberation from suffering, which is seen as the fundamental condition of human life (Nadeau 1990, p. 13). In these thirteen years, Luo Qing approached different practices already established to find liberation:

Lo enumerates the various forms of religious cultivation which he alternately embraced and rejected. One after the other, he recalls his efforts in Taoist reclusion and meditation, Pure Land recitation of the Buddha's name, Ch'an sitting in meditation, scriptural studies, contemplation of the origins of the universe, and intellectual analysis of the doctrine of Emptiness. As passionately as he attempts to integrate these practices into his own life, however, Lo comes away disappointed. None is able to satisfy his spiritual yearning or resolve the ultimate religious problem of *samsāra*. Each account ends with the same refrain: 'Dreading the pain of *samsāra*, I dared not abandon my search, and progressed another step along the path' (Nadeau 1990, p. 13-14)

Despite his desperate yearning for liberation, he did not find the answer he was looking for in these practices. In this process, Luo Qing rejected all traditional religious methods and achieved religious enlightenment through the realisation of the communal Buddha-nature of all living beings and their inherited relation with the cosmological figure of the Mother (Nadeau 1990, p. 14). After this realisation, Luo Qing's religious career as a preacher and layman leader began. He gathered many disciples who venerated him and his scripture (Seiwert 2003, 218).

However, the book contains several accounts related to Luo Qing's background that sometimes contradict one another. This especially happens between the prefaces – which we know are written by others – and the first chapter. What is worth noticing is how the prefaces, written in different moments of Luo's movement, show how the Non-Action Teachings grew throughout the decades (ter Haar 2014, 15). A clear instance is the preface by Zhou Rudi 周如砥 (1550-1615), where we read that Luo Qing was not an illiterate soldier but rather an aspiring scholar who gained enlightenment in a cave in Miyun. Zhou provides Luo's dates of birth and death (1441-1527) (ter Haar 2014, 15).

In this brief introduction to the figure of Luo Qing, I have but tackled the literary controversies around the Ming religious leader. Overall, we can suppose that he was actually alive between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and that his religious convictions deeply influenced Late Ming society. Apart from his military background at the Miyun garrison and his native place in the

¹² In the chapter below, I discuss more into details about the relevance of the *Diamond Sutra* and *Graded Ritual* to the Non-Action Teachings and the *baojuan Yaoqin*.

Shandong region, little can be known for certain since the figure seems to be more of a creation of a myth-making process than an actual person. Given the hagiographical nature of the (auto)biography in *Kugong Wudao* and in other passages in the *WBLC* book attributed to him, we can suppose that these materials were edited – if not entirely written – by later disciples to grant religious legitimacy to the Non-Action Teachings movement. Patriarch Luo could then be a product of the movement itself, whose “first identifiable leaders were Ying Ji’nan (應繼南; 1527/1540–1582), [...] and his reincarnation Yao Wenyu (姚文宇; 1578–1646)” (ter Haar 2014, 12). As explored in more detail below, just like Luo Qing was identified as Huineng’s reincarnation, Ying and Yao also claimed to be the reincarnation of Luo himself (ter Haar 2014, 12).

2.3 The Wubu liuce

WBLC is composed of five different *baojians*. From a content standpoint, the books are the overarching narrative about Non-Action Teachings and its creator, Luo Qing. These books' main ideas reflect Luo Qing’s take on the religious matters and philosophy and the reinterpretation of a large variety of popular beliefs and orthodox state religions (Zheng 1985, 32).

The earliest version of *WBLC* was published in 1509. Before the turn of the seventeenth century, two commentaries on the text were written. The first was by the Chan monk Lanfeng 蘭風, entitled *Kaixin fayao* 開心法要 (Essentials of the Dharma to Open the Mind). This edition was published in 1596 by Wang Yuanjing 王源靜 and reprinted in 1652 (Seiwert 2003, 222). This print of the *WBLC* presents also Wang Yuanjing’s supplementary commentary (Overmyer 1999, 301). Lanfeng’s edition presents Luo’s work from a pure Chan perspective, although the introduction to the 1652 version regards Luo Qing as a manifestation of the creative principle of the cosmos, *Wuji Shengzu* 無極聖祖 (Seiwert 2003, 222). Despite Lanfeng’s interpretation and Luo’s deification, which is a clear influence from Buddhist orthodoxy, it is important to point out that the Non-Action Teachings were not a heterodox branch of Buddhism, but a new religion, with its own precepts and doctrine. The texts reject Buddhist practice (Seiwert 2003, 222), such as Pure Land’s *nianfo* and Chan’s meditation practices. This is also true on the other hand: Buddhist *sangha* and the state never accepted the practice of Luo’s Teachings (Seiwert 2003, 223).

The first book, the *Kugong wudao*, in two *juans* and 18 sections (called *pin* 品), contains the (auto)biography of the movement’s leader. The work reveals several insights into Luo’s life, especially concerning the thirteen years spent searching for the means of enlightenment (Zheng 1985, 33; Pu 2008, 70).

The second book is titled *Tanshi wuwei juan* 嘆世無為卷 (Scroll of Lamenting the World and Non-Action). In two *juans* and twelve *pin*, the *baojian* discusses all sorts of difficulties and suffering in the world, such as the relationship between master and disciples, and between father and children, which do not last forever. The book repeatedly reiterates the importance of the principle of the void (*xukong* 虛空) and calls people to save themselves from the sea of suffering (*kuhai* 苦海) (Zheng 1985, 34; Pu 2008, 70).

The third book is *Poxie xianzheng yaoshi juan* 破邪顯證鑰匙卷 (Scroll on the Key to Destroying Heresy and Manifesting Evidence), in four *juans* and 14 *pin*. In this book, Luo Qing expresses his repulsion towards each method that he identifies as ‘active’ (*youwei* 有為), which are heterodox and must be eliminated. The book suggests seeking enlightenment through the method of ‘non-action’ (*wuwei* 無為), describing it as the key to opening the door of enlightenment (Pu 2008, 70). This text is longer than the other books, so it is divided into two volumes; for this reason, the *WULC* is thus called: five books in six volumes (ter Haar 2014, 18; Overmyer 1999, 300).

The fourth chapter of the *WBLC* is the *Zhengxin chuyi quxiu zizai juan* 正信除疑自在寶卷 (Precious Scroll of Orthodox Faith and Removing Doubts without Cultivation and Spontaneously), consisting of four *juans* and 25 *pin*. The chapter deals primarily with the methods of non-action, refusing other sectarian traditions, such as the White Lotus (*Bialian jiao* 白蓮教) and Maitreya (*Mile* 彌勒) (Pu 2008, 70).

The final book, divided into four *juans* and 254 *pin*, is the *Weiwei budong Taishan shengen jieguo baojuan* 巍巍不動太山深根結果寶卷 (Precious Scroll [as Firm as] the Lofty and Unshakable Mount Tai of Concluding Karma from Deep Roots). In this book, Luo Qing presents his cosmological point of view on the origin of the cosmos and the living beings that inhabit it. Further, it explains the concept of ‘original face’ (*benlai mianmu* 本來面目), which is strictly related to the characteristic topic of ‘returning to one’s native place’ (*huan xiang* 還鄉) to evade the constant cycle of rebirth.

Before, I expressed the reasons why it is most likely that Luo Qing did not write this work himself. Further reasons can be found in the text itself. For instance, through the entire *WBLC*, in his pursuit of enlightenment, a recurring phrase is repeated to show Luo’s deluded attitude toward a failed practice:

懼怕生死輪迴之苦，不肯放參，再參一步。(Huo 2013, 490).

Fearing the suffering of the cycle of life and death, I am not willing to abandon my pursuit, I take yet one step ahead.

Another instance is related to the sentence which expresses Luo’s discovery that all things that have a shape can be related back to the insubstantiality of emptiness, the origin of all things.

This formula, and many others, are repeated several times, creating a homogeneity in terms of fixed wording and the structure of the books. This homogeneity resonates with the already-established Buddhist tradition of recurring significant passages in different sutras. As Mark Allon explained, this habit represents a vital aspect of the transmission of a text, as it was easier to remember when orally transmitted (2022, 523). Allon elaborates, saying that

Early Buddhist sutras had two main functions. The first was to record the teachings, ideas and actions of the Buddha and members of his community of practitioners and sympathizers (monks, nuns, laymen, gods, deities, etc.), whether historic events or literary artifices, for the purpose of instructing and guiding and in order to provide models for instructing and guiding, including providing models for the defeat of rivals and their views. In the process they record instances of

individuals' experiences, insights, inspirations, understandings and practices, which again, may be based on a historical event or be purely literary. The second function was to inspire in order to attract converts, to motivate the converted, and to attract financial supporters, that is, these texts function as inspiration and propaganda (2022, 524-525).

These are the same two functions that the *WBLC* and other similar *baojuan*s had as expressions of new lay beliefs. Despite this being a feature of early Buddhist texts, the same pattern can be seen in Luo Qing's texts. The *WBLC*'s primary aim was to record and convey Luo's teachings. As seen above, these texts have leeway to freely cross the line between historical events and myth-like narration. Furthermore, the *WBLC* also had the function of attracting new believers and possible financial supporters. Luo, in fact, "directs his teachings to a wide audience, and his goal is clearly that the *WBLC* may be employed as an aid to universal salvation" (Nadeau 1994, 89). Taking advantage of the successful advancement of printing technology, the quasi-perfect fixity of the written word could spread faster than the spoken word.

For these reasons, the fixed wording that features in Luo's works, especially his (auto)biography, makes me think that a later edition, if not an entire composition from scratch, is plausible. To produce such a sophisticated text, full of fixed wording and citations from not only Buddhist Sūtras but also from other Chinese Daoist and Confucian classics, Luo Qing must have had access to many written sources. In fact, regarding the *WBLC*'s source, Nadeau has meticulously listed and studied them. He reports that in the books there are "275 attributed quotations from 59 works" (Nadeau 1994, 239). Among these, we find

canonical scriptures (經) and commentaries (論) (16 works); Buddhist collections (經集) and recorded sayings (語錄) (16); *keyi*, *baojuan*, and other ritual or preaching aids (19); and Taoist and Confucian works, including popular educational materials (Nadeau 1994, 239)

Thus, he had to be a well-trained scholar or monk to recreate these patterns in the *WBLC*. From the above discussion, we know he was not: he was a hereditary soldier in a region far from home, whose literacy is questionable.

From the point of view of the content, the *WBLC*, like many other books in the genre, is self-conscious,¹³ as it is aware of its salvific role in disregarding previous established practices and proposing a new innovative tradition. Luo is convinced that his revelation is the correct path to achieve enlightenment, and he shares it with his followers, saying:

我悟道，請諸經，來作証見；
證得我，明晃晃，萬法皆空。
十三年，不曾住，晝夜參道；
亮堂堂，無一物，獨自為尊。
勸大眾，休要謗，大家根基；

I have awakened to the Way and have invited
various scriptures to serve as proof. They
verify that my enlightenment is bright and
clear, and that all dharmas are empty. For
thirteen years, without stopping day and
night, I participated in the Way. The light was
glorious, [and I saw that] not one thing exists

¹³ For more nuances on the topic, see Overmyer 1999, 81-84, 102, 113, 179, 183-185, 256-260.

無量劫，失迷了，今日相逢。
無量劫，轉四生，無邊受苦；
勸大眾，休要謗，同出苦輪。
勸比丘，比丘尼，休謗正法；
優婆塞，優婆夷，休謗真經。
四眾人，佛弟子，都要領受；
無出家，無在家，一體虛空。
一母兒，七八個，原是一母；
天和地，總包含，一氣發生。
你喫水，我喫水，原是母乳；
出家的，在家的，一氣發生。
自為你，有分別，便有生死；
但迴光，肯返照，個個圓成。
太虛空，總包含，元無二氣；
一母兒，休分別，同出沉淪。

and honoured only my [true] self. I urge all [you] multitudes to stop vilifying [the teaching]. The foundation [shared by] everyone for measureless eons has been lost, but today we meet each other. For measureless eons we have revolved in the four forms of rebirth, with limitless suffering. I urge you multitudes to stop your vilification and together leave samsāra. I urge you monks and nuns to stop vilifying the correct teaching. Laymen and laywomen, stop reviling the true scriptures. The four types of devotees [clerical and lay men and women], as disciples of the Buddha, should all accept [this teaching]. Do not distinguish between those who have left the household life and those who have not—the whole body is empty. . . . When there is distinction between self and other, then there is birth-and-death. Only return to the light, consent to return to [the source of] illumination; [then] each [of you] will attain fulfillment. Great emptiness, including all within it, originally had only one vital force. Children of one Mother, [only] stop making distinctions and together you will leave samsāra (*Poxie xianzheng yaoshi jing* 1:108-109, trans. in Overmyer 1999, 113).

The passage from the third book of *WBLC* is a clear example of how the direct first-person dialogue reflects the self-conscious nature of the book. The author interacts directly with his reader, who is shown that Luo's method is effective by the book itself, which verifies the personal results he had achieved: "[these scriptures] verify that my enlightenment is bright and clear, and that all dharmas are empty" (Overmyer 1999, 113). Additionally, the text repeatedly urges the reader to undertake Luo's teachings: utilising known concepts from different beliefs, such as 'awakening', 'Way', 'samsāra', 'emptiness', the book creates a connection with the reader in a way that they can understand what is said and the underlying structure of thoughts. Like many newly established religions in the past, Luo's teaching is not a product of a diverse and unintelligible worldbuilding. Instead, it uses concepts already known to the readership, approaching them under a different light. This results in the reader understanding the books without further knowledge, making them feel connected to the new teachings in a moment of realisation similar to Luo Qing's. Thus, *WBLC*'s reconstruction of and critique of late Ming thought and beliefs exhort the reader to adopt Luo's

method and discard every other method, which is “empty”, because Luo Qing is the existing proof of the efficacy of his method.

Thus, the books that compose the *WBLC*, to the eyes of a follower of the sect, are not mere written material, but are objects of veneration (ter Haar 2014, 219). The books were recited as part of ritual practice, which gave them a strong religious power. This practice, however, is not relatable to the Buddhist practice of scripture recitation to obtain merits or miraculous healing (ter Haar 2014, 220). On the contrary, for a follower, reading Non-Action Teachings books meant to revere the doctrine and the books themselves. The *WBLC* was a source to study and memorise, because, as explained above, the book was the proof (*zheng* 證) that Luo’s teachings were the only and right way to achieve enlightenment.

2.4 Non-Action Teaching after Luo Qing

As discussed by Seiwert, the development of the tradition of the Non-Action Teachings after Luo Qing’s death is twofold: within and outside his Luo family (2003, 236-250).

In the writings attributed to him, there is no mention of a fixed name coined by Luo Qing for his new doctrine; instead, different names are used throughout the texts. Seiwert claims that after his death, the sect’s names proliferated (Seiwert 2003, 236). Nevertheless, considering the discussion concerning the paternity of *WBLC* above, I would consider the statement by Seiwert rather ambiguous. If we consider that Luo Qing was illiterate and did not write the *WBLC*, there is no proof that the names of his sect proliferated after his death. I would rather argue that the names we read in the works attributed to him were already part of a proliferation process. Given the absence of a fixed sect name, we cannot be sure that later writings were considered part of the sect Luo Qing gave birth to or belonged to other sectarian entities. If what we assumed before is correct, namely that Luo Qing’s *WBLC* was produced after his death by disciples and other followers, we have no means to distinguish a sectarian tradition before and after Luo Qing, since we possess solely what was written after his death. How can we be sure that the *WBLC* we read is actually how Luo Qing intended the Non-Action Teachings?

Despite these considerations, the sect branched out and spread throughout China. Within the Luo family, it branched out to Luo’s wife and his son, Fozheng 佛正 and his daughter Foguang 佛光.

According to Lanfeng, Luo Qing’s wife continued his teaching, founding the famous Late Ming sect Yuandun Zhengjiao 圓頓正教.¹⁴

As for the children, on the one hand, Fozheng, Luo Qing’s only son, represented the continuation of the male line of leadership of the sect, which, based in Miyun, lasted until the eighteenth century, with the ninth generation of patriarchs. Eventually, the government discovered they were still active and, deeming the sect heterodox, destroyed Luo Qing’s tomb and pagoda in 1768 (Seiwert 2003, 237). On the other hand, Foguang, Luo’s daughter, was crucial in the founding and

¹⁴ Yuandun Zhengjiao does not claim connection to Luo Qing’s teaching and “did not claim to go back to Luo Menghong’s wife” (Seiwert 2003, 237). However, Seiwert argues that we should not exclude a connection and a mutual influence between sects and Luo Qing’s wife (2003, 237 n. 79).

development of another Non-Action group. This group was still active in the nineteenth century, when an official investigation traced it back to Luo Qing and called it *Dasheng jiao* 大乘教 (Teaching of the Great Vehicle; Seiwert 2003, 237-238).

Additionally, Hubert Seiwert documents a line of transmission that grew outside Luo's family and developed from the Buddhist monk Daning 大甯, who had joined Luo's movement in 1518. He wrote several scriptures, in which Luo's teachings remain mostly the same, without any novel elements (Seiwert 2003, 241-242). Daning stresses the Buddhist nature of these teachings, especially in Chan and Pure Land terms. Likewise, other disciples, such as Qin Dongshan 秦洞山 (16th century), reinterpreted Luo's Qing under a more Confucian lens (Seiwert 2003, 242).

Qin Dongshan is an example of a follower who was not a direct disciple of Luo Qing, but rather a disciple of a disciple. Thus, members belonging to Luo's community, after Luo Qing's death, started to preach his teachings, gathering students and disciples around them (Seiwert 2003, 243). In particular, Qin Dongshan is the second patriarch out of seven of this tradition known as *Wuji dao* 無極道 (Way of Limitless). It is in this branch of Non-Action Teachings that the symbol of the Mother (of which I will discuss in detail in the following section) becomes concrete, turning from the subtle concept of the Unborn Parent (*Wusheng Fumu* 無生父母) to Eternal Mother (*Wusheng laomu* 無生老母), described as a deity of compassion. This transformation occurs throughout different steps of the line of patriarchs of *Wuji dao*, becoming concrete with the seventh patriarch. However, it should be noted that, under the second and the fourth patriarchs, Qin Dongshan and Sun Zhenkong 孫真空, the teaching tilted towards Confucian values and Buddhist Pure Land tenets, respectively. Sun Zhenkong, despite the open adversity of Luo Qing towards any established religious practice, advocates the use of *nianfo*, the practice of reciting the name of the Buddha Amitābha (*Amitufo* 阿彌陀佛; Seiwert 2003, 243-244).

Another crucial role in the development and the spread of the teachings was that of the boatmen of grain tribute. David Kelly illustrates the great importance of this group and their tight relationship with Luo's teachings. At the end of the Ming dynasty, many of Luo's followers embarked on missionary journeys on the Grand Canal to spread the teachings of their leader (Kelly 1982, 363). Soon, these boatmen established congregation halls (*an* 庵) along the canal, where they could find shelter during their travels and, especially, where they could find "satisfaction of spiritual needs" (Kelly 1982, 363). Lay people ran the congregation halls, but monks could also be found there (Seiwert 2003, 238).

By 1727, some 72 congregation halls were present in the territory of Zhejiang, especially between the two cities of Suzhou 蘇州 and Hangzhou 杭州 (Kelly 1982, 369; Seiwert 2003, 238). However, between the first and the second half of the eighteenth century, the state became less and less tolerant towards the many congregation halls scattered in the region (Kelly 1982, 378). Eventually, in 1768, an official decision was issued to destroy all the temples and remove the leaders (Kelly 1982, 381). Despite the destruction of Non-Action temples, boatmen did not cease their missionary effort to spread the teachings, even though the state did what they could to demolish the idea of them as a religious group: they were instead regarded as individual workers (Kelly 1982, 381).

I report a clear metaphor Hubert Seiwert uses to describe the branching development of the Non-Action Teachings movement:

The development of Patriarch Luo's movement may be compared to the growth of a tree, or rather a bush. Its roots are relatively easy to identify, and in the beginning there are only one or two shoots. Yet as it grows more and more offshoots develop and it is impossible to say which of them is the main branch. To make the picture more comprehensive we may add that on some branches shoots of other bushes are grafted, which brings about a bush with a variety of different leaves and blossoms. In this sense Luo Menghong's life and his Five Books in Six Volumes represent the roots. These roots proved to be extremely vigorous. However, the roots are not the same as the bush that grows out of them. Even if we could find out what the "correct" understanding of the "original" teaching of Patriarch Luo was, we would not know how these teachings were understood in the many sectarian group that transmitted these scriptures. The "Luo sects" may have a common root, but they developed under the influence of many other traditions and external constraints. Although some of these groups were more conscious of their dependence on Patriarch Luo's teachings than others, there is no way to define an "orthodox" branch of the Luo tradition (Seiwert 2003, 260-261).

This passage illustrates how Luo's movement, although with a single root or origin – Luo Qing himself and his attributed writings – evolved under the influence of various traditions and personal interpretations of key individuals (*i.e.* Daning, Qin Dongshan, and Sun Zhenkong, *etc.*). As a result, shortly after the founder's death, the movement branched out, acquiring new and diverse identities. This evolution makes it challenging to contextualise the *Yaoqin*, as we lack concrete information about its author, its readership, or any reference to the *baojuan* in other texts. Nevertheless, to contextualise the content of *Yaoqin*, it is essential to clarify the main themes of Non-Action Teachings as presented in the *WBLC*.

2.5 Themes

As anticipated before, the themes that were the foundation of the Non-Action Teachings, as we read them in the *WBLC*, are highly influenced by the religious environment of the Late Ming, especially by the syncretic tradition of the Three Teachings. During the time Luo's Teachings began to spread, syncretism was the common denominator for popular religions: the three main religions (*i.e.* Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) had merged into one tradition, and other sectarian entities, such as Manichaeism (*Ming jiao* 明教), the White Lotus (*Bailian jiao* 白蓮教), and the school which worshipped the Buddha Maitraya (*Milei jiaohui* 彌勒教會) had also largely merged into one (Nadeau 1994, 160).

Religious syncretism has been the true face of Chinese religion since before the unification of the Qin empire (*Qindai* 秦代, 221-207 BCE), during the Warring States period (*Zhanguo* 戰國, 475-221 BCE; Berling 1980, 1; Andreini 2013, 881-882). The cultural environment that characterised the period did not correspond to an open animosity between thinkers from different schools – such as *Ruists* (*rujia* 儒家), *Daoists* (*Daojia* 道家), experts in the theory of *yin* and *yang* (*yinyangjia* 陰陽家), *etc.* – but rather an acknowledged coexistence, where one did not exist without the other and, most importantly, believing and supporting one did not mean neglecting the

other (Andreini 2013, 880-881). This syncretic nature of Chinese religiosity never disappeared throughout history and still survives today. This is true for ordinary people, the lay side of society, who rarely distinguished one religion from the other and saw them as different aspects of the same unicum. Thus, this must have also been true for Luo Qing and those who first approached his doctrine.

After thirteen years of religious practice, Luo did not identify himself as Buddhist, Confucian or Daoist, because the tenets of these religions were already part of his culture. Luo's religious contribution relies heavily on the syncretism of the Three Teachings, from which he extrapolated the focal theme of his religion: the Mother-deity, creator of the cosmos (Nadeau 1994, 91). The Mother (*Mu* 母 or *Niang* 娘) is what unifies Luo's religious doctrine, as it is associated with the root (*gen* 根 or *ben* 本) and the first ancestor (*Zu* 祖). The Mother is the root of all living things, the world and the cosmos. Later, as explained above, the concept of Mother will evolve after Luo's death, concretising in the Eternal Venerable Mother (*wusheng laomu* 無生老母), who "yearns for her lost children in the 'red-dust' world of samsara" (Nadeau 1994, 92).

To understand this, we have to assume that, for Luo, the concept of *samsāra*¹⁵, the cycle of births, and *karma*, which we acknowledge as strictly Buddhist in the Chinese context, was a presupposed and undisputable truth.

While the concept of Mother is central in Luo's philosophy, it has roots that predate the sixteenth century. Daniel Overmyer shows that the Maitreya-oriented mythology and tradition had already introduced the idea of a female deity before the first half of the fifteenth century (1999, 2). This is evident in what Overmyer defines as the first exemplar of *baojuan*, the *Foshuo huangji jieguo baojuan* 佛說皇極結果寶卷 (The precious volume, expounded by the Buddha, on the [karmic] results of [the teaching of] the Imperial Ultimate [period]), which was published in 1430 (1999, 51). However, compared to this figure, the Ancient Buddha (*gufo* 古佛) Amitābha is more significant, because he spread the book worldwide (Overmyer 1999, 2). Connected to this text is the 1523 *Huangji jindan jiulian zhengxin guizhen huanxiang baojuan* 皇極金丹九蓮正信歸真還鄉寶卷 (The precious volume of the golden elixir and nine[-petaled] lotus of the Imperial Ultimate period [that leads to] rectifying belief, reverting to the real, and returning to [our] true home, hereafter *Jiulian baojuan*). In this *baojuan*, we read that Amitābha has been sent to earth by the Eternal Mother to save those who have lost the Way (Overmyer 1999, 136). According to this account, the Eternal Mother is the driving force that created the cosmos and all living beings. However, to save them from their "attachme[nt] to worldly emotions" (Overmyer 1999, 143) she had been sending "immortals, buddhas, celestial patriarchs, and bodhisattvas" (Overmyer 1999,

¹⁵ The term *samsara* refers to the Buddhist cosmological interpretation of existence. According to the moral quality of lives, humans are reborn in different levels of existence, considered superior or inferior to the human condition. The moral quality of life is understood with the concept of *karma*, which one accumulates with their personal deeds. Upon death, humans, as well as any other living being, is reborn in another level of existence according to their *karma*. This cycle of constant rebirth is called *samsara* ('perpetual wondering'). Until one can escape this cycle to finally reach *Nirvana*, they are bound to be trapped in the *samsara* (Gowans 2003, 105-106).

143) to the mundane realm. Despite their effort, people still do not wish to return to her paradise – seen as her womb – thus she is compelled to send Amitābha:

Today, however, there are still ninety-two myriads of immortals, buddhas, patriarchs, and bodhisattvas who, accepting their circumstances, have lost their true [natures] and do not think of returning home and recognizing the patriarchs. Now you [= Amitābha] are to descend to the world to search for sons and daughters who have lost their true home, so that they do not encounter the [sufferings of the] end of the kalpa and do not fall into the three forms of calamity (Overmyer 1999, 143).

Thus, unlike in the 1430's *Foshuo huangji jieguo baojuan*, the Buddha is subordinate to the female deity. Amitābha is sent to the world to spread the Mother's message, which is entailed in the book.

Even though *Jiulian baojuan* does not belong in Luo Qing's doctrine¹⁶ but it is solely inspired by it, it shares a pivotal theme, namely 'returning home' (*huanxiang* 還鄉), from the realm of dust – another metaphor for the realm of the living taken from Buddhism – to the Eternal Mother's paradise. However, in Luo's writing, the figure of Amitābha is not present; it is Luo who understood the Mother's message and undertook the task of spreading it. Although in Luo Qing's earliest writings, Amitābha is present and is considered the Eternal Parent (*Wusheng fumu* 無生父母), soon this concept is replaced by – or rather evolved into – the Mother, who equates to Emptiness (*xukong* 虛空) and non-action (*wuwei* 無為).

For Luo Qing, 'returning home' has both a personal and an eschatological meaning. With this idea, Luo Qing rejects the Buddhist view of 'leaving one's home' (*chujia* 出家) to begin a monastic religious career, advocating that the religious life can also be pursued in a social context. His experience as an orphan might have made him realise that the original birthplace one has to return to is within oneself (Nadeau 1994, 151).

At the same time, the concept of 'true home' is inspired by Pure Land's *jingtu* 淨土, since they are both located in the West. The western land (*xifang* 西方) and the 'homeland' are interpreted as the original nature (*benxing* 本性) of every living being (Zheng 1985, 121).

In Luo's doctrine, once one has understood that 'true home' is within themselves and equates to their original nature, they eventually understand that everything is emptiness. The True Emptiness (*zhenkong* 真空) is the only reality around us (Seiwert 2003, 220). The non-duality (*wuer* 無二) of the thought is well represented in the *Kugong Wudao*, when Luo Qing says:

忽然問，一步功，心中大喜。不歸無，不歸有，我是真空。娘是我，我是娘，本來無二。裡頭空，外頭空，我是真空。

Suddenly, accomplishing one step, my heart was full of great joy. I realized that there is no returning to nonbeing nor is there returning to being, I am True Emptiness. The Mother (*niang*

¹⁶ Ruchard Shek suggests that this text was written by a disciple of Luo Qing's daughter, Foguang, since it refers numerous times to Luo Qing's doctrine, see Shek 2004, 248.

娘) is I and I am the Mother, essentially there is no duality. The inner is empty, the outer is empty, I am true emptiness (*Kugong Wudao* 1:150, trans. in Seiwert 2003, p. 220).

In this excerpt, Luo's message is clear and indisputable: everything and everyone is one thing: emptiness. There is neither inside or outside: everything for Luo is fiction, or, to use his words,

凡所有相，皆是虛妄。

All that has appearance is empty and fabricated (Huo 2013, 490).

In this case, the character *xu* 虛 is used to represent the vacuity of the phenomenal world. The real world lies within the nonduality of emptiness, which is the real essence (*benxing* 本性) of me, you, Luo Qing, and the Mother. This real essence is just another name for the 'original face' (*benlai mianmu* 本來面目). The face we see in the mirror is a mere and momentary appearance (*xiang* 相). Being cast away from the Mother's womb – the western paradise – we have forgotten our original appearance, which equates to our True Home, to which we must return (*huanxiang* 還鄉).

However, emptiness (*xukong*) is just a word, a label: "Any attempt to conceptualise Emptiness will prove false, perpetuating the problem that it is seen to resolve. It is not an intellectual attachment, but rather an experiential identification with Emptiness that resolves [Luo Qing's] spiritual search" (Nadeau 1994, 35). Thus, once one has understood that everything is empty, one should not try to describe it or conceptualise it because, when labelling it with words, one loses its real meaning. The concept of wordlessness is concretised with ritual scripture utilised by followers of Non-Action Teachings, the Scripture Without Characters (*Wuzi jing* 無字經).¹⁷

The concept of emptiness resonates with an older Buddhist idea, largely expounded by the Indian monk and Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150 – c. 250). In his philosophy, we see a soteriological use of the concept of emptiness, for which Nāgārjuna rejects the phenomenal reality to gain complete liberation (Stepien 2024, ch. 5.1). Just like Nāgārjuna, the idea of emptiness in Luo Qing's works has a soteriological means: the realisation that everything is emptiness is followed by the liberation of the self from all sufferings. Unlike Nāgārjuna, who suggests that one should empty oneself of selfhood to be set free from karmic harmful actions (Stepien 2024, ch. 5.1), the core of Luo Qing's thought lies in the Self. The Self equates with the Mother because originally, they were the same entity (Nadeau 1994, 121). Furthermore, the Self should realise that it can achieve enlightenment because of the Buddha within the Self (*zifo* 自佛).

Emptiness is also related to the concept of *Dao* as described in the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Classic of the Way and the Virtue). Zheng Zhiming (1985, 97) suggests that the following passage is particularly informative for Non-Action Teachings' themes.

¹⁷ No scholarship exists on this concept, except for the discussion on the ritual practice on ter Haar's Practicing Scripture (2014, 131-134). Ter Haar cites small fragments from texts called *xiaocheng wuzi zhenjing* 小乘五字真經 (True Sutra without Characters of the Small Vehicle) and *dasheng wuzi zhenjing* 大乘五字真經 (True Sutra without Characters of the Great Vehicle). The concept of the wordlessness will be tackled in the following chapter regarding *Yaoqin*, as it is constant throughout the text.

無名天地之始，有名萬物之母

What does not have a name is the beginning of Heaven and Earth; what has a name is the mother of the myriads of things (Fan 2015, 1).

‘What does not have a name’ or ‘what cannot be named’ is the *Dao*. It was before Heaven and Earth appeared, and, as Hans-Georg Moeller suggests, the *Dao* can be described as something featureless and shapeless (2006, 9). For instance, a recurring metaphor that refers to the *Dao* in the *Daode jing* is the valley (*gu* 谷). The valley, which runs between two hills or mountains, is empty and inexhaustible (Moeller 2006, 10). Similarly, a wheel’s hub is a “hollow space that cannot be worn down and still continuously enables the wheel and the cart to run smoothly” (Moeller 2006, 11). The idea of the *Dao* is never explained directly in the *Daode jing*, but only *via negationis*, meaning that the concept is described only in an apophatic way.

Thus, this idea is closely related to the ‘hidden’ emptiness Luo Qing advocates, which exists beyond the veil of the phenomenal world. For this correlation, another name that the *WBLC* uses for emptiness is ‘Great Dao’ (*Dadao* 大道). The Great Dao, just like it is described in the *Daode jing*, created everything in the cosmos; it is formless and shapeless, it does not move (*budong* 不動), and it does not have boundaries (*wuji* 無極) (Zheng 1985, 97-98).

But how does one employ this knowledge – that everything is emptiness – to reach enlightenment and leave the cycle of *samsâra*? Luo Qing’s doctrine of emptiness suggests keeping in mind the Self and the Mother, emptiness itself, the original face, etc., to reach the state of self-illumination (Nadeau 1994, 123). To do that, one should embrace the method of the Non-Action (*wuwei fa* 無為法). To return to one’s original birthplace, acquiring one’s original face and recovering the ‘ancestral home of true emptiness’ (*zhenkong jiaxiang* 真空家鄉). This is a place where pain and suffering do not exist, where one, through non-action, can achieve self-transformation (*zihua* 自化) and detachment from mental constraints (*zizai* 自在).

The idea of the non-action finds again its roots in the Daoism of the *Daode jing*, where we find:

為無為，則無不治。

When no action is taken, there is no absence of governance (Fan 2015, 5).

In this passage the term *wuwei* refers to the state of personal harmony and spontaneous non-doing that, as Slingerland underlines, lies not in the phenomenal world – which is the “observable action” (2003, 7) – but within the doer – in their “state of mind” (2003, 7). Thus, it refers not to the phenomenal, but rather to the phenomenological state of the doer (Slingerland 2003, 7). This does not mean, however, that if one applies the non-action, one follows instincts and does not make decisions; it means that the decision-making process becomes effortless. Thus, “it is not to be viewed as ‘mindless’ behaviour, but should rather be seen as [...] ‘embodied mind’” (Slingerland 2003, 8). In this context, the term governance (*zhi* 治) refers both to a personal point of view – governance of the self, so to speak, and to a political one. Politicians who apply non-action do not need to act and will still have harmonic results in their governance.

The same meaning of the term *wuwei* is given by Luo Qing to the religious effort of practice. In the *WBLC*, practice meditation and recitation of the Buddha's name (*nianfo*) are considered pointless if one has not yet realised the emptiness that surrounds them and the importance of the Self, as holder of the Buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性). In the *Poxie xianzheng yaoshi juan*, this is expressed as follows:

執著念頭是邪宗；聲色求佛邪迷路，念佛不得見如來。佛在靈山莫遠求，如來只在我心頭；覺照自己見佛祖，認得自己莫遠尋。

The attachment to the practice of reciting [the Buddha's name] is perverse: if you seek the Buddha through sounds and forms, you are on a mistaken path. With the recitation of the Buddha's name, you cannot see the *tathagata*. The Buddha dwells on top of Vulture Peak¹⁸, so you should not seek him far. The *tathagata* lies within your heart. When you comprehend yourself thoroughly, then you will see yourself as the Buddha-ancestor. When you acknowledge yourself in yourself, you need not seek far away (Huo 2013, 583).

While this passage heavily draws from traditional Buddhism, it highlights the importance of non-action practice, which refers to the act of realisation that the Buddha is not to be sought, because it lies in each person's heart. Thus, no practice is as effective as no practice at all.

When one realises that everything is emptiness, which is “pre-existent and all-encompassing” (Nadeau 1994, 109), they understand its cosmological perspective. In Luo Qing's point of view, emptiness existed before Heaven and Earth – before the phenomenal world – and it was “Unbounded, unlimited, unmoving, unshaken, it was the Dharma-body (法身) of the Buddhas” (Nadeau 1994, 110, citing *Kugong* 7:67). The Dharma-body (*dharmkāya* in Sanskrit) is the transcendent body of the Buddha (Radich 2020), the body that is not manifested, but that constitutes the Buddha's real aspect. The Dharma-body – or original face, to use *WBLC*'s words – is another word for emptiness: everything belongs to the dharma-body and everything is the Dharma-body.

Emptiness is the creator deity and gives birth to Heaven and Earth, to women and men through its vast supernatural power (*shentong* 神通), which allows it to transform itself (self-transformation, *zihua*) into existence (Nadeau 1994, 111). This precedes emptiness, which precedes everything:

未曾初分先有道，大道原是主人公。未有三教先有道，大道原是主人公。未有諸佛先有道，大道原是主人公。未有經書先有道，大道原是主人公。未有僧俗先有道，大道原是主人公。

Before [Heaven and Earth] were first divided, first there was the Way (道). The Great Tao fundamentally is the venerable host. Before the Three Teachings, first there was the Tao. The Great Tao fundamentally is the venerable host. Before the Buddhas, first there was the Tao. The Great Tao fundamentally is the venerable host. Before the scriptures and classics, first there was

¹⁸ The Gṛdhrakūṭa-parvata was Śākyamuni Buddha favourite meditative spot.

the Tao. The Great Tao fundamentally is the venerable host. Before monks and laymen, first there was the Tao. The Great Tao fundamentally is the venerable host (*Weiwei budong Taishan shengen jieguo bao* 11:28-29, trans. Nadeau 1994, 111-112).

Emptiness, here called the Great Way, is the only true teaching because it came before every other religion, such as the Three Teachings, Buddhism, and before every dogma and rule was established, such as the division between monks and laymen and before every scripture. This postulation is the basis for Luo Qing's critique against other beliefs and religions, especially Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. In the *WBLC*, we read that despite the three religions having similar origins and their founders being born at similar times, they developed independent traditions. However, Luo suggests that the three different traditions are appearances (*xiang*) and all deal with the same doctrine, the *Dao* (Zheng 1985, 95).

In conclusion, this chapter has tackled the socio-economic environment in which Luo Qing's Non-Action Teaching movement thrived and spread. After briefly considering Luo Qing's life, I argued the authorship of the *WBLC* and its main themes. I will use this knowledge to read the *Yaoqin* and develop an analysis in the next chapter.

3. The *Yaoqin sanzang xitian qu qing jielun*

During an internship in the Special Collection of Leiden University Library, I have discovered a version of the *Yaoqin* among other *baojuan*s. This text stood out for its evident connection with Non-Action Teachings and its understudied status. This research aims to highlight the significance of the text, encouraging further scholarly research.

Che Xilun provides several publications of this *baojuan* (Che 1998, 339)¹⁹:

- 1) The first edition is dated 1582, the tenth year of the Wanli era, in the Ming dynasty (*Ming Wanli shinian* 明萬曆十年).
- 2) A reprint followed in 1585, the thirteenth year of the Wanli era.
- 3) The last version in the Ming was published in 1612, the fortieth year of the Wanli reign era. This version was reprinted with a commentary in 1645, the second year of the Shunzhi era, under the Qing dynasty (*Qing Shunzhi ernian* 清順治二年).
- 4) The most recent dated publication is from 1697, the thirty-sixth year of the Kangxi reign (*Qing Kangxi sanshiliunian* 清康熙三十六).

Furthermore, Che Xilun lists three other versions reprinted at the beginning of the Qing dynasty, which remain undated.

The *Leiden version* lacks a publication date, and it might belong to one of the undated reprint batches.

¹⁹ The following versions were not available to me at the time of this study, which instead focuses primarily on the undated versions. See the *Philological Consideration* section for further insights.

The *baojuan* is printed in large characters and is in accordion style format, typical of Late Ming and Qing *baojuans* (Overmyer 1999, 3). It features two cardboard covers, measuring 38.5 cm in height and 13.5 cm in width, bound to the printed pages.

The book has two illustrations on the first and last pages. The first illustration (Fig. 1) depicts a seated Buddha with closed eyes. In front of the Buddha, there are three figures: considering their robes and the presence of the *bindi* – the decorative dot painted on the forehead of two of them – they might represent Buddhist monks or arhats. Usually, a sitting Buddha is portrayed as either educating or meditating. Given the context, it is probable that the illustration depicts an educating Buddha. His hand positions (*mudras*) recall the *bhumisparsha mudra* (earth observer mudra): the left-hand palm is resting in his lap facing up, while the right-hand palm extends toward the ground. This position “reviews the narrative of the verifiable Buddha's edification when he requested that the earth take the stand concerning his value to turn into a buddha. The *bhumisparsha mudra* addresses immovability and is related to the *Dhyani buddha Akshobhya*²⁰ just as with the verifiable Buddha”. (Oza 2021, 8).

The final page illustration (Fig. 2) features a warrior-like figure in a pose of reverence, with joined hands (*añjali mudra*) and a sword-like object held between the elbows. The sword could be associated to the figure of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Wenshu 文殊), who is usually depicted holding the sword of wisdom. This sword is associated with cutting through ignorance (Karetzky 2003, 49-51). The figure is surrounded by clouds and his head is encircled by a halo. These two elements refer to the divine or enlightened nature of the figure.

²⁰ In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the *Dhyani Buddhas* are a group of five ‘self-born’ celestial Buddhas who have always existed. Akshobhya is one of them and he is usually depicted in the *bhumisparsha mudra* position. See “Dhyani-Buddha”, *Britannica Academic* 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dhyani-Buddha>.



Figure 1: First page illustration depicting a Buddha with three monk-like figures.



Figure 2: Warrior-like figure at the end of the baojuan.

The structure

While the *baojuan* lacks formal subsections, its structure mirrors that of other Buddhist scriptures, where the Buddha addresses a great assembly of bodhisattva, arhats, monks and nuns, laypeople.

The text can be divided into three sections: the assembly's speech, and the Buddha's two replies. From a content point of view, the first section explores the cosmological importance of emptiness and the Ancient Buddha's intention. The second section delves into spiritual misconceptions, which drive someone to lose their way (*mi* 迷). In the third section, the Buddha explains the method of non-action and offers assurance of liberation from the cycle of *samsara*.

Like many *baojuan*, the text opens with a conventional phrase:

歸命十方一切佛法僧法輪常轉度眾生。(Yaoqin, 1)

We devote our lives to all the Buddhas of the ten directions, as well as to the dharma and the *samgha*. The Wheel of *Dharma* forever turns, guiding living beings to cross [to the shore of salvation].

The passage, with an utterly formulaic intention, reflects the Buddhist emphasis on the Three Jewels (*sanbao* 三寶, in Sanskrit Triratna) in Buddhism, namely the Buddha (*fo* 佛 in Chinese), the *Dharma* (the law, *fa* 法), and the *samgha* (the clergy, *seng* 僧).²¹

Following this, the text includes a poem of similar meaning, which emphasises the challenges of understanding the *Dharma*, but reassures readers that the forthcoming text is a clarification of it. The poem hints at the ritual recitation of *baojuan* before an audience (ter Haar 2014, 187). This is evident in verbs such as 'to see' (*jian* 見) and 'to hear' (*wen* 聞), underscoring the performative dimension of the text:

我今見聞得受持；

Now, seeing and hearing it, we had the opportunity to hold it [in mind].

願解如來真實意；(Yaoqin, 1)

[Thereby], may we realise the true intention of the tathagata.

A recurring element of the *baojuan* is the text titled *Gu zhengzun qingjing lunjie* 古正尊清淨論解 (Clarification of the Ancient Most Venerable Purity), which serves as the primary source to the Yaoqin's author(s):

將《古正尊清淨論解》論講以前無佛、無法、無天、無地。上下是箇玄虛空：寸絲皆無。將甚明佛大意？理性根源從根至本，細說一遍。撒手離卻，無可無量。方寸中了當正祖本，排根一遍，頂修百世餘萬劫。(Yaoqin, 2)

The 'Clarification of the Ancient Most Venerable Purity' explains that before, there was no Buddha and no Dharma. Heaven and Earth did not exist. Above and below, there was only the mysterious emptiness. Not even a thread existed. How could we understand the great intention of the luminous Buddha? As for the origin of the essential nature, from root to stem, I will speak all the way through. Let go [anything that is discursive truth], which is impossible and unmeasurable.

²¹ See Sangharakshita 1967 for further explanations.

Once your mind is clear, you can confront the Ancestral Root. Arranging the root once, practising for a hundred generations for myriads of kalpas.

Albeit its significance for the text, I could not find other references to *Gu zhengzun qingjing lunjie*, nature of which remains unclear.

This introduction entails the *baojuan*'s central message: before the Buddha and the world existed, there was only emptiness (*xukong*). The text promises to explain the intention of the Ancient Buddha (*gufo* 古佛), which is understood as the 'Ancestral Root' (*zuben* 祖本).²²

Subsequently, the *baojuan*'s structure aligns with that of other Buddhist scriptures. A great assembly addresses the Ancient Buddha with a formal structure:

上告世尊禮白佛言 (*Yaoqin*, 3; 38; 52).

They spoke to their superior, the World-Honoured One, and respectfully said.

In the second and third instance, the assembly addresses the Buddha with simple and brief questions, to which the Buddha's answer is always introduced with:

世尊答曰。

World-Honoured One replied.

The Buddha's replies are typically elaborate and redundant, encompasses 3/3/4 verses, interspersed with prose and 7-syllable verses. The prose sections often summarise the preceding verses, while the 7-syllable poems add rhythmic variety.

The Buddha is addressed three times. In the first instance, the assembly does not ask a question, but elaborates in speech. In the second two instances, the Buddha replies to the assembly's questions.

Philological Considerations

As mentioned above, apart from the *Leiden version*, I consulted the editions housed in Harvard University's Harvard-Yenching Library (Huo 2013) and Isobe's version (2010, hereafter *Isobe*) for this philological analysis and the translation of the text. This section focuses on illustrations, layout, and textual variants, providing insight into the transmission and interpretation of the text.

Isobe version and *Leiden version* share similar initial and final illustrations, consistent in both style and content. These shared elements suggest a common lineage or replication process during their reproduction.

From a structural point of view, *Leiden version*'s is more compact, fitting 16 characters per line, compared to the 13 in both *Isobe* and *Harvard version*. Fig. 3 (*Leiden version*) and Fig. 4 (*Isobe*)

²² This aspect will be tackled later.

illustrate the main layout. The *Harvard version*, while similar to *Isobe* in character count per line, lacks decorative patterns (*tuan wenshi* 圖案紋飾)²³ throughout the text.

Decorative patterns feature in the *Leiden version* and *Isobe*, even though with clear differences (cf. Fig.1 and Fig. 2).

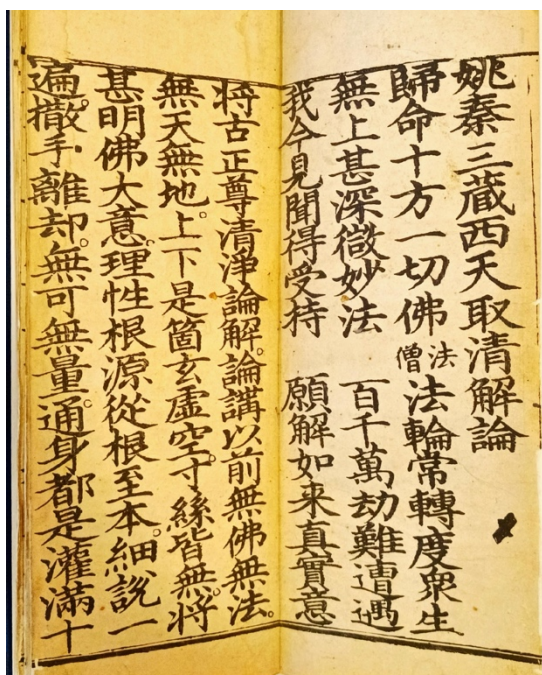


Figure 3: Leiden version (photo taken by the author).

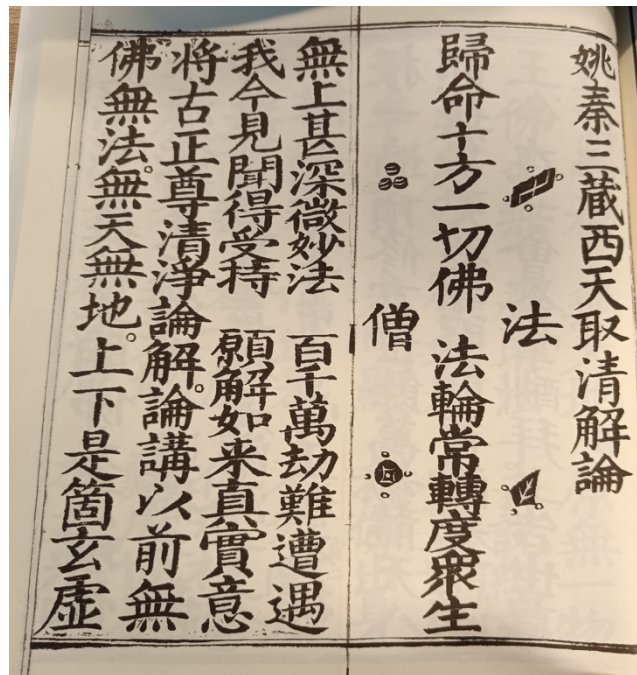


Figure 4: Isobe version (Isobe 2010).

The three versions do not present substantial differences in terms of graphic variants. For instance, one notable textual variant is the homophonic substitution of the *lection chuan* 穿 (pierce through) with *chuan* 川 (to flow) in two instances:

真寶光，無毀壞，常川法界。(Yaoqin, 26; Isobe 2010, 407; *Harvard version* 2013, 105)

The true treasure light is indestructible and constantly pierces through the dharma-realm.

Although 川 is typically a noun ('river') or an adjective ('streaming'), here it is a verb, because it is preceded by the adverb of time *chang* 常 (always, often). If taken with its original meaning, the phrase would mean 'the true treasure light constantly flows in the dharma-realm'. This interpretation is not necessarily wrong, but it does not reflect the meaning of this sentence in the context of Ming sectarianism and Luo's teachings. The phrase's meaning aligns with 'to pierce through' to emphasise the transformative power of the true light, representing the Buddha's dharma-body (the body of the Buddha and the 'true home') penetrating the human experience

²³ The first page of *Isobe* (Fig. 2) has four decorative patterns that represent the Three Jewels (top left), a book or scripture (top right), a golden coin (bottom left), and a leaf (bottom right). These patterns do not have a specific meaningful purpose. Instead, they increase the religious and mystical flavour of the book in the eyes of coeval readers (Zhang 2019, 258).

(dharma-realm). The light reaches every spot in the ten directions (*shifang* 十方).²⁴ A similar meaning appears in the *WBLC*, where emptiness is described as ‘piercing through mountains and seas’ (*chuan shan tou hai* 穿山透海), reinforcing this interpretation.

Additionally, all three versions include a character resembling *zhan* 𣎵 (‘felt’), which lacks modern equivalents (Fig. 3).

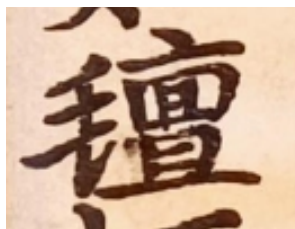


Figure 5: graphic loan for *zhan* 𣎵/𣎵.

The character can be interpreted by the context. In this section, the text makes several comparisons and draws several metaphors to exemplify the prowess of the non-action and the transformative power of the light, that, if understood, allow oneself to escape the cycle of rebirth and return to the ‘true home’.

不動不搖自性光；
運行天地共名山；

運行日月如翻掌；

本無名號自在仙；

銅胎鐵底不占塵；

上下通連共一同；
鋸成一架如𣎵板；

鐵笛無孔一片聲。(Yaoqin, 35; Isobe 2010, 431-432; Harvard version 2013, 117)

The light of your nature does not move or shake,
But it moves all Heaven and Earth famous mountains.

It moves the sun and the moon as if it was you with
your hand to move them.

The root has no name and it does not depend on
anything outside itself and resides among the
immortals.

With a bronze stomach and iron bottom it is not
touched by any dust:

Up and down are connected as one.

If you saw it into a construction, it will be like a
fragrant wood plank.

It is like the sound of an iron flute with no holes.

In that state of enlightenment, people emanate a light which is the same as the body of the Buddha. Sun and moon are but mere things that can be handled in one’s hand. The power of the enlightened nature does not touch the dust (a reference to the materiality of the world, which is often called the dust world in Buddhist contexts, *chenshi* 塵世). Thus, it is not concerned with the material world. With its spiritual powers (*shentong* 神通), if it were to build anything, the result would be like a

²⁴ These concepts will be explained in more details later.

fragrant (*zhan* 檀) wood plank. The metaphor reinforces the transformative qualities of enlightenment.

The meaning ‘fragrant’ of the word 檀 aligns with the context of spiritual purity and transcendence, suggested by the graphic similarity to the character portrayed in Fig. 3.

The comparison of textual and physical features among the *Leiden*, *Isobe*, and *Harvard* versions reveals a remarkable consistency in *lectiones*, but also shows significant stylistic differences.

While these philological considerations help us understand the text’s textual integrity and variation it is equally important to consider how and why the text was reproduced overtime.

Printing the Yaoqin

Subsequent to the increasing development of the printing culture and the commercialisation of the economy, beginning from the mid-Ming period, printed books became more available to the general public, and the number of readers increased (McLaren, 2019, 152). The readership expanded from a mainly homogeneous group of literati and collectors to a more heterogeneous group, also including laypeople and relatively unlearned individuals (McLaren, 2019, 152). Specifically, laypeople, considered as individual collectors or audience of ritual oral practices, became the readership of *baojuans* (McLaren, 2019, 160). These texts, for their performative role, are part of performance texts, meaning that they were text that records a religious-liturgical performance. These texts were published in a simple language, so that they could reach a large portion of the population (McLaren, 2019, 168). It is for this reason that *Yaoqin*’s language is predominantly vernacular, with simple syntax and rare classical structures (see Appendix).

In this context, it is interesting to wonder about the impact of *Yaoqin* on the Late Ming and Qing society. The text does not give any reference to the place of publication, date of publication or other copies of the version in circulation at the time of the print. This information cannot be known from the written text. Further studies might focus on the physical objects and compare them with the different editions available, which might give new insight regarding a possible timeframe of publication, as well as hints to where the book was printed.

According to the list of published versions I have provided above, what can be said, however, is that *Yaoqin*, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was reprinted seven times. Even though it is unknown how many copies were provided for each print, it is plausible that the text was considered rather important.

The text might have been used for ritual practices, where it was read aloud by a preacher. This explains the rather repetitive nature and structure, as well as the simple language. In order to be understood by everyone, it has to be simple in language and structure.

3.1 The Title

The full title of the *baojuan* is *Yaoqin Sanzang Xitian qu qing jielun* 姚秦三藏西天取清解論, which I have translated as Treatises on the Clear Explanation [retrieved] from the Western Heaven by Tripitaka of the Yao Qin Dynasty, Kumārajīva. From my first reading of the text, it became

apparent that while Kumārajīva's name is featured in the title, it is notably absent from the main text, creating a puzzling dissonance.

Kumārajīva was one of the most renowned translators in Chinese Buddhist history (Chu 2000, 48). He was a non-Chinese scholar who arrived in China after formative years in Central Asia and in north-west India. His translations introduced China to an “early authentic interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism” (Liu 2021, 28). Over fifty texts in the Chinese Buddhist Canon are attributed to him, such as *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and texts, including the *Diamond Sūtra* and the Heart Sūtra (in Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya-sūtra*, *Banruo boluomi duo xin jing* 般若波羅蜜多心經; Thompson 2008, 135).

However, *Yaoqin* do not belong to his translations or original texts: among the texts translated by him, no text aligns with this *baojuan* (Cf. Thompson 2008, 135). Furthermore, the language and style used in *Yaoqin* resembles more the one of other texts of the genre.

The inclusion of Kumārajīva's name in the title, despite his lack of connection in the text, is intriguing and was one of the reasons I was drawn to study this text.

Analysing the Title

The first segment of the title, *Yaoqin Sanzang* 姚秦三藏, is the Chinese abbreviated version of Kumārajīva's name: *Yao Qin sanzang fashi Jiumoluoshi* 姚秦三藏法師鳩摩羅什. ‘Yao Qi’ refers to Emperor Yao Xing 姚興 (366-426) of the Later Qin dynasty (*Houqin dai* 後秦代; 384–417), under whose rule Kumārajīva lived. *Sanzang* 三藏 (lit. three baskets) refers to the Buddhist Canon, to which, as seen above, the fourth century translator startlingly contributed with his translations. Finally, *Jiumoluoshi* 鳩摩羅什 is the Chinese transliteration of his name.

I believe that after the name of the famous translator, the title has to be read three characters at a time. Thus, firstly, we have the term *xitian* 西天, which translates to the Western Heaven, referring to India (*Tianlan* 天藍). Together with *xitian*, we read *qu* 取, which bears the meaning of ‘retrieved from’ and ‘fetched from’. Thus, the three characters have to be interpreted as ‘retrieved from the Western Heaven’.

As for the rest of the title, the phrase *qing jielun* 清解論 is more ambiguous. I understand *qing* as an adjective, ‘clear’, which determines what comes next. I translated *jielun* as ‘explanation’, nuancing it with its vernacular meaning. Notably, the title omits an explicit reference to its genre as a *baojuan*.

To summarise, the title includes the name of the translator, Kumārajīva, a reference to India, and four characters that give an understanding of the type of text *Yaoqin* is. While the relation between Non-Action Teachings and the Pure Land has been underlined repeatedly, its relationship with Kumārajīva remains unclear.

Correlations with Kumārajīva

To find a correlation, let us examine at Kumārajīva's works and translations more closely. Among these texts, one stands out to be particular influential to Non-Action Teachings: the

Diamond Sūtra. As discussed above, the hagiography of Luo Qing revolves around his moment of enlightenment upon hearing the *Graded Ritual* recited aloud. According to the *Kugong Wudao*, Luo Qing was greatly influenced by the work.

He listened to them at night and heard the line ‘One must accept in faith, pick it up and investigate it oneself.’ His heart was instantly filled with joy; “he requested a copy of the Graded Ritual of the Diamond Sutra and read it in its entirety in three years.” (ter Haar 2014, 16).

Although this represents just one step in Luo Qing’s spiritual enlightenment, it was a crucial one. Out of the thirteen years spent searching for the correct path, three were dedicated to reading and understanding this book. The *Graded Ritual*, composed by Shi Zongjing 釋宗鏡 (d.u.) during the Song dynasty (*Songdai* 宋代, 960-1279), was inspired by the *Diamond Sutra*. It is a *baojuan* because it moves away from a mere Buddhist perspective and proposes a sectarian view (Hou 1998, 314). The text pertains primarily to the topic of the suffering of life and the destiny of rebirth, lamenting life’s brevity while expressing hope for liberation (Zheng 1985b, 29). It further critiques the constant striving for fame and profit (*mingli* 名利), which is the main reason for suffering, describing this pursuit as empty and fabricated (*xuwan* 虛妄) dream-like existence (Zheng 1985b, 29).

每日塵勞汨汨，終朝業識茫茫。不知一性之圓明，徒逞六根之貪欲：功名蓋世，無非大夢。(Zheng 1985b, 29).

Every day they slave in the dust without end, and all they long their knowledge of karma is non-existent, from dusk to dawn. They do not know the perfect brightness of the One Nature (一性). Instead, they indulge in the sinful desires of the six senses.²⁵ Even though your fame and glory might cover the world, but it still nothing but a great dream.

A similar perspective appears in the *Yaoqin*:

到李家，與李家，就做兒孫；

捨死命，巴活計，治下產業；

到老來，斷了氣，甘費場心；

過去了，又過來，從心受苦；

到頭來，又不知，那裏安身；

高不知，底不曉，如同夢過；(*Yaoqin*, 18).

Sometimes, they are born in the Li family, and of the Li family they live as sons and grandsons.

They risk death: clinging to their jobs, they establish a livelihood.

Once they are old, they stop breathing and willingly they waste their energy.

Having gone one life, they come back again and they suffer in their hearts.

After all, they know nothing. Where should they settle to be at rest in body and mind?

The height, they do not know; the low, they do not know as well. They live like in a dream.

²⁵ These refer to sight, sense of smell, hearing, gustatory faculty, bodily senses, and faculty of thought.

These passages show the futility of human striving for fame and wealth, likening their existence to a dream. The similarity between the two excerpts is blatant. However, on the one hand, *Graded Ritual* argues that even the spirit (*linghun* 靈魂) also endures a painful dreamlike existence in the cycle of rebirth, given the suffering they undergo in the realm of King Yama (*Yanluowang* 閻羅王)²⁶ and then rebirth (Zheng 1985b, 29). The only way to free oneself from worldly sufferings (*jietuo* 解脫) is to understand the combined message of the Three Teachings and aspire to be reborn in the Blissful Land (Zheng 1985b, 29). On the other hand, as explored later in the chapter, King Yama plays a completely different role in *Yaoqin*. Here, Yama is not to be feared because once one has awakened to the idea that Buddha resides within oneself, death and the cycle of transmigration become insignificant. After enlightenment, one will not be reborn again, but reach the ‘true home’ (cf. *Yaoqin*, 16).

Despite these disparities, the thematic similarities are significant. The inclusion of Kumārajīva’s name on the title may suggest an intertextual relationship. Given that the Diamond Sūtra inspired the *Graded Ritual*, which in turn influenced the contents of *Yaoqin*, the choice of associating Kumārajīva with the *Yaoqin* becomes understandable. Another reason for Kumārajīva’s name inclusion could be merely seen as a strategic embellishment. The name of the famous translator and scholar might have attracted a larger readership who were already acquainted with Kumārajīva’s work, possibly aiding in legitimising the themes of the text.

Notably, this is a rare case. According to Che Xilun’s catalogue of *baojuans* and Sawada Mizuho’s research, *Yaoqin*’s case is unique, as no other *baojuan* bears Kumārajīva’s name (Che 1998; Sawada 1975, 1-12). While some *baojuans*’ titles incorporate names of historical or legendary figures (e.g., *Cao Wenzheng sha zi qiu qin hui lang baojuan* or *Liu Xiang baojuan* 曹文正殺子求親回郎寶卷, and *Liu Xiang baojuan* 劉香寶卷)²⁷, these are usually tied to the text’s narrative. However, Kumārajīva’s name conveys a broader symbolic authority, making the *Yaoqin* an exceptional case.

There are, however, *baojuans* which have a person’s name in their title. This is done to pitch the content of the text or to picture a particular image in the reader’s mind. Nonetheless, this usage is less potent than Kumārajīva’s name, as it conveys a certain set of meanings by itself. For this reason, *Yaoqin* represents an exceptional case.²⁸

Therefore, this discussion on the title has also served as a preliminary investigation of the *baojuan*’s themes. Its similarity with the *Graded Ritual* and connection with the *Diamond Sūtra* exemplify its spiritual and doctrinal content.

²⁶ King Yama is the god of the underworld, who judges the dead, presiding on the cycle of *samsara*. See Tiefenauer 2018 for more information. The figure will be discussed later in the chapter in more details.

²⁷ The Qing dynasty *baojuan* *Cao Wenzheng sha zi qiu qin hui lang baojuan* 曹文正殺子求親回郎寶卷 (Sawada 1975, p. 137; Che 1998, p. 22) presents the name of Cao Wenzheng (also written 曹文政), a reference to a popular story on filial piety set in the Late Ming dynasty. The *Liu Xiang baojuan* 劉香寶卷, is about a wine shop keeper, Liu Guang 劉光, who lived in the Late Ming who, together with his daughter, dedicated his life to *nianfo* practice (Sawada 1975, 155).

²⁸ This discussion does not aim to give a definitive solution to the problem related to *Yaoqin*’s title. Here, I just scraped the surface of this topic, which remains open for further investigations.

3.2 The cosmology of Yaoqin

The *baojuan* opens its discussion on emptiness and non-action, giving a cosmological perspective to the topic. *Yaoqin* establishes that emptiness predates all creation, including the Buddha and the *Dharma*.

The Primacy of Emptiness

以前無佛無法。無天無地。上下是箇玄虛空。寸絲皆無。(Yaoqin, 2)

[I]n ancient times, there was no Buddha and no dharma. Heaven and Earth were not. Above and below, there was only the mysterious emptiness. Not even a thread existed.

This statement conveys the core principle of Non-Action Teachings and *Yaoqin*: the Buddha did not precede emptiness. On the contrary, the emptiness is the force of creation that originated everything else. At the beginning, there was no scripture or preacher to show people the way (*dao* 道); it was instead already clear in its original form:

想當初，無天地，原無一物；

Imagine, at the beginning, there was no Heaven and Earth: originally, there was not one thing.

佛也無，那取法，去說經文；

If the Buddha was not there either, where one would find the Dharma and preach the scriptures?

太虛空，發大光，安立世界；

In the great void, a light sparkled and established the world.

半空中，光明顯，我佛出身；(Yaoqin, 4).

In the midst of the void, a great light appeared and our Buddha came to be.

In addition to presenting emptiness as the foundation of *Yaoqin*'s cosmological perspective, the text also challenges the importance of scriptures as a means to understanding the dharma. For instance, in Pure Land Buddhism, awakening can be reached by simply hearing the Buddha preaching (Jones 2019, 52). For whoever lived after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha, reading the scripture and listening to preachers have been the sole remaining means to engage with the dharma. But if the Buddha himself does not even exist yet, how can one approach the dharma? The passage above suggests the Buddha is secondary to emptiness. Furthermore, the *Dharma* is presented not as a product of the Buddha's teachings, but as an inherent truth embedded in the fabric of emptiness. The text rejects the dependency on scriptures and preachers, but suggests that the Dharma's essence is accessible through direct realisation of emptiness. Only then will one understand that everything – including divine entities like the Buddha – is subordinate to the concept of emptiness. In fact, as we read in the passage, in the void a great light sparkled, which, in turn, gave life to the Buddha.

The Role of the Light and the Qi

In *Yaoqin*, the light is a constant metaphor for emptiness: light is its manifestation, the creative driving force that generated everything. This force has supernatural powers (*shentong* 神通) with transformative potential:

一段光，涌出來，不分南北；

One beam of light gushed forth. South and North were not distinct.

上下無，都玄虛，化現神通；(*Yaoqin*, 5).

Above and below were not: all was mysterious emptiness. [From the void, a] supernatural force appeared.

The text immerses the reader (or listener) in the process of creation. By indicating that there was no distinction between North and South, it creates an immersive point of view that the audience can latch onto. The text not only describes the cosmological myth of creation but also puts the reader at the centre. After the first light appears, the reader can finally see, and what they can see is emptiness – e.g., the North and the South are one thing. Emptiness, with its transformative powers embodied in the great light, gave the Buddha a shape

有法身，無天地，難成世界；

With the Dharma-body, but without Heaven and Earth, it is impossible to create a state of existence.

清淨身，神通廣，放大光明；

A pure body with vast supernatural force emitted a greatly bright light,

將清氣，上為天，星辰都有；

With the bright *qi*, above the Heaven was created
Along with all the stars and asterisms.

將濁氣，下為地，樹木園林；(*Yaoqin*, 5-6).

With the murky *qi*, below the Earth was created
Along with all the trees and gardens.

To create the world, the Dharma-body of the Buddha – which equates to the light – had to give a shape to the cosmos. With bright or pure *qi* 氣 it created the Heaven, while with murky *qi*, the Earth. The excerpt holds many terms with great philosophical significance, such as Dharma-body (*fashen* 法身) and *qi*. *Fashen* is a significant term in Buddhism. In this context, the Dharma-body is created by the light, and emanates a light itself. The Dharma-body, the Buddha, emptiness and the great light represent all the same concept: they originated and are part of everything.

A similar description of the beginning of the world can be found in the *WBLC*:

In the beginning, when there was no Heaven and no Earth, what sort of scene was this? Suddenly I had an insight into Emptiness (虛空): before there could be a Heaven and Earth, first there was a motionless Emptiness. Unbounded, unlimited, unmoving, unshaken, it was the Dharma-body (法身) of the Buddhas.

Ch'ien and *k'un* [Heaven and Earth]²⁹ are subject to decay, but Emptiness is indestructible. It is the essence of the Dharma (法體) of the Buddhas (Nadeau 1994, 110).

Although *Yaoqin* and *WBLC* agree on the centrality of emptiness and the role of the dharma-body in the creation of the cosmos, the latter does not refer to *qi* as creation force.

Qi, meaning ‘vital force’, plays a significant role in the cosmology of *Yaoqin*. *Qi* has a long history in Chinese philosophy, and it is not the intent of this thesis to break it down. What is relevant to understand is its usage in the text. The presence of the concept of ‘vital force’ is a sign of the syncretic nature of this text, in which a plethora of Chinese philosophical concepts are considered independently from the original context. Since early conceptualisations of *qi*, it was regarded as possessing a dual nature: a masculine nature, *yang* 陽 – or bright 清 –, and a feminine one, *yin* 陰 – or murky 濁. The usage of *qi* has to be seen in a context where Mahāyāna Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism had been undergoing a process of mutual blend and influence. For instance, *qi* in Neo-Confucianism is the product of the Great Vacuity (*Taixu* 太虛), to which one is reunited after death (Fu 1973, 382). The *qi* is the physical manifestation of the Confucian concept of *li* 理 (the Principle), and it possesses a similar generative force to what we read in the *Yaoqin*. However, while *Yaoqi* applies the concept to the creation of the cosmos, Neo-Confucians identify it as the driving force that turns the moral (or heavenly) nature of human beings into physical.

The principles of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom - all of which are differentiated principles of the Supreme Ultimate - constitute the moral or heavenly nature in its original state. When this nature is implanted in *ch'i* (e.g. *qi*), it becomes physical nature differentiated in terms of clear/turbid, pure/impure, etc. Hence, different capacities, talents, feelings, desires, etc., are discernible in different men-the best kind of men being those receiving the Mean (perfect balance) of *ch'i* (Fu 1973, 383-384)

Thus, in Neo-Confucianism bright or murky *qi* are strictly related to human nature: they define different aspects of human life, such as talents, emotions and desires. On the contrary, *Yaoqin* elevates these concepts on a cosmological level, in which bright and murky *qi* are the physical manifestation of the light emanated by the Dharma-body and, through its supernatural powers, it creates Heaven and Earth.

The Creation of Life

The formation of human beings and other life forms further underscores *qi*'s generative role:

有了天，有了地，人無一箇；

There was the Heaven and Earth, but still not
[even] one human being.

²⁹ The term *qian* 乾 (Heaven) and *kun* 坤 (Earth) are old terms of Chinese philosophy already in use during the Warring States texts, if not before. The first mention can be found in the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) in relation to the mythological righteous ruler Shun 舜.

著甚麼，立人緣，去做眾生；

正大光，涌出來，光明無數；

不著氣，難得活，怎得成形；

散光明，遍大地，借土為殼；

一氣接，萬般活，都得成身； (*Yaoqin*, 6-7).

What could be used to establish human condition
and create every other living being?

The great correct light gushed out; it's brightness
was unlimited.

Without holding the *qi*, it is impossible to obtain
life. But, how to be complete with a shape?

The Light took [some of] the Great Earth apart, and
the ground was borrowed to create a shell.

Once the *qi* was connected [to the shell]. The ten
thousand things came to life, all completed with
a body.

The passage entails the interplay between emptiness, light, and *qi* in creating life. Firstly, the text stresses the fact that after Heaven and Earth were created, no human beings existed. *Yaoqin* does not give any rationale for human creation; our existence is taken for granted. Secondly, light, which originated from primordial emptiness, is the driving force that gave human beings life. *Qi* was infused into the shells (*ke* 殼) shaped from the ground; in fact, the text states that '[w]ithout *qi* it is impossible to create life' (*Yaoqin*, 7). According to *Yaoqin*, life happens when the cosmic force of *qi* is breathed inside the hollowed shells.

An overall similar creation myth can be read in the 1523's *Jiulian baojuan*, of which Overmyer reports a significant passage:

想當初，混沌一炁之時。那有天、地、佛、祖？那有一切萬物？無當真空聖祖將真空元炁久久煅煉。無中有一生，二三生。三各立號名。無極粧嚴劫。

When one thinks back to the very beginning, the time of the single vital force of the origin in chaos, where were Heaven and Earth and the buddhas and patriarchs? Where were all the myriad things? [They did not yet exist.] Then the Holy Patriarch of matchless true emptiness took the primal vital force of true emptiness and refined it for a long time. [Thus] being was produced from nonbeing, the one produced the two, the two produced three, and each was established and named. The three apex periods [of cosmic time] put the universe in order (1999, 163).

In this excerpt, *Jiulian* clearly refers to the concept of primordial emptiness, which preceded everything, including Heaven and Earth, the Buddha and other divine figures. Furthermore, it explains how the Holy Patriarch used the primal vital force and shaped non-being into being. Here, the Holy Patriarch is another name for the Ancient Buddha, the same divine entity that *Yaoqin* introduces as a product of emptiness. The term that he translates as 'vital force' refers to *qi* (炁). If this is the case, *Jiulian*'s creation myth differs from *Yaoqin*'s myth because of the absence of light, which is a dominant theme in *Yaoqin*.

Salvation and the Nature of Suffering

Following creation, *Yaoqin*'s myth ends with a 7-syllable poem in 4 verses, shifting focus to the human condition:

我佛起智纔掌教；
正光涌出明耀耀；
氣接聞活稱名號；
立下諸般都是有； (*Yaoqin*, 8).

And again:

老古佛，每日家，心中盼望；
想眾生，迷了家，不得還鄉；
幾番家，稍書信，千萬囑付；
上寫著，分明說，佛祖真空；
看罷書，心痛功，亮眼垂淚；
死了生，生了死，不得長生；
從無始，離家鄉，生死受苦；
又無倚，又無靠，到處轉輪； (*Yaoqin*, 15-16).

When our Buddha brought forward his wisdom and only then he could support his teachings, a correct light gushed out and shined bright. The *qi* was connected [to the shells] and [human beings] inhaled life, they were given a name. [It] established the many kinds and all existed.

Every day, the Ancient Buddha's heart looks out with hope. He thinks of all the living beings who have lost their home and cannot go return to the true home. Several times [in the past], he had sent letters; Myriads of times, he warned us. In the letters he clearly explains the Buddha's Ancestral True Emptiness. [If you] read the letters, your heart will suffer and your eyes will be full of tears. Because when people die, they are reborn, and when they are born, they die again, without obtaining eternal life. From the non-beginning, [human beings] left their native place. They suffer through life and death, Because they do not rely on [the Ancient Buddha] and they are not supported [by his teachings]. When they get to one place, they already must transmigrate [to the next one].

These passages suggest that after creation, every living being was given a name. By being named, their state became knowable and detached from their original state of emptiness. In other words, they left their non-being state of existence (their native place) to endure lives of suffering. This is why the Buddha arose his wisdom and shared his teachings through letters sent across the world: people have forgotten their true form (their original face, *banlai mianmu*) and thus they have to be reminded of it. This motif finds resonance in other *baojuan*s. For instance, in 1430's *baojuan Foshuo huangji jieguo baojuan* and *Jiulian* a similar concept emerges.³⁰ The Ancient Buddha sends letters to guide the living beings.

The Ancient Buddha in the Great Ultimate [Palace] was grieved and worried, and looked tearfully at sentient beings sinning without limit. He repeatedly [sent] letters, and over and over spoke with you (*ni*) of his forty-eight great vows, but you paid no attention at all. Morning and night, at home

³⁰ The two *baojuan* are discussed in chapter 2.

he pondered; the nine-leafed lotus had no place for its school. He first sent men to open up new fields, and then sent others to set forth the details (*ch'u-hsi*) (Overmyer 1999, 58).

The passage taken from the 1430's *baojuan* reports concerns that resonates with *Yaoqin*. Similarly, in 1523's *Jiulian baojuan*, it is the Eternal Mother who, moved by the suffering endured by all living beings, sent letters across the world. Ultimately, she sent Buddha Amitābha to spread her teachings and save people. However, unlike *Yaoqin*, these texts do not specify whether this concern arose before the creation of human life.

Yaoqin's narrative can be understood on two layers. On the surface, it recounts the creation myth, where *qi* was connected to human shells to create life. On a deeper level, it reveals that the author(s) suggested that the Ancient Buddha had already shown concern for human beings' lives at the time of creation. Aware of our condition, the Buddha pre-emptively spread his teaching through the light. This implies that the text recognises its own salvific power. Like many other *baojuans* studied by Overmyer, *Yaoqin* is self-conscious: it understands itself as a revealed scripture (Overmyer 1999, 185).

The creation myth analysed in this section stands out among other *baojuans*' narratives as original and detailed. As Overmyer (1999, 188-195) has shown, the other sixteenth-century *baojuans* emphasise the Eternal Mother's role in spreading her teaching across the world. However, they lack a detailed account of cosmic origins and the creation of humans from *qi*. Contrarily, *Yaoqin* never refers to the Eternal Mother. Instead, it identifies the Ancient Buddha – the manifestation of emptiness – as the ancestral divine entity who created the cosmos. The concept of emptiness is fundamental to understanding the creation myth, as it conveys the message that everything originated from emptiness and the reader needs only to realise this to return to the 'true home' – emptiness itself.

3.3 The Scripture Without Characters

This following section examines *Yaoqin*'s narrative, which critiques established religious practice and presents its central themes. The text is extremely redundant and wordy³¹, a feature characteristic of many *baojuans*.

Critiques of other practices

The text's main aim, as a self-conscious text, is to make the reader/audience understand the original root (*bengen* 本根) of life – emptiness. Once this realisation occurs, the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian practices become fruitless.

不在坐，不在念。不識根本干莫亂。多攪雜念不成功：枉著撈攬受苦辛。若你廣通都知會，不著正念怎得中。曉了正念和本地，何須出聲又喘氣？不舉不念自有佛；萬中裏頭無一箇。(Yaoqin, 9-10).

³¹ See the appendix for a full translation of *Yaoqin*.

Do not sit down to meditate or recite. Without knowing the root, you will be lost. You will not succeed if you hold on to all those diverse notions. In vain holding on to all kinds of strange efforts, you only suffer bitter pain. Even though you know everything, how could you hit the centre without grasping the correct thoughts? After you understand the correct notion and [what] ‘true home’ [means], what do you need to utter and cry? There is no need for actions or thinking; the Buddha is already within you. However, among ten thousand [people], there is no one who grasps [this].

Understanding the fundamental role of emptiness makes the followers realise that Buddha, as the manifestation of emptiness, is already within themselves (*zi you fo* 自有佛). Consequently, practices like sitting down in meditation (*zuo* 坐) or reciting the Buddha’s name (*nian*) become futile. The passage compares the act of recitation to ‘uttering and crying’ (*chusheng you tanqi* 出聲又喘氣, i.e. to waste *qi*), emphasising the importance of *qi*, the driving force that brought life into the human bodies. Understanding this idea reveals the depth of this passage. The *qi* must not be wasted, because it is both the essence of life and the connection to our true self—emptiness.

In Non-Action Teachings, the Self equates the ‘Mother’, the ‘Original Face’, and ‘True Home’. As Nadeau notes, this concept is influenced by Chan teachings, particularly the idea of *mingxin jianxing* 明心見性 (‘seeing one’s own nature’).³² Zheng Zhiming suggests Luo Qing drew inspiration from the Chan concept, blending it with the Pure Land Tradition’s Blissful Land (Zheng 1985a, 59).

In this regard, the *WBLC* states:

Deluded people yearn for [rebirth in] the East or the West, but for the enlightened person this very place is the Western Land. Everyone possesses the Pure Land of the West. Ultimately there is no need to be steadfast in maintaining [pious practices], [because the Pure Land] is already right before you! Deluded persons do not understand that the Self is the Western Land. Seeking to be reborn there, their efforts are in vain, and they sink deeper into the bitter sea of samsara, unable to exchange their bodies [for others] through innumerable kalpas. (Nadeau 1994, 132-133).

In this passage, Luo, citing the Platform Sūtra, clarifies that awakening can be found within oneself. All other efforts are fruitless unless this simple truth is understood. This mirrors *Yaoqin*’s position, where Chan and Pure Land practices are critiqued.

Practices such as meditation and *nianfo* are considered empty if the practitioner fails to grasp the ultimate truth, the Way (*Dao*).

空念佛，不知道，都是虛言；

Empty is the *nianfo* when you do not know the Way. Every word [you pronounce in this way] will be empty.

³² In Chan Buddhism, only after one sees their true nature (*xing* 性), which entails the Buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性), the two truths (*erdi* 二諦, i.e. the ultimate truth, which is life experienced by enlightened people, and the conventional truth, referring to life experienced by unenlightened people), and the Dharma-realm (*fajie* 法界) can understand the Dharma and so achieve awakening.

若得省，未來面，無極根本；

纔是貴，為真正，出世之人；(Yaoqin, 24).

If you awake to your future face from the limitless root,

Only then it will be meaningful. You will be a true and correct and transmundane person.

Thus, Yaoqin does not reject practices like *nianfo* outright. Instead, it argues that these practices are empty words (*xuyan* 虛言) unless the practitioner realises that the Buddha already resides in the Self. For the Yaoqin, knowing and recognising this inherent connection is the correct dharma. Thus, this realisation surpasses (*ding* 頂) all other practices, enabling the practitioner to escape the sea of suffering and live a limitless life (*wanwan yu chun* 萬萬餘春, lit. for ten thousand and thousand and more springs; cf. Yaoqin, 25). Practices that lack this understanding remain confined to the phenomenal world.

迷還生，不得省，著相修行(Yaoqin, 23).

Who is lost comes back to life. They do not have opportunities to investigate and grasp only practices that relate to the phenomenon.

This critique suggests that *nianfo* and meditation fail to transcend the apparent world (to borrow a term from Nietzsche) because they are external practices that do not involve an inward investigation of the Self. While the phenomenal world relates to observable actions (Singerland 2003, 7), the primordial world of emptiness, from which everything derives, relates to non-action. This is why Yaoqin advocates for an awakening rooted in self-reflection and non-action. In the *WBLC*, returning home (*huanxiang*) “consists in recovering the Self” (Nadeau 1994, 121). Thus, *nianfo* can be useful only after having realised the truth. Likewise, also scriptures are pointless if the reader does not know the Way.

五千四十八卷為教化門路。求食之法。不能了道。外念著了聲色。內念捉了裏義。不念著了地獄。(Yaoqin, 28-29).

The 5048 *juans* [of the Tripiṭaka] should be the religious road to teaching, but they have become a method for making a living [for the monks]. However, if you cannot understand the Way, your external thought will be attached to forms and sounds. If your internal notions grasp the internal meanings, your thoughts will not be attached to hell.

This passage critiques reliance on the Tripiṭaka, stating that it cannot explain the correct Way. Since the Way already resides within the Self, no book can convey this principle, except for the Yaoqin itself, which is self-conscious of its salvific prowess. The lost and deluded (*miren* 迷人) are compared to individuals who seek food: who read scripture to ease their sufferings without realising that the Dao is already within them. Thus, Yaoqin calls for a shift from external (*wai* 外) to internal (*nai* 內) focus, paralleling the Non-Action Teachings and the *WBLC*’s emphasis on the Self. For instance, the *WBLC* states that “[t]he *tathāgata* is in fact within my own mind, and by illuminating myself I perceive the Buddhas and Patriarchs. Recognizing this in myself, I need not seek far” (*Poxie xianzheng yaoshi jing* 13:21-22, trans. in Nadeau 1994, 131).

Yaoqin portrays a non-dualistic religious worldview, where only one dharma is true. This view suggests the futility of other practices as all beings – i.e. the Buddha, Nature, human beings – are unified in pre-existing oneness.

清淨身，無二法，一體虛空；(*Yaoqin*, 53).

This Pure Body does not have binary dharmas, but only one body, emptiness.

And again:

性是佛，佛是性，本源無二；(*Yaoqin*, 40).

Nature is the Buddha and the Buddha is Nature: its origin is in the Non-dual.

And finally:

正法門，本無二，穿連大地；(*Yaoqin*, 38).

The root of correct dharma-gate is Non-dual. It penetrates and connects with the whole world.

Through these passages, *Yaoqin* expresses the nondual nature of the dharma. Oneness prevails as a core theme, suggesting that awakening requires only one practice: the realising that Buddha is within the Self. This realisation allows individuals to return to the ‘true home’, reuniting with pre-existing emptiness.

True Scripture Without Characters

If every scripture fails to represent the real Way, how can one understand the importance of the Self? *Yaoqin* explains that the Way can only be found in the wordless (*wuzi* 無字). The wordless is the origin of everything that has words and characters:

元是無字造下有字。立下經文。遍滿塵世。(*Yaoqin*, 57).

Originally, the wordless made everything with characters, establishing the scriptures which filled the dust-world.

This concept parallels emptiness, which similarly establishes everything that has shape. Since no scripture can capture the essence of the Dharma, *Yaoqin* asserts that the sole path to understand enlightenment lies in the True Scripture Without Characters (*Wuzi zhenjing* 無字真經), which is described as follows:

是真從無始以來，佛流無字真經運轉。娘生寶藏，正實相亦無佛。穿山透海，徹底玄翻無處不照。上下一氣普運十方，普覆十方，普照十方。宣流變，展開含法界。將來不見踪，十方都照徹。(*Yaoqin*, 58-59).

From the beginningless on this truth was transmitted by the Buddha in the form of the True Scripture Without Characters. The Mother (*niang* 娘) created [this] repository for precious treasures. The true and correct shape (*xiang* 相) does not even entail the Buddha. It pierces through mountain and seas: down to the bottom, darkness turns over and

there is no place not illuminated. Above and below, the one *qi* widely spread through the ten directions, covering them, and illuminating them. It manifests its transformation: if it expands, it contains the dharma-world; but in the future, you will not see any trace. It shines and penetrates the ten directions.

In this passage, the wordless and the True Scripture Without Characters are described in the same guise as the light. In fact, the text states, “It pierces through mountain and seas: down to the bottom, darkness turns over and there is no place not enlightened” (*Yaoqin*, 59). Words like ‘piercing through mountains and seas’ are repeatedly used in the text to refer to the light. This resonates with the wordless as another manifestation of the all-encompassing emptiness. If its mystery is investigated (i.e. expanded), it becomes clear that the wordless encompasses the entirety of existence. Conversely, if it is not understood, one cannot perceive its trace.

The True Scripture Without Characters shares descriptive features with emptiness as articulated in the *WBLC*:

忽然參透虛空，穿山透海，普覆人身，裡外原是一體 (Huo 2013, 505)

Suddenly, I grasped emptiness, which pierces through mountains and seas and widely covers our bodies. Inside and outside, we originally were one sole body.

In *Kugong Wudao*, Luo Qing’s realisation of the cosmos’s true nature confirms that emptiness encompasses all. This equivalence between True Scripture Without Characters (*Wuzi zhenjing*) and emptiness is supported by Nadeau’s account, which lists *Wuzi jing* 無字經 (Scripture Without Characters) as a synonym for ‘emptiness’ that can be read in the *WBLC* (Nadeau 1994, 122).

Barend ter Haar’s study on Non-Action Teachings reveals that the True Scripture Without Characters was an actual text used in the sect’s ritual practice (2014, 131). During the two phases of initiation, two texts entitled *True Sutra without Characters of the Small Vehicle* (*xiaocheng wuzi zhenjing* 小乘無字真經) and *True Sutra without Characters of the Great Vehicle* (*dasheng wuzi zhenjing* 大乘無字真經) were transmitted to the followers (ter Haar 2014, 131-136). Although they have not survived entirely, ter Haar collated fragments from three different versions cited in external sources.³³ The themes of these fragments are summarised as follows:

[T]he poem contains a simple Pure Land message: (1) to recite the name of Amitābha, (2) to avoid getting lost in the underworld and on the roads to different types of reincarnation, (3) to remain

³³ The True Scripture Without Characters of the Small Vehicle was transmitted in a Christian text from the seventeenth century, in the 1814’s confession of Gui Zibang, and in material owned by family of the patriarch Yao collected in the 1990s. These last two external sources also contain references to the True Scripture Without Characters of the Great Vehicle. For more detailed information about these external sources as well as about the initiation ritual they were recited in, see ter Haar 2014, 131-134.

focused on the road home or the Bodhisattva path, and (4) to leave one's cozy human existence behind (ter Haar 2014, 131).

Additionally:

This “sutra without characters” begins with a confession of faith in Amitābha and Guanyin as the guardians of the Pure Land, namely, the World of Extreme Joy in the West. The entire text centers on one's heart, anticipating the wordless transmission from heart to heart that will follow at the third level of the movement's initiation ritual. The rest of the text is patterned like a Buddhist mantra, progressing from the initial Bodhi heart of the average lay Buddhist believer to the heart that becomes aware that the origin is in oneself and the belief that ultimately the heart (or, if one prefers, the heart- mind or mind) is empty (ter Haar 2014, 134).

These accounts suggest that the two Scriptures Without Characters³⁴ were deeply influenced by Pure Land tenets, encouraging practices like reciting the name of Buddha Amitābha. This allows a twofold framework of Scripture Without Characters:

1. The Conceptual Scripture. The text is an abstract idea produced by the Mother and transmitted by the Buddha to liberate deluded people. This Scripture Without Characters is a mere concept, imbued with salvific power, and it is a synonym of emptiness itself.
2. The Physical Scripture. This is the actual texts which ter Haar mentions in his study. This is a physical text of which we have different versions and that conveys a specific Pure Land-inspired message.

The latter likely derives its name and inspiration from the former, embodying abstract concept in textual form. This duality underscores the dual nature of the *Scripture Without Characters* as both an idea as perfect and ideal scripture and a practical guide within the Non-Action Teachings.

3.4 Salvation for Yaoqin: *The Fear of Hell*

After explaining how to achieve awakening, *Yaoqin* lingers over the results of awakening and how the ‘true home’ appears once one has returned there.

Firstly, the Ancient Buddha emphasises the suffering of the dust-world and the cycle of rebirth:

從無始，離了家，輪迴受苦；

串四生，和六道，萬死千生；

這里死，那里活，改頭換面；

From beginningless, you left home and endured the cycle of existence in suffering.

You went through the four kinds of births and the six realms of rebirth: myriads of times you die and thousand more you are reborn.

Here you die, and there you are reborn again; you keep changing your head and face.

³⁴ I refrain myself from translating *jing* 經 as Sūtra in this case, as the text belongs to a sectarian environment which is independent from Buddhism, even though it is influenced by it.

行姓張，可姓李，頂帶虛名；

In one moment, you are [a member of] the Zhang family or the Li family. You have carried but empty names.

認假相，迷失了，娘生真面；(*Yaoqin*, 32-33).

If you recognise your fake forms, your delusions will come to an end. Your Mother gave you your true face.

Through time, one is to be reborn endlessly until the final realisation takes place: ‘recognising the false form’ (*ren jiaxiang* 認假相). One’s shape belongs to the phenomenal realm, and so it has lost its true form. As religious practices exist within phenomena (*xiang* 相) and should be avoided because they do not reach the core of the Self, also one’s shape is not real, because it is attached to what looks, smells, and feels real. For *Yaoqin*, being born in the Zhang family or in the Li family does not concern one’s true Self. Upon realising the falsity of these forms, one can reach awakening and escape the world of suffering, thereby realising one’s true face (*zhenmian* 真面).

For *Yaoqin*, realising one’s true face means to live without being afraid to die and being reborn again.

悟悟了了。本性不怕閻羅老。無人及手提寶劍。我怕誰。生也不怕生。死也不怕死。
(*Yaoqin*, 41-42).

Once you have awakened, your original nature will not fear old [King] Yama. No one will be gathering around you with sharp swords in their hands [aimed against you], who will you fear? [This is] to live and not be afraid that one will be reborn; to die and not be afraid that one will die.

This brief passage exemplifies the nature of those who have reached awakening: they do not fear death or being reborn again. It is important to notice that in this stage, no one will ever fear death again. Death, in Buddhist Chinese mythology, is personified by King Yama, the king of the netherworld. In Buddhist tradition, “he is to be feared for bringing sudden death, as he cuts or steals the ‘root of life’ of all beings” (Faure 2013, 49). *Yaoqin* promises that if one knows the root, there is no need to fear the king of the underworld, because death will no longer come.

According to the text, the reason lies in the root of life, which is emptiness. With an empty mind which conforms to non-action, one is neither reborn nor dies.

我這無為真人。無生無死。生也不歡喜。死也不煩惱 (*Yaoqin*, 42-43).

I [the Ancient Buddha] myself am the perfected person of the non-action: I am not reborn nor do I die. Birth does not please me; death does not afflict me.

Here, the Ancient Buddha clarifies what it means to be awakened in non-action. Once returned to the ‘true home’, one does not know death and rebirth. However, the second part of the passage suggests that before leaving the cycle of rebirth, one lives in the world as enlightened. In this stage, they do not fear death, and living gives no pleasure. This passage recalls the fundamental Buddhist philosophy of the four noble truths (*sishengdi* 四聖諦, in Sanskrit *catvāriāryasatyāni*), which deal with suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path to this cessation (Eltzschinger 2014, 254). In

traditional Buddhism, birth, death, and decay are the main sources of suffering (Vimala 1966, 9). Thus, awakening does not mean a happy life, but the realisation that pleasure (*huanxi* 歡喜) or affliction (*fannaο* 煩惱) are fake experiences and emptiness only remains.

However, *Yaoqin*'s soteriological promise is far more concrete than the existence of emptiness:

有幾箇，得知道，家鄉大道；	If there are some people who understand this Way
	– the Great Way of the original home –
願滿心，稱了意，不死常生；(<i>Yaoqin</i> , 46).	they vow wholeheartedly and their desire is met.
	They will live forever without dying.

Similarly to Pure Land Buddhism, *Yaoqin* promises eternal life in heaven (i.e., one's original home). In Pure Land, Buddha Amitābha's Sukāhvati, the Buddha and all who are granted rebirth there live for many kalpas.

彼佛壽命及其人民，無量無邊阿僧祇劫 (*Amituofo jing* T366, CBETA).

That Buddha's and the people [who live in that land]'s life span spans through immeasurable, limitless and incalculable kalpas.

While in Pure Land's Blissful Land, one is promised to live for thousands of kalpas, *Yaoqin* asserts that in the 'true home', there is no death. This subtle difference implies that even Buddha Amitābha cannot stop his followers from dying eventually. On the other hand, upon realising the Ancient Buddha's truth and retrieving one's original face, one will never die again.

In the 'true home', people acquire the same supernatural powers that emptiness employed to create the cosmos:

觀三千，大千界，如同手掌；	[Those who achieved awakening] consider the great trillion of worlds just like the palm of their hand.
滿十方，遍世界，似觀魚鱗；	In the whole of the ten directions, the wide worlds are seen like a scale of a fish.
[...]	[...]
出塵世，脫苦海，無上正果；	Leaving the dust world and thus being released from the sea of suffering is the fruit of unsurpassed [awakening].
到當元，還本處，不滅不生；	Having reached the beginning, you will return to your original homeland, where you will not die or being reborn.
永快樂，真受用，無窮無盡；(<i>Yaoqin</i> , 46-47).	Forever you will be joyful and truly experience [it] limitlessly.

Those who return to their original birthplace will not only experience pleasure limitlessly, but also become as powerful as the Ancient Buddha. With this power, the entirety of the cosmos can be grasped within the palm of one's hand. The state of enlightenment is described by a phrase that

appears many times throughout both *Yaoqin* and *WBLC*, *zongheng zizai* 縱橫自在 (Nadeau 1994, 35, n. 41). 縱橫, which literally means ‘vertically and horizontally’, refers to the state of mind when one behaves as one pleases. The Buddhist concept of 自在 indicates “a state in which one is freed from the constraints of mental attachment and anxiety” (Nadeau 1994, 35, n. 41). In this manner, one has obtained the Original Body:

自己光，皆具足，淨妙法身；	Your light will provide [you] a pure and miraculous dharma-body.
本性空，無毀壞，堅牢固久；	Your original nature is empty; therefore, it is indestructible, and stable and eternal.
永無生，永無滅，自在縱橫；	It will not ever be reborn or destroyed again. Free from mental restrains, you will stretch out in all directions as you please.
不忍寒，不受熱，真妙本體； (<i>Yaoqin</i> , 48-49).	You will suffer no cold or warmth. This is your True Wonderful Original Body.

Once returned to the ‘true home’, people become one with the dharma-body and realise their empty nature, which encompasses every part in the ten directions. Thus, salvation means returning to be one with everything. The concept of oneness³⁵ in relation to the soteriological level is constant in the other sixteenth-century *baojuan*s. Janet MacGregory Kerr discusses three Late Ming and Qing *baojuan*s³⁶, all of which “portray an image of salvation as reunion; it comprises moving back towards, or returning to, a pre-existing oneness” (Kerr 1994, 233). Thus, *Yaoqin* shares its soteriological views *in toto* with other *baojuan*s that were composed in a similar period.

Overall, this chapter analyses the *baojuan Yaoqin* in light of the cultural context in which it first appeared, namely the Late Ming period. Due to the limited material available on this text, this analysis could not propose a more precise timeframe for initial compilation. However, according to the examination above, *Yaoqin* can be placed among the *baojuan*s produced in the Late Ming period. Firstly, the chapter contextualises the text with a close examination of its title, which reveals connections with the famous translator Kumārajīva. I framed this connection in terms of the influence of Kumārajīva’s texts and translations on the sectarian environment where *Yaoqin* was likely produced.

Secondly, I explored the cosmology depicted by the text, situating it in the context of the *WBLC* and other Chinese traditions, such as Inner Alchemy Daoism and Buddhism. I demonstrated how *Yaoqin* portrays a unique cosmology while drawing upon these influences.

Next, I discussed how the text advocates a singular path of religious practice, rejecting other established practices belonging to Buddhism or other traditions. I highlighted the correlation

³⁵ Which I discussed at the end of the previous section.

³⁶ The *baojuan*s are namely *Lihua baojuan* 李華寶卷 (Precious Scroll on Lihua), *Xiangshan baojuan* 香山寶卷 (Precious Scroll on the Fragrant Hill), and *Gufo Tianzhen kaozhen Longhua baojing* 古佛天真龍華寶經 (The Precious Scroll on the Dragon Flower as verified by the Old Buddha of Heavenly Purity). See Kerr 1994.

between the text and Luo's tradition, particularly in its terminology and concepts. At the same time, I underscored its originality, as it diverges from other creation myths in coeval *baojuans*.

Lastly, I examined the eschatology of the text. I noted its similarities to other texts of the genre, particularly in its depiction of salvation as the action of 'returning home' and the achievement of unity with emptiness. This analysis situates *Yaoqin* within the broader discourse of sixteenth-century *baojuans*, emphasising both its shared themes and unique contributions.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that, in terms of content and religious milieu, *Yaoqin* aligns closely with Luo Qing's teachings and the *WBLC*. Central topics, such as emptiness, salvation through the realisation of one's original nature as the Buddha, and a strong critique of other practices, are portrayed in similar ways. Thus, *Yaoqin* reflects the syncretic religious environment that favoured the development and spread of Non-Action Teachings, while sharing its core religious insights.

Regarding the inclusion of Kumārajīva's name in the title, my analysis traced similarities between *Yaoqin* and Luo's teaching with texts like the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Graded Ritual*. The presence of the famous translator's name likely served as a strategic embellishment, proving religious legitimacy to *Yaoqin*. In doing so, the author(s) connects the book to a broader religious context.

Furthermore, although no clear publication date exists for this specific version, the context of the text suggests a connection to sixteenth-century *baojuans*. For instance, its framing of salvation as a return or reunion mirrors coeval texts. Therefore, it is plausible that *Yaoqin* emerged in this period, under the direct or indirect influence of *WBLC* and other Non-Action Teachings' texts. Nonetheless, a precise framework could not be determined due to the lack of prior research on the text.

The creation myth that opens the book stands out for originality, drawing from Buddhism, Daoism, and other Chinese popular beliefs. Unlike many other *baojuans*' cosmologies, which predominantly reflect Buddhist influence, *Yaoqin* integrates themes like emptiness, *qi*, and light in a unique cosmological vision.

Overall, the research opens a window to an understudied *baojuan*. While the close reading method provided a clear understanding of its themes, contextualising the text within the Late Ming's syncretic religious milieu allowed for a deeper and more grounded interpretation. However, many questions remain unanswered. For instance, further research could clarify its origin and influence during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Comparative studies of different versions and prints, as well as linguistic and stylistic analyses, could shed light on its development. Additionally, exploring the text's printing history and readership could enhance understanding of its performative and societal dimensions. The fact that it was published seven times, even though the scale of each print run remains unknown, suggests that *Yaoqin* held a degree of importance among readers. Another topic that can be broadened relates to the readership. I suggested that *Yaoqin*'s readers were laypeople, given its simple structure and language. However, further studies on the diffusion of the text can provide a more detailed answer to this question.

In conclusion, this research provides new insight into *Yaoqin* but should be seen as a springboard for further investigation. Expanding on this study could deepen our understanding of *Yaoqin* and its place within sixteenth-century syncretic religious traditions.

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Appendix Translation of *Yaoqin sanzang xitian qu qing jielun*

姚秦三藏西天去請解論³⁷

Treatises on the Clear Explanation [retrieved] from the Western Heaven by Tripitaka of the Yao Qin Dynasty, Kumārajīva

歸命十方一切佛法僧法輪常轉度眾生。

We devote our lives to all the Buddhas of the ten directions, as well as to the dharma and the *saṃgha*. The Wheel of *Dharma* forever turns, guiding living beings to cross [to the shore of salvation].

無上甚深微妙法；

The supreme, extremely profound and wonderful Dharma.

百千萬劫難遭遇；

In one hundreds of thousands of ten thousand of kalpas it cannot be met.

我今見聞得受持；

Now, we see and hear it and embrace it.

願解如來真實意；

May we realise the true intention of the *tathagata*.

將《古正尊³⁸清淨論解》論講以前無佛、無法、無天、無地。上下是箇玄虛空：寸絲皆無。將甚明佛大意？理性根源從根至本³⁹，細說一遍。撒手離卻，無可無量。方寸中了當正祖本，排根一遍，頂修百世餘萬劫。

龍天八部、無量大眾、諸賢聖菩薩，奉請法王今在一會。合掌酬拜，上告世尊禮白佛言：

The ‘Clarification of the Ancient Most Venerable Purity’ explains that before there was no Buddha and no Dharma. Heaven and Earth did not exist. Above and below, there was only the mysterious emptiness: not even a thread existed. How could we understand the great intention of the luminous Buddha? As for the origin of the essential nature, from root to source, I will speak completely. Let go [anything that is discursive truth], which is impossible and unmeasurable. Once you hit the core [of the teachings], you can confront the Ancestral Root. Arranging the root once, practising for a hundred generations for myriads of kalpas.

³⁷ In the following translation, I punctuate only the prose sections, leaving untouched the verses. This is to maintain the poetic integrity of the text.

³⁸ The term 古正尊 could be also interpreted from a more Daoist perspective, nuancing it as a name of a divine figure. Usually, Daoist divines figure have *tianzun* 天尊 in their names. However, 古正尊 could be a fabricated name of a god. This conjecture, however improbable it might sound, could still prove some degree of truth given the syncretic nature of the text. Just like the presence of Kumārajīva’s name in the title, could have served as strategic embellishment to give legitimation to the text. For more information regarding the *tianzun* divine figure, see Kamizuka 2006.

³⁹ The phrase 從根至本 literally means ‘from root to root’. In Chinese the two terms *gen* 根 and *ben* 本 carry the same meaning of ‘root, origin’. In this context, I believe it refers to the fact that the Buddha is going to talk in detail about emptiness. Thus, his discussion will start from the *gen* (root), so the origin, and go all the way back to it. As deduced by the text, emptiness is all-encompassing: everything has its foundation in emptiness, which is the true nature of every phenomenon – the essential nature (*lixing* 理性).

The nāgas and the eight groups, alongside a numberless crowd, respectfully requested the Dharma-King to meet that day. With their palms joined together and bowing, they spoke to their superior, the World-Honoured One, and respectfully said:

想當初，無天地，原無一物；

Imagine, at the beginning, there was no Heaven and Earth: originally, there was not one thing.

也無，那取法，去說經文；

If the Buddha was not there either, where one would find the Dharma and preach the scriptures?

太虛空，發大光，安立世界；

In the great void, a light sparkled and established the world.

半空中，光明顯，我佛出身；

In the midst of the void, a great light appeared and our Buddha came to be.

一段光，涌出來，不分南北；

One beam of light gushed forth. South and North were not distinct.

上下無，都玄虛，化現神通；

Above and below were not: all was mysterious emptiness. [From the void, a] supernatural force appeared.

有法身，無天地，難成世界；

With the Dharma-body, but without Heaven and Earth, it is impossible to create a state of existence.

清淨身，神通廣，放大光明；

A pure body with vast supernatural powers emitted a greatly bright light

將清氣，上為天，星辰都有；

With the bright *qi*, above, the Heaven was created, along with all the stars and asterisms.

將濁氣，下為地，樹木園林；

With the murky *qi*, below the Earth was created, along with all the trees and gardens.

有了天，有了地，人無一箇；

There was the Heaven and Earth, but still not [even] one human being.

著甚麼，立人緣，去做眾生；

What could be used to establish human condition and create every other living being?

正大光，涌出來，光明無數；

The great correct light gushed out; it's brightness was unlimited.

不著氣，難得活，怎得成形；

Without holding the *qi*, it is impossible to obtain life. But, how to be complete with a shape?

散光明，遍大地，借土為殼；

The light took [some of] the Great Earth apart,
and the ground was borrowed to create a
shell.

佛一氣接，萬般活，都得成身；

Once the *qi* was connected [to the shell]. The
ten thousand things came to life, all completed
with a body.

我佛起智纔掌教；

When our Buddha brought forward his wisdom
and only then he could support his teachings,
a correct light gushed out and shined bright.

正光涌出明耀耀；

氣接聞⁴⁰活稱名號；

The *qi* was connected [to the shells] and
[human beings] inhaled life, they were given
a name.

立下諸般都是有；

[It] established the many kinds and all existed.

任般不少。恐怕修行人路頭著，將古《正尊解論》講說，印證是實採得分明。提真性證實相十方總管，頭一公案。⁴¹

起初，也無天，也無地。古佛當初獨自立。半空，一段光明顯十方世界自一展。立下乾坤無期數。上下圓通一性掌。靈光證訴本根。照滿上下處明。又無東西和南北，亦無天、地、共星辰。古佛正光為大力：發現遍滿都是。上立天堂共星斗，下立地府共山林。先治人緣和水土，後治五穀贍人。

[Naturally, members of all] kinds were not few. Fearing that the practitioner of self-cultivation might lose their way, [The Buddha] explained the ‘Clarification of the Ancient Most Venerable [Purity]’, and gave proofs that it held the truth, so that they could see clearly. By raising the True Nature, [the Buddha] gave the proof of the true outer form, which coordinates the ten directions. This was the [individual] case.

Originally, there was no Heaven and Earth. The Ancient Buddha originally was alone. In the midst of the void, a sudden light appeared and burst in the ten directions, stretching out to every world. It established all numberless things on Heaven and Earth. Above and below, the light pierced through the One Nature and coordinated it. The Spiritual Light [of the Buddha] is the proof that narrates the original root, and it illuminates above and below every spot [of the cosmos]. However, still there were no East and West, no South and North, [as well as] no Heaven and no

⁴⁰ I translated the term 聞 (lit. to hear, to listen to) as ‘inhale’ to render the connection of *qi* with breath. Literally, this passage should have been translated as ‘they heard life’ and refers to the moment when human being was brought to life.

⁴¹ I rendered 頭一公安 as ‘This was the [individual] case’ to be closer to the original meaning. This sentence refers to the fact that the Buddha proves that the truth is held in the *Clarification of the Ancient Most Venerable Purity* and this is the sole case where the truth is held.

Earth and all the stars and asterisms. The Ancient Buddha's correct light is the great power: it shows that everything is. Above, the Heaven with all its stars was established. Below, Earth and all of its mountains and forests was established. Firstly, it regulated mankind, rivers and land, while subsequently, the five grains for nourishment to support the people.

不在坐，不在念。不識根本干莫亂。多攬雜念不成功：枉著撈攬受苦辛。若你廣通都知會，不著正念怎得中。曉了正念和本地，何須出聲又啣氣？不舉不念自有佛；萬中裏頭無一箇。若還識得這箇佛，不怕地府惡閻羅。經文書本無期數，都是靈光巧轉成。明明朗朗是乾坤，纔是古佛正家風。熬的海枯山倒石頭爛：真性不動半毫分，纔是古佛正大身。

Do not sit down to meditate or recite. Without knowing the root, you will be lost. You will not succeed if you hold on to all those diverse notions. In vain holding on to all kinds of strenuous effort, you only suffer bitter pain. Even though you know everything, how could you hit the centre without grasping the correct thoughts? After you understand the correct notion and [what] 'true home' [means], what do you need to utter and cry? There is no need for actions or thinking; the Buddha is already within you. However, among ten thousand [people], there is no one who grasps [this]. If you already know this Buddha, do not fear Yama's Hell. The scriptures and books, and beyond counting, are all skilfully composed by the Spiritual Light [of the Buddha].

Extremely bright are Heaven and Earth. This is the unique correct tradition of the Ancient Buddha. You could wait until the seas dry out and the mountains crumble, but the True Nature would not move of one inch. This is the great right body of the Ancient Buddha.

打為頭，人喫土，養身過日；

次後來，日久時，土還喫人；

立人緣，和水土，山林樹木；

立江河，並大海，上下通連；

天連人，人連天，至今無離；

聖做凡，凡做聖，還照當元；

想從前，一根是，不分男女；

Originally, mankind would eat [the products of] the Earth to daily nourish their bodies.

Later, after many days, it was the Earth that would eat mankind.

[This] creates mankind, as well as waters, lands and trees.

[This also] establishing rivers and the great oceans. Above and below, [everything] is connected.

Heaven is connected to mankind, and mankind is connected to Heaven. Until today, this connection never broke apart.

The divine becomes ordinary, the ordinary becomes divine, yet it all reflects the original source.

Let's think back, from before the single root was undivided into male and female.

本無生，又無滅，自古至今；
又無老，又無少，每常一例；
又無寒，又無熱，不辯秋冬；
老古佛，每日家，心中盼望；
想眾生，迷了家，不得還鄉；
幾番家，稍書信，千萬囑付；
上寫著，分明說，佛祖真空；
看罷書，心痛功，亮眼垂淚；
死了生，生了死，不得長生；
從無始⁴²，離家鄉，生死受苦；
又無倚，又無靠，到處轉輪；
到張家，與張家，為兒做女；
到李家，與李家，就做兒孫；
捨死命，巴活計，治下產業；
到老來，斷了氣，甘費場心；

From ancient times until now, the root has
never been reborn nor die.
It does not age, but it is [also] not young. It
has always been like this.
It is not cold or warm: it brings no distinction
between autumn and winter.
Every day, the Ancient Buddha's heart looks
out with hope.
He thinks of all the living beings who have
lost their home and cannot go return to the
true home.
Several times [in the past], he had sent
letters; Myriads of times, he warned us.
In the letters he clearly explains the Buddha's
Ancestral True Emptiness.
[If you] read the letters, your heart will suffer
and your eyes will be full of tears.
Because when people die, they are reborn,
and when they are born, they die again,
without obtaining eternal life.
From the non-beginning, [human beings] left
their native place. They suffer through life
and death,
Because they do not rely on [the Ancient
Buddha] and they are not supported [by his
teachings]. When they get to one place,
they already must transmigrate [to the next
one].
When they are born in the Zhang family. Of
the Zhang family, they might be sons or
daughters.
Sometimes, they are born in the Li
family, and of the Li family they live
as sons and grandsons.
They risk death: clinging to their jobs,
they establish a livelihood.

⁴² The term 'beginningless' refers to the idea that, in cosmology, there is not a real beginning point before which nothing existed.

過去了，又過來，從心受苦；
到頭來，又不知，那裏安身；
高不知，底不曉，如同夢過；
自今番，纔曉的，佛是真空；
普天下，人念佛，不知理義；
透不著，真祖意，難得出塵；
若得知，佛祖意，至根達本；
不用你，閑啣氣，自然神通。

Once they are old, they stop breathing
and willingly they waste their
energy.
Having gone one life, they come back
again and they suffer in their hearts.
After all, they know nothing. Where
should they settle to be at rest in
body and mind?
The height, they do not know; the low,
they do not know as well. They live
like in a dream.
From now on, you understand that the
Buddha is the True Emptiness.
Throughout all *tianxia*, people recite the
name of the Buddha, but they do not
comprehend the general principle.
If you cannot pierce through the real
Ancestral intention, you cannot escape the
dust.
If you do understand the Buddha's Ancestral
intention, you can reach the root.
You do not need to sigh in desperation, as
you will be filled by supernatural powers.

起初無天無地。本體還照當元。本言前一段光明，明朗郎照十方。不見青不見黃，無跡無影亮堂堂。不可稱不可量。不可欺不可降。斧難劈劍難傷。

乾坤少，有世難藏。風不能刮，雨不能濕，火不能燒，水不能澆，刀不能砍，簡不能穿，萬般諸物都難比。

未曾有天先出世。水土人緣也曾治。經卷不學都自會。不告天不求地。曾虛空踏粉碎。本來生實是強，又無爺又無娘。虛空一涌領大綱。古今山河無相立。上下一切總承當。

At the beginning, there was no Heaven and Earth. The original body returned to reflect its original source. Before the original words, a beam of light was cast, illuminating the ten directions. No blue nor light could be seen: no footprint nor shadow were cast. [Emptiness] cannot be named or measured; it cannot be raised or dropped. Axes cannot chop it, and blades cannot hurt it.

The cosmos, being young, could not hold the world. The wind did not blow, while the rain did not fall. The fire did not burn, and the water did not flood. Knives did not cut, while arrows did not pierce. The myriad things cannot be compared to each other.

[Emptiness] came to existence before Heaven existed. When water, land and human karma were regulated, there was no scripture, [but humans would] learn naturally. They did not pray to Heaven or the Earth. Once, emptiness was shattered into pieces under their steps. Originally, there was no

rebirth, and that was great! No father and no mother. From the void, [people] received the main principle. Ancient and new, mountains and rivers did not erect each other: everything above and below was undertaken.

說人人，都有箇，貴寶聖物；

迷還生，不得省，著相修行；

若不明，摩尼寶⁴³，萬劫黑暗；

朝參禪，暮念佛，枉費心勤；

每日家，甘慌忙，不知起落；

空念佛，不知道，都是虛言；

若得省，未來面，無極根本；

纔是貴，為真正，出世之人；

識真佛，玄中事，絕妙之法；

頂坐禪，賽念佛，萬萬餘春；

全容易，不慣想，真空顯現；

有當人，為正主，就是真經；

這真經，臨危時，無佛無祖；

無晝夜，放光明，本體無生；

Talking about people, everyone has one precious treasure and holy object.

Who is lost comes back to life. They do not have opportunities to investigate and grasp only practices that relate to the phenomenon. If you do not understand the *mani-gem*, you will live for ten thousand kalpas in darkness. In the morning you meditate and, in the evening, you recite the Buddha's name. In vain will be all your mental efforts.

Every day, you will feel joyful to be busy, not comprehending rises and fall.

Empty is the *nianfo* when you do not know the Way. Every word [you pronounce in this way] will be empty.

If you awake to your future face from the limitless root,

Only then it will be meaningful. You will be a true and correct and transmundane person.

Knowing the true Buddha mysterious matter – the profound and subtle Dharma –

Surpasses sitting meditation and it is better than reciting the Buddha's name. Thus, you will live for thousands and thousands of springs.

Without effort, without habitual thoughts, true emptiness will manifest itself.

If there is someone fit to be in charge, they will be correct ruler. This is the true scripture.

This true scripture, facing time of crisis, is neither Buddha or the Ancestor.

With no dusk or dawn, [the true scripture] casts a great light: the original uncreated body.

⁴³ The *mani-gem* (which literally means precious jewel), in Buddhism is a wish-granting gem. However, according to Nadeau (1994, 123), it is a synonym for emptiness.

無生體，無邊表，諸佛聚會；

This body is not reborn; it had no limits nor margins. All the Buddhas are congregated in it.

堅固身，無營轉，自古常存；

[This is the] indestructible body without regulation, From ancient time, it exists.

古家鄉，真聖境，光明不斷；

The old homeland is the divine land, where the light never stops.

又無黑，又無暗，普現光明；

It is not dark nor dim, but everywhere through the light you can see.

真寶光，無毀壞，常川法界；

The true treasure light is indestructible and constantly permeates the Dharma-realm.

亮堂堂，明耀耀，照透乾坤；”

It shines brightly with radiance, illuminating through Heaven and Earth.”

上告世尊禮白佛言：“本六字是真，四字是真。”

They spoke to their superior, the World-Honoured One, and respectfully said: “The six-syllable formula carries the truth, like the four-syllable formula.”

世尊答曰：“《解論》講說無字是真。有字是假：六字佛是誘引法門，四字佛亦是誘引法門。五千四十八卷為教化門路，求食之法。不能了道，外念著了聲色。內念捉了裏義，不念著了地獄。

怎麼用度？當人發現、靈光發現，靈光發現萬億高。一氣綿綿透九霄，不離絲毫出三界。也不動，也不搖。萬象森羅一性包：無上無下無間斷，周圍滿面都通照。好箇情境玄妙處，永劫無毀最為高。天地有老皆有壞。自是性佛大堅牢。

修，也不添。不修，也不減。本是真空常發現。不生不滅本如然，自在踪橫玄妙玄。無老，無少，同一例。自古，常明無二邊。又不穿，又不喫。無冷，無熱，無生、滅。猛然，一會顯金身。敢和古佛同伴行。有人會得真面目。歡歡喜喜永無生。

He replied: “The ‘Clarification [of the Ancient Most Venerable Purity]’ says that the wordless carries the truth. If a formula carries syllables, it is fake. The six-syllable and the four-syllable Buddhas are a seductive Dharma-gate. The 5048 *juans* [of the Tripiṭaka] should be the religious road to teaching, but they have become a method for making a living [for the monks]. However, if you cannot understand the Way, your external thoughts will be attached to forms and sounds. If your internal notions grasp the internal meanings, your thoughts will not be attached to hell.

How to employ [internal notions], then? Men in charge manifest themselves; the Spiritual Light manifests itself, manifesting in a myriad of meters of height. The one *qi* continuously pierces the highest Heaven, not departing by a single hair from the Three Realms. It does not move or shake. All multitude is contained in the One Nature, where there is neither above or below, and there is no in-between. Around it, light fills everywhere, illuminating and passing through everything. This is a good, pure, and wonderful place. There, forever, there is no extinction: this is the highest [truth]. Heaven and Earth grow old, and all things decay. However, the self is the nature of the Buddha, which is indestructible.

Self-practice won't add anything to it. No practice at all will not diminish it. This is the True Emptiness that manifests itself. It is not created and does not finish; it is always like that. By itself, it wanders across the wonderful mystery: it is not old nor young, but it is always the same. Since ancient times, it has been clear and is non-dual. It does not dress or eat. It does not feel the cold or the heat. It was not born and will not die. Suddenly, it manifests its golden body that dares to walk together with the Ancient Buddha. If anyone can obtain their true face, then they will be forever joyful without being reborn again.

到這里，都是佛，同共一體；

巴凡聖，都識破，永不占塵；

從無始，離了家，輪迴受苦；

串四生，和六道，萬死千生；

這里死，那里活，改頭換面；

行⁴⁴姓張，可姓李，頂帶虛名；

認假相，迷失了，娘生真面；

呆眾生，著相修，不曉根元；

起初分，立人緣，分散去了；

在苦海，生死轉，不得還鄉；

因為你，迷了家，不得知道；

At this stage, all is Buddha and shares one body.

Of mortals and divine, you have seen through, so you will never be contaminated by dust [again].

From beginningless, you left home and endured the cycle of existence in suffering.

You went through the four kinds of births and the six realms of rebirth: myriads of times you die and thousand more you are reborn.

Here you die, and there you are reborn again; you keep changing your head and face.

In one moment, you are [a member of] the Zhang family or the Li family. You have carried but empty names.

If you recognise your fake forms, your delusions will come to an end. Your Mother gave you your true face.

So, the slow-witted beings are attached to practices that revolve around the outer form. They do not understand the root's origin.

From this original dispersal, humankind was established and you were scattered and got lost:

In the sea of suffering, you lived and died cyclically, but could never return home.

This is because you have lost your home and have no opportunity to know the Way.

⁴⁴ The term *xing* 行, in this context, carries a meaning related to English words such as 'temporarily', and 'makeshift'. This indicates that the time lived as a member of one family is quick and temporarily, before dying and being reborn in a different family.

傳五千，四十八，經卷書文；
說還生，本來面，常生不滅；
永無生，永無滅，無字真經；
這無字，能變化，神通廣大；
不占天，不占地，本性虛空；
半⁴⁵虛空，光燦燦，難描難畫；
半虛空，光燦燦，發現十方；
發現大，忒又大，撐破世界；
發現小，忒又小，不見踪影；
行又有，可又無，隨改隨變；
尋遍世，無物比，獨自為尊；

指無相，無住所，可是實相；
指有相，有住所，道是頑空；
若有人，明自己，真空法性；
不論男，不論女，一般都成；

The five thousand and forty-eight scriptures
have been transmitted:
[They] explain that, being reborn, [one's]
original face is eternal and cannot be
extinguished.
It will never be reborn and will be never
extinguished. Through the True Scripture
without characters,
The wordless can transform itself and has
enormous supernatural powers.
Do not get attached to the Heaven or to the
Earth The essence [of the wordless] is the
emptiness
In the midst of emptiness, bright cannot be
depicted or portrayed.
In the midst of emptiness, bright appears in the
ten directions.
When it appears big, or even even bigger [than
that], it fills the world, tearing it apart.
When it appears small, or exceptionally small,
you do not see any trace or shadow.
One moment it is there, the other it is not. It
follows changes and transformation.
If you search through the entire world, you will
not find nothing alike. So, it is by itself alone
[does not depend on anything else] the most
venerable.
Pointing at the featureless that resides
nowhere: that is true reality.
Pointing at what has forms which resides
somewhere: that is nonsense.
If there are people who understand themselves
and the True Empty Dharma-nature,
Then, it does not matter if they are men or
women, they can all succeed.

⁴⁵ The term *ban* 半 in this and the following verse literally means 'half'. I could not find any logic in the expression 'half of emptiness', so I decided to give it the meaning of the 'in the midst'. In vernacular Tang and Ming Chinese, 半 can render the expression *zai...zhizhong* 在……之中 (in the midst of).

正法門，本無二，穿連大地；

合理性，無分別，皆是一同；

說本地，好風光，無寒無熱；

三千界，買不過，絕是告強；

又無面，又無目，春秋不變；

佛聖境，貴寶處，永無秋冬；

性是佛，佛是性，本源無二；

永堅牢，無退轉，證大實根；

知根源，明佛意，踏著實地；

若曉的，禪指中，就了修行；

證法神，成正覺，安身立命；

又不生，又不滅，獨自為尊；

悟悟了了，本性不怕閻羅老：無人及手提寶劍⁴⁶，我怕誰？生，也不怕生，死，也不怕死。”

The correct Dharma-gate is not dual. It penetrates and connects with the whole world.

It unifies principle and nature: it does not make distinctions, since everything is all the same. Speaking of the true home, it has a good scenery, There, there is not cold nor warm. Throughout the three thousand worlds, you could not buy anything better. It is absolutely outstanding.

It has no features no shape: Spring and Autumns do not change it.

It is the sacred Land of the Buddha: a place with the richest treasure, where autumn and winter never come.

There, Nature is the Buddha, and the Buddha is Nature: its origin is in the Non-dual.

[That place] is forever indestructible: there, retrogression cannot happen and it is the proof of the great substantial root.

Once you know the origin of this root, the intention of the Buddha will be clear to you and you will walk on solid ground.

If you understand this, with a click of a finger you have can achieve your self-cultivation and your Dharma-body. You will thus reach correct awakening: [achieving] personal peace and realisation of enlightenment.

From that point on, you shall not be born or die again. So, it is by itself alone [does not depend on anything else] the most venerable.

⁴⁶ The term *baojain* 寶劍 literally mean jewelled sword and often is connected to divine figures. Given the context, I decided to render it ‘fine sword’. The main meaning of the passage is in fact related to rejecting fear of death and King Yama.

Once you have awakened, your original nature will not fear old [King] Yama. No one will be gathering around you with sharp swords in their hands [aimed against you], who will you fear? [This is] to live and not be afraid that one will be reborn; to die and not be afraid that one will die.”
上告世尊禮白佛言：“怎麼生也不怕。死也不怕。”

They spoke to their superior, the World-Honoured One, and respectfully said: “How can you be reborn and yet not be afraid? How can you die and yet not be afraid?”

世尊答曰：“《解論》講說凡夫有生有死。我這無為真人，無生，無死。生，也不歡喜；死，也不煩惱。好消息！好消息！無相真人幾人知？

若還人人都知道，四生六道轉興誰？真實意合祖機。本事上乘大根基，不占天，不著地。古往今來，無所住。這箇消息，無人識：迷人對面不相知。穿山透地無隔礙，大地、山、河徹底明。勝天倒地，無遮當。

意動如飛賽過風。法身遍滿顯神通：遍週沙界一掌中。有人會，有人識，就是天神不可欺。是真實，不虛說。本是真言真口訣。若還參透真祖意，不論遲早，都出期。

He replied: “The ‘Clarification [of the Ancient Most Venerable Purity]’ says that common people experience being reborn and dying. I [the Ancient Buddha] myself am the perfected person of non-action: I am not reborn nor do I die. Birth does not please me; death does not afflict me. What a great news! What a great news! How many people know the faceless perfected person?

If everyone knew who would transmigrate and raise the four kinds of birth and the six ways of rebirth? The real substantial intention [of the Buddha] conforms to this ancestral true notion. It is originally the great root foundation of the great vehicle and does not grasp the Heaven, nor does it touch the Earth.

From antiquity until today, it has dwelt in no place. There is no one who knows this process: deluded people do not grasp it even when faced with the truth. It finds no hindrance when piercing through mountains and seas, and the great earth of mountains and rivers down to the bottom are enlightened. Even if you invert Heaven and Earth, you cannot block it.

Its intention flies faster than the wind. The Dharma-body in its full extension displays its supernatural powers: encompassing the sand-worlds in the palm of its hand. If there are people who realise and understand it, even the divine gods cannot deceive them. This is true substantiality, not false words. This truly is a true word of oral sacred transmission. If you can see through the true ancestral great intention, no matter if it is late or early, you will be beyond time.

說自己，明為處，圓覺一會；

Talking about the Self, when clarity is the place, you will reach perfect enlightenment at once.

頂修行，勝坐禪，萬萬年春；

This tops self-cultivation and outperforms sitting in meditation for myriads of years and Springs.

有幾箇，得知道，家鄉大道；

If there are some people who understand this Way – The Great Way of the original home –

願滿心，稱了意，不死常生；

When they vow wholeheartedly and admire the [Buddha's] intention, they will live forever without dying.

觀三千，大千界，如同手掌；

[Those who achieved awakening] consider the great trillion of worlds just like the palm of their hand.

滿十方，遍世界，似觀魚鱗；

In the whole of the ten directions, they see the wide worlds as a scale of a fish.

廣變化，真妙用，神通過日；

Vast transformations, truly wonderful functions, and miraculous powers surpass the ordinary of the day.

受風光，常快樂，自在真人；

The enjoy the environment and are always pleased: they are free from mental attachments as perfected individuals.

出塵世，脫苦海，無上正果；

Leaving the dust world and thus being released from the sea of suffering is the fruit of unsurpassed [awakening].

到當元，還本處，不滅不生；

Having reached the beginning, you will return to your original place, where you will not die or being reborn.

永快樂，真受用，無窮無盡；

Forever you will be joyful and truly experience [it] limitlessly.

自己光，皆具足，淨妙法身；

Your light will provide [you] a pure and miraculous dharma-body.

本性空，無毀壞，堅牢固久；

Your original nature is empty; therefore, it is indestructible, and stable and eternal.

永無生，永無滅，自在縱橫；

It will not ever be reborn or destroyed again. Free from mental restrains, you will stretch out in all directions as you please.

不忍寒，不受熱，真妙本體；

You will suffer no cold or warmth. This is your True Wonderful Original Body.

永快樂，無修證，纔是風光；

You will be forever joyful and will not practice nor [need any] proofs. Only then you will have reached your true home.

展放開，滿世界，無處不照；

[This place] stretches out to fill the world and there is no spot not illuminated.

將上來，無可比，透過針尖；

Heretofore, it is incomparable and it pierces through the hole of a needle.

過百千，大萬劫，從容易轉；

After hundreds of thousands, and great kalpas, it easily turns.

古元光，為正尊，不動寶珍；

The ancient original light is correct and honourable: the unshakable precious treasure.

風又刮，火又燒，何曾毀壞；

Let the wind blows, let the fire burns. How can they destroy [emptiness]?

要堅牢，要固久，也是真空；

It is indestructible and everlasting. This is the true emptiness.

自己光，滿十方，皆同一體；

The light of the Self fills the ten directions, [showing that] everything is the same body.

參透了，無為法，不滅不生；

[Thus], you have pierced through non-action's Dharma, so you shall not die nor be reborn [again].

正根元，無裏外，元情一體；

The correct original root has not inside nor outside: [it encompasses] the original in one body.

不論男，不論女，一般神通；

No matter if you are a man or a woman, you will possess the same spiritual powers.

觀天地，真法界，明明晃晃；

When you observe the Heaven and the Earth, the true Dharma-realm [will appear] bright and radiant.

金光現，無可比，古佛家風；

When the golden light manifests, it is incomparable [with anything else]. This is the Ancient Buddha's original tradition.

自己光，真佛祖，永劫不壞；

The light of the Self is truly like the Buddha and the Ancestor: forever it will be undestroyed.

改山河，換天地，自古長存；

It changes mountains and rivers; replaces Heaven and Earth. It exists from ancient times.

本無古，本無今，無新無舊；

The root is timeless: it has no past, no present, it is not new, not old.

清淨身，無二法，一體虛空；

This Pure Body is a non-dual Dharma: [it is in fact, only] one-bodied emptiness.

得出劫，何有緣，正遇祖意；

[It] enables you to leave the kalpas. Why should you have karma to correctly meet the ancestral intention?

裏頭清，外頭清，徹底都清；

[The Pure Body] is pure inside and outside: it is utterly pure.

提祖根，將從前，細分一遍；

Raise the ancestral root and let me carefully explain it once from the beginning.

頂參禪，勝念佛，萬倍修行；

It tops the meditative insight and surpasses the recitation of the Buddha's name done for myriads of times.

不明佛性，不明佛意，東扯，西蓋。橫推煉修，浮雲遮障。執著經書，片口張舌，對不著祖本，合不著祖意。死後墮在苦淪，不免重罪。

著明佛意，若知自性，更又坐禪，再又念經。本來面目自然真經，莊嚴千經萬教。書是閑言。有省之人，把這雜法且放一邊。真空妙性是根源。

天下，經卷曾打裡頭。說千經萬教，都從一字流出。若不明自性，說的閑言。是無常法，不是佛法。佛法是不二法：自性佛法，諸佛難忖量。自古，無形相。提起萬般說，將來一字無。自己就有三藏法，如何紙上去尋墨？”

If you do not understand the Buddha's nature and his intention, you will grasp the East and cover the West. You do not go forward (lit. you push sideways), and you practice something trivial (lit. clouds) that is hindering you. So, if you hold on to scriptures, even a single word cannot hit the ancestral root and cannot conform to the ancestral intention. After your death, you will fall into the stream of sorrow and will not avoid the grave's punishments.

If you grasp the Buddha's intention and know your own nature, then you can sit in meditation or recite the scriptures. The original face is the natural, true scripture, which has been made sophisticated by thousands of scriptures and myriads of beliefs. Books are made of superfluous words. People who have understood place these miscellaneous Dharma aside. The true miraculous void is the original root.

Under the Heaven, scriptures have been circulating since the beginning. Even if you explain these thousands of scriptures and myriads of beliefs, they all originated and flowed out from one word. If you do not understand your own nature, you will speak superfluous words, and this is not the impermanent Dharma, and it is not the Dharma of the Buddha. The Buddha's Dharma is not twofold: the Buddha's Dharma of your own nature is something that all the Buddhas cannot comprehend. Since ancient times, it has had no shape. If you want to talk about these myriads of manifestation, they can be summarised in the one word 'nonexistence' (*wu* 無). In your own Self, you already have the Dharma of the Three Baskets. Why should you go and search it on the ink of a page?"

禮白佛言：“可是哪三藏。”

世尊答曰。

[They spoke to their superior, the World-Honoured One] and respectfully said: “But which Three Baskets?”

He replied:

“經，一藏；文，一藏；論，一藏。⁴⁷論，即是自性；文，亦是自性；經，也是自性；文經紙，也是自性。抄造經，元是自性。元是無字造下有字，立下經文遍滿塵世。全憑穿窮，引化迷人。自將相法看，不知著相法，迷了自性。

⁴⁷ The list of term *jing* 經, *wen* 文, *lun* 論 refer to the three baskets that compose the Buddhist Canon. 經 are the Sūtra – which contain the teachings of the Buddha ; 文 the Vinaya – which regulate the monastic life; 論 the Abhidhammas – the analysis of the Buddha's teachings. In this passage, the *baojuan* explains that the scriptures of the Three Baskets are not to be rejected, because they all are a reflection of everyone's nature (*zixing* 自性). However, the text expresses the need of detachment from scriptures to realise the one truth – that the Buddha already resides within oneself.

是真從無始以來，佛流無字真經運轉。娘生寶藏，正實相亦無佛。穿山透海，徹底玄翻無處不照。上下一氣普運十方，普覆十方，普照十方。宣流變，展開含法界。將來不見踪，十方都照徹。

盡是法王身：不在裏，不在外，不在中心與內外。出入縱橫無妨礙。行、住、坐、臥觀自在。上，不占天；下，不著地；東，不靠邊；西，不著岸；裏，不照境；外，不著相。徹上徹下。

無字真經晝夜常轉，無有間斷。若踏著實地，生死永無。不動不搖，常放光明。光罩十方，都相見：周圍滿面普光明。

如如不動是真空：勝過修行百萬春。無寸草，不占塵，都是靈光巧轉成。古佛玄妙是真空，不變春夏共秋冬。無生無死聖常存。多變化，廣神通：無邊世界。一手擎天和日月，又帶地府共山林。若收日月如拳指，放出日月觀觀紋。十方世界如手擎。收來不勾一手心。若放開，占滿天。收將來，不見踪。

無了又有却為真。自古，常明無黑暗。錦片靈光蓋世明，天地萬轉空不動。永無毀壞，貴寶珍。識的玄妙名大道。了道為源體皆空：無生無死，又無窮。快樂，常川真受用。無休無毀真實駒⁴⁸。文合天地常轉輪，諸物遊巡不空。元是性佛正本根：這裡立命安身處，十方世界現空身。

“Sūtras are one canon, Vinayas are another one, and Abhidharmas are the last one. Abhidharmas are your own nature, just like Vinayas and Sūtras. Paper of books and Sūtras are your nature. If you copy out sutras, those are also your nature. Originally, the wordless made everything with characters, establishing the scriptures which fill the dust-world. They completely rely on deceptive trickery to lead the deluded people. They look at the Dharma of the forms and phenomenon (lit. Dharma of images), they do not know that if they become attached to it, they will lose their way as to the truth of their nature.

From beginningless on, this truth was transmitted by the Buddha in the form of the True Scripture Without Characters. The Mother created [this] repository for precious treasures.

The true and correct shape does not even entail the Buddha. It pierces through mountains and seas: down to the bottom, darkness turns over, and there is no place not illuminated. Above and below, the one qi widely spreads through the ten directions, covering them, and illuminating them. It manifests its transformation: if it expands, it contains the Dharma-world, but in the future, you will not see any trace. It shines and penetrates the ten directions.

All is part of the body of the Dharma king: it does not reside inside or outside, nor in your inner mind, nor inside or outside your body. Going in and out, up and down, it encounters no hindrance. If you walk, stand, sit or lie down, you will always see that you are not constrained by mental attachments. Above, do not be attached to Heaven and below, do not grasp the Earth. In the East, it has no cliffs, and in the West, there are no harbours. Within it does not shine on borders, and outside it does not grasp the visible form. It penetrates to the very above and the very below.

⁴⁸ The use of this term here is interpreted literally. 駒 refers to a fine breed of horses and I have translated it as ‘colt’. In this context, this word might be a reference to the Chinese famous metaphor of seeing a horse running from a crack of the wall – a shifty vision that barely is caught by the eyes.

From dawn to dusk, the True Sutra Without Characters keeps turning without interruption. If you step into the real land, rebirth and death will be no more. [This Sūtra] does not move nor shake and forever casts a bright light. This light covers every visible phenomenon in the ten directions: all around you is fully filled with bright light.

The unmoving suchness is the true emptiness: it surpasses practice for myriads of years. Without worldly afflictions (lit. leaves of grass), do not be attached to the dust, [because] everything is skilfully composed by the Spiritual Light [of the Buddha]. The ancient Buddha's subtlety is the true emptiness, which does not change Spring and Summer into Autumn and Winter. It is not reborn and is not extinguished, and yet its divinity forever exists. Everything, it changes with its wide supernatural power: the borderless world fits in your palm together with Heaven, sun and moon, also with the Earth with all its mountains and forests. If you grasp the sun and moon like they are in your palm, when you release the sun and the moon, you can observe their pattern. The worlds in the ten directions are like something you hold in your palm: if you grasp them, there will be space in your hand, while you release them, it could fill the entirety of Heaven. However, in the future, you will not see any sign.

What is non-existent and yet exists is the true reality. Since ancient times, it has always been bright and not dark. The splendid light, like a little piece of brocade, is earth-covering bright. Heaven and Earth go ten thousand turns, yet emptiness does not move. It has never been destroyed, and it is rich in treasures. The dark mystic wonder that [can be] known is called the Great Way. If you comprehend the Way, it is the source that embodies, and all its embodiments are empty. It is not reborn and is not extinguished: it is never-ending. Pleasure is a constant permeating true enjoyment: it is the endless true treasure colt, [that easily escapes your sight]. The texts align with Heaven and Earth, perpetually turning the wheel: all things revolve and do not fall into emptiness. This is the original Buddha-nature's correct root. If you, here, establish your fate and settle your body, the worlds of the ten directions will manifest their vacuous body.

包裹日月共娑婆;

When it encapsulates the sun and moon,
together with the saḥā-world,

方可名為一聲佛;

Only then, it can be called the single-sound
Buddha.

若還識得這一佛;

If you can understand this single Buddha,

不用參神苦煉麼;

There will be no need for partake in the
practice and self-cultivation.

無天無地不見邊;

Without Heaven and Earth, you cannot see the
borders,

一顆圓光照大千;

One marvellous point of round light shines
through the billions of worlds.

自說虛空無倚靠;

It is said that emptiness does not depend on
[anything else].

誰知虛空駕鐵般⁴⁹;

Who knows emptiness can ride an iron boat.

摩訶般若頭一科;

Mahāprajñā (great wisdom) is the foremost
principle,

本來面目枉張羅;

Your original face is futility entangled in
schemes.

有人曉的根源事;

If you understand the matter of the root origin,

不用看經自成佛;

You do not need to read the scriptures, because
you can naturally become a Buddha.

本性彌陀大如天;

Amitabha's true-nature is as big as the Heaven,

駕著三千及大千;

And it rides through trillions of worlds,

無量劫來常生境;

Through innumerable kalpas, it abides
eternally in the realm of life.

未曾有天先在前;

Before the Heaven was, [emptiness] was there
already,

靈光持誦要相應;

It's Spiritual Light [of the Buddha] must align
with the recitation,

鼓響即催鏡又鳴;

The drum resounds, urging, as the mirror
reverberates with its hum.

八萬四千都相轄;

84 thousand [people] all gather,

分明擁護主人公;

Clearly embracing the master,

⁴⁹ Which was considered too heavy to float on the sea.

無影寺⁵⁰里鏡鼓響;

In the Temple of Wuying (lit. Shadowless)
drums and bells resound,

驚惶轉經念佛人;

[all the monks], awake all the people of the
world who read the scriptures and recite the
Buddha's name.

不住陞堂常說法;

Without stopping, [the Buddha] will ascend
the hall to preach the Dharma.

行往坐臥轉法輪;

Walking, standing, sitting, and lying down,
you will turn the wheel of Dharma [all the
same]

識得真經一法通;

[But once you] understand the True Scripture
and the one Dharma.

有甚分別俗共僧;

What will be the distinction between lay and
monks?

本是一佛能出現;

Here the single Buddha manifests his body,

若得歸一都圓成;

If you can return to the one, everything will be
perfectly complete.

去也去也歸本方;

Leave! Leave! Return to that land!

參透從前正法王;

Penetrate the former correct Dharma-king
from the very beginning.

若得心空無所住;

If your mind becomes empty and abides
nowhere,

心空就是古家鄉;

Your empty mind will be then your ancient
home.

誰佛聚會永團圓;

Whose Buddha's assembly is forever
gathered?

⁵⁰ I believe that this term does not refer to a specific temple, but to a metaphorical place, where the everything is shadowless (i.e. without false appearances). This reflects the theme of the text in rejecting all that has form and embracing emptiness, which is without form.

亮亮堂堂照大千;	Bright illuminates the Great Thousand Worlds.
本地風光絕為貴;	One's native place is supremely precious,
普遍乾坤誰再強;	Is there a greater place in the whole cosmos?
清清亮亮好縱橫;	Clear and bright, it beautifully expands up and down,
明明朗朗勝如燈;	Radiant and shining, surpassing even a lamp.
萬般變化都廣勝;	The myriads of transformations are broadly victorious,
普運乾坤現金身;	[Emptiness] widely revolves around the cosmos, showing its golden body.
識得玄妙本體空;	If you grasp the subtle and mysterious essence of emptiness,
大千沙界逞精神;	In the vast realm of the great thousand worlds, its spirit will freely manifest.
神通廣大無比賽;	Its supernatural powers are great and incomparable,
乾坤普照獨為尊;	By itself alone [does not depend on anything else] it is the most venerable, it shines throughout the cosmos.
無春無夏又無冬;	[There,] there is no spring or summer, not even winter,
一段金光永無生;	Just a beam of golden light that will never be reborn.
永劫無生常快樂;	There, for unlimited kalpas, you will not be reborn and will be joyful.
自在逍遙不動身;	You will be free from mental attachments and your body will not move.

不動不搖自性光;

The light of your nature does not move or shake,

運行天地共名山;

But it moves all Heaven and Earth famous mountains.

運行日月如翻掌;

It moves the sun and the moon as if it was you with your hand to move them.

本無名號自在仙;

The root has no name and it does not depend on anything outside itself and resides among the immortals.

銅胎鐵底不占塵;

With a bronze stomach and iron bottom it is not touched by any dust:

上下通連共一同;

Up and down are connected as one.

鋸成一架如甌板;

If you saw it into a construction, it will be like a fragrant wood plank.

鐵笛無孔一片聲;

When it encapsulates the sun and moon, together with the sahā-world,

一聲佛名，四維上下，通身放毫光。十方光皎皎：無處不圓明。豁開透地通天眼。現出金剛不壞身。點開眼目人人具足。箇箇圓成。成就無毀壞。得了永劫不壞金身。

The name of the single Buddha shines its light with its entire body everywhere in the four cardinal points, high and low. Its light shines bright in the ten directions: there will be no place that is not entirely illuminated. It pierces open the Earth and opens the eye of Heaven. It manifests its adamant body. If you open your eyes, everyone will be inherently complete, succeeding in avoiding destruction and acquiring a golden body, which will be endlessly indestructible.

《清淨論解》一週圓;

The 'Clarification of [the Ancient Most Venerable] Purity' is complete in itself,

海枯山崩本不然;

Even if the seas dry and the mountains collapse, the root will still be the same.

惟有一般無價寶;

There is only one priceless jewel,

輝今耀古鎮常源;

Which shines today as it shone in ancient times, it calms the eternal source.

《清淨論解》不虛言;	The ‘Clarification of [the Ancient Most Venerable] Purity’ does not have empty words.
佛祖玄妙量無邊;	Buddha and Patriarchs are mysterious and wonderful without limits,
靈明通透西來意;	The spiritual luminosity pierces through the Western-derived intention:
自有靈光莫外傳;	By itself, the Spiritual Light [of the Buddha] is not transmitted outward.
未曾初分我在先;	Before the first partition took place, I was there,
三大大千我立安;	And I established the three billion and more [things].
天堂地獄從此出;	The Heavenly Palace and Hell came out of this [created universe]
無極太極 ⁵¹ 是假名;	The limitless Taiji is the just [this phenomena’s] fake name.
能問能答是強名;	Being able to ask and answer are stronger names,
永斷無名得縱橫;	You should cut off names to attain freedom (lit. vertically and horizontally).
箇裏本無元字脚;	Here, originally there no character,
空中誰肯強安名;	Who in the emptiness dares to impose names?
大乘寶卷云 The <i>Baojuan</i> of the Great Vehicle says:	
舉起無為莫非真;	If you raise the non-action, nothing will be not true.
匊圖吞盡大乾坤;	Swallowing entirely the great cosmos,

⁵¹ Taiji refers to the great polarity between the binary forces of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 that existed before Heaven and Earth were created and thus manifested the two forces’ differentiation.

娑婆世界為教主;

The *sahā* world is the teacher,

西天東土獨為尊;

The Western Heaven and the Eastern Land are
by themselves venerable.

《清淨論解》且是逢源，超過佛、祖、仙。包裹天地。應遍三千。人解論，論便是架法般。
The ‘Clarification of [the Ancient Most Venerable] Purity’ draws from the source. Thus, it surpasses Buddha, Ancestors, and Immortals. It encompasses Heaven and Earth, and responds to all within the three thousand realms. If you understand its arguments, it turns into the Dharma’s foundation.

心淨越諸天;

With a pure mind, one can cross over to all the
Heavens.

體淨自然安;

With the pure body, you can be by yourself at
peace.

心動終有二;

If the mind moves, in the end it will be binary.

不動自周圓;

So do not move and naturally [you will be]
complete [in yourself].

天龍、八部、羅漢、聖僧、人、非人等、諸大菩薩、聲聞、緣覺等眾，無法可得言受奉行。作禮而退。

The *nāgas* and the eight groups, alongside arhats and the holy *samgha*, with all the with humans and non-humans, every *bodhisattvha* sravakas and *pratyekbuddhas* with non-action can receive the Buddha’s teaching with conviction and understanding and then truly practice it. They pay respect and retire.

一報天地蓋載恩;

First, we thank Heaven and Earth for covering
and carrying us.

二報日月照臨恩;

Second, we thank the sun and the moon for
arrive every day.

三報皇王水土恩;

Third, we thank the emperor, the rulers, the
rivers and the lands.

四報爺娘養育恩;

Four, we thank our fathers and mothers for
nourishing and teaching us.

諸尊菩薩摩訶薩摩訶般若波羅蜜。

All venerable *bodhisattvha-mahāsattva mahāprajñāpāramitā*