

PART ONE

Inspiration: The Organization
and Ideology of White
Lotus Sects

IN 1813 members of certain previously uncoordinated and non-violent religious sects, convinced by prophecies contained in their religious literature, anticipated the imminent destruction of existing society and its replacement by a better world and joined together to bring about this change. Nearly eighty thousand people lost their lives in this unsuccessful attempt to destroy the Ch'ing government. While the great majority of rebel supporters could hint at the intensity of their discontent only by giving their lives, the others, the sect members who were both the leaders and the nucleus of the movement, could and did articulate their goals and aspirations. It was their visions of an apocalypse and utopia that gave birth to the rebellion and inspiration to those who died in its cause. Moreover, it was these several thousand sect members who planned the uprisings ahead of time, despite the watchful eye of the Ch'ing government, and then rallied more than one hundred thousand people to their cause. Arranging for uprisings in a dozen cities in three provinces was not an easy or haphazard undertaking, nor was assembling thousands of men to fight a government army a simple matter of ringing a gong and gathering a crowd. Such a rebellion might seem a prairie fire, struck by a single spark and burning everything in sight, but it was not. Finding, recruiting, and mobilizing men for an enterprise of this size and risk involved quietly creating and activating extensive but selective personal networks. Not everyone was interested, useful, trustworthy, or even available for this kind of endeavor. It was the institution of the religious sect that provided the organizational vehicle for initiating and sustaining this rebellion. In order to understand the Eight Trigrams rebellion, it is therefore necessary to examine first the organizational system and millennial vision that produced it.

The religion that inspired the Eight Trigrams uprising had its own beliefs and practices, literature, ritual, and organization. During the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties this religion was branded as heterodoxy and prohibited by law. In consequence, its ideas and practices were transmitted in simple fashion on an individual basis with little reliance on public institutions such as temples or clergy. The religion thus manifested itself as short-lived groups consisting of a senior teacher and all his pupils and their pupils. Each group would have its own name, would gather occasionally for small meetings in a private home, and might persist for one or more generations in any

one place. After the death of its senior teacher, a group often fragmented into smaller branches, some of which might take a different name. Not only were these groups separated in time and place from one another and often different in their specific practices, but they tried deliberately to be so. Each teacher sought to isolate and pass on the true system and set of practices that would bring salvation. Nevertheless, all drew on a common tradition, subscribed to a common core of beliefs, and based their teachings on scriptures particular to this religion.

Believers called this religion their *chiao* 教, "teaching." They also used this same word *chiao* to refer to the organization through which that teaching was perpetuated. Because of a regrettable lack of alternatives I have translated the organizational usage of the term *chiao* as "sect." In choosing a single name for this admittedly diverse popular religious teaching, I have—with even greater reluctance—followed traditional historians and called it the White Lotus religion.¹ There was, however, no single "White Lotus Society." There was only a diverse White Lotus religious teaching that found expression in sects calling themselves by a wide variety of names. The following section explains this matter more fully.

Most, perhaps all, of the elements of the White Lotus tradition existed prior to the Ch'ing dynasty and were deeply rooted in China's past. This fact and the occasional use of the name White Lotus by both religious and rebellious groups since the Sung dynasty² have obscured the relatively late genesis of this sectarian religion. In fact, the various components do not appear to have crystallized into this distinctive religious tradition until the middle of the sixteenth century. It was during this period that the first references to the central deity of this religion, the Eternal and Venerable Mother, appear in the historical record, and most sect literature handed down to believers for centuries afterward dates from the late sixteenth century.³ Many sects place their own founding in the late Ming period, and it is at this time that frequent reports of sect activity of this type are recorded by historians.⁴

Although it is not clear how or why this religion took shape, its ideas and practices are somewhat more accessible. Little research has been done on this subject, however, and such information as does exist is widely scattered and of very uneven quality. What follows in Part One is therefore only a patchwork with many of the pieces still missing. I have relied primarily on information found in Ch'ing documents for the years 1812 through 1820 (by the Chinese calendar

Chia-ch'ing 17 through 25) and supplemented this with material from the religious literature of these sects dating from the 1830s (some of which has been preserved),⁵ and to a lesser extent with primary and secondary source material on nineteenth- and twentieth-century sects.

COSMOLOGY AND HISTORY

The central deity of these sects was a powerful mother goddess who, though she became an object of sectarian worship in the sixteenth century, had antecedents in Chinese popular religion from earliest times. By the first century B.C. a deity known as *Hsi-wang-mu* 西王母 (Mother Ruler of the West) had already become associated with millennial expectations.⁶ White Lotus sects of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties called her *Wu-sheng lao-mu* 無生老母, Eternal (literally, without birth or beyond rebirth) Venerable Mother. She was also known as *Wu-sheng fu-mu* 無生父母 (which I have rendered as Eternal Progenitor) or, more rarely, *Wu-sheng fo-mu* 無生佛母 (Eternal Buddha Mother).⁷ Since the late nineteenth century she has been called by a variety of other names, including *Yao-ch'ih chin-mu* 瑶池金母 (Golden Mother of the Jade Pool), *Wang-mu niang-niang* 王母娘娘 (Empress Mother Ruler), and *Lao-sheng-mu* 老聖母 (Venerable Sagely Mother).⁸

The story of the Eternal Mother was to be found in the literature of her sects. There she was described as the progenitor of mankind: she had given birth to a son and daughter who had married and were in turn the ancestors of all men. She had sent mankind, her children, to the "Eastern world" to live on earth. To the Eternal Mother's great distress, her children soon "indulged in vanity and lost their original nature."⁹ "All living beings were confused and lost in the red dust world; they had fallen and knew not how to return to their origin." The Eternal Mother, seeing her offspring in this state, was filled with sorrow. "[She] weeps as she thinks of her children. She has sent them many messages and letters [urging them] to return home and to stop devoting themselves solely to avarice in the sea of bitterness. [She calls them] to return to the Pure Land, to come back to Mount Ling, so that mother and children can meet again and sit together on the golden lotus."¹⁰

Sectarian literature combined this image of an aged mother, longing and weeping for her lost children, with a romantic vision of a

splendid paradise where both could be reunited. The Eternal Mother wanted her children to return to their "primordial native land," their "original home in the world of true emptiness" (*chen-k'ung chia-hsiang* 真空家鄉), the spiritual paradise that mankind had once left and where their mother still resided. On one level this Original Home was the place where one's ancestors had lived and where one's roots were, symbolizing for all believers what the ancestral village meant to every Chinese family. On another level, this home meant the womb from which all were expelled at birth. "When he ascends to the eternal realm," stated one scripture, "the child sees his dear mother. When he enters the mother's womb, . . . he eternally returns to peace and security." "When the child meets his mother," said another, "he confirms that he is unborn (*wu-sheng* 無生) and will not again turn in the wheel of transmigration." The Original Home was a nirvana: "in contrast to a life of uncertainty and aimless wandering, full of unending suffering, if one is able to ascend to the Primordial Native Land, then for him, birth and death forever cease." As a spiritual paradise, this Original Home in the World of True Emptiness symbolized safety and security, stability, comfort, and consummate dependence. It was also a splendid and luxurious place, a paradise that incorporated many of the features of the Pure Land, or Western Paradise, of popular Chinese Buddhism. The Eternal Mother was said to live in a beautiful palace there, with "seven-treasure pools and eight-virtue streams. The ground is made of yellow gold, and bordered with golden ropes. There are buildings, terraces, halls, and pavilions of great variety."¹¹

Having described this paradise to which the Eternal Mother longed to bring her children, the literature of these sects goes on to explain how the Eternal Mother would, to this end, intervene in human history. She would send down to earth gods and buddhas who would teach a new system of values by means of which men could find salvation and thus "come home." Because mankind was "steeped in wickedness" the Eternal Mother had been compelled to make repeated efforts to open this road to salvation. She had first sent down the Lamp-lighting Buddha (*Jan-teng fo* 燃燈佛) to save the world; then she had sent down the Sakyamuni Buddha (*Shih-chia fo* 釋迦佛) to try again. Each had been able to save some of her children, but most of mankind remained lost. Therefore, the Eternal Mother had promised that she would send down yet another god to lead men to salvation, the Buddha Maitreya (*Mi-le fo* 彌勒佛).

It is one of the salient characteristics of this religion that believers

expected the arrival of each of these Buddhas to coincide with the termination of three great periods of history. Each of these eras was termed a "kalpa" (*chieh* 劫 or *chieh-shu* 劫數). In traditional Buddhist thought, history was divided into great kalpa periods, each lasting hundreds of thousands of years. Each period was marked by a steady degeneration, and toward the end of each kalpa, Buddhist teachings would appear, prevail at first, and then be gradually undermined. At the end of a kalpa a cosmic holocaust would destroy the world and a new period would begin.¹² White Lotus sects had absorbed and adapted this view. They asserted that there would be only three kalpas, each "governed" by the Buddha sent by the Eternal Mother. Each kalpa would last a specified length of time (considerably foreshortened from the Indian original) and would be associated with a certain teaching. At the end of each period, those "children" who had been saved would be greeted by a Dragon Flower Assembly (*lung-hua hui* 龍華會) held in the Eternal Mother's palace and attended by all the gods and immortals.¹³ One sect member described the scheme as follows:

The first [period] was that of Lamp-lighting Buddha who was in charge of the world for 108,000 years; he sat on a five-leafed azure lotus throne. The name [for the teaching during this period] was the Azure Sun Assembly (*ch'ing-yang hui* 青陽會) or the Ch'ing-yang sect (*chiao* 教). When the period of Lamp-lighting Buddha's responsibility was over, it was Sakyamuni Buddha who became responsible for the world. He sits on a seven-leafed red lotus platform. The name is the Hung-yang (Red Sun) Assembly, or the Hung-yang sect. When the period of Sakyamuni Buddha's responsibility is over, it is Maitreya Buddha who will be responsible for the world. He will sit on a nine-leafed white lotus platform. The name will be Pai-yang (White Sun) Assembly or Pai-yang sect.¹⁴

A great many religious books were used by sect members, and they provided elaboration of this iconography and variations in detail. According to one, the length of the kalpas was specified as 108,000, 27,000, and 97,200 years respectively.¹⁵ One scripture stated that each kalpa would be characterized by a different time system (perhaps related to cosmic changes). In the first, the Ch'ing-yang era, there were six hour-periods (that is, twelve hours) in each day,¹⁶ fifteen days in each month, and only six months in a year. In the present, Hung-yang, period, there are twelve hour-periods (twenty-four

hours) in a day, thirty days in a month, and twelve months in a year. During the coming Pai-yang era, there will be eighteen hour-periods (thirty-six hours) in a day, forty-five days in a month, and eighteen months in a year.¹⁷

The end of one kalpa would be characterized, sect members believed, by great disorder caused by both human wickedness and natural disasters. At such a time, "The Three Powers [Heaven, Earth, and Man] will not be in harmony. When Heaven is not in harmony, the stars and planets will roll about chaotically. When Earth is not in harmony, the five grains will not grow. When Man is not in harmony, the people will be in great distress."¹⁸ These calamities would be sent down by the Eternal Mother as a punishment to mankind for refusing salvation and for allowing the "true way" to disappear once more.¹⁹

Some sects believed that each "turn of the kalpa" (*yun-chieh* 運劫) would be accomplished with its own distinctive type of calamity. For example, one group believed that there was flood after the first kalpa, fire after the second, and wind after the third.²⁰ All sect members believed that at the end of the present kalpa, there would again be an apocalypse, and the literature is full of descriptions of the horrors to come:

When Maitreya comes to rule the universe, there will be chaos for seventy-seven days. The sun and the moon will alter their courses, and the climate will change.

At that time the four elements, earth, water, fire, and wind would all shake at the same time so that not only the people would suffer death, but also the gods would have no place to live on earth.²¹

One group awaited widespread death caused by the "Old Tiger Epidemic," and another claimed that "a great calamity was about to descend, a wind of destruction was about to sweep the world from the sky."²² Rebels in 1796 expected that "for an entire day and night, a black wind (黑風) will rise up and blow, killing countless people, leaving mountains of white bones and oceans of blood." In 1813 the Eight Trigram rebels, heirs to this tradition and its visions of apocalypse, predicted that "the great Pai-yang kalpa would arrive and cut away [the past] with a black wind for seven days and seven nights."²³

These were terrifying prophecies of catastrophe and destruction,

especially for nonbelievers, who were told that the Eternal Mother would mercilessly use this apocalypse to punish them. For her followers, however, the Eternal Mother promised protection and safety in the midst of chaos. One believer explained: "In the future those who are not in our assembly will meet with the disasters accompanying the arrival of the kalpa"; another told a friend more bluntly, "In this sect there are lots of good benefits. If you join the sect, you live. If you don't, you die. Wait until the 15th of this month [when the kalpa was expected to arrive] and you will understand."²⁴

Most sects of the Ch'ing period believed themselves to be living in the second kalpa, and they anticipated the arrival of the third and last Pai-yang era.²⁵ They believed that as the kalpa ended, the Eternal Mother would send down into the world Maitreya Buddha, who, armed with the correct teaching (*chiao*), would save all believers by showing them how to survive the apocalypse and return to their Original Home. Since it was through belief in the correct and true teaching that one could be saved, the central concern of all believers was to determine the nature of this teaching and to follow it. Different teachers and different interpretations, all based on these same traditions and texts, produced a variety of teachings, a variety of sects. Each sect group claimed that its own practices and predictions were more correct than the others and assured its members that theirs was the true path to salvation. Always bearing in mind the death and destruction that awaited those who did not follow the Eternal Mother, each sect tried to propagate its own "excellent system for rescuing the scattered and lost" and to convert all nonbelievers, so that their teachings could be established as the foundation for all ordered human activity.²⁶

Anticipating the day when their teachings would prevail, Ch'ing dynasty White Lotus sects saw the coming Pai-yang era as a millennium. The calamities accompanying the end of the second kalpa would eliminate nonbelievers and only the followers of the Eternal Mother would remain alive. Some sect members expressed this romantic and utopian vision in the form of a metaphor, asserting that when the kalpa catastrophes occurred all believers would go to a place called Yun-ch'eng 雲城 (Cloud City) where they would live and be protected:

Yun-ch'eng is a general term we use because looking at it from afar, it seems to be a cloud; looking at it from up close, it appears to be a city. This place is very wide and broad. It reaches as

far as the Yellow River in the south, to Yen in the north, to the Eastern Sea in the east, and to the mountains in the west. In it there are several ten thousand people. All are in the sect.²⁷

In more concrete terms, the turning of the kalpa meant the elimination of existing society and the coming to power of the followers of the Eternal Mother. Sect members hoped for wealth and power and prestige in a world where "everyone was in the sect." Their teachings, the true moral order, would be the basis for all relationships between men and between heaven and earth and man, so that the "harmony of all things would be achieved." In such a utopia, "heaven and earth will be in harmony. Among men there will be neither youth nor old age, neither birth nor death. There will be no distinctions between men and women. This then is the Great Way of Long Life in which all will live for eighty-one thousand years. When the time destined by Heaven has been fulfilled, this new universe will be established."²⁸

This was the view of history transmitted by these sects, the key to understanding events of the past, present, and future with which their literature and tradition provided them. They believed that they truly understood what was happening in the world, and they felt this knowledge to be a privilege and a responsibility. Sect members waited with impatience for the time when the Eternal Mother would signal the turn of the kalpa when they, with her protection, would survive the calamities and greet the millennium. In consequence of this, a major focus of their religious literature and of the sect leaders who interpreted it was on the problem of determining exactly when the crucial time would come. Two events always accompanied the end of the kalpa, great calamities and the appearance of the Buddha sent by the Eternal Mother; believers therefore looked constantly for signs that these might be occurring.

In bad times—periods of great wars, droughts, famines, or epidemics—members of White Lotus sects would ask themselves whether this meant that the turn in the kalpa was about to come. Of course the converse was equally true, and if a sect teacher announced the kalpa was ending at a time when life was relatively good, his followers might be skeptical. "If you want to rebel, you must wait a few more years," one sect member counseled another. "How can you do it during such a peaceful time? You all are too early."²⁹ If, however, there had been a series of natural disasters, believers might then begin looking for the Buddha promised by the Eternal Mother. At

such a time, a man teaching a new set of religious practices and claiming to be Maitreya reincarnated might, if he were persuasive, gain a large following.

There are no indications that this Maitreya incarnate would have any special identifying characteristics other than a generally "extraordinary" appearance.³⁰ Nor is it easy to find any precise indications as to what sect members expected him to do. Was he to be the founder of a sect, bringing the correct teaching to the world? Or would he merely assist or inspire a prominent teacher, giving the Eternal Mother's sanction to the other man's teachings and joining with him to usher in the new era? It is possible that each sect answered these questions differently; nevertheless, although Maitreya might not be recognized by appearance or even actions, he might possibly be identified by his surname. It appears that there were certain names traditionally favored, by others as well as by members of White Lotus sects, as the surnames of great rulers or gods reborn. These names were Li, Liu, Chu, Chang, and Wang.

The surname Li 李, often called by the names of the component elements of the written character itself, Mu-tzu 木子 or Shih-pa-tzu 十八子, was the surname of the ruling family of the T'ang dynasty (618-907). More important, it was the traditional surname of Lao-tzu, who had since the Han period become a messianic figure to some popular religious sects, a god who would be reborn on earth to save mankind.³¹ Liu 劉 (also called Mao-chin 卯金 or Mao-chin-tao 卯金刀) was the surname of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) ruling house and after this formative period became a natural surname for would-be rulers. To the Eight Trigrams of 1813, Liu was also both the surname used by Maitreya in a previous incarnation and the name of a prominent family of sect teachers.³² Chu 朱 (also called Niu-pa 牛八) was the surname of the Ming (1368-1644) ruling family whose restoration was the frequent goal of many rebellions during the Ch'ing period.³³

Chang 張 (called also Kung-ch'ang 弓長) was the surname of Chang Chüeh and Chang Tao-ling, leaders of the Yellow Turban millenarian rebels at the end of the Han. The charisma of this surname was perpetuated through the title of Heavenly Master (*t'ien-shih* 天師) held by the Chang family of Taoist masters in Kiangsi province since that time. One sect scripture told the story of the Patriarch Kung-ch'ang to whom the Eternal Mother transmitted the law.³⁴ The surname Wang 王, although it has the meaning of "king," was not generally considered an especially imperial or holy name

except within the White Lotus tradition. There it became identified with a family of sect practitioners from a small village in northern Chihli province. This Wang family had transmitted sect teachings since the sixteenth century and over time their network of pupils became very extended. The preeminence of this family was asserted and published in religious books written about them. This literature predicted that "Maitreya Buddha will appear in the family of the sect patriarch named Wang from Stone-buddha village."³⁵

If a leader claiming to be Maitreya had made himself known during a period of some distress, the problem still remained for believers to determine exactly when the great cosmic catastrophes would descend. It was usually a sect leader (who may or may not have claimed to be Maitreya himself) who made this determination according to sect literature. White Lotus scriptures, written in poetic, sometimes abstruse language, were full of phrases and passages that could be interpreted and reinterpreted. Some scriptures named certain years, designating them by the sixty-year stems-and-branches system, as the time of the arrival of the new kalpa. Of these, the first year of the sixty-year cycle, the *chia-tzu* 甲子 year, had long been considered a likely and auspicious time for such a beginning. One sect text stated:

In the *chia-tzu* year, a holy one will be sent down, and on the 3d day of the 3d month during the noon hour-period will be born as a member of the Mu-tzu [Li] family. During the third *chia* year after that [i.e., thirty years later], all men of talent will go to the Yu and Yen [Peking] area for there will be great calamities.³⁶

Another scripture quoted the Eternal Mother as saying:

During the final period in the *chia-tzu* year,
the end of the kalpa will approach.
In the *hsin-ssu* year there will still be no harvests,
and the people will die of starvation.
In the *kuei-wei* year, caught in the conjunction of the three
afflictions, epidemics will spread.³⁷

A year specified by both its stem and branch name would occur only once every sixty years. Other predictions, such as "the catastrophes of the *hsu* and *hai* years,"³⁸ specified only the branch name, and years fulfilling these prophecies would recur every twelve years. The variety of different predictions using this year system gave a sect leader

considerable flexibility and, like fortune-tellers of all sorts in China, sect masters manipulated these cyclical characters and used them to prove conjunction between current events and the prophecies set forth in sect scriptures.

Within the year, certain days (such as the 3d day of the 3d month, mentioned above) would be specified for the start of the new kalpa, the birthday of Maitreya, and so forth. One sect predicting the coming millennium for the year 1814 had calculated the first day of the kalpa in terms of the first day of spring, traditionally referred to as "when the dragon lifts his head" (that is, when the ice breaks). They figured that "traditionally the 2d day of the 2d month was considered the dragon's head, and the 29th day of the 2d month was considered the dragon's tail; therefore they had chosen [2/29 as] their date by selecting the time when the manifestation of the dragon would be complete."³⁹ Any *chia-tzu* day (for the days of the year were also so numbered) would be considered auspicious, and as we shall see below the 15th day of the 8th month also appears to have been a frequently favored day.⁴⁰

Once a sect leader could point to a reincarnated Maitreya and to the signs of escalating catastrophe and could predict a date on which the new kalpa would begin, he and his followers did not simply sit back and wait for the millennium to arrive. Their certain knowledge of this imminent apocalypse drove them to convert and save as many people as possible. As the terrible day approached, they distributed special charms, identifying signs (banners, clothing, headgear, for example), and other protective devices which, leaders assured their followers, would save all believers in the Eternal Mother from harm. Even more important, sect members believed it their responsibility to "respond to the kalpa" (*ying chieh* 應劫) by mobilizing their sects and, as the agents of the Eternal Mother and the avant-garde of the millennium, to speed the destruction of the existing order and its replacement by a better system. Sect members called this "making known the Way" (*ming-tao* 明道)⁴¹ and in this response to the kalpa were transformed from secret believers into openly and publicly committed followers of the Eternal Mother.

In order to transform religious sects into revolutionary organizations, a higher level framework was necessary, one in which many dispersed and separate sects could be incorporated and coordinated. Such frameworks were often simple, even crude, borrowings from White Lotus tradition or popular religion in general. For example, one sect found a phrase in a scripture that said "the twenty-eight

constellations will not come into world the until the *ping-hsu* year"; they used this to pull together many different sects whose different leaders were designated the "twenty-eight constellations (*hsiu* 宿)."42 A more common practice was to combine eight or nine groups on an equal basis by naming each one after either the eight trigrams (*pa-kua* 八卦) or the nine mansions (*chiu-kung* 九宮). The eight trigrams were symbols representing the eight possible combinations of three solid (representing *yang*) or broken (representing *yin*) lines. These eight trigrams themselves could be combined in sets of six lines to form the sixty-four hexagrams on which the *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*—a perennial source of symbolism—was based. The nine mansions were astrological divisions of the sky which, like the eight trigrams, had become associated in popular religion—the White Lotus tradition in particular—with an array of colors, gods, directions of the compass, elements, numbers, animals, and symbols and objects of all sorts.⁴³

SECT SCRIPTURES

Although many sect ideas and practices were transmitted orally, it was through the written word that the story of the Eternal Mother and the three kalpas was safely passed down within these White Lotus sects for nearly four hundred years. The preceding summary of this cosmology and history describes only the most basic tenets of sect ideology and does not suggest the great variety of legends and stories and elaborations on basic themes that filled these scriptures—books that are called in Chinese *ching* 經 (sutras or classics) or *pao-chüan* 寶卷 (precious volumes).

In addition to the accounts of the Eternal Mother, of the birth of mankind, and of the three Buddhas and three kalpas, many of these scriptures told the story of how a particular sect was founded. They described the birth of the sect patriarch and told how he communicated with the Eternal Mother⁴⁴ and was sent by her to bring the true teaching to the world so that those who believed and followed it could be saved. Said one book: "On the 15th day of the 1st month of the *chia-wu* year of the Wan-li reign [1594], the most honored P'iao Kao Venerable Patriarch, while living on the Great Tiger Mountain, opened wide a new means of salvation to save the multitude of the lost."⁴⁵ There were many such stories, and the following, condensed from a much longer passage serves as another example:

The divine Buddha, the Holy One, will enter the world and be born among those of the Eastern world. The place where he will come down and be born is on the central plain, south of Yen, in San-yuan-li: Ta-pao village. He will be called Kung-ch'ang. . . . The Eternal Mother told Kung-ch'ang, "Come in person and receive the Law. Mother will transmit to you this very day the ten steps to self-perfection." . . . The Venerable Mother then instructed Patriarch Kung-ch'ang to go to the east to find the scriptures [and] Kung-ch'ang went to the region of Stone-buddha village to get the true scriptures. . . . [She] told Kung-ch'ang about the coming kalpa calamities and Kung-ch'ang said, "In this kalpa, how can we be saved?" The Eternal Mother said, "I will give you magic charms to save people."⁴⁶

In addition to these pseudohistorical accounts, sect literature contained a variety of other tales of the Eternal Mother, often interwoven with traditional myths and legends. In one such story, for example, "Buddha converted the brothers Pao-chung and Pao-hsiao, their mother, and their wives. While they were on their way to Hsiang-shan to fulfill their vows, they met the Eternal Mother on a wagon drawn by a white ox. She asked them to ride in her wagon to the Cave of Immortal Water at the Heavenly River to see the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Buddha."⁴⁷ These stories not only helped to establish the Eternal Mother as a legitimate actor in mythological dramas, but provided sect members with a convenient proselytizing device.

Sung Chin-yao and the others often assembled [and] . . . listened to [their teacher] Ku Liang tell stories about buddhas and immortals. . . . When Ku Liang sat and talked, they didn't close the gate, and so people would come to listen and see what was happening. Their fellow villagers [here named] . . . often came and listened and in that way became familiar [with the sect].⁴⁸

The storytelling atmosphere was emphasized by the language of some of these scriptures, which was similar to that of Chinese folk plays and popular songs. Sometimes, perhaps in imitation of sutra readings, a simple drumbeat or gong would be provided to give rhythm to the reading or recitation of a scripture.⁴⁹

Not all sect literature contained stories. Some preserved instead abstruse technical information used by sect leaders. There were books

containing pictures of *fu* 符, charms that were part character and part drawing, and the uses to which they were designed. A *fu* would be copied from the book onto a piece of paper and then burned. The ashes would be immersed in water or tea and then drunk by a person who was ill; this would effect a cure. Other books contained *chou* 咒, incantations. These would be recited and, like charms, had a beneficial, protective, or healing effect. While many charms and incantations could be transmitted orally, these books served as reference manuals for those who needed them.⁵⁰ Like the "inside story" which the sect scriptures related, the books of magic spells and formulas were repositories for the "secrets" disclosed by the Eternal Mother to her followers. Because of the great power of the Eternal Mother, these charms and incantations had more than ordinary efficacy: "If you burned and drank [a certain charm], it would enable you to enlighten your mind and realize the Buddha-nature within you," said one sect teacher; moreover, with it "you could avoid the calamities of fire, flood, and the sword."⁵¹

Most of the scriptures used by White Lotus sects during the Ch'ing were written and first printed at the end of the sixteenth century. Since that time, these scriptures had been carefully preserved and reprinted, or copied and recopied by hand.⁵² The Ch'ing government had a firm policy of confiscating all heretical (*hsieh* 邪) books, declaring them to be "full of wild and irregular talk with rebellious passages that make one's hair stand on end."⁵³ Whenever a sect teacher was arrested, his house was searched and all suspicious literature was seized and then destroyed. Books were sometimes even destroyed by owners who were afraid of being caught with incriminating evidence.⁵⁴ Therefore, despite the dangers involved in ownership of the books themselves or their printing blocks, constant efforts and frequent copying and reprinting were a necessity if a steady supply of sect scriptures was to be maintained.⁵⁵ These books looked much like the Buddhist sutras after which they were modeled. According to the district magistrate Huang Yü-p'ien, who confiscated many of these scriptures in the 1830s, "they were printed in large type, bound with brocade covers, with pictures of buddhas on the first and last pages." They usually consisted of only one volume, although some were two or even three volumes in length.⁵⁶

Because of their scarcity, illegality, and importance to sect doctrine, these scriptures were treated with great respect. They contained the Eternal Mother's keys to understanding history and truth and were believed to have great value and power. The author of one book

encouraged the reader, saying, "If this book be in anyone's family, then those who fully understand its meaning will not be exposed to any adversities or obstacles; their door will be guarded by the Holy Ones. . . . All who are unwearied in the study of this book will ascend bodily to the Purple Cloud [where Immortals live]." ⁵⁷ Sect leaders with prophetic power (or aspirations) would use these books to prove the accuracy of their predictions and their understanding. A few lines quoted from a scripture could achieve wide currency and provide proof of the consonance between sect plans and the heavenly order. ⁵⁸

These religious scriptures did not circulate freely among all members of White Lotus sects. On the contrary, as treasures they were almost always the exclusive property of sect leaders. The evidence further suggests that many of these books were owned by a relatively small number of leaders, those men and women who had transmitted sect ideas within their families for many generations. There was a general tendency for power within these sects to gravitate to and remain in the hands of hereditary leaders; by virtue of their long experience and large network of pupils, some families who had passed on sect teachings since the sixteenth century acquired great prestige and authority and came to constitute an informal hereditary elite among believers.

One of the most striking examples of such a family is the Wang family¹ of Stone-buddha village (Shih-fo-k'ou 石佛口) in Luan district in northeastern Chihli province. In the Wan-li reign of the Ming dynasty (1573–1619) a man named Wang Sen 王森 had founded and propagated an Incense Smelling (Wen-hsiang 聞香) sect. His son succeeded him as sect master and in 1622 predicted the collapse of the dynasty and organized a rebellion. The rebels were defeated by Ming armies within three months, but the Wang family was not eliminated. They continued to transmit their teaching, which was known by a variety of other names, and family members became hereditary sect masters. The rebellion had probably been generated by a prophecy in their scriptures—which date from the late Ming—stating that when Maitreya Buddha comes down to earth, he will be born in Stone-buddha village as a member of the Wang family. Despite the failure of this first rebellion (and perhaps because of the attempt), the scriptures reinforced the family's position as acknowledged authorities on sect practices and as potential leaders of the "great undertaking" (*ta-shih* 大事), a traditional euphemism for rebellion. They were active in proselytizing, and as members of the

family or their pupils changed residences, their network of followers spread throughout the north China plain and into Hupei and Kiang-su. Copies of their scriptures multiplied as the network grew, and those without books would commit to memory the important passages. This family was periodically investigated and arrests were made, but they and their particular scriptures survived for at least two hundred years, into the Tao-kuang reign (1821-50).⁵⁹

This Wang family was only one of many families of this informal hereditary elite. Members of a family named Kao 鄒 were leaders of a Li Trigram sect in Honan that will be discussed in some detail at the end of Part One. There was, as another example, a Mrs. Liu Kung (that is, 劉龔氏, Mrs. Liu née Kung) who was arrested in 1816. Her son admitted that their sect and sect literature had originated with "his paternal grandmother twelve generations back, Grandmother Mi (米奶奶), who had lived during the Wan-li era of the Ming. . . . She had been the sect master and people called her Patriarch Mi. In their family this sect had been passed down through the women."⁶⁰ In addition to those families who could trace their leadership in a sect back to the sixteenth century, there were many more families with somewhat less impressive pedigrees who passed down a sect teaching for several generations and possessed their own religious books, and who constituted a lower echelon within this White Lotus elite. The teaching transmitted in Peking in 1813 by a Mrs. Kao Chang, for example, could be traced back four generations within her own family. She was the acknowledged sect master and possessed at least thirty-five volumes of religious literature. During those four generations, the sect had grown and spread through four branches and two other provinces.⁶¹

At any point in time there were many sect leaders with varying pedigrees, but more authority and a greater number of religious books were concentrated in the hands of those with the longer claims to leadership. At the same time, this literature and authority was being diffused outward as these leaders propagated the religion and converted followers. A teacher might give a religious book to one of his pupils who was not a member of the family or might allow him to make a copy. "I went to [my teacher's] house. He took out two books which he told me were true scriptures spoken by Buddha. He gave me one volume, but he told me I should make a handwritten copy of the other one."⁶² A limited number of books and this system of transmission tended to restrict possession of scriptures to people who were in a legitimate line of descent of teachers and who thus had credentials as sect leaders. In a way sect members had made a virtue

of necessity, for this system helped protect them from charlatans and other irresponsible persons who were interested only in utilizing the potentially inflammable (and illegal) sect ideology to their own ends.

It was possible however for a leader to gain access to sect literature and its legitimizing power even if he did not inherit it from a relative or teacher. Lin Ch'ing 林清, one of the two major leaders of the 1813 rebellion, did not join a White Lotus sect until he was thirty-seven years old. He took over local leadership of his sect after the death of the previous leader, forced those pupils and relatives of the old teacher who disapproved to form a splinter sect, and inherited no books. He added to his knowledge of sect doctrine by visiting and talking with the leaders of separate sects in villages nearby. He was apparently able to master sect history and cosmology in this way, because within three years his predictions about the coming kalpa and arrival of Maitreya (Lin Ch'ing himself) were sufficiently convincing to enable him to begin organizing a rebellion. It was not until after such planning had begun that one of Lin Ch'ing's pupils presented him with a religious scripture. We do not know where this book came from though it had been used by White Lotus rebels fifteen years before and was one of those transmitted by the Wang family of Stone-buddha village. It was entitled "A Comprehensive Manual for Responding to the Kalpas of the Three Buddhas" (*San-fo ying-chieh t'ung-kuan t'ung-shu* 三佛應劫統觀通書), and with it Lin Ch'ing determined the date of the uprising and the new hierarchy that would prevail during the coming era. This is a good example of how these religious books might slowly come into the hands of those who needed and could use them.⁶³

The majority of sect members were evidently illiterate, a fact that bolstered the power of those leaders able to read and explain sect scriptures but that also limited the production of miscellaneous writing that might serve the historian. Fortunately Ch'ing sources do suggest what some of these other kinds of written material might have included. When one sect leader died, his son asked a literate friend to write up for him a handbill (*ch'uan-tan* 傳單) that could be sent to others in the sect to announce the death.⁶⁴ Another sect member named Wang Ying-chieh possessed two certificates (*chih-chao* 執照) made of yellow cloth on which were written a few lines (probably from a sect scripture) about the Eternal Mother and her palace in the Original Home. Wang claimed that these were for burial with his mother to guide her spirit after death (presumably to guarantee her entry into the Eternal Mother's paradise).⁶⁵ When

leaders of a Ta-sheng 大乘 (Greater Vehicle) sect that had already been dispersed after a government investigation the previous year decided to reassemble, they made up placards (*pang-wen* 榜文) "which could be used as a call to action for the members of the assembly," and at the top stamped in vermilion ink a homemade seal. These were distributed to members, but it was not long before a copy came to the attention of the government.⁶⁶ Obviously, the danger of these "heretical" materials falling into the hands of the authorities discouraged their production.

On the other hand, there was one kind of written record kept by a great many sects—that is, lists of the names of their members. These "books for the names of pupils recruited" were usually called *pu* 簿, and they would consist in their simplest form of names only. In some cases, donations made by believers were also recorded there. A sect head with a large following might have many volumes full of thousands of names and making and keeping these lists could be a full-time job. Many sects undertook to compile registers of names when they anticipated the arrival of the new kalpa and wanted records of those believers who would survive. Prior to the Eight Trigrams rebellion in 1813, sect groups that had not previously done so were asked to register their members so that rewards could be distributed later. One group had no members with sufficient education and had to ask the local schoolmaster (a degree-holder) to write down the names dictated to him. Another group, not knowing how to make up such lists and wanting to be inconspicuous, copied the *pao-chia* registration placards (which listed households and the names of their members) with which they were already familiar. Sect name lists were of obvious value to the government, despite their relatively innocuous appearance, and the need to call on the literate elite for assistance was a source of great danger. In the case described above, the local schoolmaster went directly to the district magistrate to report the sect members' activities.⁶⁷ It is no wonder that sect members normally kept few records, for it was their general lack of incriminating written materials and religious paraphernalia that protected them from government scrutiny and allowed them to survive despite their illegality for hundreds of years.

THE EIGHT-CHARACTER MANTRA

During the Chia-ch'ing reign converts to White Lotus sects were

taught a protective incantation consisting of eight characters; many believers also received instruction in certain special therapeutic techniques, the most common of which were yogic meditation, massage for curing illness, and beneficial fighting exercises. Instruction in preventive medicine and the curing of illness was of course by no means limited to these sects—far from it—but from the very large body of such “arts” diffused throughout Chinese society, certain techniques had, together with the eight-character mantra, become part of the teachings of many White Lotus groups.

The basic chant taught to sect members in the early nineteenth century consisted of the eight characters *chen-k'ung chia-hsiang wu-sheng fu-mu* 真空家鄉無生父母, “Eternal Progenitor in Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness.” During the early Chia-ch'ing reign these characters had replaced a very similar chant that had ended with another name for their mother deity, *Wu-sheng lao-mu* 無生老母,⁶⁸ the Eternal Venerable Mother. Some sects in the Chia-ch'ing period treated these eight characters as part of a longer chant:

Respect the Buddhist law,
Eternal Progenitor
In Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness,
Now the Buddha-to-come,
Our patriarch, will soon be here.⁶⁹

The basic eight-character mantra (*chou-yü* 咒語 or *ke-chueh* 歌訣) was formally referred to as the “Eight Character True Sutra” (*pa-tzu chen-ching* 八字真經) or the “Wordless True Sutra” (*wu-tzu chen-ching* 無字真經) or sometimes simply the eight-character “true words” (*chen-yen* 真言). Given to a new member by his teacher, this mantra was a secret known only to believers, a magic formula that was the exclusive property of sect members and the basic source of the “good benefits” offered to converts. These eight characters could be quickly memorized by even the most uneducated or simpleminded; thus membership in a sect was not restricted to people with learning or great intelligence. Realizing that knowledge of the chant indicated true membership in a sect, the Ch'ing government used this as a criterion for assigning punishments.⁷⁰

The mere recitation of this formula, like the mantras of Tibetan tantric Buddhism, had the magical power to “encourage good things and protect against bad ones.”⁷¹ When a convert learned the eight characters from his teacher, he was usually given instructions about

when and where and how to recite, and thus benefit from, this chant. The nature of this ritual recitation ranged from the elaborate to the very simple. In some sects (or for more sophisticated believers?) there was a formal ritual to be performed three times a day. In the morning, one faced east, bowed to greet the rising sun, and recited the chant twenty-seven times. At noon, one faced south, again bowed to the sun, and recited the eight characters fifty-four times. And in the evening, one faced west, bowed to bid farewell to the setting sun, and recited the chant eighty-one times. During the recitation the believer sat cross-legged like a monk, with eyes closed and arms clasped to the chest.⁷² This ritual of kneeling or bowing (*kuei* 跪) and "facing and performing ritual obeisance to the sun" (*ch'ao li t'ai-yang* 朝禮太陽) was a way of paying tribute to the power of *yang* 陽, the positive force in the world.⁷³

In keeping with the general pattern of great flexibility in sect practices, this ritual could be, and often was, simplified. Sect members could merely face in the appropriate direction without kowtowing, or could simply "face the heavens." The chant did not have to be recited a specific number of times. Some believers were instructed to perform the ritual only in the morning. Others were told merely to "recite" or "silently intone" these eight characters "often" or "every so often" without any accompanying ritual. Sometimes incense was burned as part of the ceremony.⁷⁴

Most members explained the purpose of this ritual rather simply, saying that the chant "was very efficacious and could bring good benefits (*hao-ch'u* 好處)." One sect leader, trying to convert a friend of his, elaborated: "I will teach you a system by means of which you can encourage good fortune and avoid bad fortune and be saved from poverty." Others claimed the eight characters provided protection against illness and disease: "If you were sick and recited it you would become well"; "He said that if I recited this chant often then all my illnesses would be cured."⁷⁵ The recitation of the mantra, in its more elaborate forms, was part of an act of meditation: "To recite these words several times would enable you to circulate your breath"; "[My teacher] taught me to sit and meditate and silently intone them [the eight characters]."⁷⁶ Many converts were taught to meditate as part of learning the chant. A close look at this meditation affords a better understanding of the benefits that were believed to be derived from recitation of this mantra.

This meditation was a type of internal exercise—of a kind known in China since at least the fourth century B.C.—designed to move and

circulate one's vital breath (*ch'i* 氣) throughout the body. The effects were believed to be therapeutic, bringing good health and long life.

"[His teacher] declared that if after a long time one could meditate effectively (*kung-shen* 功深), one could have long life and not die. . . . When a member of the first and highest rank completed his study, he would attain the Tao and become an immortal. When a member of the second rank had completed his study, he could conquer illness and lengthen his life span. A member of the third rank could [at least] avoid difficulties and survive calamities.⁷⁷

To meditate, one usually sat cross-legged, with eyes closed and arms folded, in a pose like a Buddhist monk; this was called *ta-tso* 打坐. By concentrating, one could then guide and move his vital breath within his body (*yun-ch'i* 運氣). If successful, one would go into a type of trance (*tso-kung* 坐功). In this meditation, eyes, ears, mouth, and nose were considered the "four gates," and there was a chant with the lines, "to encourage the ruler, the four gates must all be tightly closed." Thus, in order to control and circulate your *ch'i*, your internal energy, "you first brought your hands toward your face and touched and closed your eyes. A breath of air from your lungs and abdomen was sent down and circulated. Then it was expelled through the nose."⁷⁸ The circumstances under which this meditation was carried on varied with each sect. Many combined it with the recitation of the eight-character chant and the morning, noon, and evening rituals to the sun. One sect insisted that it be done in private and never in the presence of nonbelievers, otherwise "there would be no benefits." Other sect members assembled to meditate together, or did so oblivious to the presence of outsiders. In general such sessions do not appear to have lasted more than a few hours at the most.⁷⁹

If one meditated successfully, a trancelike state could ultimately be achieved and even used to other purposes. One government official wrote: "Hsing Shih-k'uei was very good at circulating his breath. When we tried to interrogate him, he just closed his eyes and held his breath for a while. His complexion became that of a dead man and it was impossible to get any confession from him."⁸⁰ If one was successful in achieving a trance, this was interpreted to mean that one's soul was going up to the heavens to pay its respects to the Eternal Mother. One sect scripture described this as a ten-step process, beginning with "taking up the shining [*ch'i*] from the bottom of

the sea” and concluding with “going out through the K’un-lun mountains [meaning the top of the head]” and going up to the heavenly palace there to be with the Eternal Mother and “never come down to earth again.”⁸¹ The teacher of a Huang-yang 黄洋 (Yellow Ocean) sect in Chihli in the 1810s taught his pupils to recite several long chants. One was:

. . . As you breathe out and in
the heavenly gate opens.
Your soul [*yuan-shen* 元神] manifests itself
and goes up to heaven to bow respectfully
to the Eternal Progenitor.

Another was:

As there are eight trigrams in heaven
and eight rivers on earth,
so there are eight houses in your body.
If you meditate and enter into a trance,
your white breath will rise up to heaven.
It will go to the Imperial Heaven
to Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness.
There it will bow respectfully to the Eternal Progenitor
and by means of this, prepare for a time to come.⁸²

This yogic meditation was believed to result in a variety of benefits. According to the beliefs of one sect, the soul will be able to become a buddha if at the time of death it leaves the body by passing through the “dark pass” (*hsuan-kuan* 玄關). The dark pass refers to the place between the eyebrows, and this group believed that one type of meditation would teach the soul the location of this dark pass so that it would be able to find the way more easily at death.⁸³ Another sect member claimed that through meditation he became able to predict the future: “He was able to meditate and circulate his breath, to make his spirit leave his body and to know about future events.”⁸⁴ One sect referred to this mediation and recitation of the eight-character chant as “learning the right way” (*hsueh-hao* 學好) and so reaching the Tao. The whole process was sometimes called “meditating successfully and learning the right way” (*tso-kung hsueh-hao*). Others called it “circulating one’s breath and nourishing one’s nature” (*yun-ch’i yang-hsing* 運氣養性).⁸⁵

Although recitation of the eight characters was rather easy, this type of yogic meditation, if done properly, was far more difficult and

was only learned and practiced by those willing to invest the time and the energy. Converts who learned first just to recite the eight characters might later, if they so desired, be taught how to meditate. There were those who learned how to meditate and later gave it up. Liu Wen-t'ung said, "I recited the eight characters often but got no benefits. The meditation made me depressed, and so my mother forbid me to do it any more." T'ang Ssu-chiu "had trouble breathing through his nose, and so he found it difficult to do the meditation."⁸⁶ Because the art of meditation could be learned at many different levels, a student could begin with a very simple intoning of the magical formula and progress as far as he wished through gradually more difficult and time-consuming rituals, perhaps ultimately learning to go into trances for long periods of time.

Meditation was only one form of "skill" or *kung-fu* 工夫⁸⁷ transmitted through these White Lotus sects. A different skill taught in some sects was a system of massage for curing illness. This massage, *an-mo* 按摩, was also called *t'ui-na* 推拿 or *an-na* 按拿,⁸⁸ terms that suggest the pulling and pushing motions involved. One sect transmitted a system of applying pressure at the body's "caves and roads" (*hsueh-tao* 穴道), certain nerve centers and channels also used by acupuncturists for curing and by Chinese boxers for striking paralyzing blows.⁸⁹ No system of massage is described in the source material in any detail, and the following reference is typical:

[One day] Sung Shang-chung invited me and Kao Chu to have some wine with him. Kao Chu wasn't feeling very well. Sung Shang-chung massaged his body a little, and Kao Chu was better. Sung Shang-chung said he was in a group called the Jung-hua Assembly. It was for "learning the right way." He urged us to join, and we said we would. He taught us the eight characters, "Eternal Progenitor in Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness." He also said he would teach Kao Chu how to do massage in order to cure illnesses.⁹⁰

A great many sect teachers were healers of some sort who recruited pupils and converts by persuading their patients to join the sect. The techniques they used are not specified except for the system of massage, but a wide variety of diseases and injuries were treated.⁹¹ Religion and medicine were very closely connected in traditional China—as in all folk societies—and expertise in one field was assumed to mean expertise in the other.⁹²

Healing might precede or follow conversion. In some cases the

healer would tell the patient that in order to be cured he had first to join the sect. Sometimes the healer extended this requirement to other members of the patient's family, telling them that "because the cure was difficult, they . . . should first take [the healer] as their teacher and join the sect." In most cases, however, it was the grateful patient, now cured, who (perhaps together with relatives who had been impressed by the cure) kotowed to his "doctor," became his pupil and joined the sect. In many instances, the teacher then shared with his former patient the "secrets" of the sect, and might teach him how to make and recite healing charms or how to do massage. The healer's skill in curing illness was transformed into authority on religious matters as well, and the doctor-patient relationship only strengthened the sect teacher-pupil bond.⁹³

Another skill transmitted within these sects was that of "boxing" or "boxing and fencing" (*ch'üan-kun* 拳棍, *ch'üan-pang* 拳棒). These exercises, performed bare-handed or with a stick, were designed to be at once useful for self-defense and beneficial for one's health and therefore one's spirit.

Chin-chung-chao 金鐘罩, Armor of the Golden Bell, was one method of fighting transmitted to sect members. A man named Chang Lo-chiao studied it, and his teacher told him that after learning Chin-chung-chao, he need not fear anyone trying to attack him with a knife. He evidently meant that this system could confer physical invulnerability, for later Chang Lo-chiao practiced by stabbing himself in the shoulder and in the ribs. He found that indeed he was not hurt and only a white scar appeared in the places he had stabbed. Another fighter in this school made a similar claim: "He couldn't be injured by the stab of a knife or the jab of a sword."⁹⁴

A student of Chin-chung-chao could learn more than a system of fighting; he could learn, if he were interested, a set of chants and formulas for charms that cured illness. Liu Yü-lung was given a book by his teacher in the Armor of the Golden Bell entitled "Chang Lin-ts'un's Sacred Manual of Mystical Practices" (*Chang Lin-ts'un fang-shan shen-ts'e* 張林存放山神冊), which contained lists of formulas used to heal illnesses and convert followers.⁹⁵ A pupil of Liu's describes his cure:

I had an ulcer on my back. I heard that Liu Yü-lung could effect cures. He used incense and drew for a while with it on the ulcer [writing a charm there] and also spit on it, saying that it would now get better. Then he said that he knew another good spell which he could teach me which would make everything

be however I wanted it to be. He recited the eight characters "Eternal Progenitor in Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness" and taught them to me.⁹⁶

Chang Lo-chiao, the Chin-chung-chao boxer mentioned above, was also a healer. Being illiterate, however, he had only memorized a few of the chants: "When he is curing someone, he merely recites what he remembers and gets someone else to write it down."⁹⁷

The Armor of the Golden Bell was by no means the only school of fighting taught by sect members. One kind in which there were eight prescribed steps was called Eight Trigrams boxing (*pa-kua ch'üan* 八卦拳). Others were called Yin-yang 陰陽 boxing, Mei-hua 梅花 (Plum Flower) boxing, Pa-fan 八番 (Eight Times) boxing, and I-ho 義和 (Righteous harmony) boxing—the latter being made famous by the Boxers in 1900.⁹⁸ These exercises were believed to act as preventive medicine by aiding digestion and circulation, and by keeping the body supple and fit. They could also be used for fighting, and contests between practitioners of different schools at fairs and markets were not uncommon. There were probably other schools of boxing associated with the White Lotus tradition; certainly there were other forms of Chinese boxing that were *not* associated with these sects. But a sect member who instructed his pupils in fighting (like those who taught healing or meditation) offered them a permanent relationship, stronger than the usual one between boxing teachers and pupils because it was not dependent on relative fighting skills. Students of the Armor of the Golden Bell, as we have seen, were also given access to the sect "secrets"—special incantations for healing, the beneficial eight-character chant, and the protection of the sect should the kalpa calamities arrive.

SECT MEMBERSHIP

The eight-character mantra and the various arts described above were perpetuated through a chain of teachers and pupils stretching from the sixteenth into the twentieth century. To join a White Lotus sect meant becoming a part of this chain by being the pupil of someone already in a sect.

During the Ch'ing dynasty sect members could not appeal openly for new members, and the healing skills possessed by many—yoga, massage, or boxing—became in essence advertisements and avenues of access to the sects. Many new members joined a sect for the ex-

PLICIT purpose of learning either to fight or to cure illnesses. Such conversions tended to follow very similar patterns:

I became ill and Wang Ta of T'i-shang village cured me. So he told me to take him as my teacher and join the Jung-hua Assembly. He also taught me to recite the eight characters, "Eternal Progenitor in Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness." He said that if I recited this spell often then all my illnesses would be cured.⁹⁹

One sect member who performed a great many cures stated that he would not let patients whom he had helped present him with gifts (as was usual); instead he urged them to become his pupils and join the sect.¹⁰⁰ The gratitude a person normally feels toward the one who has saved him from pain or death was thus channeled into the pupil-teacher bond and strengthened it. The tie was even stronger when the doctor not only cured his patient but then taught him how to do cures himself, thus sharing his power as well as his secrets.

For men who were interested in fighting techniques, it was normal for a pupil to study with a master for a period of time and to consider the latter his teacher. If two men fought, by chance or in a public match, and one man clearly bested the other, the loser was expected to acknowledge the other's superiority and ask to receive instruction. Learning the boxing techniques of a White Lotus sect was no different: "A man from my district . . . sponsored me to go to Te district and compete with Sung Yueh-lung. Sung Yueh-lung couldn't surpass me, so he and his son . . . both took me as their teacher and they joined [my] Li Trigram sect."¹⁰¹

Boxing and curing skills were an important drawing card for White Lotus sects. Healers and fighters traveled about the countryside, the former looking for patients, the latter competing at market fairs and providing an occasion for gambling. People of different backgrounds and different villages with common interests or a common problem could meet, and a sect would spread along the random lines that such a network would create.

Many, perhaps most, sect members did not have this kind of "professional" interest in the sect, but rather joined in order to benefit from the efficacy of the powerful eight-character chant and its meditative techniques. The existence of the chant was not advertised, and this kind of conversion therefore proceeded along the lines of preexisting relationships. Parents instructed their children; friends and neighbors told one another. Pien Erh, for example, moved to a

certain village and found a job working for Li Shih-te. Subsequently, at age twenty-eight, "he took Li Shih-te and his wife as adopted parents, and then followed them, and joined their sect. Li Shih-te taught him to recite the Wordless True Sutra." A stone-worker named Su Chien-te stated: "I happened to go to Hou-hsin village to the house of Yang Lao to make a stone mortar for him. Yang Lao invited me to join their assembly; he said there would be good benefits, so I agreed to do so."¹⁰² In some cases, explicitly material benefits were offered to potential converts, or at least given to them later. One sect member testified:

I have known Chang Ssu-hu-tzu . . . for a long time. He makes his living by controlling who is granted the right to plant Banner lands. In 1811 Chang Ssu-hu-tzu and I were going to market and talking along the way. He mentioned that he was in the White Lotus sect. He told me that if I joined his sect, he would give me some Banner land to rent, and he'd do so at a lower rate. Since I didn't even have the money to pay the rent on such land, I said I didn't want to join. But then he said that if I wanted to join the White Lotus sect, he would let me go along with him later when the harvest was in to collect rents from the tenants on the Banner lands, and he would let me help carry the rent payments. He said he would pay me 10 cash for each *mou's* worth of rent which I carried. I agreed. After I joined the sect, Chang Ssu-hu-tzu taught me to burn incense three times a day facing the heavens.¹⁰³

Initiation into a sect took the form of a very brief and uncomplicated ceremony that could be performed nearly anywhere or anytime. The minimal ritual was simple; the pupil knelt and kotowed to his teacher and the teacher recited and taught him the eight-character chant. "He told me to kneel down, and then he transmitted to me the eight characters, 'Eternal Progenitor in Our Original Home in the World of True Emptiness.' He told me to recite them every so often."¹⁰⁴ More elaborate ceremonies did, however, take place. Incense, whose smoke rising into the sky established communication between men and gods, was considered a desirable part of the ceremony. In one sect, the pupil would light and hold the stick of burning incense as he knelt; in another, it was held by the teacher. In one case the ceremony was performed in front of an image of a buddha.¹⁰⁵

Other chants might be recited by the teacher during the initiation

and learned then or later by the pupil. Members of one Chia-ch'ing-period sect described in detail their more elaborate ceremony, in which the teacher first burned incense and knelt in front. The pupil who was learning the chant knelt behind him. Then they both recited:

Our faith is on high.
 The three Buddhas guide us upward.
 We, your pupils, are here below.
 We are converted to our faith,
 converted to the Buddhas,
 converted to the law,
 converted to our teacher.
 We are converted to these three treasures.
 If we, your pupils, do not respect the Buddhas' law,
 or if we divulge this Way of the Immortals,
 may our flesh be reduced to congealed blood.
 We will never go against this teaching.
 If we should go against this teaching
 may a thunderbolt strike us dead.

After both had finished reciting this, then the teacher alone recited:

I am a teacher and a sponsor,
 I do not teach a heretical sect.
 If I should transmit any heretical teaching
 or if I should use tricks to get people's money for myself,
 then may a thunderbolt strike me dead.¹⁰⁶

The swearing of an oath—a common way to bind a compact from earliest times—was not infrequently part of the initiation ritual, even when the ceremony was less elaborate. One woman told how “first they told me to burn incense and then to swear that if I let it [the sect teaching] be known, then Heaven should strike me with a thunderbolt. So I swore and [my teacher] taught me the eight characters.”¹⁰⁷ Another related that “his teacher . . . instructed him to kowtow and to swear to be his pupil. He received his teacher's warning: if he broke the fast of vegetarianism [practiced by that sect] or violated any of the other abstentions, his body would turn into pus and blood.”¹⁰⁸

An initial contribution of money was expected from new members in some sects. In return the new member might receive a receipt (*piao* 表) that he could burn and so “register” the contribution with

the Eternal Mother.¹⁰⁹ (The financial dimension of sect organization will be discussed in greater detail below.) In general, initiation rituals were flexible and varied, and each sect and each teacher could introduce innovations at will—within the limits of what was safe. The leader of the 1813 Eight Trigrams, Lin Ch'ing, had been given a vermilion scroll with a seal at the top, dragons along the sides, and an efficacious charm (*fu* 符) drawn in the center, and he considered putting this to use in initiating new pupils. He wanted to have each pupil kotow to the scroll as well as to their teacher. Eventually, however, he rejected the idea, feeling that the scroll with its blatantly imperial pretensions might attract too much attention.¹¹⁰ Considerations of secrecy and flexibility encouraged simplicity and brevity.

Some sects physically marked new members. "His teacher put his hand on a place on the back of his head, recited a spell, and wrote a charm which was then burned and put in water for him to drink. After that, a sore appeared in that place and then a half-moon scar where no hair would grow." Less magical methods were used to the same effect: a small area of hair under the queue was burned off with moxa, or a strand of hair in the queue was simply cut off.¹¹¹ This mark was considered a "secret identifying sign" and as such was used to a limited degree (possibly very limited) by some participants in the 1813 rebellion. This kind of mark had the advantage of being verifiable but not readily visible and was considerably less drastic than the queue-cutting or hair-growing adopted by some rebels.

There is also evidence that some White Lotus sects, at least in the Chia-ch'ing period, used secret hand signals as identifying gestures. One man stated that his teacher had told him about some of these hand signals, but the only ones he remembered were that "the Li Trigram hand signal was to point the thumb straight up; the K'an Trigram sect signal was to extend one's hands and make the character for the number ten with one's fingers." Some rebels were told that "if you meet a comrade whom you don't know, you clap your hands as a secret sign." Another described a different procedure: "Whenever two people from the sect ran into one another, they put out their two fingers and rotated them until they pointed upward. This was given the name *chien-chueh* (劍訣)." ¹¹² Ch'ing sects did not usually have physical tokens of membership because of the danger, and so these identifying gestures were a far safer form of proof.¹¹³

The teacher-pupil relationships thus created constituted the links in the chain that held these sects together. This bond was a strong and respected one in China. It was an important relationship among

members of the elite, cementing friendships between those who had studied and been examined on the Confucian classics. Among non-elite it usually played a lesser role, except perhaps between masters and apprentices. Thus, the White Lotus sects made it possible for ordinary people to attain the respected status of teacher and to be treated with deference, respect, and obedience by others. And yet it was not difficult to become such a teacher; the information was available to all on a variety of levels and one could simply study and master sect doctrine and practices to a minimal degree.

Just as joining a sect was a personal and individual choice, so each believer was free to "leave the sect" (*ch'u chiao* 出教) any time he wished. Severing the teacher-pupil relationship was even simpler than establishing it. Yen Hsing "changed his mind [about the sect] and because he saw that their activities had no benefit, he had no further contact with the men in the sect."¹¹⁴ Short of terminating this contact, an individual could simply reduce his participation in sect affairs by degrees. Because of the relative ease of leaving, those whose commitment was more shallow, especially those who were looking for quick benefits, were more likely to drift away when they became disappointed with the lack of results. Such people were often men who had never taken the trouble to convert followers of their own, and their leaving meant no serious loss of manpower. On the contrary, it was in the interest of all White Lotus followers to discourage the marginally interested from remaining and so increase their collective security. One scripture circulating in the late nineteenth century stated this view rather well:

But as to such persons as are not changed and are not true disciples, it would be better to let the fire of the incense die out than entrust to them our rules of abstinence or communicate to them those doctrines which tell what gods and men practice and which are not to be transmitted to men of a low grade. Let there be mercy, diligence, anxious care, and extreme strictness in propagating our religion.¹¹⁵

Like most missionaries, sect members had to balance the desire for converts against the undesirability (and in their case the danger) of attracting those who could not be fully trusted to appreciate the value of the sect teachings.

Government investigations into sect activities or the suppression of a sect-led uprising could drive many, including people with a deeper commitment, to take the step of severing relations.

On account of the legal proceedings [involving the sect] I was afraid and asked Yang Erh to strike my name off the list of those in the sect . . . [He told me] if you are not going to be in the assembly, then you should explain to Lin Ch'ing [the sect head]. . . . [So I went to see him] and said that I didn't want to be in the assembly. Lin Ch'ing and [another man] were standing in the courtyard and they really cursed me and we had a big argument. I never went there again.¹¹⁶

At the time when the Eight Trigrams uprising was being suppressed in 1813, some members of unaffiliated sects in the Tientsin area formally broke the vegetarian regimens practiced by their group and left the sect.¹¹⁷ The government recognized such a renunciation. Indeed it tried to make it easy for sect members to declare publicly that they had left their sects: people were invited to go to their local officials and swear oaths or bonds (*chü-chieh* 具結) to this effect. Sun P'eng, for example, went to the district offices and swore that he had repented and left the Ta-sheng sect; he did not, however, go so far as to destroy his religious literature until later when he learned of a new government investigation and feared that even his public renunciation was not enough.¹¹⁸

A sect member could have only one teacher at a time, but it was possible for a person to have a number of teachers in sequence. For example, if a man moved and lost contact with his teacher, or if he left one sect and then joined another, or if his teacher died, he could take a second teacher. Men who specialized in the fighting skills of the White Lotus tradition appear to have been more likely to study with many different people. Consider Chang Lo-chiao:

In 1782 he followed his elder sister's husband's elder brother Wang Yueh-heng (who is now dead) and learned boxing and fencing, plus curing illness by massage. In 1793 he followed Chang Huai-chin . . . and learned the Armor of the Golden Bell. Then he went around to various places doing boxing and taking pupils for profit. In 1800 he then followed Wang Hsien-chün . . . and practiced the Li Trigram sect, reciting the True Emptiness chant. Later, since Wang was always wanting money from him, he practiced it no more.¹¹⁹

There were some people who went from sect to sect, joining first one and then another, always searching for the "best" system. Ma Sheng-chang, for example, first joined the Jung-hua Assembly, then

a few years later an acquaintance persuaded him that another sect was “doctrinally more profound,” and so Ma became his friend’s pupil instead. A year later, members of the Jung-hua Assembly, came and tried to persuade Ma Sheng-chang to rejoin their group, but Ma resisted and explained, “I had already taken several teachers and I didn’t want to be a member of their sect again.” These veteran seekers were both desirable and undesirable converts. They were familiar with and serious about sect matters on the one hand, but they were always looking out for more efficacious charms, more persuasive ideas, more “beneficial” practices, and so could not be counted on for their faithfulness.¹²⁰

There were no restrictions as to who could join a White Lotus sect, and one teacher’s claim that “it didn’t matter if [your pupils] were men or women, young or old” is fully confirmed by the evidence available about sects in the Chia-ch’ing period. Sect members ranged widely in age, from as young as sixteen to as old as “over eighty” and all ages in between.¹²¹ Similarly, “any person male or female could transmit and practice a sect,” and despite the Ch’ing government’s greater interest in male members—who were after all the ones who became active rebels—it is clear that many women became followers of White Lotus teachings. Unfortunately, the fact that the government tended not to prosecute women for the crime of belonging to a heretical sect means that the full extent of female participation in sect activities is not revealed in the sources.¹²² We do know, and shall discuss in more detail below, that women did act as teachers and sect leaders.

It is difficult to generalize about the class or occupational background of Chia-ch’ing-period sect members. The most striking fact is the wide variety of occupations and great range of social classes represented. Sect members included Chinese and Manchu, the destitute and the well-to-do, country folk and city dwellers. There were members of the Manchu nobility, military officials of low and medium ranks, holders of the lowest degree in the system of military examinations, clerks and runners in the district yamens, and ordinary citizens of all kinds. Information on more than two hundred people who belonged to a sect in the Peking area in the 1810s yields the following occupational breakdown: 4 percent were ranked office- or title-holders;¹²³ 14 percent had low-status positions in service to the government;¹²⁴ 19 percent derived at least part of their income from doing hired agricultural labor;¹²⁵ 19 percent derived income from the land;¹²⁶ 32 percent very probably were also supported by agricul-

ture;¹²⁷ and 12 percent made their living from a variety of crafts and services (these included peddlers and sellers of windowpanes, beancurd, firewood, paper, fruit, vegetables, chickens, and ducks; household servants, weavers, cart drivers, stone masons, a brick-factory worker, cook, waiter, bow-maker, theater owner, and the proprietor of a teashop).¹²⁸ Practically the only thing that all of these individuals had in common was the fact that none enjoyed the prestige of a degree obtained through the civil service examinations based on the Confucian classics.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

It was not a person's occupation or social class that determined his place in a White Lotus sect. In order to see how power within a sect was structured, let us begin by looking, as an illustration, at the organization of the Jung-hua Assembly. A sect teacher named Ku Liang had begun teaching this sect in the area of Sung-chia village just southwest of Peking in about 1796. A dozen years later, the sect had grown to include at least seventy members who lived in that and adjacent villages. Ku Liang was regarded by all as Sect Master (*chiao-chu* 教主). There were no active connections with Ku Liang's teacher, whoever he was, and for all intents and purposes, Ku Liang was the head of the sect. These seventy-odd sect members, men and women of all ages, were pupils under Ku Liang, either directly or through his pupils' pupils or their pupils. Formally, teachers were called "preceptors" (*ch'ien-jen* 前人) and pupils "receptors" (*hou-jen* 後人).¹²⁹ The structure of this sect as diagrammed from available information might resemble figure 1. Most sect organizations would look something like this, but obviously an infinite variety of structures could be created within the framework of only one teacher for each pupil and any number of pupils for each teacher.

The person who was generationally senior within an area, as Ku Liang was in the above case, was referred to familiarly as a "sect head" (*chiao-t'ou* 教頭 or *chiao-shou* 教首). Those leaders who could claim direct transmission from a sect founder (called a patriarch or *tsu* 祖), and who often backed up this claim to authority with religious literature, were called "sect masters" (*chiao-chu* 教主). The term "master" (*chu* 主) was used by White Lotus sect members to indicate one with considerable expertise and authority. The usual term for "teacher" was *shih* 師 (or *shih-fu* 師傅) and for "pupil"

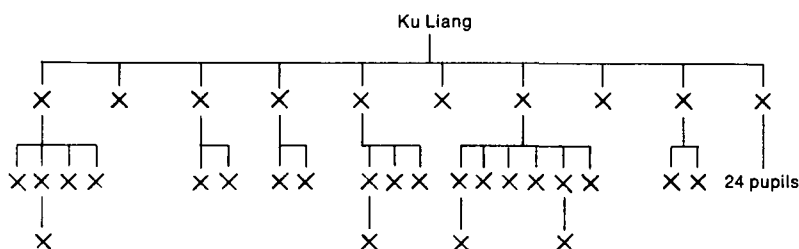


Fig. 1

t'u-ti 徒弟, both phrases in ordinary usage. Some teachers were respectfully addressed by their pupils as “sir” (*yeh* 爺). Several of the sects that later made up the Eight Trigrams employed the term “manager” (*tang-chia* 當家) to designate some sect leaders.¹³⁰ With the possible exception of the term “master,” all these titles were in common usage and did not represent esoteric language.¹³¹

While this sect organization was well suited to secrecy, I have seen no indication that members felt it necessary to conceal the identity of the sect head. On the contrary, it was considered desirable for all members of a sect to be formally presented to their sect leader and to kotow to him “while he remained standing and received this courtesy.”¹³²

Within each sect there was some awareness of generational levels, called *pei* 輩 or *ts'eng* 層. Most believers knew the line of teachers between themselves and the sect leader, and could usually name these men or women. Hsing Shih-k'uei, for example, could name the nine preceding generations of teachers in his sect. A pupil was expected to treat all those in that direct line “above” him as teachers, to kotow in greeting them, and to accept their authority in sect matters.¹³³ The structure of these sects was fundamentally hierarchi-

cal, and fellow believers, even pupils of the same teacher, did not refer to one another as "brothers." This is in sharp contrast with the Triads and other "secret societies" of south China.¹³⁴

Relations between teachers and pupils in White Lotus sects were not, however, bound by the same requirements of hierarchy prevalent in Ch'ing society as a whole. There the superior-inferior relationship of a teacher to his pupil paralleled other unequal relations, elder to younger, men to women. In Chinese society in general, an older man seldom treated a young man (much less a young woman) as his teacher, and it was rare for any man to have cause to study with or learn professionally from a woman of any age. These pervasive but informal rules did not apply to White Lotus sects, although certainly their influence was felt. In these sects, the respected skills of healing or fighting and the protective secret of the eight-character chant could be learned by sect members of all ages and both sexes, any one of whom could teach it to anyone else, and was actively encouraged to do so. It was possible and not uncommon for a pupil to be older than his or her teacher. Of the members for whom all the relevant information is available (again based on the Peking area sects), nearly 16 percent had teachers who were younger than they.¹³⁵ For the women on whom information is available, 76 percent had men as their teachers, and 24 percent had female teachers. Of women teachers, half had women as their pupils, half had men.¹³⁶ Such flexibility as compared with normal practice was an attractive feature of White Lotus sects for those individuals, women in particular, who wished to escape from the restrictions imposed on them by the hierarchical nature of their society.

Just as women or younger people could be teachers to anyone they converted, so there were no formal restrictions on who might be treated as a sect head. Whoever was the first believer in a village and who began to teach the sect there would be considered the leader. A younger man who wanted to build up a following of his own could do so by moving or traveling to new places. Itinerant healers converted pupils in the villages and towns through which they passed.

Custom as well as bound feet circumscribed the movements of most women; nevertheless, they could and did act as sect leaders. Mrs. Liu Kung was considered a sect master; moreover she had inherited this position of authority from her great grandmother eleven generations past who was herself the founder and patriarch of their Dragon (*lung* 龍) school sect, in which the teachings and responsibility were transmitted through the women of the family.¹³⁷

The words used for leaders in these sects could be applied equally to men or women. The commander of the government forces sent to suppress the 1813 Eight Trigram rebels commented on the role of women: "With these bandits who practice a sect, it was in many instances the women who taught the men. . . . The women are cunning and dangerous (*yin hsien* 陰險) and this heterodoxy leads to rebellion. . . . Moreover, [in battle] our forces have so far killed more than one woman."¹³⁸

Most Ch'ing White Lotus sects did not have firm rules for determining succession to the position of sect head. There was, as we have indicated, a bias in favor of hereditary succession, and if a son (or daughter) could command the respect of his father's pupils, he could inherit his authority. This was especially probable in families in which the sect had been practiced for generations and in which there was sect literature to be inherited, although the line of transmission was not necessarily from father to son. "Wang Fa-hsien's ancestors had transmitted the Pai-yang Assembly. . . . He had learned the sect from his older cousin Wang Hsuan. . . . After Wang Hsuan died, Wang Fa-hsien became the senior member of the assembly."¹³⁹

A problem arose more readily when a sect leader died (or was arrested) without leaving a natural successor. His pupils would then jockey for power, and anyone who could command the respect of the group by a combination of personality, mastery of sect ideas and practices, and size of personal following, would be acknowledged as the new leader. In several cases described in greater detail in Part Two, this acknowledgment took ritual form, and all those in the sect not previously pupils under the new leader would kōtow to him and "submit to his authority." Those who did not wish to do so could, however, simply take their pupils and withdraw. Because of the natural tendency for these sects to fragment if crucial links in the chain were broken, many "succession crises" were probably ignored, and instead the sect was allowed to divide into its component units at the next generational level down. It was also possible for a pupil to reject his sect leader and transfer his allegiance to another man; we shall see instances of this below.

Changes in leadership were frequently accompanied by changes in sect name. The multitude of sect names has been a problem for historians; some assume that one group would change its name as the result of government persecutions and others assert that each name means a different group.¹⁴⁰ My investigations indicate that a group of believers could and did change its name, but it did so not

in response to persecution but on its own initiative and in order to reflect new organizational arrangements. The evidence indicates that pupils who acknowledged a common sect master at any one point in time referred to their group by the same name. This name could be very short-lived; it might be changed if the sect leader died, or if he himself later acknowledged a higher teacher and became part of his following. Relationships between sects were generally amiable, and these mergings and branchings took place more or less continually.¹⁴¹ If a pupil moved away and converted his own followers in another village, he might be treated by them as a sect leader, even though he distantly deferred to his own teacher as a higher authority. Such a branch group might keep the same name, might take an entirely new name, or might call itself by a double (or triple) name combining both old and new. Sect members appear to have been very comfortable with this plethora of names and used a variety of ways to express the relationship between branches and their trunk sect, including such names as the "Venerable Prince school of the Li Trigram sect, also called the Righteous Harmony school,"¹⁴² or the "Eastern Section of the Chen Trigram sect, also known as the Dragon Flower Assembly."¹⁴³

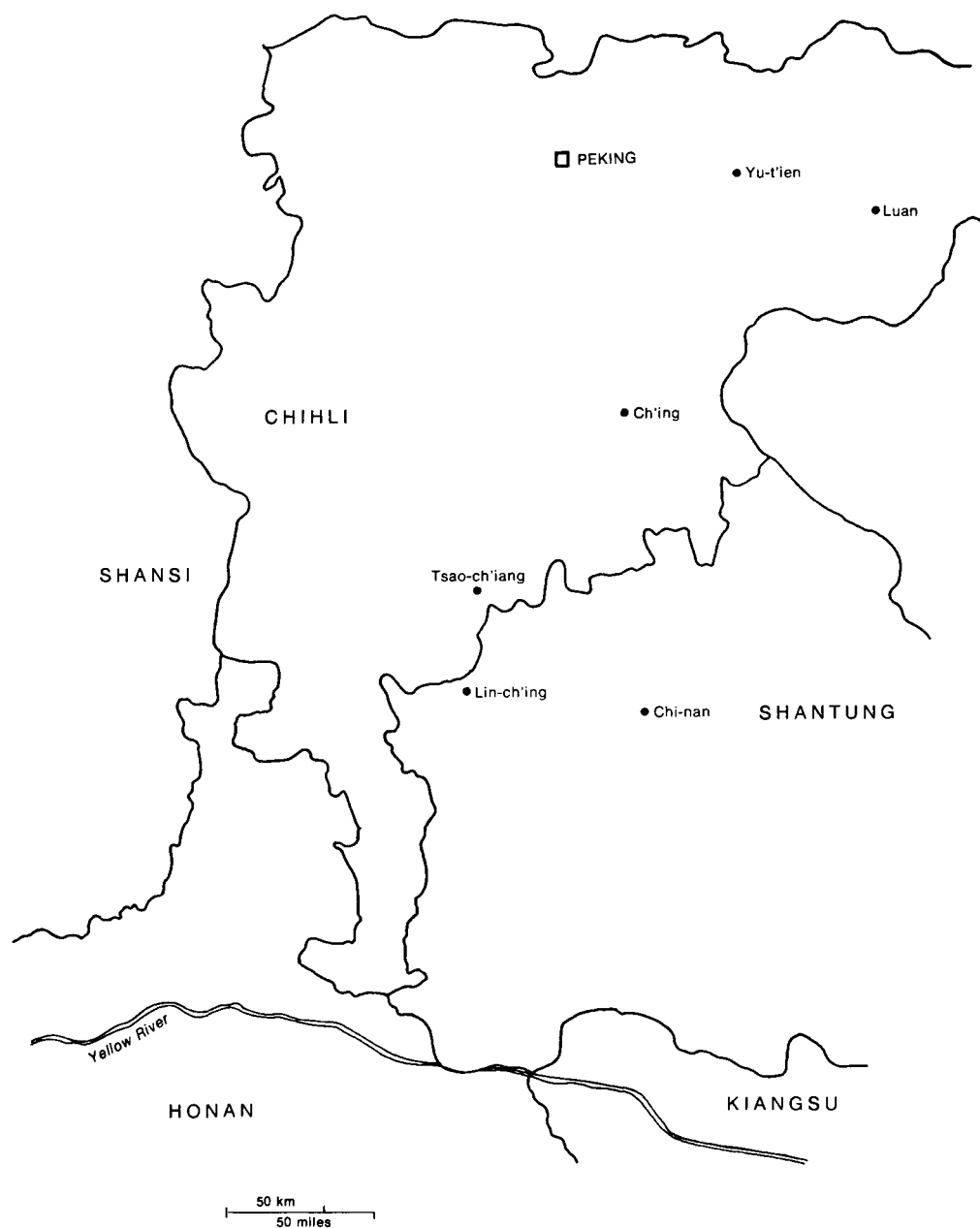
The Eight Trigram rebels themselves used a series of names. Originally the rebels belonged to small isolated sects, each of which had its own name. These were pulled together organizationally and redivided into eight groups, each of which was called by one of the eight trigrams and which were known collectively as the Eight Trigrams sect. When it was time for the new kalpa to arrive, the sect members declared the establishment of the T'ien-li 天理 (Heavenly Doctrine) Assembly.¹⁴⁴ All these changes occurred within the space of three years and were the results of affirmative decisions by sect leaders, in no way related to any government action. The changes were, however, related to organizational shifts, and each new name signaled a realignment of the teacher-pupil chains along which believers were organized.

The terminology used by sect members to describe these various sect groups appears to have been more precise than is usually assumed. As we have seen, the term *chiao* 教 is used in one sense to mean the teachings of the White Lotus religion and in another to refer to the organizational structure through which these teachings were transmitted, a usage I have translated as "sect." The term *hui* 會 does not have either of these meanings but refers to a group of believers who are actively meeting and practicing the religion as a

congregation; I have translated it as "assembly."¹⁴⁵ Branches founded by pupils of a certain teacher were sometimes called *chih* 枝, but more often *men* 門, "school." Thus it was possible for a sect member to tell a government official that in his religion, there were thirty-six *chiao* (sects with their own teachings and teachers) and seventy-two *men* (branch schools of those sects).¹⁴⁶ In the Chia-ch'ing period, some members of White Lotus sects referred to themselves as "believers," *tsai-li* 在理 (literally, "living according to doctrine").¹⁴⁷

The way in which sects were formed, grew, and related to one another can perhaps be best illustrated with a concrete example. Let us look at what happened to a sect called the Yuan-tun sect (圓頓 Completed and Sudden Enlightenment), which at the end of the seventeenth century was being practiced by a resident of Peking named Kao Pa-kang 高八崗. After Kao's death, the sect continued through at least four branches. The main line of the sect was transmitted through his descendants, and by the early nineteenth century the head of the sect was a widowed daughter of the Kao family, Mrs. Kao Chang. Called "Granny Sect Master" (*chiao-chu nai-nai* 教主奶奶) by her pupils, Mrs. Kao Chang lived in the southern section of Peking with her widowed daughter and her son, both of whom also practiced the sect. The name they now used was the Single Stick of Incense, Clean and Pure, Effortless Action sect (*i-chu-hsiang ch'ing-ching wu-wei chiao* 一柱香清淨無爲教). Mrs. Kao Chang had in her possession a large number of religious books (at least thirty-five were confiscated in 1813), and she received contributions regularly from her followers. These pupils lived in Peking and elsewhere in north China—in Yü-t'ien (east of Peking), in Chi-nan prefectural city in Shantung, and in Tsao-ch'iang district in Chihli.

In addition to this main line of the sect maintained by the Kao family, there was a branch of the original Yuan-tun sect located in southern Shensi province in Hsi-hsiang district near the Szechwan border. One of Kao Pa-kang's daughters had married a man named Ch'en Kuei from this area. Ch'en Kuei was his father-in-law's pupil and so he carried the sect back to his home and transmitted it there. His sons and grandsons therefore inherited the position of sect leader which he had created for himself; by the Chia-ch'ing reign, the sect in southern Shensi was being managed by Ch'en's great-great-grandson Ch'en Heng-i. Yet another branch of the Ch'en family's sect was created when Ch'en Heng-i's brother moved to western Shantung (to Lin-ch'ing district) in 1811 and there gathered his own followers. And there was still another offshoot of the original Yuan-



Districts and cities of the north China plain

tun sect located in Feng-t'ien (in Manchuria). That sect was originally transmitted by Wang Ching-ch'ao, a pupil of Kao Pa-kang who happened to come from that area. One hundred years later, Wang's great-grandson was still practicing and teaching the sect.

These branches did not remain isolated, despite the distances in space that separated them and the distances in time from their original association with one another. They were aware of one another's existence and kept in relatively frequent contact. Mrs. Kao Chang was acknowledged as the legitimate main-line descendant of the sect founder, but there was an exchange of information between her sect and the branches that was more or less between equals. In 1808 the Shensi sect head Ch'en Heng-i came to Peking and stayed with the Kao family. He told Granny Sect Master that, according to his predictions, in five or six years there would come a period of hard times. But, he told her, he happened to know of some spells that, if properly recited, could help one avoid these troubles. Ch'en taught her the spells and also gave her several written charms, which, if burned and taken with water, would help one find enlightenment as well as avoid "the calamities of fire, flood and the sword." Mrs. Kao Chang welcomed these new sources of protection and in turn passed them on to all her pupils. Wang Shih-ch'ing, the sect head in Manchuria, was in the habit of sending money annually to Mrs. Kao Chang. When one of his pupils came to Peking in the spring of 1813, bringing with him 30 taels, Granny Sect Master told him about these new charms and formulas. He returned to Feng-t'ien and told Wang Shih-ch'ing, who in turn passed them on to his followers.¹⁴⁸ Despite their proximity to the sects that led the Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813, there is no indication of any involvement by these people in that rebellion, or even of any connection with the rebels. It was in the wake of that uprising, however, that Mrs. Kao Chang and the others were discovered by the government and prosecuted.

RIGHT BEHAVIOR

Many White Lotus sects practiced some sort of dietary regimen. Dietary restrictions had long been considered physically beneficial and a path to long life and possible immortality, and through Buddhism such regimens had also become associated with piety and right

behavior. As it happened, few of those sects involved in the Eight Trigrams uprising put great emphasis on diet—though some of them claimed to abstain from wine¹⁴⁹—but many other believers were vegetarians.¹⁵⁰ Some believers abstained from eating certain foods,¹⁵¹ others abstained from meat only on certain days, or ate normally at home but always had vegetarian meals at sect meetings.¹⁵² Abstinence from meat for religious reasons turned a hard necessity into an approved and pious gesture. As we have seen, swearing to keep the fast of vegetarianism could be part of the sect initiation ritual, just as public renunciation of such a regimen could indicate severance of connections with a sect.¹⁵³

Most sects encouraged their members to practice a certain code of moral behavior as part of the teachings of the Eternal Mother, though the degree of emphasis on ethical behavior varied from group to group. Some sects prohibited gambling, others forbade alcohol, tobacco, and opium.¹⁵⁴ The Jung-hua Assembly of the Chia-ch'ing period claimed to "abstain from wine, sex, greed, and anger,"¹⁵⁵ while another sect of a later period prohibited "killing, robbing, licentiousness, reckless falsity, and liquor."¹⁵⁶ Wine and alcohol were often considered both unhealthy and evil, but the injunctions against them were not always respected.¹⁵⁷

In addition to prohibiting what was judged bad behavior, sect leaders encouraged their pupils to live correctly. They were urged to be diligent and thrifty and to "do good deeds" including helping out fellow believers who "were poor or in distress."¹⁵⁸ One man was told, "If you encounter trouble, you should be benevolent, righteous, properly polite, wise, and thoughtful. You should not be a law-breaker or do evil things." Another was told to "respect heaven and earth, be filial toward father and mother, and not cheat those who have more or oppress those who have less."¹⁵⁹

A common government criticism of White Lotus sects has been that they not only permitted men and women to meet and fraternize with an alarming disregard for social convention, but that the sects sponsored sexual relations outside of marriage and permitted orgies at their meetings. As we have seen, it was certainly true that in these sects a woman's role as wife, mother, or unmarried daughter did not restrict her participation, and as a fellow believer her sex was relegated to a secondary position. By thus liberating women from their normal roles, these sects did indeed run counter to the status quo. Women held positions of leadership, serving as teachers of men, and

they may easily have drawn some sense of importance from the fact that the Eternal Mother herself, supreme among deities, was of their sex.

Reliable information about the sexual practices of White Lotus sects is difficult to obtain, for government accusations cannot be taken as fact. Certainly there was a tradition of orgiastic meetings by popular "Taoist" sects extending back many centuries and an equally venerable association between sexual practices and long life.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, evidence from source materials on sects in the Chia-ch'ing period does suggest that government suspicions may have been justified.

Members of some Eight Trigram sects practiced a degree of sexual permissiveness toward which the Ch'ing government, as guardian of public morality, might justly have been disapproving, even if orgies were not part of their practices. In two Peking area sects, fellow believers were apparently encouraged (or at least allowed) to have sexual intercourse with one another. When the sect leader and future rebel Lin Ch'ing came to visit one of his pupils, he would tell (ask?) his pupil's wife and sometimes his daughter-in-law to come to bed with him. In a spirit of reciprocity which was apparently part of their morality, Lin Ch'ing offered his own wife and stepdaughters to this pupil and the latter's son.¹⁶¹ It is not clear whether the women were free to refuse. Li Wu, the leader of another sect south of Peking and a friend of Lin Ch'ing, and his wife evidently had sexual intercourse with various women and men (respectively) who were pupils in their sect. Not every believer thought this sexual permissiveness was either right or proper. Wu Hsien-ta was coming to Li Wu's house for a meeting when he found a fellow believer in bed with Li Wu's wife. He left immediately and "decided that men and women in the sect mixing together like that wasn't what I considered 'learn-ing to do right,' so I stopped believing and went no more."¹⁶² Lin Ch'ing and Li Wu were both influential sect leaders, and it is not clear if their privileges extended to their pupils.

It is impossible that a tradition as old and as widespread as the White Lotus religion would not have produced its share of those who took advantage of these relaxed sexual standards. Hsing Shih-k'uei, for example, had once belonged to a sect where he had learned to cure illness by massage. Later, he decided to set up his own sect and, abandoning the usual practices, he simply invented ideas and activities as he went along. According to his own testimony: "In 1809, Mrs. Lu Yin from a neighboring village became ill and she came to him

for help. Hsing Shih-k'uei was using massage to cure her when all of a sudden he felt a great desire for this woman, and so he had sexual intercourse with her. After that, he found other occasions to sleep with her. He doesn't remember how many times. Later he came up with the idea of [pretending her son was a god reincarnated in order to increase his following], delude other women, and so make money and have more opportunities for sex."¹⁶³

MONEY AND MEETINGS

One of the more frequent government criticisms of heretical sects was that their leaders wanted only to make money from those whom they "hoodwinked" into believing in them. While the question of true individual motivation is a difficult one, it is very clear that White Lotus sects could and often did generate considerable wealth. Teachers in the sect regularly solicited contributions from their pupils, and this money was passed up along the pupil-teacher chain into the hands of the sect head. These donations were voluntary, but they were usually systematized in such a way as to make refusal by a "sincere" believer very difficult.

There was enormous variety among sects in the procedure by which contributions were elicited, each trying to find the most efficient system for its particular group. Many sects expected an initial contribution by all new members. At least three sects in the Chia-ch'ing period called this donation "foundation money" (*ken-chi ch'ien* 根基錢).¹⁶⁴ One sect then asked for either monthly or seasonal donations, called respectively "small gifts" and "large gifts" (*hsiao li ch'ien* 小禮錢 and *ta li ch'ien*). Another expected "installment money" (*ken-chang ch'ien* 跟賬錢) twice a year, "according to your ability to pay."¹⁶⁵

This money was generally used for the benefit of the sect as a whole. Some groups used contributions to buy food and incense for regular meetings where vegetarian dishes were eaten by those attending. One group held banquets each year on its leader's birthday.¹⁶⁶ Although money was used for meetings, the sect heads also benefited. One sect member explained that they believed in their leader and so they had "helped him by giving him money to spend."¹⁶⁷ Contributions were passed up the line of teachers, and although it is not clear how much each teacher took out, the person at the top of a large pyramid of pupils could receive a regular in-

come.¹⁶⁸ The promise of contributions from pupils certainly encouraged all believers to proselytize and expand their own networks.

This system of regular assessments could easily turn into an even more systematic, rebellion-oriented tithing. The new kalpa could arrive at any time, and those sects that expected it to be soon might take specific steps to plan for their own role in this event. One sign of such organizational activity was a difference in the scope of money collecting.

It appears to have been common practice for more ambitious sects to maintain lists of their members' names, and in some cases of their contributions as well. One scripture contained the passage:

Patriarch Lü established himself in Huang village,
down to the present he has been prospering.
All the virtuous people under heaven
are those who have registered their names [as sect members].
. . . Go to Huang village to present money and grain.¹⁶⁹

When plans for an uprising were under way, members were told that their contributions represented more than registration and could now buy them wealth and power in the coming kalpa era. "Lin Ch'ing was always asking for people's money. He said that [giving money] was like sowing the seeds of future benefit (*fu* 福) and in the future [the gifts] would be multiplied tenfold. So people believed and gave money."¹⁷⁰ The benefits promised could be quite explicit. The Eight Trigrams promised that everyone who gave money or grain would later be given land or official position, the amount of land or degree of position depending on the size of the contribution. One group gave each contributor a receipt describing the donation and the promised benefit.¹⁷¹ Anticipation of rebellion might therefore mean a bias in favor of people who were relatively more useful to the sect: one teacher told his pupil to "bring young and rich people into the sect."¹⁷²

Money raised in the name of rebellion did not simply line the pockets of sect leaders. In the 1813 rebellion, as we shall see, there were a number of necessary expenses met by contributions. Many leaders supplied their pupils either with weapons or with money to buy weapons. Each rebel was to wear at least one and in some cases two pieces of white cloth as a sash or turban; this cloth and the material for many white banners was supplied by the top leadership. For his attack on the Forbidden City, Lin Ch'ing needed assistance from eunuchs who worked inside. Those eunuchs already

in the sect were therefore encouraged to convert others, and Lin authorized payments of money to eunuch members—a reverse of the usual flow.¹⁷³ In short, there were purchases to be made on behalf of the Eight Trigrams as a whole, and while it is undeniable that the leaders themselves made ample use of contributions to improve their life style, money was spent generously in the interest of their pupils as well.

Even in normal times pressure was exerted on members to contribute, and there were those who left the sect because they were no longer willing or able to do so. Wang Liang, for example, went to a meeting of the group he had just joined. He was told to pay 500 cash in the current year and double that the following year. The next year, however, he refused to pay this much. His teacher told him that he was obviously “not dedicated,” and so he “wasn’t included in their activities after that, not their meetings or their rebellion.”¹⁷⁴ Another man testified that “we had an argument because I had no more money to give him [my teacher], and after that I had no more contact with him.”¹⁷⁵ In some ways, the necessity for donations provided a useful weeding-out technique. It discouraged those who were not willing to sacrifice for the sake of the group and provided a regular and escalating test of commitment that served to cement the group. When rebellion was being planned, the leaders were less willing to write off those who would not meet the increased need for funds—they needed all the men they could get and wanted all who knew of their plans to stick with them. At this stage, it was not unusual for warnings and the threat of death to accompany requests. Sect members believed that when the kalpa did come, all nonbelievers would be killed. The fear of being excluded from the ultimate benefits of sect membership and the dread of dying with other outsiders was a powerful weapon in the hands of rebellion-minded leaders, and they did not hesitate to use it: “[My teacher] told me that Li Lao was taking his pupils to rebel. He told me to contribute two strings of cash in order to help Li Lao. If I did so, then Li Lao [and his men] wouldn’t kill me. If I didn’t give the money, then they would kill my whole family.”¹⁷⁶ It was, however, cooperation that leaders wanted, and sect members who had no resources were asked to give their time and energy rather than money by helping run errands, deliver messages, arrange meetings.¹⁷⁷

Perhaps the most important aspect of this question of contributions is the degree to which they were a hardship for sect members.

This is a difficult problem and this discussion must be regarded as no more than preliminary guesswork based on a small sample. (For details on donations and on the cost of living and sources for this information see Appendixes 2 and 3.) Initial donations ranged from 100 to 400 cash, averaging about 200. If we assume 200 cash to be the very rough equivalent of two days' labor for a poor person, this is high but not outrageous. Annual gifts ranged widely, from as low as 200 cash to nearly 4,000; from two to twenty days' earnings. At the last minute, individuals were asked to make special contributions toward the expenses of rebellion; these also ranged widely, from 20 to 5,000 cash (from less than one to twenty-five days' work). Because teachers expected less money from those who earned less, it is likely that the normal donations by the individual to his sect were not an excessive burden. Demands for cash at the last minute before the rebellion were more of a hardship; but these demands were made in the 8th and 9th months, as the harvest was coming in, and everyone who worked the land had more ready cash at that time. Moreover, it was surely argued that if the new kalpa did indeed arrive, sect members would not have to worry about making ends meet later, and spending one's reserve (if one had any) was quite justified.

Because leaders of small groups were expected to solicit contributions from their pupils and then pass on some of it to the top leadership, their donations were substantially larger. One leader gave Lin Ch'ing over 10,000 cash in the first nine months of 1813, and another was asked to give 4,000 cash every month for the three months prior to the uprising. Lin Ch'ing, who received money from all the groups who participated in the uprising, thus amassed quite substantial sums. The gifts he received included also rolls of pale blue cloth, a cart, a donkey, a mule, a box of silver ingots, five hundred ounces of silver on one occasion, probably the same amount on two other occasions.¹⁷⁸

These are large sums of money if seen through the eyes of one for whom one or two taels was a great deal. According to Chang Chung-li, the average per capita income for a commoner (based on percentage of GNP) was 5.7 taels a year, and for a member of the gentry class 90 taels a year. On the other hand, the poet and scholar Yuan Mei who lived half a century before Lin Ch'ing would customarily be paid 300 to 500 taels simply to compose a tomb-inscription, and he made 300 taels a month while serving as a prefect. Wealthy salt merchants, admittedly an extreme case, regularly contributed mil-

lions of taels to the central government.¹⁷⁹ Thus, a sect leader could become "rich" in comparison with his followers, and a leader at the head of a broad alliance of sects such as the Eight Trigrams could begin to achieve the same income as a member of the elite. Equally important, this system of contributions provided an economic foundation for the sects and gave their leaders a source of income that was entirely independent of government or elite control.

One of the great strengths of the White Lotus tradition was its capacity for both diffused and coordinated activity: meditation, healing, boxing, or vegetarianism could be practiced either individually or in groups. The act of joining a sect and its daily religious activities could involve no more than a few people and could take place anywhere. Nevertheless, these sects were by tradition and by continually renewed choice congregational sects and reflected this fact by calling their groups "assemblies" (*hui* 會). Because "a group which meets secretly at night" was illegal in the eyes of the government, holding such meetings was in itself a dangerous act of defiance.

There was no fixed pattern for sect meetings. Each group assembled whenever and as frequently as it wanted, and within the tradition there was much variety. The most common pattern appears to have been bimonthly meetings, on the 1st and 15th days, which on the lunar calendar represented the nights of the new moon and full moon respectively.¹⁸⁰ Some groups met less often: one, two, three, or four times a year.¹⁸¹ One sect leader decided to hold eight meetings a year, each of which was called by the name of one of the eight trigrams.¹⁸² Assemblies were usually held in the home of one sect member, often the sect leader. At these meetings, food (brought or purchased with contributions), often vegetarian food, was first offered in sacrifice, and then the sect members sat down to eat.¹⁸³ Those attending might then listen to, read, or recite sect scriptures, sometimes meditating or reciting the eight-character chant together. Members of a San-yuan (Three Origins) sect arrested in 1816 stated:

Whenever there was a meeting, P'ei Ching-i and the others all went to the house of [one of the members]. They contributed money which was turned over to [another member] to buy vegetarian food and an offering. Then, in the evening they burned incense, worshiped, and practiced reciting chants. After the worship was over, they all shared the food. Then they sat and meditated and circulated their breath. On other ordi-

nary days, P'ei Ching-i and some others might meet in one place in groups of three or five or else they might each individually practice yogic meditation at home.¹⁸⁴

Sometimes the leader might expound and explain sect teachings or exhort his pupils to good behavior—"besides, the meetings are devoted to pious conversation, particularly about the five commandments, to the faithful keeping of which they admonish and encourage each other."¹⁸⁵

During the Ch'ing dynasty the tension between the individual and congregational aspects of this tradition was actively encouraged by the government. It was the policy of the Ch'ing state, as C. K. Yang has demonstrated, to make "a constant effort to preserve the diffusion of religion and to prevent the development of independent religious organizations which might concern themselves with affairs of state."¹⁸⁶ The government did not take into account, however, the strength of the White Lotus tradition, for its ideas continued to be taught even when local assemblies had been dispersed by government investigations. Meetings were important to sect members, for they allowed their group to congregate as a community with all the attendant pleasures and benefits for members; but the group could survive for some time without meetings so long as the assemblies eventually were able to reconvene.

One final point must be made with regard to the nature of these White Lotus sects. There are indications, albeit inconclusive, that these sects conceived of themselves as having, in terms of both organization and practice, two dimensions. These dimensions correspond to the age-old dichotomy between *yin* and *yang* but are here more often referred to as *an* 暗 (dark or secret) and *ming* 明 (bright or public). As we shall see, the Eight Trigram rebels used two types of slogans during their uprising. One was called a "public slogan" (*ming-hao* 明號) and would be displayed on their banners; the other was called a "password" (*an-hao* 暗號) and would only be spoken between fellow rebels. In the twentieth century this division into secret and public organizational systems or into comparable types of activities became even more discernable.¹⁸⁷ This religion does in fact seem to manifest itself in two ways, as a secret religious organization in normal times and as a vehicle for open rebellion and revolution at the time of the new kalpa; it does not therefore appear unusual for believers to have been conscious of the dual nature of their religion.

THE KAO FAMILY'S LI TRIGRAM SECT

In normal times, the White Lotus sects scattered about the north China plain appeared isolated from one another, small in size, fixed in one place, and preoccupied only with day-to-day religious activities, unconscious even of their own past histories. The preceding description of sect organization and practices only mirrors this static picture. In order to see how these sects lived and changed, it is necessary to look at them over a longer period of time. We would then see that each sect was in constant motion, expanding, branching out, flowing from place to place, sometimes shrinking to nearly nothing and then rapidly growing again. Each sect member was conscious of this dynamic past. The chain of teacher-pupil relationships of which he was a part encouraged him to forge new links into the future and tied him directly to past prosecutions and rebellions. The emphasis on conversion and the continuity provided by the families of hereditary sect leaders encouraged members to find new pupils in new places. Thus there was a steady pressure away from areas where a sect had become embroiled with the government and toward places where there had never been a sect or trouble before. In other words, these sects were very much alive in time and space. To illustrate this before turning to the Eight Trigrams, let us look at another sect and its various branches as it existed in north China in the late Ch'ien-lung and Chia-ch'ing periods.

The Kao 郛 family lived on the north China plain in Shang-ch'iu district in Honan, near the Shantung border and just south of the Yellow River (which prior to 1850 did not take its present course but flowed due east across the plain and entered the sea south of the Shantung peninsula). This family is known to have practiced the Li Trigram sect 離卦教 "for generations" and is a good example of the hereditary elite who were the carriers of this White Lotus tradition. A member of the family was regarded as sect master and known more formally as the "Immortal of the First Hall of Southern Area Li Trigram Sect." Thus this family saw itself as only one branch of an even larger teaching.

Late in the Ch'ien-lung reign one member of the Kao family decided to move in order to escape the prosecution as a sect member that had befallen most of his immediate family. Kao T'ien-lin's father and two uncles had been executed (they were probably involved in a planned rebellion), another uncle had died in prison,

and one of his cousins had been sent into exile. While the Kao family as a whole was able to survive this period of difficulties, Kao T'ien-lin decided to change his name and surname, and in 1787 he moved to Tung-ch'ang prefectural city in west central Shantung, about one hundred and fifty miles away. Kao had by no means turned his back on his family's sect, however, and he continued to take new pupils until his death (of natural causes) twenty-three years later. His son and his nephew, who had accompanied him, were both in the sect, and the latter succeeded his uncle to the position of sect head. Thus, in the early years of the Chia-ch'ing reign, the family maintained at least two centers of sect leadership—the main family in Honan, and Kao T'ien-lin's sect in Shantung. Everyone in the family continued to recruit pupils and to spread the sect, and so branches were steadily established.

One branch was established by a pupil of Kao T'ien-lin, in his own home in Hsin district in western Shantung near the Grand Canal. There this man taught the sect to those who would follow him and acquired many pupils. Further to the south in Chin-hsiang, another branch of the Shantung Kao family sect had been established. Ts'ui Shih-chün was four generations below Kao T'ien-lin and had been teaching the sect since 1804. He had a large network of pupils in his own and adjacent districts, and by 1811 he was regarded as a prominent sect leader there. Leaders of these two branches in western Shantung were acquainted with each other, but contact between them was infrequent.¹⁸⁸

The Kao family in Honan, in the meantime, had continued to spread and generate its own sect offspring. Through an intermediary teacher from central Chihli, one set of pupils became active in Chü-lu district in central Chihli—the district where Magistrate Huang Yü-p'ien would later seize dozens of sect scriptures. The leader of this Chü-lu group, who was himself at least three generations removed from the Honan leadership, was a healer named Wu Lo-hsing 吳洛興 (also known as Wu Number Two Earthen Pot 吳二瓦罐). In the early years of the Chia-ch'ing reign, Wu had taken a considerable number of pupils from his own district, and through his pupils he spread the sect teachings to at least five more generations of believers in the region to the west of Chü-lu. Some believers from Wu's own district had moved to central Shansi; there they had taken pupils of their own and renamed their group the Hsien-t'ien 先天 (Former Heaven) sect. In 1800 Wu Lo-hsing and two of his pupils were arrested, punished with beatings for the crime of practicing a sect, and then



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released. If this was his sect's first encounter with the law, it was certainly not its last.¹⁸⁹

In the years after 1800, Wu Lo-hsing's following continued to expand, especially in the Chü-lu area where he lived. A decade later they had more than sixteen hundred members listed in registers as believers in what they had begun to call the Ta-sheng (Greater Vehicle) sect. The use of the new name reflects the fact that Wu's own followers considered themselves independent enough to be more than an extension of the Kao family sect. Every new and full moon the members met in small groups, burned incense, read and recited their religious books, and were urged by their leaders to live properly and to do good works. Contributions were encouraged, and as much as 4,800 taels had been collected.

Given the large scale of these operations, it is not surprising that the sect again came to the attention of the government. A failed exam candidate decided to inform the authorities about these illegal activities. The resulting prosecution, in 1811, was again not especially severe. The sixteen hundred people listed on the membership rolls were not punished at all; their names were noted by officials in their localities and they were instructed to stay out of further trouble. Some of those on the lists came forward voluntarily and swore oaths that they would no longer follow the sect. Other believers continued to practice the sect but held fewer meetings in smaller groups. The leaders of the Ta-sheng sect were treated less leniently than the membership at large. Wu Lo-hsing's pupil and the supposed ring-leader of the sect (who had also been prosecuted with Wu a decade before) was sentenced to immediate strangulation. Wu himself, judged a "lesser leader," was sentenced to exile in Kwangsi and died of illness en route there. Four other lesser leaders were sentenced to exile.¹⁹⁰

These sects were much too resilient to be eliminated by one or even two government investigations, and the prosecution of the Ta-sheng sect in 1811 did little to dampen the zeal of the membership in Chü-lu, although smaller communities were more intimidated.¹⁹¹ Despite the arrest and removal of several of the highest ranking sect leaders, including Wu himself, there was no shortage of leadership. Only one year after these arrests, a follower named Liu Kuo-ming decided that it was time to revive the sect. He went to a nearby district to consult with Chang Chiu-ch'eng. Chang was a fellow believer, a healer, astrologer, physiognomer, diviner, and boxing expert, as well as a relative of one of the recently exiled leaders. Chang agreed

that the sect should begin assembling again and suggested that they send out to the membership announcements of this revival; they could even carve a facsimile of an imperial seal and stamp it on the placards. Liu and Chang set about making these announcements, but not long afterward, one of their followers was arrested in Peking. The placards, with their "presumptuous" seals, were scrutinized by government authorities. Liu Kuo-ming was promptly arrested and sentenced to death. Chang Chiu-ch'eng managed to avoid arrest and remained at liberty and active in sect affairs for several years.¹⁹²

Reviewing the history of this sect, the Chia-ch'ing Emperor decided that the sentences meted out in the past to this group had been too light. He criticized the officials responsible and ordered that the sentences of those punished the preceding year (1811) be now reconsidered. As a result, these punishments were all made one degree more severe. For three of these sect leaders, this meant imprisonment in prefectural jails in Chihli province and possible execution in the fall of that year.¹⁹³

Despite the heavier punishments, these leaders did not "abandon their evil ways." On the contrary, one of those leaders who had been resentenced, a man called Li Ching 李經, actually began to organize an uprising while in prison in southern Chihli. Several years before, the fortune-teller Chang Chiu-ch'eng had made some predictions about the auspicious future of Li Ching's son. He calculated that in 1814 the kalpa calamities would occur, and young Li could be considered the reincarnation of the Buddha who had come into the world at this crucial time. In 1813, therefore, Li Ching sent a message via his jailer to several other sect leaders, reminding them of this prophecy. These men came and visited Li in prison. He told them to make banners on which would be written his son's name and the month and day of the uprising. All members of the sect were to be given these banners, which were yellow in color, and told to acquire weapons and plan for "responding to the kalpa."

Li Ching's plans were disrupted by the Eight Trigrams rebellion in the fall of that year: government investigators again made inquiries into the Ta-sheng sect, and the Eight Trigrams' claims to have correctly predicted the coming kalpa had won support from some of Li Ching's own pupils. Despite Li's efforts to change the date and rise up quickly before the Eight Trigrams could "lure away their members," his own plot became known. Angry at these continued and persistent efforts by the Ta-sheng sect to cause trouble, the emperor ordered Li Ching executed immediately by slow slicing (*ling-ch'ih*

凌遲), and twenty-one other sect leaders were arrested and also put to death.¹⁹⁴

Many members of the Ta-sheng sect, and of its parent Li Trigram sect, knew about the government prosecutions in 1811, 1812, and 1813, but relatively few of them were punished. One follower from Chü-lu, a man called Yang Yü-shan, was certainly quite undeterred. He reestablished a personal link with the Kao family in Honan by taking a young man from that family as his pupil, and subsequently he sent monetary contributions to them. Moreover, having followers who were clearly interested in being saved should the kalpa calamities arrive, Yang made contact with the leaders of the Eight Trigrams and arranged for the participation of his sect in their uprising, and he made sure that the Kao family was notified of these plans.¹⁹⁵ After the enormous loss of life and very intense investigations that accompanied the failure of the Eight Trigrams in the winter of 1813, it does appear that the Ta-sheng sect, the Li Trigram sect, and their various branches, opted for a quieter course, for they do not appear in the historical record in the next decade.

While these Li Trigram sects represent only a portion of the White Lotus sects active during the early Chia-ch'ing reign, this account of several decades of their history should illustrate what life was typically like for such groups and should provide a brief alternative to the more detailed and somewhat different history of the Eight Trigrams during this same period.