

# The Collapse of the Han Empire on the Impact of Daoism

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**Abstract.** Daoist School has exerted a great influence on shaping Chinese history. However, Daoism did not really appear in China until more than 600 years after the birth of the Daoist School. The special cultural and political shaping of the Eastern Han dynasty led to the transformation of Daoism from a pure idea to a more practical theory. The Han Empire had an elaborate and massive bureaucratic system that ensured that imperial power was concentrated in the hands of the emperor and his trusted ministers. At the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, the government could not maintain a costly bureaucratic system due to the plague, famine, and financial crises. Daoism gained unprecedented freedom to preach. This paper analyzes the late Han dynasty's unique social and political background through historical materials. Comparing the attitudes of different Daoist tribes towards the government concludes that the true foothold of Daoism in China must be an alliance with aristocrats. At the same time, Daoism has assumed the corresponding social responsibility and gained more people's trust. However, when Daoist power grew to a certain size, it inevitably attracted the attention of the empire. Different sects have chosen different paths to develop. The Taiping Dao underestimated the empire's military power, which soon led to its own destruction. The Heavenly Master avoided direct conflict with the empire and achieved their religious and political goals by uniting with local forces when the empire was on its way to destruction.

**Keywords:** Daoism; Han Empire; Heavenly Master; Yellow Turban.

## 1. Introduction

Daoism is one of the cores of Chinese culture. The Daoist school has been spreading in China for hundreds of years. From the Western Han Dynasty, the empire took the Daoist school seriously. However, the emergence of Daoism and the decline of the Han Empire is closely linked. Daoism was initially formed in the late Han dynasty and greatly influenced the whole Han Empire. At the same time, the formation of Daoism was influenced by the Han dynasty's political and cultural traditions. Buddhism also gave a great impetus to the birth and development of Daoism. Thus, Daoism has been concerned with human nature's core components throughout Chinese history [1]. As the Han dynasty declined, so did Confucianism [2]. Against such a harsh background and under the strict guidance of enlightened Master, the prospect of a better, if not yet redeemed, personal life through religious rituals must seem tantalizing; this is particularly true in the provinces and rural areas, which are far from the highest socio-political spheres [3].

As a religion, Daoism attracted a group of officials not only by philosophy or ideology. For example, after the foundation of Daoism, it greatly influenced the thought system of ancient China and promoted the development of metaphysics. Daoism was also the first national religion in China to have a sophisticated system. Its religious thoughts were deeply imprinted on the common people and even the emperor. Thus, there are two ways for Daoism to get more followers and power. First is, through the influence of the emperor or other high-ranking officials to preach, the top-down method. The second is to gain the civilian class's trust and slowly spread to the aristocracy or start a rebellion, to establish a religious state.

There were often rebellions in ancient China, especially in areas with plagues or border areas. Because of the strong military power of the Han Empire, not every rebellion will have a great impact on the Han Empire. However, as one of the early Daoism sects, Taiping Dao launched an unprecedented religious uprising in China. The uprising, commonly known as the "Yellow Turban Rebellion," had a major impact on the Han court's hold on the empire. Taiping Dao is a Daoist sect that believes in *Scripture of the Great Peace (Taiping Jing)*, whose doctrine refuses to kill. Such a

seemingly peaceful religion set off a nationwide religious uprising. The Yellow Turban uprising could not happen without the unique background of the times.

Due to the short life and incompetence of successive emperors, the decline of the Han empire was inevitable. Huan and Ling, two emperors in the Eastern Han dynasty, rely on eunuchs, resulting in the royal power of the court and local authorities' communication is not smooth. At the same time, the Han Empire occurred a great plague, causing a nationwide impact and creating countless death; the empire's power was further weakened. To seek their continuity, local noble families have had to strengthen their own armed forces substantially. Ordinary people had neither the help of the official nor the support of their families. The people had to put their faith in religious organizations. For the first time, Daoism was organized, institutionalized, and even had military power.

With a certain amount of military strength, Daoism maintains a delicate relationship with the authorities. Heavenly Master Daoism, who preached mainly in Sichuan province, had not only military power but also charged certain membership fees for believers. Each follower needs to be offered 5 bushels of grain. As a result, they are also known as the Way of the Five Bushels of Grain. It mainly imitates the bureaucracy of the Han dynasty and incorporates more religious elements. Unlike Taiping Dao, Heavenly Master Daoism did not directly engage in large-scale confrontation with the Han Empire. Before it became a warlord in the late Han dynasty, he maintained good relations with local officials. Heavenly Master Daoism's political leanings are closely tied to its creed. The historical material and the Daoism religious classics combing is advantageous to Daoism, and the Han empire's interaction carries on the research. Although the Han empire was attacked by nomads or plagues, it did not shake the foundation. It was not until the rebellion of Daoism that the doom of the empire was revealed to the bureaucrats of the Han dynasty. Meanwhile, Daoism itself suffered a great failure. The interaction between religion and Empire had a profound influence on Chinese history.

At present, Chinese scholars are more inclined to study the relationship between Daoism and peasant uprisings. The early Daoism in the Eastern Han dynasty, mainly among the lower-class workers, often combined with the peasant revolution, became a revolutionary contact tool and organizational form [4]. As soon as Daoism took shape, it contained two branches with strong military power. Taiping Dao and Heavenly Master, though facing similar threats, which have different strengths. This paper analyzes the different choices made by two similar sects in the face of similar situations. To explore the impact of the collapse of the Eastern Han Empire on the spread of Daoism. Therefore, the first part of this article analyzes how the Eastern Han dynasty changed the Daoist thoughts into mystical and religious ones. The second part mainly discusses the behaviors and consequences of Tai Ping Dao and the Heavenly Master, respectively. Then discuss the collapse of the Eastern Han Empire on the impact of the two sects.

## **2. Organization of the Text**

### **2.1. Han Empire and Daoist School**

Since the establishment of the Western Han dynasty, the Empire used the HuangLao tradition to govern the country to restore normal economic and social life. Although Confucianism was officially promoted after Emperor Wu [5], the Daoist school continued to spread throughout the empire. Both Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling were devoted followers of the Daoist School [5]. The emphasis on Daoist School, however, did not make them the emperors that the Daoist School or Confucians had hoped for. Although emperors did not directly use Daoist School to rule the empire, the emperors' love of the Daoist School had a direct impact on the eunuchs. Eunuchs, as a special political group, also had a considerable tolerance of the Daoist School. The bureaucrats were more like Confucians, and the conflict between the two political groups became more intense. The competition for power and belief between the bureaucrat and eunuchs further led to political chaos in the Han Empire. The eunuchs had initiated a "proscription of the faction" (danggu) to prosecute people who defied them. Some of them are well-educated scholars, for example, Zheng Xuan and Ma Rong.

Not only were the emperors unable to solve the political mess, but they were also very superstitious. Because Liu Xiu, the founder of the Eastern Han dynasty, used prophecy to help him rule China [6]. Such prophecies are often called “charts and prophecies.” (tuchen) In addition to the traditional classics, the weft book was very popular in the Han dynasty. Charts and prophecies use weft books to support their legitimacy. Therefore, even the educated elite or the bureaucratic class also pays great attention to charts and prophecies. However, the information conveyed by the prophecy is very vague and difficult to understand. Sima Qian thought that Daoist substance is easily carried out, while their words are difficult to understand [5]. Daoist scholars want to use Daoist ideas to explain prophecies. These prophecies and witchcraft merge into Huang-Lao Dao. Therefore, Huang-Lao Dao absorbed a lot of non-Daoist ideas. Huanglao Dao is gradually from philosophy and political thought to a more mysterious nature of theory.

In the late Eastern Han dynasty, there were frequent epidemics and famines. Huang-Lao Dao focused on health, and some Daoists began to help ordinary people heal. Due to the limitations of medical conditions, many methods of treatment are mixed with regional witchcraft. Based on Huang-Lao Dao and sorceries, Daoist School became an institutional Daoism religion. There were two main sects of Daoism, Taiping Dao and Heavenly Master.

### **3. The interaction between Taiping Dao and the Han Empire**

#### **3.1. The Formation of the Taiping Dao and Scripture of the Great Peace.**

The founder of Taiping Dao was a civilian named Zhang Jiao. Zhang Jiao and his brothers first spread their creeds by helping others heal. Their religious creed was the *Scripture of the Great Peace*. The Scripture of the Great Peace is long, and its various sections have different argumentative goals. Zhang Jiao was not the author of the book, which had long been in the royal collection. An official named Xiangkai dedicated the book to the emperor [7]. However, no one paid much attention to the book at that time. Because Han emperors believed in Daoist School, bureaucrats often donated this kind of book. The content of Taiping Jing is very complicated, including medicine, mythology, politics, and ethics. The author of this book is called Ganji, probably a pseudonym. The book also spread widely among ordinary people. Zhang Jiao has been a missionary for more than a decade and has many followers. Zhang Jiao's followers included not only ordinary people but also some officials and even eunuchs. Around 180 A.D., the Taiping Dao established 36 territorial units. Each unit is not just a parish but also has military power [8].

The Han Empire itself did not have enough independent and strong religious organizations. Therefore, the rapid development of Taiping Dao has attracted the attention of some officials. Therefore, Taiping Dao has been closely watched by some prescient officials; they want to request the prohibition of Taiping Dao [8]. Nevertheless, due to the emperor's own love of the Daoist School and political incompetence, the empire connived in the development of the Taiping Dao. The leader of Taiping Dao is called “Master”. They would carry nine-knot, stave and use spells and blessed water to cure believers. Taiping Dao also has its own ritual system, which is very similar to the traditional Chinese rite. Although criticized by some officials, Taiping Dao has not suffered a great failure as an acceptable and philanthropic religion. It is strange that the leaders of the Taiping Dao have openly launched a rebellion.

The reason for the Taiping uprising is unknown. They put forward the slogan, “Azure Heaven is dead; Yellow Heaven should rule. The year is Jiazi, which is a very good omen for the world”. This slogan includes the ultimate purpose of the Yellow Turban uprising and the time of the uprising. However, due to the leak of a mole, they finally launched a hasty uprising in February 184. Zhang Jiao and his brothers called themselves “general of the Lord of Heaven”, “of Earth”, and “of Men”. This is an interesting comparison to Taiping Dao's goal of overthrowing the Han Empire. Because in China, only the emperor is the legitimate ruler and is regarded as the son of heaven. Before the uprising, Zhang Jiao called himself a “Great Teacher”. Zhang Jiao seems to have deliberately rejected the title of traditional Chinese ruler. Zhang Jiao thinks he is a messenger from heaven. Therefore, the

goal of the Taiping Dao is the will of the gods. In the early days of the Yellow Turban uprising, with their large numbers, they soon occupied a number of cities.

### 3.2. Yellow Turban Uprising

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The Han Empire soon elected good generals who served in the central government and transferred troops from the frontier regions. Hence, the Yellow Turban uprising lasted only nine months. Zhang Jiao died. Zhang Bao Zhang Liang died. Zhang Jiao’s forces, by and large, were largely untrained peasants who could not withstand the onslaught of regular troops. The Taiping Dao has been hit hard by the authorities.

Nevertheless, local officials recruited troops and built up their military strength in the war. The emperor himself lacked the political skills to control local officials, as he was fond of beautiful women, music, and other things. Therefore, even though most of the Yellow Turban’s soldiers have been eliminated or surrendered, there are still some followers who have turned into bandits. Since then, the Han Empire, from time to time, outbreaks the small-scale uprising. It was difficult for the emperor to completely eradicate the military threat, while the politics of the Han Empire faced greater risks. The provincial governance was neglected, corrupt officials were appointed, and the welfare of the empire’s subjects was not taken into consideration as a result of the factional fighting between the eunuchs and the empress’ family in the imperial court [9]. The emperor was at the heart of the Empire’s politics. The emperor’s sudden death led to more tension between the eunuchs and their relatives. Eunuchs derived their power from the emperor they served, and their relatives were the official bureaucrats appointed by the emperor.

In order to wipe out the eunuchs, the relatives tried to bring in local officials who had gained strong military power in the Yellow Turban rebellion. Under normal circumstances, the Han empire would not allow local officials to have a strong military. In the *Houhanshu*, “Because the empire eliminated Yellow Turban. Han changes the reign title to Zhongping. Huangfu Song suggested using a year’s worth of Jizhou income for disaster relief, and the Emperor (Ling) agreed. Huangfu Song destroyed the Yellow Turban, and his fame is legendary. But the politics day after day disorderly like a day, And political chaos and empty coffer [6].” Therefore, although the Taiping Dao failed militarily, it indirectly led to the political imbalance of the Han Empire.

Thus, a vicious circle is formed. Local governments need more money and food to consolidate their rule. Officials demand more taxes from the people, which in turn causes people to live in misery. Helpless people were forced to join anti-government religious organizations. These religious organizations are considered bandits by the government. The more bandits there are, the more powerful the forces will need to crack down. Meantime, in order to crack down on the growing number of bandits and ease financial pressures, the central government has had to give more power to local governments. To maintain their own strong military strength, local governments must retain more tax revenue, further reducing the central government revenue. In the end, the central government lost both military and financial power, retaining only political legitimacy. As the political conflict intensified, the empire inevitably went to ruin.

#### 4. The dual identity of the Heavenly Master

Compared with the Taiping Dao, which led to a nationwide religious uprising, Heavenly Master's reach was fixed and remote. Heavenly Master was founded by Zhang Daoling and his descendants. The territory of the influence of the Heavenly Master is mainly in today's Sichuan province. Heavenly Master's most respected creed is Xiang'er Commentary to the Laozi. This book is a commentary on the Dao Te Ching. The Heavenly Master also created a kind of cosmology that would serve to appropriate practices that were disapproved by the imperial court (and thus appeal to those who engage in those practices), but they were doing so in a way that allowed them to advocate for a close-knit, hierarchical social structure [10]. However, Heavenly Master's organizational structure is far more complex than Taiping Dao's.

This sect is also called "grain bandits" because those who want to join this religion need to offer 5 bushels of grain. The third-generation leader of the Heavenly Master, Zhang Lu, and his mother had good relations with Governor Liu Yan. Liu Yan, a royal, came to Yizhou as a governor to escape the chaos of the central government. Liu Yan liked Emperor Ling's enthusiasm for Daoist School. Therefore, Liu quickly accepted the Heavenly Master's Word and appointed Zhang Lu as a military officer. Hence, the Heavenly Master has not only been a folk shamanic religion. Zhang Lu's dual identity greatly facilitated the spread of the Heavenly Master. During the Yellow Turban uprising, some of the Heavenly Master's followers tried to rebel. Zhang Lu's official status means that the Heavenly Master cannot be banned by the empire. Second, Zhang Lu has limited military control.

However, Zhang Lu's ambition was not just to be an imperial commander. When Liu Yan ordered Zhang Lu and Zhang Xiu, another Heavenly Master leader, to attack Hanzhong governor, Zhang Lu not only succeeded in conquering Hanzhong but also killed Zhang Xiu. Zhang Lu became the only leader in Hanzhong. When Liu Yan died, Zhang Lu broke off a good relationship with Liu Yan's son, Liu Zhang. Because of Hanzhong's unique geography, Zhang Lu has not faced much pressure from the central government. Heavenly Master developed an organizational structure similar to that of the Han imperial bureaucracy. He did not establish government subalterns and used a libationer (Jijiu). Libationers serve as a priest to Heavenly Master and also have administrative power. He also divides the territory into 24 parishes.

Heavenly Master has thus preserved its organizational structure. When Cao Cao conquered Hanzhong, he ordered Zhang Lu to move north. Heavenly Master got a good chance to start preaching to the aristocrats and bureaucrats of the central government. From a regional religion, Heavenly Master accidentally gets the opportunity to preach from the top down. The aristocrats need the consolation of religion in the war. The theory of the Heavenly Master was very attractive to these nobles. The ideal espoused in the Xiang'er commentary is the transcendent noble [11]. As a result, Heavenly Master has not only avoided large-scale conflict with the government but has also managed to gain more well-educated followers. Soon, the center of the Heavenly Master shifted to the north of China. During the Sichuan period, Heavenly Master were sometimes more like bandits, and many of their followers were peasants and even homeless. Heavenly Master in northern China is a more organized and honorable religion. The reason is that the Han empire has always stressed the centralization of the power system. No non-governmental force is allowed to hold too much political power. The division of the Han Empire made Heavenly Master a local warlord, but the political legitimacy of this warlord was insufficient; only when it was controlled by the state could it have a real legal, political status.

#### 5. Conclusion

The Eastern Han Empire had a very special position in Chinese history. The establishment of the Eastern Han dynasty had a strong legitimacy and completely inherited the political system of the Western Han dynasty. As a result, the culture of the empire was not suffered badly damaged. Both the aristocrats and the ordinary people are still keen on Daoist School. Because of the Eastern Han dynasty's emphasis on divination, charts, and prophecies, Daoist School is not only a school of

thought. It absorbed regional witchcraft and gradually shamanized and organized. Unlike Buddhism, Daoism was the first religion to be born in China. Therefore, the Eastern Han Empire also had no experience with religion. At first, the Han Empire mistook Daoism for an emerging academic community. The Han Empire did not take any measures to regulate religion but let it develop freely. Daoism spread its religion by curing diseases and soon became a powerful folk force.

The centralization of the Han Empire always tried to suppress local power to maintain its rule. Although Daoism was not suppressed by the Empire, the Han Empire itself had a complete and powerful bureaucratic system. For the empire religion initially entered the empire's sphere of vision as an independent entity. Under normal circumstances, the empire would not allow religion to be capable of antagonizing the government. Nevertheless, religious leaders not only wanted to gain economic support, they even gained some political influence. Different branches of Daoism have chosen different ways to gain power. Although Daoism was not suppressed by the Empire, the Han Empire itself had a complete and powerful bureaucratic system. The bureaucrats have taken up social and political power and left no room for religion. Therefore, it is difficult for Daoism to enhance its political status further. However, because of successive emperors' incompetence and the unique cultural context of the Eastern Han dynasty, the empire ignored the power of Daoism. Currently, the Empire is busy with the power struggle and has no time to consider "Religion".

The emperor, as the Supreme Leader of the empire, could not balance the political group within the Empire, which led to chaos in the government and a sharp decline in fiscal revenue. The empire was no longer indestructible but allowed religion to grow. The Taiping Dao, after thinking it had accumulated enough power, chose to rebel against the Empire Head. However, the Taiping Dao underestimated the military strength of the empire. Meantime, the empire had excellent generals and powerful infantry. The widespread Taiping Dao was almost wiped out, religious organizations and rituals were completely lost, and a small number of residual organizations into bandits. Although the religious goal of Taiping Dao was not realized, it greatly intensified the contradictions within the empire. In order to protect local governments themselves, they have to upgrade their local military strength, thus weakening the central government's control over the locals. The Empire succeeded in suppressing religious uprisings, but the financial and military impact was devastating.

In the end, Emperor Ling's death triggered widespread political turmoil. The Han empire began to collapse, and there was no time for uprisings. Local governments have gained unprecedented political autonomy. Zhang Lu, the leader of Heavenly Master, adopted a strategy of "Befriending a distant state while attacking a neighbor" to get along with local governors, under which he developed rapidly. When Heavenly Master gained enough strength to be independent, it contacted the central government decisively and gained political legitimacy. Heavenly Master avoided direct conflict with the empire and not only gained the support of the common people but also received the support of the aristocrats. The rapid development of Daoism took place in the unique social context and political background of the Eastern Han dynasty. In ancient China, it was only when the empire was in political chaos and unable to maintain control over the bureaucracy that religion was able to gain political and even military power. Therefore, the decline of the Han Empire is the most important reason for the development of Daoism.

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