

1. *Innovation and Historical Continuity*

Before we turn to more theoretical questions, we first have to recall shortly a problem of historical research. The religious movements founded in the latter half of the Ming dynasty appeared as a new development in the religious history of China. Beginning with Patriarch Luo, a number of new religious groups entered the historical stage. We are far better informed about their teachings and internal development than about any preceding religious movement since antiquity with the exception of the orthodox traditions. However, at present we have no means to decide to which extent these new religious movements of the Ming were really new in the sense that they were different from earlier beliefs about which we have little or no information. The main reason why the Ming sects appear in such a clear light is that they have produced scriptures that have been preserved and can be studied today. Indeed, this is one of their specifics that might justify to regard them as a new chapter in the history of popular religions. Still, we know that since the Tang dynasty, if not before, there were popular religious groups using scriptures, which were considered apocryphal or heterodox. The use of books was, therefore, nothing new even if the genre of *baojian* developed only during the Ming dynasty.¹ Considering the teachings of the late Ming *baojian*, we find that they use a symbolic language that has many parallels in the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian traditions. So close seem Patriarch Luo's teachings to Chan Buddhism that one could regard them as its popular variety. Other sects including the *Huangtian jiao* could be classified as varieties of Daoism. Since popular

¹ There is some discussion about the earliest scriptures of this genre. This may be of interest in the context of the history of literature, but it is of only limited importance to the history of popular religious movements. There is no question that sectarian scriptures existed long before the Ming dynasty. The oldest known *baojian* is the *Huangji jingao baojian* printed in 1430, but according to its own testimony it was not the earliest. On the other hand, the genre of *baojian* is rather heterogeneous including scriptures of different types. Normally "*baojian*" is used as a generic term for sectarian writings since the Ming, although they were not always called "*baojian*" (e.g., the scriptures of *Lao Mengchang*). Hence, the appearance of this literary genre is of limited use to draw a line between the Ming sects and earlier popular sects. More important is the social dimension of the sectarian literature. During the late Ming it was published in great number and openly distributed, while earlier sectarian scriptures were mostly considered heterodox and often confiscated and destroyed. — For the discussion of the earliest *baojian* cf. Ma Xisha, "Zuizao yibao baojian de yanjiu," Overmyer, and Li Shiyu, "The oldest Chinese sectarian scripture," Che Xihou, *Zhongguo zuzao de baojian*, Overmyer, *Precious volumes*, pp. 287–289.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DYNAMICS OF POPULAR RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS
DURING THE QING AND MING DYNASTIES

In the preceding chapters I have presented a number of popular religious movements founded during the Ming and Qing dynasties to illustrate some characteristics of their teachings, organization, and internal development. It was not possible nor did I intend to give a comprehensive historical description of the religious movements dealt with. Still less was it possible to introduce all popular religious groups. The proliferation of religious groups during the last five hundred years of imperial China made them a ubiquitous phenomenon in Chinese society. Most of these groups were small and short-lived and never entered the historical records. But even the larger ones with extended networks that persisted over decades or centuries are too numerous to be mentioned all. Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang have treated many of them in a book of more than fourteen hundred pages. They provide exhaustive historical information, much of which has been used in this book. However, popular religious movements in late imperial China are not only an important object of historical research. They also give us insight into the internal dynamics of religious developments and their interaction with the surrounding society.

While we cannot reasonably try to reconstruct all historical ramifications, it is possible to analyse certain common tendencies of the Ming and Qing sects. In the present chapter I shall summarize in a more systematic way some of the interpretations presented paradigmatically in the previous parts. I will first discuss the question to which degree the sects of the Ming dynasty are innovative or continued older popular traditions. Thereafter, the main part of the chapter will be more theoretical in orientation. I shall propose some interpretations to explain the formation and certain features of the development of new religious movements in Ming and Qing China.

religious movements based on Buddhism or Daoism are attested at least since the Song dynasty, it may well be that the late Ming sects do not represent a development as new as it appears at first sight. If we imagine for a moment that the late Ming *baojuan* were lost and we had to rely only on the scarce information of other sources, these sects would appear in the same light as earlier movements. Thus, historical methodology obliges us to state that the only indisputable difference between the late Ming sects and earlier sects is that we know much more about the former than about the latter.

However, with this caveat we can state that the Ming sectarian *baojuan* represent a new genre of religious literature and a new type of religious movement. Whatever earlier scriptures might have existed, they do not seem to have been printed and distributed to the same extent as the Ming and Qing *baojuan*. This does, of course, say nothing about the degree of their doctrinal innovation, but it shows that the social standing of the late Ming sects was different from that of their precursors. Even if their teachings were possibly not as new as the coincidence of available sources suggests, it was new that they were propagated openly using written texts. During the sixteenth century there was no persecution of the sects that produced this new form of religious literature, which allowed some of them to spread both geographically and socially. Scriptures were printed and read, and a distinct literary tradition developed. Conditions remained comparatively favourable until the eighteenth century when the sects became subjected to severe and recurrent persecutions. Thus, there were about two hundred years of development to take roots in Chinese society. It was a development that produced not only an increasing number of scriptures and a proliferation of diverse sectarian groups, but also extended networks, interaction, and wide geographical distribution of various sectarian traditions. Although committed sect members were only a tiny minority of the population, they were probably not less, perhaps more than the number of Buddhist monks and nuns or Daoist priests. Hence, the sects founded in late Ming and their successors in the Qing dynasty changed the religious landscape in China. These were significant changes since they produced a fourth distinct religious tradition in addition to the three established teachings. Distinct it was in the sense that there were clear boundaries of membership with formal initiations, independent organizations, and a cumulative literary tradition. It was, however, no unified tradition, neither in terms of organization nor with

regard to teachings and practices. There was no central leadership or a commonly recognized canon of normative scriptures. Like the Daoist movements before the fifth century, diversity and even competition was paired with certain shared beliefs and similar forms of organization. But unlike Daoism, none of the popular religious movements of the Ming and Qing succeeded in establishing itself as an orthodox, state-approved form of religion.

While it cannot be denied that the sectarian movements as a social phenomenon represent a new and significant element in the society and religious culture of late imperial China, it must remain open to which degree their teachings were really new. They certainly were not just popularized versions of conventional Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian teachings. Of course, sectarian writings and teachings shared many symbols and ideas with the three other traditions. They did not stand outside the Chinese religious and cultural tradition. Yet, they were more than a syncretic blend of diffused symbols and ideas stemming from the three orthodox traditions. There was a fourth element whose origin is obscure. As has been analysed in the case of the *Louhua jing*, anthropology and soteriology differed considerably from orthodox Buddhist beliefs, even if the symbolism relied strongly on Buddhism. The central mythological theme of the divine origin of humankind, its fall into the world of mundane entanglement and the hope to return to the Native Place had no Buddhist or Daoist precedents. Likewise, the symbol *Wusheng Laomu* (Unborn Venerable Mother), which during the Qing dynasty became a distinctive feature of many sects, is absent in Buddhist or Daoist scriptures. It does appear in sources earlier than the sixteenth century *baojuan*. Can we conclude, therefore, that it was an innovation of late Ming sect founders, a new belief emerging and taking shape in the sixteenth century? Granting that these beliefs and symbols do not appear in scriptures of the three orthodox traditions, one has to be cautious not to draw conclusions based on *argumenta e silentio*. Not to be part of the orthodox religious traditions does not mean not to exist. Admitting that the mythological complex conventionally labelled “*Wusheng Laomu* belief” was part of popular sectarian traditions, it is not far-fetched to consider the possibility that they do not appear in sources earlier than the sixteenth century for the simple reason that no sectarian scriptures of the preceding centuries have been preserved. Of course, we have the *Huangji jiaqiao baojuan*, where the symbol *Wusheng Laomu* is lacking. This may be an argument to

presume that the religious group in which this scripture originated did not use this symbol. Yet it does not justify the conclusion that it was unknown elsewhere. For *Wusheng Laomu* is likewise not mentioned in Patriarch Luo's writings, while it was used in the contemporary *Julian jing*. What we can state, however, is that the symbol *Wusheng Laomu*—wherever and whenever it originated—penetrated the scriptures and beliefs of many sects from the sixteenth century onward.

At least some elements of the *Wusheng Laomu* belief had a long history. As a central idea we can isolate that of a female deity associated with immortality who rescues her devotees from death. This basic theme we find already in the cult of *Xi Wangmu*, the Venerable Mother of the West, towards the end of the first century BCE.² Although the symbols *Wusheng Laomu* and *Xi Wangmu* are slightly different,³ they refer to ideas that have some traits in common. Both are imagined to reside in the West where they represent the realm of immortality to which the believers hope to proceed. In the case of the *Xi Wangmu* cult in 3 BCE the deity offers escape from impending catastrophes and death, which shows that the idea was occasionally combined with apocalyptic expectations. The same is true for *Wusheng Laomu*. Unfortunately we have no evidence of this combination of ideas after the Han dynasty until the Ming. But the single elements of this complex remained within the cultural space of popular religious traditions. One of them were ideas about the end of the present time and coming apocalyptic events. After the Han dynasty they appeared in various contexts, among them Daoist messianism and apocalypticism.⁴ As early as in the early middle ages such beliefs were often combined with prophetic traditions about the end of the present dynasty and the coming of a new emperor who belongs to the family of a former dynasty. Barend ter Haar has reconstructed a similar type of popular belief connected with the idea of impending catastrophes, which he calls the "demonological messianic paradigm". He is mainly concerned with the occurrence of this paradigm during the eighteenth century, but makes it clear that its elements

² See above pp. 31 ff.

³ *Wangmu* and *Laomu* have nearly the same meanings, both being honorific titles for elder women. *Xi Wangmu* points to the mythical abode of the goddess in the West, while *Wusheng Laomu* refers to the more abstract idea of no-birth-and-death, which as a linguistic symbol is of Buddhist origin.

⁴ See above pp. 80 ff.

have a long history dating back to at least the sixth century.⁵ While prophecies about a new emperor do not appear in Ming *baojuan*, they surface in some sectarian scriptures of the Qing dynasty.⁶ This again shows that late appearance of an idea in sectarian writings is no evidence of its late origin.

Many other symbols and ideas that became standard repertoire of sectarian *baojuan* are continuations of earlier traditions. The idea of three cosmic periods associated with the three Buddhas of the past, the present, and the future, and of catastrophes at the end of great *kalpas* had its precedent in orthodox Buddhism. Even in pre-Tang times there were, however, also less orthodox Buddhist traditions about the near advent of Maitreya, an idea that was to become a latent element in many popular religious traditions. It occasionally became fervent in millenarian movements such as the Han Shantong uprising at the end of the Yuan dynasty. In late Ming *baojuan* the symbol of Maitreya does not seem to imply strong millenarian expectations. It rather stands for the idea of a new epoch in the history of divine revelations following the age of Buddha Śakyamuni. This new epoch is usually thought to have been inaugurated by the revelation of the respective scripture or sect founder. Only in the *Dacheng jiao* uprising of 1622 and above all during the Qing dynasty, the latent millenarianism connected with the symbol Maitreya became fervent and violent. This was, however, no innovative element of Ming and Qing sectarian beliefs but part of a long tradition.⁷

If we do not concentrate on specific symbolic expressions but on the structure of ideas, we find that the anthropological and soteriological conceptions of the *Wusheng Laomu* myth antedate the sixteenth century *baojuan*; for the *Huangji jieguo baojuan* of 1430 contains the same mythological structure using a slightly different symbolic language. Here the creative principle is not called *Wusheng Laomu* but *Gufu* (Ancient Buddha) or *Gufu Wusheng* (Ancient Buddha No-Birth). Like *Wusheng Laomu* in later scriptures, *Gufu* is described as being full of sorrow because his creatures are entangled in the mundane world of sin. To rescue them, he discloses the saving teaching.⁸ More than two hundred

⁵ Cf. ter Haar, *Ritual and mythology of the Chinese Triads*, pp. 224–228.

⁶ Cf. above p. 309 for the *Sanjiao yingjie zongquan tongshu*.

⁷ For an extensive discussion of historical antecedents of the scriptures and beliefs of the Ming sects cf. Overmyer, *Precious volumes*, pp. 9–50.

⁸ Cf. above p. 276.

years later, in the *Longhua jing*, the same symbol *Gufo* is still used to form a pair with *Wusheng Laomu* as two personalized aspects of the source of all being.

We can conclude that the central ideas found in late Ming *baojuan* had precursors in older traditions. The mythological theme of men's divine origin, fall into sin, and salvation appears already in the oldest surviving *baojuan* of the fifteenth century, and there is little reason to suppose that it had its historical origin there. It is more probable that it was part of beliefs in the sectarian milieu to which the *Huangji jiegao* *baojuan* belonged. It seems that in other sectarian groups different symbols were used to express similar ideas. In the *Jiulian jing*, which appeared less than a century later, the Ancient Buddha of the *Huangji jiegao* *baojuan* is already combined with the symbol *Wusheng Laomu*. But still in the scriptures of the *Huangtian jiao* and the *Hongyang jiao*, which originated at the end of the sixteenth century, *Wusheng Laomu* is just one of various symbols to refer to the Absolute. While the structure of the mythological motive is fairly constant, the symbols used are different. It does not seem that during the Ming dynasty the symbol *Wusheng Laomu* was more important than many other symbols such as *Gufo*, *Zhenkong* (True Emptiness) or *Wusheng Fumu* (Unborn Parents), which are found in various *baojuan*. It was only in the seventeenth century that *Wusheng Laomu* began to overshadow them and became the characteristic symbol of numerous sects during the Qing dynasty.

With regard to the history of religious ideas, it appears therefore that the sects founded in the sixteenth century do not mark a significant break. They probably did not propagate teachings that were completely new, but continued and combined existing traditions. The main innovation of the late Ming sects is rather in the field of social history, namely, the founding and expansion of new sectarian groups, and the large-scale printing of their scriptures. Scriptures crystallized popular beliefs to material form and contributed considerably to the social and geographical expansion and historical transmission of sectarian teachings. They also fostered the exchange of ideas within sectarian milieus and a gradual homogenization of ideas and symbols. Hence, the role of popular religious groups in Chinese society changed significantly since the middle of the Ming dynasty. They transformed into literary and partly institutionalized traditions that became a most dynamic element in the religious culture. In this sense the new religious movements

of the late Ming mark the beginning of a new epoch in the religious history of China.

2. *The Emergence of New Religious Movements*

The dynamics of the popular religious movements of the Ming and Qing is not only an intriguing field of historical research, it also presents rich material for developing and testing theories about the formation and development of new religious movements. At present, the most elaborated theory in this field is probably Stark's and Bainbridge's exchange theory of religion.⁹ The main part of this theory deals with the emergence, growth, and evolution of new religious movements. While I do not subscribe to some of their central theoretical assumptions about religion, this part of their theory appears to be a fruitful approach to a sociological interpretation of the dynamics of new religious movements. Since they develop their theory mainly against the background of Western religious traditions, its application in the context of Chinese religions offers the opportunity to test and revise it on a broader empirical base.

One of the features demanding explanation is the continuous formation of new religious groups since the Ming. Even during the Qing dynasty with its severe persecutions, the number of sectarian groups did not decline but appears to have increased constantly. I shall therefore first consider the processes by which new religious groups came into being. To explain these processes three types will be constructed: the "revelation," "entrepreneur," and "schismatic" type.¹⁰

The revelation type

By "revelation" I understand an individual experience that is interpreted as bringing some kind of insight or knowledge not available under normal conditions. The paradigm for the formation of a new religious movement based on the individual experience of its founder is the Luo Menghong movement. Luo Menghong describes his life before his enlightening

⁹ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A theory of religion*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996 (Original publication: New York: Lang, 1987). Hereafter quoted as Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*.

¹⁰ This typology is influenced by Stark's and Bainbridge's theory of the formation of sects and cults. Cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, pp. 121–193.

experience as thirteen years of religious seekership. It was a time when he was trying to find a solution to his fundamental problem of feeling lost in a world of impermanence and without anything where he could feel at home. We can speculate that this intense sentiment of forlornness was partly due to the loss of his parents in early childhood. In any case, Luo Menghong appears as a socially isolated individual wandering around to find a teacher who could offer a way to overcoming his emotional and spiritual despair. For about two years he tried various Daoist methods, but does not seem to have joined the religious communities of his teachers, if they had any. In any case, he did not stay there long. He remained, however, for eight years in the community of a teacher who taught him to believe in Amitābha as the Unborn Parents (*Wusheng Fumu*). Yet, the social bonds he developed in this group weakened after some years and he left the group to continue his search for another three years. After eight years of relatively close social relationships with his teacher and fellow disciples he was again alone. While he was intensely longing for overcoming his isolation and to find a place to feel at home, he seems to have been unable to engage in permanently satisfying relationships. Whatever the reasons for this dilemma may have been, we can easily understand that he experienced his situation as extremely distressful. The common Buddhist explanation of mundane existence as a sea of suffering must have had a high degree of plausibility to him. The cultural system available to him explained not only suffering in religious terms, but also deliverance from suffering. Hence, his endeavour to find a way out of his personal experience of distress took the form of a religious search. Apparently without the direct guidance of a teacher, he finally reached what he experienced as enlightenment: awareness of his being united with the only and ultimate reality, which he alternatively called 'True Emptiness, Limitless or Mother. It was an experience opening to him a new understanding of his existence that obviously brought relief from the intensely felt anguish of mind.

There were cultural patterns available that permit an interpretation of his experience as enlightenment, which was highly prestigious in the religious milieu he was accustomed to. Since he had reached his enlightenment without a teacher, he could conceive it as his personal accomplishment that revealed to him the truth about human existence, suffering and salvation, and the unity of all that exists. While his insight certainly was conditioned by available religious ideas and symbols,

they were subjectively a new revelation, which laid the foundation of Luo Menghong's ensuing career as teacher of a new and single way to salvation.

Having revelations of a sort that they fundamentally change one's life is not very common. Most people do not have them. We may hypothesize, therefore, that there are some factors in the individual biography or personality that make some people more disposed to having revelations of that kind than others. Luo Menghong's biography certainly was unusual. Before his enlightenment his psychic disposition was not that of a well-integrated member of the society. It is not the normal case for soldiers to become religious seekers in their twenties. As he laments in his autobiography: "Also soldiers who serve thousands of miles away have a home place where they can stay. Why is it only this soul of mine that has no home place?"¹¹ Given his early orphanage, this longing for a home place may not just be a metaphor. To grow up without mother and father and to have no family in a society largely based on kinship relationships was indeed a lamentable fate. Modern psychiatrists would possibly diagnose the corresponding state of mind as a psychosis. In any case, there are good reasons to suppose that his experience of human existence as suffering had some base in his psychic disposition and his conditions of life. He apparently had no satisfying social relationships that could have prevented him from leaving the army in search for deliverance from his anguish of mind. What he found was a religious community that seems to have provided rewarding social relationships for several years. However, he left after eight years because of differences with the leader of this group. If an individual separates from a group to which he was attached for many years and in which he was deeply involved and has invested a great deal, he usually experiences some kind of psychic crisis.¹² Hence, we can expect that Luo Menghong was thrown back to a similar state of mind as he was in before he joined the Amitābha community. Again he underwent a phase of three years' search for deliverance from his psychic suffering. Even in his dreams he was tormented by his anguish of mind. It was under such extraordinary psychic conditions that he finally found the solution to his problems in the visions of his enlightenment. It is difficult

¹¹ *Kuigong zhidao jian* (BJC), vol. 1, pp. 104 f.

¹² Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Theory of the concepts attachment, investment, involvement and turning point*.

to imagine that revelations of this type can be experienced by someone who feels at ease and comfortable with his actual situation.

This interpretation is largely based on hypotheses developed by Stark and Bainbridge. It roughly corresponds to what they call the "psychopathology model".¹³ Although there are some weak points in this model, it is remarkable that what we know about Luo Menghong's life fits very well with the hypotheses formulated in this theory. Admittedly, the sources are too scarce to confirm the theory beyond any doubt, but at least they do not disprove it. In any case, the model allows to explain some conditions of revelation experiences that otherwise would remain unexplained. Until we have more convincing and better confirmed theories, it is the best explanation available.

Of course, the revelations experienced by an individual are not enough to form a new religious movement. What followed were more than forty years of teaching and organizing a community of disciples. These were most rewarding activities. They brought what Luo had been searching for so many years: social relationships, recognition, and confirmation of his own insight. In addition he gained fame, power, and probably also wealth. To find the role of religious teacher and leader of a community was not difficult for him, for he had eight years of experience with such a community. The role pattern was available to him and he was unusually successful in it. His teachings were attractive to many people.

The revelation type of cult formation seems to have been rare during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This impression may partly be due to the lack of detailed information on the founders' biographies.¹⁴ Certainly, there were many founders of religious groups who claimed to have experienced enlightenment. However, after Luo Menghong this was part of the role pattern of would-be sect founders. Some similarities to Luo's biography can be found in Lin Zhao'en's, although his social background was completely different. But Lin also seems to have undergone a period of psychic instability after he failed the higher examinations. He reached a solution to his problems through the revelations experienced after meeting the mysterious enlightened master. Since he had not formerly been a member of a religious community and had no experience with that type of organization, he first organized

¹³ Cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, p. 158-168.

¹⁴ It is remarkable, however, that many sect leaders shared Luo's fate of being early orphans; cf. above p. 263.

his following after the model of a Confucian school to which he was accustomed. Only as the community grew, it gradually adopted features of a religious sect. His work as a religious leader was like Luo's highly rewarding and certainly compensated for the aborted career of an official.

The entrepreneur type

Successful sect founders including Luo Menghong and Lin Zhao'en became professional teachers and leaders of their communities. It was a rewarding profession that, if successful, secured prestige and income, even if this may not have been the primary goal of these men. Anyhow, the rewards that could be gained as leader of a religious group were without doubt attractive. It is understandable, therefore, that others also attempted to enter into this profession. Above all, leading and ambitious members of existing communities, who accordingly knew how the business works, were tempted to establish their own sects. They became religious entrepreneurs.¹⁵

Even Luo Menghong complains about disciples who after many years in his community started to propagate teachings without his consent, because they wanted fame and profit. They became sect leaders who copied Luo's teachings using even his scriptures. Since government repression of religious groups was weak during the sixteenth century, there were no great obstacles in founding new sects. The founders usually were first disciples of one or several teachers and learned the religious business there. A good example is the case of Han Taihu, alias Piaogao, the founder of the *Honggang jiao*. Before he established his own sect, he met many teachers most of whom he left because they demanded money from their followers. He finally joined the community of Master Wang who did not charge money.¹⁶ We see here that there were numerous teachers who made religion a source of income. Without doubt there were charlatans among them, and not to demand money could therefore be taken as a sign of honesty. However, honest teachers still needed material resources to survive and to organize their communities. Even a wealthy man such as Lin Zhao'en finally had to

¹⁵ For the entrepreneur model of cult formation cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, pp. 168-178.

¹⁶ *Honggang kangang wendao jing*, ch. 10 (Bj67), vol. 15, pp. 234-239, ch. 12 (pp. 259, 266).

accept contributions from his followers to finance the activities of his community. Honest teachers may not have demanded money, but they certainly received presents that allowed them to devote their life to teaching. Piaogao himself became such a religious professional after he left Master Wang and founded his own sect. The richly decorated editions of his writings printed in the imperial printing office show that he enjoyed the support of wealthy followers, who certainly did not allow their teacher to impoverish.

Piaogao's scriptures expose a further characteristic of religious entrepreneurship: the copying of successful methods of other religious teachers. One of the factors that contributed to the tremendous success of the Luo movement in the sixteenth century was the use of printed scriptures. Scriptures allowed to spread the teaching geographically, but they were also highly prestigious. Religious teachings with their own writings had a much greater appeal to the more educated classes than teachings transmitted only orally. Since the use of scriptures proved to be a successful method of propagation, it was adopted by other religious groups. In Piaogao's case it is evident that his writings were created after the direct model of Patriarch Luo's scriptures. This general tendency of religious entrepreneurs to adopt successful methods and teachings contributed to the homogenization of sects addressing the same or similar types of audience.

There were, however, various types of audiences. What was attractive to an educated and well-off public was not the same as what an illiterate audience expected. To propagate religious teachings among the less privileged and less educated demanded to respond to their expectations and level of understanding. Hence, religious entrepreneurs had to adapt their teachings to the circumstances in which they were active. To form large sectarian organizations necessarily implied a majority of less educated members. Since the religious background of these members was less moulded by the literary traditions of the orthodox teachings than by popular religious traditions, sectarian teachings were more successful if they conformed to popular beliefs and practices. This was a factor that considerably affected the dynamics of sectarian development. A good example for the transformation of teachings in response to the expectations of the audience is the *Sangyi jiao*, which was rather close to the literary traditions of the elites in its formative period. As it spread among peasants and fishermen in Fujian, particularly the *Mingxia* branch founded by Lin Zhenming gradually adopted local

religious beliefs and practices. To these popular religious traditions belonged beliefs transmitted through the centuries in sectarian groups. The new religious movements of the late Ming spread into a religious culture where older sectarian traditions and smaller or larger religious groups were already present. The social milieus that were most likely to affiliate with a new sect were those that were most affected by older sectarian beliefs. There was only a limited number of persons disposed to joining a religious community. Dynamic new religious movements that attempted to increase their membership had to recruit new members from the same reservoir in which other sects were already active. In many cases new converts had therefore formerly been members of other sects or disciples of other teachers.

These new members had already certain beliefs and expectations when they joined the new religious groups. It was easier and more successful to attract them by accepting at least part of the beliefs they were accustomed to. Hence, as the new religious movements spread in popular sectarian milieus, they were brought closer to the beliefs prevailing in these milieus. This explains why even sects revering Patriarch Luo as founder, to the extent that they spread into popular religious milieus, adopted such symbols as Maitreya and *Wusheng Laomu*, and the idea of three cosmic periods. These teachings do not appear in Luo Menghong's scriptures, but they were obviously highly attractive. Sect founders and leaders who wanted to be successful in these milieus had, therefore, to respond to these demands and adapt their teachings accordingly.

The schismatic type

The majority of the countless sectarian groups of the Ming and Qing probably came into being through separation from existing organizations, that is, schisms. In many cases the schismatic type and the entrepreneur type coincide. Thus the *Huangtian jiao*, which was founded by Li Bin, alias Puming, separated after Puming's death into two branches. One was headed by the founder's descendants, leader of the other was Pujing, a senior disciple of Puming's. Pujing's establishing his own sect partly corresponds to the entrepreneur type. On the other hand it was a schism of the *Huangtian jiao*, since its membership was divided into two different and, as it appears, competing sects. The death of a sect founder seems to have almost regularly engendered schismatic

tendencies as the major disciples each had their own following. Thus, after Lin Zhao'en had died the *Sanyi jiao* split into different branches, after Yin Ji'nan's execution his sect disintegrated into smaller units, and after Wang Sen's death different groups evolved under various leaders. Less often it occurred that leading members contested the authority of an established sect head. Li Guoyong revolted against Wang Sen and separated from his organization drawing a great number of members with him. Likewise, Wang Changsheng challenged Yao Wenyu's authority and with his own following left the sect.

Schisms were not always due to competition between sect leaders. They were likely to appear if in a larger sectarian organization social cleavages developed.¹⁷ If for some reason parts of the membership interacted much more intensely with each other than with the rest of the sect-members, they formed sub-groups that easily separated when the overall organization was weak. One reason for social cleavages was geographical distance. In the eighteenth century the so-called Luo sects in Fujian and Zhejiang were in fact independent sects not affiliated to organizations in the North that equally derived from the Luo movement. Another likely cause of social cleavage was the internal segmentation of sectarian networks into teacher-disciple relationships, which structured the hierarchies of most extended sects. An example is the "old" *Bagua jiao*. Liu Zuochen, the founder of the *Shouyuan jiao*, which later was known as *Bagua jiao*, organized his sect in several units led by his senior disciples. Although the religious leadership of the Liu family seems to have been recognized by most sub-sects for many decades, the segmentation was the base for the development of independent sects after the persecution of 1772. This shows at the same time that persecution and government pressure contributed to the splitting of sects. Since government measures concentrated on eliminating the leadership of larger sects, they weakened the central organizations and made communication between dispersed communities difficult. Some communities completely disbanded when the pressure of persecution was too strong and the leaders had been executed or exiled. When activities were resumed after some time, new organizations had to be built.

Social cleavage can also result from social distance between groups originating in the same tradition. As new members of religious groups are mostly recruited through personal contacts with persons who are

¹⁷ For the concept *social cleavage*, see Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, pp. 65, 131.

already members, they usually belong to the same social milieu.¹⁸ There was a tendency of single congregations to be socially homogeneous. Thus, the congregations of canal sailors seem to have consisted mainly of boatmen and persons of a similar social background. Although they were part of the Luo movement, they had little social contacts with communities whose members belonged to the more privileged classes. This is one reason why the Luo movement became increasingly differentiated into various sectarian groups without an overall organization.

In many cases the single factors inducing social cleavages within a larger religious movement reinforced each other. Social distance often coincided with geographical distance, networks of teacher-disciple relationships tended to recruit new members from the same social milieu and thus to be socially homogeneous. And missionaries who went to other places to gain converts built their own networks of disciples that were at the same time geographically distant from the parent group. Given the pressure of persecution that impeded the formation and maintenance of coordinated large organizations, the segmentation of new religious movements into smaller units was a natural outcome.

The three types analytically distinguished to describe the formation of new religious groups are, of course, ideal types rarely found in pure form. Empirically there are many mixed forms. Taking again Luo Menghong as an example, he illustrates first the revelation type in devising a new teaching based on his personal religious insight, and second the entrepreneur type in propagating his teachings and founding a religious community. It should be clear that being a religious entrepreneur does not mean to be dishonest. Religious entrepreneurs may, of course, be dishonest like any other entrepreneur. However, they may also, and probably do in most cases, sincerely believe in the religious message they preach. But to organize successfully an expanding religious movement demands more than just having sincere beliefs. After all, Luo Menghong could have been content with having reached enlightenment and keeping his insight for himself. Yet he propagated them and even wrote books to make them public and gain followers. Hence, he turned into a religious entrepreneur, and a successful one moreover. The same combination of the revelation type with the entrepreneur type can be observed in Piaogao's case. On the other hand,

¹⁸ Cf. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of faith: Interpersonal bonds and recruitment to sects and cults," in *The future of religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 307-324.

the revelation type can also combine with the schismatic type when a member of an existing group preaches his own religious insight as a new revelation. An example is Gongchang who belonged to one of the groups connected with Wang Sen, but based his own teaching on the claim to having received a revelation from *Wusheng Laomu*. In fact, in this case all three types go together, since he was also a religious entrepreneur.

3. *Changing Degrees of Heterodoxy*

Having explained some of the factors contributing to the formation and proliferation of new religious movements during the Ming and Qing dynasties, I shall consider more closely their dynamics of development. I will argue that many features evolving during the Qing dynasty are due to the tension developing between them and their social surroundings. If we compare them with the other institutional religions in China, Buddhism and Daoism, we find that the most important difference was their being regarded as heterodox. Of course, there were other differences, but most of them can be explained by the fact that Buddhism and Daoism had a longer history. Their scriptures were accordingly more numerous, their teachings more elaborated, their geographical and social expansion wider, and they had more personal and financial resources. However, these were secondary differences that equally applied to older and newer denominations within the realm of Buddhism and Daoism. What most distinguished the new religions from new developments within the realm of the two orthodox religions was that they became to be considered heterodox. This deeply affected their development.

Heterodox and *orthodox* can be designed as theoretical concepts referring to the relation between religions and the political authorities. As it would lead too far away from the present discussion to develop this terminology in detail, I confine myself to giving a formal definition: In the present context I call religious organizations *orthodox* to the degree that they are supported by the state; they are called *heterodox* to the degree that they are repressed by the state.¹⁹ The concepts are *gradational*

¹⁹ The concept *heterodox* roughly corresponds to Stark's and Bainbridge's *deviant* (cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, p. 124), but is more specific in considering only the attitude of the political institutions and not of other segments of the society (which may

since there may be greater or lesser support or repression. They are *relational* in that they do not refer to a certain quality of a religion, but to its relation with the political authorities.²⁰ This relationship was changeable.

The new religious movements emerging during the Ming dynasty certainly were not orthodox religions in the sense of being actively supported by the state. However, their degree of heterodoxy varied considerably. Some groups, including Lin Zhao'en's *Sanyi jiao* and Luo Menghong's *Wuwei jiao* in their formative periods, do not seem to have suffered substantial repression by the political authorities. In fact, the scripture-producing new religious groups of the sixteenth century all started with a low degree of deviance. In the case of the Luo movement there was some criticism from the part of orthodox Buddhism, and Lin Zhao'en had to face repressive measures from local officials, but there is no evidence of systematic repression by the government. This is remarkable because from early Ming onward there were laws against heterodox religious groups of various kinds that probably could have been applied against the new religious groups.²¹ While there are some sources indicating official mistrust and even persecution of religious groups falling under this law in the first decades of the sixteenth century,²² the Luo movement was mentioned in memorials warning against the activities of heterodox religions only towards the end of the century.²³

have a different attitude). *Orthodox* has no equivalent in Stark's and Bainbridge's terminology. We can describe *heterodox* as referring to a negative attitude of the state towards a given religious organization and give it values from -1 (highest degree of repression) to zero (no repression). *Orthodox* would then be the extension of the scale to the positive, ranging from zero (no active support) to 1 (highest degree of active support).

²⁰ It should be emphasized that this terminology departs from common usage of the terms "orthodox" and "heterodox". It refers exclusively to the attitude of the ruling institutions towards religious organizations and does not imply any judgement on the beliefs or practices by the standards of a given "orthodox" religious tradition. The claim to orthodoxy (in the sense of correct or true teaching) is made by most religious groups including those considered heterodox by others. However, unless the political institutions take side these are just competing claims. It is thus ultimately the politically powerful who decide what is orthodox and by implication heterodox.

²¹ Cf. above p. 210, note 1.

²² There was a zealous inquisition of heterodox groups by the official Wang Bangqi 王邦奇 during the Zhengde era (1506-1521). Wang used *agents provocateurs* to unveil heterodox teachings. (*Mingshi*, j. 192, p. 5092). In 1525, a memorial was submitted warning against heterodox religious activities (*Guangzong zhengshi* 光宗政記, j. 16, 20-3a, in *ShiQS*, vol. 123, p. 474), translated in ter Haar, *The White Lotus teaching*, p. 142.

²³ Cf. above p. 235.

Thus, for more than half a century after the first printing of Patriarch Luo's scriptures there was little repression, and the movement does not seem to have been classified as heterodox. During these years it expanded geographically from Zhili to Shandong and along the Grand Canal to the southern provinces. At the same time the movement split into several subgroups.

Some branches of the Luo movement were led or dominated by members of the more educated and privileged middle classes. They repeatedly edited and published Luo's writings. Other religious groups likewise published and distributed their scriptures, which in the case of the *Hongyang jiao* were even printed in the imperial press. This all suggests that these religious groups were not subjected to severe repression and could act openly even after the first memorials had warned against the proliferation of heterodox religions. There were, however, also other cases. Yin Jī nan, who considered himself as a reincarnation of Patriarch Luo, was imprisoned in 1576 and executed in 1582. Wang Sen, whose *Dacheng jiao* was likewise connected with the Luo movement, died in jail in 1619, and his successors launched a rebellion in 1622. This uprising confirmed the critics of popular religious groups who saw in them subversive movements breeding social unrest and rebellion. What these critics had in mind were not people who edited books, but closely knit religious groups with a majority of lower-class members. For this type of religious movement, the elites had clear historical analogies. They put them into one line with the Daoist movements of late Han dynasty, the Yellow Turban rebellion and the Five Pecks of Rice sect, with the Fang La rebellion during the Song, and, of course, with the Han Shantong uprising at the end of the Yuan dynasty, and the White Lotus Teaching.²⁴ Such perceptions were not just stereotypes. In 1596, Lü Kun 呂坤 in a famous memorial presented what could be called a sociological analysis of the sources of rebellion. He distinguished four social causes: extreme poverty, rapacity, political ambition, and heretical sects.²⁵ For the ruling elites these were lessons to be learned from history. It is, therefore, not surprising that the spread of all kinds of popular religious movements, which Lü Kun and others complained, was seen as an alarming development. The 1622 *Dacheng jiao* uprising

²⁴ Cf. *Ming shilu*, *Shenzong shilu*, j. 533, 18b-19a (Wanli 43/6 [1615]); *Wu zozu Ji* 雜俎, by Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛, j. 8, quoted in Ma/Han, p. 722, translated in Dean, *Land of the Three in One*, p. 100.

²⁵ *Mingshu*, j. 226, p. 5936.

seemed to confirm these judgments. Tendencies to control and repress the new religious movements were reinforced and influenced their further development.

The Qing dynasty continued the Ming policy towards popular religious movements. The Ming law concerning heterodox teachings and popular religious activities was repeated almost verbatim.²⁶ That this was not just a formal act reveals from an imperial instruction issued in 1660:

Since We are obliged to order the world, We have first to rectify men's mind. To rectify men's mind, we have first to eliminate heterodox practices. The three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism belong together, they all induce men to do the good and to abandon the evil, they oppose the heterodox and lead back to the orthodox (*fan xie gui zheng* 反邪歸正). On the other hand, there are evil teachings appearing under such names as *Wuwei*, *Bailian* or *Wenxiang jiao*. They set up associations and form gangs, coming together at night and dispersing at daybreak. The lesser among them aspire to wealth and profit or shamelessly indulge in debaucheries; the more dangerous mobilize desperados and plan criminal acts. The ignorant common people are misled by their deceptions and do not realize it until the end of their life. If we consider history, we see clearly the traces of disasters [caused by such sects], which is a cause of deep concern. In the past there have been repeated prohibitions, but it was not possible to repress these manners, and those who engage in these heterodox practices have many followers. Even in such an important place as the imperial capital they make loud propaganda pretending to form pious groups that offer incense. However, male and female intermingle, they fill the streets and lanes with great noise and act openly without any restraint. If we do not strictly forbid these practices by law, the public order will be undermined. While the perfidious people who found and lead these groups are fully responsible for their criminal acts, those simple-minded who are trapped in their nets are really deplorable when they suffer punishment. The Board of Rites is to announce a public order: From now, if there are followers of heretical teachings who still form groups to burn incense and to collect money under the name of the Buddha and similar things, then in the capital the censors of the five districts and the local officials, elsewhere the governors, the circuit attend-

²⁶ *Du li canyi* 讀例存疑, art. 162, translated in William C. Jones, *The Great Qing Code*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 174. The text is quoted and translated in De Groot, *Sacramentalism*, pp. 137 f. Cf. also *Donghua lu*, Shumzhi 3 (1646), 6th month (page 7b) for government policy against heterodox sects in the early years of the Qing dynasty.

ants, and other officials have to take measures to arrest them and thoroughly investigate the treacherous activities, and to punish the crimes adding one degree to the punishment prescribed by law. If [the officials] are negligent and do allow the breeding of rebellion, the Board of Rites will direct the investigations and punishments. This is a special proclamation on Imperial instruction.²⁷

This proclamation was posted in public places. Hence, it was generally known to the population that religions such as the *Wuwei jiao* were heterodox and followers would be severely punished. Since the instruction is not very specific about which kind of religious group it applies to, all religious associations outside the three orthodox religions had the label of heterodoxy and their members the risk of punishment. This could not remain without effect on the development of these religions.

The proclamation shows that heterodox religions were widespread and usually acted openly even in the capital. This suggests that the existing law against heterodoxy had not been enforced before. We have no information to which extent the instruction of 1660 was carried out. In 1673 the Kangxi emperor issued a similar edict mentioning again the *Wuwei*, *Bailian*, and *Wenxiang* sects, but also *Hunyuan*, *Hongyang* and *Dacheng jiao*.²⁸ However, it is only in the eighteenth century that the sources relate large-scale persecutions of heterodox religions and executions of their leaders. During the Qianlong era the policy of violent repression became the rule, and popular religious groups thus moved to the extreme of heterodoxy. Under such conditions sect members were under the permanent threat of punishment, even if the intensity of repression varied. While the government did not succeed in eradicating heterodox religions, its measures considerably affected their further development.

4. *Diversification, Homogenization, and the Dynamics of Expansion*

From the perspective of officials, there was little difference between various sects. They often were regarded as mere variations of the

so-called White Lotus Teaching (*Bailian jiao*), which since the Han Shantong uprising at the end of the Yuan served as paradigm of heterodox sects. It is clear, however, that the religious beliefs varied not only between different sects but also within the same religious movement. On the other hand, there was a certain tendency towards homogenization of sectarian beliefs. Some of the factors contributing to the dynamics of diversification and homogenization shall be considered.

The newly evolving religious movements of the late Ming were different from older sectarian groups in that they expanded into social milieus usually not prone to join heterodox religious movements. As scripture-producing movements they addressed another audience than older popular sects mainly based on oral traditions. After having analysed the processes through which new religious groups came into being, we now have to look for the conditions under which they expanded successfully. Some newly founded religious groups were not successful at all and disappeared quickly, while others were able to gain many followers expanding both geographically and socially. We may suppose that an important, although not the only factor responsible for the expansion of a new religion was its teachings. If the teachings were attractive for some persons, there were chances to convert them and increase in membership. We shall later consider the question what may have made the teachings of the new religious movements attractive. At present it suffices to note that religious teachings may be attractive to some people but not to others. Members of popular religious groups always remained a minority, which means that the majority of the population was either not attracted by their teachings or at least not enough attracted to join a sectarian group. For a number of reasons there was only a limited reservoir of potential converts.

One cause of this limitation was the heterodox character of popular religious groups. Even during the Song dynasty, there were laws threatening members of such groups with punishment. The Ming and Qing laws continued this policy of repression. Most people were not prepared to pay these costs and to take the risk of joining an outlawed religious group. Moreover, to many people the teachings of popular sects were not attractive for other reasons. Particularly millenarian beliefs were of little appeal to those who were quite content with the present situation. The more educated mostly could only despise popular beliefs. And finally, even if their beliefs were attractive, most popular groups could

²⁷ From a publicly posted proclamation, first month of Shunzhi 17 (1660), quoted in Ma/Han, pp. 590 f.

²⁸ Edict of the year Kangxi 12 (1673), quoted and translated in de Groot, *Sectarianism*, pp. 153 f.

reach only a very limited audience because they were transmitted orally. These were, generally speaking, the limitations inhibiting an expansion of popular sects under normal conditions. It is evident that the situation was somewhat different with the emergence of new religious movements in the sixteenth century.

Again, it is the formation of a literary tradition and the use of scriptures to propagate the teachings that mark the beginning of a new development. Even if sectarian *baqian* were mean literary works by the standards of the literati, they addressed an audience that read books and thus had some education. That there was such an audience is evident, for otherwise Luo's scriptures would not have been printed time and again. Hence, the teachings of Luo and of the other scripture-producing new religions diffused into social milieus to which older sects had little access. Furthermore, Luo's teachings were shaped in a way that made them acceptable to members of the middle class. He explicitly distanced himself from heterodox beliefs and groups such as White Lotus and Maitreya sects. Certainly, his teaching was not orthodox, it was not supported by the ruling institutions and met some criticism from the part of orthodox Buddhism. However, it was neither clearly heterodox, since it was not repressed, and even attracted followers who were socially close to the ruling elites. Thus, the Luo movement expanded into a different social milieu than existing popular sects. It was a milieu where it had to compete mainly with the orthodox religions. Since the followers gained in this milieu had some wealth and power, their support was more valuable than what the older sects received from their less privileged members. They could promote further expansion by financing the printing of books and using their social relations to bring new converts who belonged to the same social milieu. Hence, the resources of the movement increased and it could gain a dynamism unparalleled by the older religious movements.

The early Luo movement is exceptional in that it had more than a century of fairly unrestricted development. Until the end of the Ming dynasty, one of its social bases was the middle class milieu of merchants, low officials, and monks. Without doubt, there also were many women among the followers, who belonged to the same social milieu. The situation was similar in the case of Lin Zhao'en's *Sanyi jiao*, and the early *Huangtian* and *Hongyang jiao*, although the latter had a shorter time of unrestricted growth. They all used scriptures to propagate their teachings and addressed an audience where there was barely

competition from older sects. It is not surprising that the scriptures propagated in this milieu contained little that could have been taken as heterodox teachings. Nothing was taught that undermined conventional morality or the political order. Although in *Huangtian* and *Hongyang* scriptures, and to some extent in Lin Zhao'en's writings, Maitreya was mentioned, the context was not millenarian expectations of the imminent transformation of the social and political conditions. Maitreya was rather a symbol for the new epoch when the lost truth was revealed again to offer humankind the way to salvation. From the perspective of orthodox Buddhism, these teachings were surely heterodox, but from the perspective of the political institutions the degree of heterodoxy was low. When in the late sixteenth century first voices were heard that warned against sects including the *Luo jiao* or *Wuwei jiao*, their objective were not primarily the well-integrated middle class followers of these teachings but the increasing number of sectarian groups among the larger population.

The success of the new teachings with members of the middle classes had some parallels with the development of the White Lotus and White Cloud traditions during the Song dynasty. It was exceptional, however, when compared to older popular sects of the early Ming. However, it must not be overlooked that it was meagre when compared to the influence of the orthodox traditions. Nothing suggests that any of the new religious movements succeeded in gaining a large-scale following in these milieus. Their members had more wealth and power than the uneducated peasants and labourers of many other sects, but they did not represent the power elite and remained a minority. The teachings had little subversive, yet they were not orthodox either. What is more, even in Luo Menghong's scriptures, to say nothing about other sectarian writings, there was the spirit of sectarian exclusiveness. These teachings claimed to present the only way to salvation, and to surpass and supersede the traditional religions. Hence, there was a certain tension between the new religious groups and their religious and social environment. To commit oneself to these teachings and join one of their communities did not fully conform to what was expected from a merchant, official or monk. Thus, the new religious movements remained marginal in this social milieu, and the potential to increase in membership was limited. These limitations became stronger to the extent that government policy enforced repression of new religious movements, which moved them further to the pole of heterodoxy.

The growth of the new religious movements in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was stimulated by the support they received from members of the middle classes. This and the printing of books gave them a new quality in the history of popular religious movements. However, if we consider the quantitative dimension of their spread, it was another type of audience that filled the ranks of their followers. Large-scale recruitment for deviant religious groups was not possible among the middle classes. The social expansion of the new religious movements demanded propagating them also in other social milieus. Extended sectarian organizations, such as Yin Jīn'an's and Yao Wenyu's variety of the Luo movement or Wang Sen's sectarian network, had to draw the majority of their members from the lower classes. These members were less educated and less influenced by the literary traditions of the elites and the orthodox teachings. Instead, their religious ideas and understanding were shaped by popular religious beliefs and practices. Even among the larger population, however, only a small proportion of people were disposed to join a sectarian group. And in this milieu other sects and teachers were already active. Hence, the new religious movements competed with existing popular religious groups.

Teachers had to present their teachings in a way that corresponded to the pre-understanding and expectations of their audience if they were to be successful. This applied to the new religious movements not less than to the orthodox religions. Orthodox Buddhism was preached among the common people not in the same way it was discussed in books written for a readership educated in the literary traditions. Mahāyāna Buddhism had no difficulties in promoting devotional piety, the worship of merciful deities such as Amitābha and Guanyin, and the wish to be reborn in the Western Paradise. On the other hand, it taught the emptiness of empirical phenomena and all distinctions, including the distinction between buddhas and other beings, between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The new religious movements likewise offered teachings allowing a wide range of interpretations and understanding. Their scriptures were not elaborated as philosophical treatises, but they were more than just mythological narratives. In the centre of their religious message was the idea of *returning to the origin*, which was a metaphor for transcending the distinctions of the empirical world and realizing one's unity with the Absolute, the only true reality. This idea could be presented in rather abstract symbols, as in Chan Buddhist and Daoist contexts. It could, however, also be presented in the concrete symbols

of mythological language. The Absolute as the source of all and to which everything will return is called True Emptiness (*zhēnkong*) in Luo Menghong's scriptures, which is an abstract symbol. But it is further referred to as *Holy Patriarch Limitless* (*Wuji Shengzu*), which suggests a personal deity. *Wuji* (Limitless) occurs also in other *baojuan* as a common symbol of the Absolute. Often it is personalized, as in *Wuji Shengzu* or *Wuji Gufo* (Ancient Buddha Limitless). Another common symbol was *Wusheng* (No-birth-[and-death]), which was mostly personalized in female form as *Wusheng Laomu* (Venerable Mother No-Birth or Unborn Venerable Mother).

For an audience accustomed to personal deities, the concrete images of mythological narratives were much easier to understand and accept than more abstract explanations of the religious message. To the extent that the new religious movements spread and attracted large followings, these personalized symbols naturally gained prominence. Sectarian groups whose members mainly consisted of common folk interpreted the scriptures differently than groups dominated by more educated members. There was also room for individual members to understand the scriptures and teachings in a way that most fitted their personal religious inclinations. Many sects developed graduated systems of membership that allowed to advance in the sect hierarchy. While these hierarchies were partly of an organizational nature defining different levels of power and influence, they also implied advancement in the level of initiation into sect teachings. There were, thus, esoteric and more esoteric aspects.

The teachings of the new religious movements were flexible enough to allow a certain range of interpretation. They were not only adapted to popular religious contexts. It was possible to interpret them more in accordance with the orthodox religions. The Buddhist interpretation of Luo Menghong's scriptures by the monks Daning and Lanfeng is an example. Others, including Qin Dongshan, stressed Confucian morality in explaining Patriarch Luo's teachings. Thus, different interpretations entailed a certain diversification of sectarian teachings that in this way adapted to the persuasions of different audiences. Diversification considerably increased the potential to expand socially since it allowed to respond to the diverse expectations and needs prevailing in different social milieus. Since the single communities tended to be socially homogeneous, they were likely to prefer certain interpretations and to disregard others that corresponded less to their social and cultural

background. In larger networks or in heterogeneous communities, different interpretations of the teaching stimulated the emergence of social cleavages. Members preferring one type of interpretation would usually interact more intensely with each other than with those who had other opinions and interests. This could be a source of schisms, particularly if the interpretations diverged considerably or were advocated by competing leaders. The split of the *Sanyi jiao* after Lin Zhao'en's death seems at least partly to have been conditioned by different interpretations of his teachings.

Hence, schisms reinforced the tendency towards social and doctrinal homogenization of sectarian groups. While single communities were likely to be fairly homogeneous, the religious traditions to which they belonged became diversified by the same process. On the other hand, communities deriving from different traditions but living in the same social and cultural milieu had to respond to similar religious needs and beliefs. And since they often recruited members from each other, there was a constant exchange of ideas. Thus, they increasingly approached each other in terms of belief, which reduced the differences between sectarian groups of the same social milieu regardless of their affiliation to larger traditions. This is one of the reasons why during the Qing dynasty doctrinal boundaries between different sects are often difficult to establish, and affiliation to one of the older traditions says little about the actual beliefs of single communities. Certainly, the influence of particular traditions was in most cases not completely eliminated. The scriptures, if available, were still used and recited, even if they were not understood by all in the same way. They gave a sense of historical continuity and identity. The single communities of a tradition usually communicated with each other at least on a regional base. These networks fostered exchange of ideas and personnel. This all prevented sectarian groups from becoming completely isolated.

Moreover, contact and communication between sectarian communities allowed vigorous leaders to bring dispersed groups together and to form more extended networks. Wang Sen's *Dacheng jiao* was such a case. However, the more extended a sectarian network was, the more heterogeneous it was. Wang Sen brought together groups that were related to different traditions and used different scriptures. His success seems to be due to his ability not only to unite these groups to a network under his leadership, but also to integrate the teachings of their respective traditions. In Gongchang's *Louhua jing*, which originated

in one of the groups evolving from Wang Sen's network, virtually all known *baojiao*-producing sects of the sixteenth century are listed as parts of the tradition. Thus, there were forces to overcome the distinctions between different traditions and to form new syntheses.

5. *Rewards and Costs of Membership*

The described dynamics of expansion had their moving force in the attraction that the new religious movements and popular sects had to members and recruits. The greater the number of people who felt attracted by their teachings and organizations, the greater was their success in expanding. Still, there were also factors preventing affiliation to a popular religious group, such as the fear of punishment or social stigmatization. These and other costs not many people were prepared to pay. In this section I shall consider the rewards that could be gained through affiliation to a popular religious group, the costs that had to be paid, and the balance of costs and rewards.²⁹

Mundane and religious rewards

Joining a religious group can be rewarding for different reasons. On the one side, there are rewards of a specific religious kind. Salvation, eternal life, liberation from sin are such "religious rewards". They usually can only be obtained from religions. On the other side, there are rewards that can sometimes be gained by affiliating to a religious group, but may likewise be acquired in other contexts. Examples are social contacts and material support. They can be termed "mundane rewards".

The mundane rewards that could be gained in popular religious movements are fairly clear if we consider the leaders of these groups. Successful religious teachers who gathered a large following could acquire many things difficult to obtain by most people: wealth, status,

²⁹ The concepts *costs* and *rewards* are central in Stark's and Bainbridge's theoretical approach (cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, pp. 27–30). The basic axiom of their theory is "Humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs." *Rewards* are defined as "anything humans will incur costs to obtain," while *costs* are "whatever humans attempt to avoid." They also introduce the concept *compensation* (p. 36), which is theoretically ill-founded and, therefore, not used here. For some of the problems connected with the concept *compensation* see below note 40.

and power. Luo Menghong, who was born into a family of hereditary soldiers and lost his parents as a child, could not expect to obtain them under ordinary conditions. After his death, a pagoda and a stele were erected to pay reverence to a respected teacher who certainly was not poor. Many sect leaders were of low origin, the most conspicuous exception being Lin Zhao'en. Yin Jìnan and Yao Wenyu were poor in their youth and became rich through their sectarian careers. However, both were executed, which showed the risk of the business. As Wang Sen, who was likewise executed, Yao Wenyu died as a wealthy landlord. Both became the ancestors of dynasties of sect leaders maintaining extended networks of followers whose financial contribution increased the wealth of these families. Transmission of sect leadership within family lines was more the rule than the exception, at least in the larger networks. Luo Menghong's and Li Bin's descendants were still found to be sect leaders in the eighteenth century, more than two hundred years after the sects had been founded by their ancestors. It was a profitable profession that could make families wealthy and powerful. Hence, the mundane rewards that could be gained by religious leaders were very concrete.

Even less successful teachers who headed only small communities had some material benefits. The members of the *Hongyang jiao* who resumed sect activities after their local community had been dissolved after a persecution did so to earn a living by offering ritual services to the local population. This certainly did not make them rich, but it allowed them to survive. In larger organizations, the possibility to get a share in the sect's revenue was also an incentive to actively proselytize, as gaining disciples raised the position in the sect hierarchy through which the contributions of members were channelled. Not all who were attracted by such material rewards may always have been honest people. The power derived from religious status could be used for selfish purposes. There were, for instance, cases where sect leaders exploited female members sexually claiming that intercourse with leaders was necessary for attaining salvation.³⁰ Given the great number of larger and smaller sects, it would be surprising had there not been individuals and groups taking the opportunity to deceive other people

³⁰ In some cases reports about sexual exploitation of female members may be stereotypes, but probably not always. Cf. Yan Yuan, *Can ren bian*, f. 2, p. 153, about the *Huangtian jiao*, and reports about practices of some sect leaders belonging to the *Yandao jiao* tradition (quoted in Ma/Han, p. 903).

and to gain personal profit. Generally, however, the mundane rewards obtained by sect leaders were part of an exchange relationship between leaders and common members. Though power was unequally distributed and allowed leaders to gain more material benefits than ordinary members, the latter also received some rewards that induced them to maintain the relationship.

Most rewards gained by common members were probably of the religious type. But there were also mundane ones. As has been mentioned, ambitious members could rise in the sect hierarchy and thus make a career. Persons who in ordinary life had no chances of gaining social status and respect could thus experience success and recognition. Still, even without a sectarian career membership could be socially rewarding. It established networks of social relations for people who otherwise may have lacked them. The most visible example are the communities of canal boatmen who often had even no family ties. In their religious communities they found not only spiritual consolation but also material support in life and a proper burial after death. Sect members supported each other, and in some cases sect networks were well-organized mutual help associations, as Hou Biao's branch of the Luo tradition in Shandong. Of course, the attraction of such rewards depended on the personal situation of the members. Those who in ordinary life could easily support themselves and were part of social or parental networks that gave them recognition and material security, were probably more interested in other kinds of benefit. However, for people with little social support, members of poor families, orphans and widows, sect membership secured social relationships they otherwise would not have had. Besides the material support they could receive, there were psychological aspects. Those destitute, who in ordinary society had little to gain self-respect, belonged to religious sects that assured them of their superiority because they were among the elected few destined to receive the way to salvation.

Particularly women in many religious groups had opportunities to gain scarce rewards they could not obtain in ordinary society. Not only was the position of women exalted religiously, giving them same chances as men to belong to the elected ones who will be saved; they could also gain social status as sect leaders. Such equality of the sexes was hardly found elsewhere in Chinese society, although in Mahayāna Buddhism the chances to salvation were equal to all beings. Yet, the social position of Buddhist nuns was still formally subordinated to the

monks, as were their power and prestige. In contrast, in many popular religious sects women could have leading positions and be accepted as teachers. Thus, Gongchang's teacher Cuihua was a woman who led one of the subbranches in Wang Sen's sect. Three of the sects listed in the *Longhua jing* were founded by women.³¹ The leadership of one of them, the *Longtian jiao*, remained in the hands of women until the nineteenth century.³² In other cases, women followed their deceased husbands or fathers in the role of sect leaders.³³ There were also women who wrote or edited *baojuan*.³⁴ Popular religious sects, not only the new religious movements of the Ming and Qing, provided opportunities to women to gain status and power they had not in ordinary society. Of course, this contravened Confucian morality and contributed to their being considered offensive and heterodox. It should not be ignored, however, that in most cases sect leaders were male.

With the exception of the opportunities women had in popular religious groups, most other mundane rewards could to some degree also be gained in communities that were not religious. There were a variety of mutual help associations, sworn brotherhoods, and secret societies where one could engage in rewarding social relationships, and obtain material support and prestige. The popular religious groups offered, however, additional rewards. An intermediary form between mundane and religious rewards was health. In many religious movements healing sickness was an important means to attract new followers. A good example is Lin Zhao'en who consciously used his skills at healing to prove the truth of his teaching and in this way convert new members. A great number of other sects also practised healing. It seems that successful cure and the wish to be cured motivated many people to join a religious group. To be sure, health can be considered a mundane reward. However, in popular religious contexts health was

³¹ The sects are *Xi Dacheng jiao* 西大乘教 (Western Dacheng Teaching), *Longtian jiao* 龍天教 (Dragon Heaven Teaching), and *Nanyang jiao* 南陽教 (Southern Yang Teaching). Cf. *Longhua jing*, ch. 23, in *MJZ*, vol. 5, pp. 736–737.

³² Cf. Ma/Han, pp. 689–695.

³³ Examples are Luo Menghong's wife and his daughter Fuguang, Puning's (i.e., Li Bin) wife Puguang, his daughters Pujing* and Puzhao, and his granddaughter Puxian. Wei Wangshi inherited leadership of a branch of Zhang Baotai's *Dachang jiao* from her husband and became a vigorous sect leader. — On the role of women as leaders of popular sects cf. Rosner, "Frauen als Anführerinnen chinesischer Sekten."

³⁴ The *Puning baojuan* seems to have been edited by Puning's granddaughter Puxian, the *Taiyang shengguang Puzhao laoyi baojuan* 太陽生光普照了義寶卷 by his daughter Puzhao (cf. Ma/Han, p. 434).

a benefit resulting from the observation of religious rules, whether they were ritual or moral. Hence, health was to some degree a blessing not to be obtained by other means than religious. Particularly people who could not afford professional medical treatment or who suffered from diseases that could not be cured by doctors experienced healing as a supernatural blessing. Considering the misery caused by disease and the impossibility for many people to obtain proper medical treatment, healing cannot be overestimated as a motive to join a religious group. Against the background of popular religious understanding, securing health was part of the general desire to avert misfortune and procure a life in peace and harmony. For the common people there were many hazards of life that were beyond their control. To avert misfortune and attract fortune was a central aim of popular religious practices. It was also a motive to join a sectarian group and practise its rituals.³⁵

These mundane rewards obtained by religious means were not offered by the new religious groups alone, but also by common religious practitioners. What distinguished the new religious movements from common popular cults was that they offered salvation from the miseries of human existence. How important these teachings of salvation were to individual believers is difficult to judge. We have no means to estimate the proportion of followers who were attracted by the promise and hope to overcome ordinary human existence and to find liberation in realizing the unity of self and the ultimate reality. However, given the prominence that the symbols *Wusheng Laomu* and *Returning to the Native Place* had, it appears that the hope for salvation and transcending the conditions of the mundane world remained a central element of sect teachings and beliefs during the Qing dynasty. The symbols used to express the idea of salvation to a transcendent form of existence were numerous: *Returning to the Origin*, *Realizing the Original Nature*, *Joining the Dragon-Flower Assembly*, this all referred to the same idea: that life as experienced by the unenlightened, who are unaware of the revealed truth, is not the real life; that there is another form of existence transcending the limitations and the misery of mundane life. However these ideas were conceived in detail, whether as a paradise to be reached after death, or as an enlightened state of mind realizing the illusionary nature of all mundane distinctions and the unity with the Absolute, it implied a radical devaluation of the empirical world. If common life was not the real life, then all suffering of the empirical life

³⁵ Cf. above p. 336 for confessions of members of the *Huangyang jiao*.

could be overcome by following the way that leads to emancipation from the ephemeral world of illusions.

As we have seen in Luo Menghong's case, this insight could indeed bring liberation from suffering. His enlightenment brought him self-reliance and security. He experienced an altered state of mind, frustration was changed to joy. It certainly is difficult, if not impossible, to analyse and describe the psychic transformations going along with these enlightening insight. Yet, there is no reason to doubt that they were followed by a new perception of his own existence that considerably improved his psychic condition and enabled him to become a successful teacher. There is no need to attempt psychological explanations of enlightenments or to discuss the reality of such experiences. For the present purpose it suffices to state that attaining an altered state of mind was something some people were aspiring to. They were even prepared to invest time and energy to reach enlightenment. A number of new religious movements offered methods that could be learned to experience altered states of mind. The cultivation method in ten steps mentioned in the *Longhua jing*, but also in earlier scriptures, is an example. What exactly these altered states of mind were in each case is less important than the fact that they were sought after. Hence, new religious movements offered rewards that could be obtained by following the practices of self-cultivation and meditation. Without doubt, aspiring to altered states of mind implied some kind of frustration with the normal state of mind. There apparently were many people who did believe that the common frustrations experienced in life had not just external causes, but could be overcome by changing one's mind. And it seems that the various methods of self-cultivation and self-transformation were not without any effect.

Attaining liberation from suffering through enlightenment and similar experiences was a religious reward that could be acquired through sect membership and initiation into the methods of meditation and self-cultivation. Practising meditation and methods of inner alchemy was, however, not the only way offered by popular religious teachings. For some, to reach an altered state of mind was a rather abstract idea of liberation from suffering. More concrete were teachings offering deliverance from misery in a future paradise. To be member of a religious group that secured rebirth in the Western Land of the Eternal Mother was certainly attractive to persons who suffered not only from the miseries of this life but lived also in fear of the punishments of hell.

Popular and diffused Buddhist ideas of the afterlife, of the courts of hell and rebirth in lower forms of existence, were deeply rooted in the religious culture. Buddhist and Daoist rituals for the dead and the popularity of the *ullambana* festival for the denizens of the underworld give ample evidence of these beliefs. Against their background sectarian teachings promising escape from the cycle of birth and death and a joyful existence in the realm of the Eternal Mother reduced fears widespread such fears were, the more attractive were sects that secured a future existence in heaven. As we may suppose that not all people were equally occupied with the afterlife, teachings stressing this kind of reward worked to select a certain type of believer, who thus were concentrated in sectarian groups and mutually reinforced their beliefs.

The same applied to some other beliefs that were part of popular religious traditions. Apocalyptic fears of coming calamities, of famine, floods, and warfare, corresponded to some degree to the historical experiences of common people engraved in the collective memory. Real calamities often had apocalyptic dimensions for many in the befallen regions. Even under normal conditions, there were people living in extreme poverty who had to struggle to survive. In cases of natural disasters, droughts, floods or locusts, surviving could quickly become impossible for those who had only scarce material resources. Hence, fears of coming calamities were no bizarre beliefs of some religious fanatics, but had a very real base in many people's conditions of life. To them, teachings about catastrophes at the end of *kalpas* did not sound absurd, the less so as they were part of popular beliefs since ancient times. The *Wugong jing*, an apocalyptic text first mentioned during the Song dynasty but still used during the Qing, contains lamentations about ten calamities. They reflect at the same time actual experiences and the fear of impending catastrophes.³⁶ Some sectarian scriptures, as the *Longhua jing*, responded to such apocalyptic beliefs describing the horrors of famine, flood, and war to contrast them with the blessing of the elected few who will be saved to attend the Dragon-Flower Assembly. Like the fears of hell and unfortunate rebirth, apoc-

³⁶ Various forms of this text have been transmitted with different versions of the lamentations about the ten calamities. Cf. for example *Wugong mojie jing* 五公末劫經 (in *MFJ* 卷 10, pp. 264b-265a), *Wugong mojie jing*, edition of 1903 (in *MFJ* 卷 10, 266b-267a), *Tiantaichan Wugong pusa tingying* 天台止公菩薩靈經 (in *MFJ* 卷 10, pp. 300b-300a).

apocalyptic fears brought together a certain type of believer who thus formed sectarian groups where these ideas were particularly intense. While individual groups tended to be homogeneous in their beliefs, they contributed to the internal diversification of sectarian traditions. Hence, popular religious movements developed cumulative traditions covering a wide range of beliefs. Some of them could become prominent under certain conditions.

Evidently, sects that assured their members to be saved from impending catastrophes had some attraction to people who had apocalyptic fears. And the more such fears prevailed in popular culture, the more important was this aspect of sectarian beliefs. It does not seem, however, that the new religious movements of the Ming dynasty and the early *baojian* promoted apocalyptic ideas. They were latent in such topoi as the "three calamities and eight difficulties" (*san zai ba nan*), but they were not intense. Only during the last decades of the Ming and under the Qing dynasty apocalypticism and millenarianism became more prominent. *Millenarianism* is here understood as beliefs expecting a radical transformation of the conditions of mundane life through supernatural intervention.³⁷ The best documented example of a millenarian movement is the *Bagua* rebellion of 1813.³⁸ Millenarianism shared with other varieties of sectarian beliefs the devaluation of the present conditions of life and the hope for a new and more rewarding form of existence. In this case, however, overcoming the present form of existence was not sought through transformation of the mind or entering another world, but through transformation of the existing world. These were attractive ideas to those frustrated by their actual conditions of life. Sects promoting millenarian beliefs offered their followers prospects of a radical improvement of their conditions of life. There certainly were many who liked this idea, but considerably fewer who believed in it. Under normal circumstances, a radical change of the existing world for the better was not to be expected. However, millenarian beliefs implied that these changes would take place under other than normal circumstances. There were prophecies about a new ruler and supernatural forces that would accomplish these transformations. During the Qing dynasty, some religious movements, including Zhang Baotai's *Dacheng jiao*, adopted such millenarian beliefs and thus responded to

³⁷ Cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, p. 210.

³⁸ Cf. the detailed study by Naquin, *Millenarian rebellion in China*.

expectations that in some milieus became increasingly popular.³⁹ For a certain type of audience the prospects of belonging to the fortunate who join the right side were rewarding. They were prepared to accept substantial risks in the present for the hope of attaining a better life in the future.

An important aspect of the various rewards offered to members of popular religious movements must not be overlooked. While the experience of altered states of mind was to some degree open to confirmation, the hopes for joining the Dragon-Flower Assembly after death or to witness the transformation of the empirical world were not. However, deep belief in the truth of teachings that assured liberation from the world of suffering and avoidance of the horrors of hell and coming disasters was not without any effect. It really could help to overcome fears and to make present suffering more tolerable. Hence, such beliefs were indeed rewarding.⁴⁰ Yet, it was difficult to maintain them. It was only in the rather closed structures of sectarian groups, whose members shared and mutually reinforced these beliefs, that they retained their plausibility. Sect membership was therefore essential for securing these rewards. The more homogeneous and closed a sectarian group was, the more convincing were its beliefs to individual members. Since it was actual belief and faith that brought relief and the certainty of being saved, maintaining faith was crucial. In this sense the scriptures were right in asserting that only those who believe in the message will be saved. Maintaining certain beliefs requires a social plausibility structure⁴¹ that confirms their truth. Common beliefs were usually confirmed through everyday communication since they were shared by most mem-

³⁹ Cf. ter Haar, *Ritual and mythology of the Chinese Triads*, pp. 284–262, where some aspects of such popular beliefs are treated as "demonological messianic paradigm."

⁴⁰ I stress this point in contrast to Stark and Bainbridge who introduce the concept *compensator*, which roughly refers to what I call *religious rewards*. They define *compensators* as "postulations of reward according to explanations that are not easily susceptible to unambiguous evaluation" (Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, p. 36). The concept *compensator* implies that religious beliefs are not really rewards but substitutes for rewards that for some reasons cannot be obtained. However, relief from the fears of hell is no substitute for anything else. If someone has such fears he or she will incur considerable costs to obtain relief from them. This, however, corresponds exactly to the definition of *reward* (Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, p. 27). Hence, the distinction between rewards and compensators cannot be maintained.

⁴¹ On the concept *plausibility structure* cf. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1970, pp. 165–170.

bers of the same social milieu. However, religious beliefs that were more peculiar were easily challenged in everyday interaction since most partners would not share them. To maintain faith in them demanded to intensify interaction with partners who supported them and at the same time to restrict interaction with partners who doubted them. Luo Menghong was very outspoken in this point when he warned his disciples not to listen to other people because this will cause "the disease of doubt."⁴²

Hence, to obtain the reward of faith required to maintain close relationships with one's fellow believers. The more idiosyncratic certain beliefs were, the more important was it to restrict interaction with outsiders who challenged them. There were, therefore, various degrees of social closure. Sectarian communities that do not depart much from common beliefs are usually less closed than others maintaining very specific beliefs. The correlate to the social closure of sectarian groups is tension with the social environment. To the extent that their beliefs departed from common beliefs, the sect communities were in tension with the surrounding society. This tension was interpreted in religious terms. All sects stressed the contrast between the chosen ones who were destined to hear and accept the saving teachings, and the mass of unbelievers who did not accept them. This sense of clannishness was rewarding as it nurtured self-esteem. To belong to the elected few who know the truth and will attain immortality while the ignorant rest will face suffering and death, was a belief that helped to remove feelings of inferiority and deprivation. As sect teachings generally devaluated the ordinary world, those who in ordinary life had low social status were assured that in reality they were superior. Sect membership could thus bring relief from a variety of fears and frustrations and offer rewarding experiences.

As far as mundane rewards are concerned, they could to some degree also be obtained in other types of communities and networks of social relationships. Nevertheless, the mundane rewards doubtless contributed to the attraction of sectarian groups. It was the religious rewards, however, that could be gained only in religious communities and therefore were decisive for the expansion of the new religious movements. Some of these religious rewards were also offered by the orthodox religions. To return to the Native Place joining the Eternal Mother was not very different from being reborn in Amitābha's Western Par-

⁴² Cf. above p. 234.

adise. To attain enlightenment and discarding all mundane distinctions was also possible in Chan Buddhism. And, of course, *neidan* practices of inner alchemy were common among Daoists. We may ask, therefore, what made the new religious movements more attractive than the orthodox religions, at least to some individuals. One factor probably was the mundane rewards that could be obtained through membership in sectarian communities. Neither Buddhism nor Daoism were lay religions. Buddhist lay communities were subordinate to the *sangha* of monks according to *vinaya* rules. Hence, such rewards as the prestige of a religious teacher were not available to members of Buddhist lay communities. Similarly, religious status in orthodox Daoism depended on ordination. Thus, independent lay communities were not possible within the institutional structures of the orthodox religions.

Certainly, there was still the option of obtaining the religious and mundane rewards of religious communities by joining the Buddhist order or becoming a Daoist priest. These were, however, costly options. The costs incurred were not primarily financial, but resulted from the obligations to which a monk or nun were submitted. Suffice it to mention the requirement to forsake family life, which was a cost many would not accept. The lay communities of the new religious movements offered similar rewards at considerably lower costs. In addition, the number of regularly ordained monks and nuns was restricted by state law. Not everyone who wished to enter the Buddhist order could freely do so. The same applied to the Daoist clergy. It was not open to everyone since Daoist priests did only accept a very limited number of disciples. The new religious movements, in contrast, had no restrictions in accepting new members and thus offered alternatives at lower costs.

Luo Menghong, whose movement is the paradigm of the emerging new religions, explicitly remarks that his teachings offer an easy way to salvation, which means that the costs are low. Salvation can be attained "without wasting energy and time."⁴³ It could be added: and without wasting money. For common forms of Buddhist lay piety were declared useless in his teaching of non-action (*wuwei*). There was no need to pay for sumptuous rituals, to construct temples and pagodas, or to give donations to monasteries. Nor was it necessary to spend much time for reciting *sūtras* or sitting in meditation. Faith and accepting the mantra in four sentences containing the essence of his teachings were sufficient to reach salvation. These were indeed low costs.

⁴³ Cf. above p. 228.

However, participation in new religious movements was not for free. Some costs were lower than in the orthodox religions, but others were higher. Joining a sectarian group, particularly if it was rather closed, meant additional social control. The sects demanded some commitment from their members. They had to invest time in collective rituals, and in many groups such practices as *sūtra* recitation were resumed. Members also had to invest money, for they were expected to contribute financially to the organization. After all, they had to subordinate in the formal and informal sect hierarchies, even if there were some chances of advancing in them. These all were costs incurred by sect membership. Not everyone would have accepted these costs, but those who did certainly felt that the mundane and religious rewards obtained in return were worth them. For persons who strongly aspired after the kind of reward sectarian groups did provide, there were little options to gain them at lower costs.

Changing balances of costs and rewards

There was, however, one additional aspect that could heighten costs tremendously. Sectarian groups were outlawed. Even at times when the law was not enforced by the authorities, the groups were in a greater or lesser tension with their social surroundings. Already Patriarch Luo complained the hostility of some monks and orthodox Buddhists, although his community appears to have been at the low end of the tension scale. Other sectarian groups had to face much stronger conflicts, as the violent deaths of Yin Ji'nan, Yao Wenyu, and Wang Sen attest. The price of exclusiveness was a certain amount of segregation, which reduced interaction with non-members. This price was high for those who maintained rewarding forms of social exchange outside the sectarian community, and it increased to the extent that the tension between the religious group and its social environment increased. Hence, high-tension groups were not likely to attract many followers who were well integrated in social networks outside the sect. Such persons lost much more when their ordinary social relationships were restricted than others who had little rewarding relationships outside. The community of Luo followers who republished Luo's scriptures with Lanfeng's commentaries in 1652 appears to have been dominated by members of the middle classes. One of them was Pushen, a wealthy merchant. Such persons had a vested interest in maintaining their private and professional

social relationships. As members of high-tension sectarian groups they would have had to face their partner's distancing, if not opposition. It is, therefore, not surprising that they preferred interpretations of Luo's teachings that minimized tensions with their surroundings, such as Lanfeng's Chanist commentaries.

The degree of tension with the social environment depended not only on the teachings and practices of a particular religious group. It was also significantly influenced by the attitude of the surroundings. The new religious movements and popular sects of the Qing dynasty encountered sharp criticism and from the seventeenth century on increasing repression by government institutions. As has been described above, during the Qing dynasty new religious movements, including the Luo movement, were publicly declared illegal and membership threatened with severe punishment. These were no empty threats, and in the eighteenth century persecutions followed by systematic investigations into sect activities and networks markedly increased the risk for sect members. Since punishment was severe, if not excessive, to take these risks heightened the costs of sect membership extremely. Many people were not prepared to pay these costs. They would not join a sectarian group if it was too dangerous, while under other conditions they participated to obtain the rewards connected with membership.⁴⁴

There were some ways to reduce the costs incurred by being treated as heterodox. One was to pose as an orthodox religion. The third edition of Luo Menghong's scriptures published in 1518 had a faked imperial certificate to give the impression that their distribution was approved by the emperor. The same strategy was applied by some sects during the Qing dynasty.⁴⁵ Since government declarations often mentioned particular sects by name and officials searched for known sects, it was quite common to change sect names. This is one of the reasons why it is often difficult to identify sectarian traditions by their name. A third possibility was to hide sect membership and to develop clandestine forms of organization. This strategy was successfully applied

⁴⁴ An illustration of this point are the members of a *Hongyang jiao* group who disbanded their community because of intense persecution. When the pressure of persecution decreased after some years, they resumed sectarian activities to obtain again the rewards they had lost through the disbanding (cf. above pp. 335 ff.).

⁴⁵ Statements in sectarian scriptures about imperial support are, therefore, to be taken with caution. Cf. for example the introduction of the *Longhua bianchuan* where it is reported that the text was presented to the throne and approved by the emperor in 1599 (in *MTJ*, vol. 5, p. 751).

for many decades by the "old" *Bagua jiao* founded by Liu Zuochen. Until 1772 the sect leaders were not identified although they acted in public as local officials.

The incentive to obtain the mundane and religious rewards offered by sect membership was thus restrained by the costs connected with it. The balance of costs and rewards was not constant. High tension incurred higher costs than low tension with the surroundings, and tension varied. Also rewards were different. Some rewards were more valuable to certain types of members than to others. To the canal boatmen the mundane rewards, such as mutual help, shelter, and material support, were more important than to well-off members of the middle classes. Hence, everyone had to make his own balance of costs and rewards.

The changing balance of costs and rewards helps to explain some features in the historical development of popular religious movements. The most important observation is that the costs of sect membership steadily increased from the early sixteenth to the early nineteenth century because government repression became more intense. Hence, to accept these high costs demanded that the value of the rewards was also very high. Now, the value of certain types of costs and rewards was different for different individuals. Wealthy people could much easier make financial contributions than poor ones. On the other hand, social segregation and repression was easier to accept by those who were marginalized and disprivileged anyway. Some people had little to lose. For them the certainty of attaining immortality in a heavenly paradise could possibly outweigh the risk of being punished.

In general, increasing repression moved religious groups to the high end of heterodoxy and tension with the environment. The members most affected by this process were those belonging to the more privileged milieus. They had much to lose: wealth, status, and social relationships. Since costs of membership in heterodox communities rose disproportionately for such members, their balance of costs and rewards worsened. Hence, we can expect that the proportion of upper and middle class members in popular religious movements decreased as repression increased. It appears that exactly this was the case after the Ming dynasty. While during the late Ming many sects even enjoyed the support and patronage of high officials and aristocrats, and wealthy members secured the printing of their scriptures, during the Qing dynasty these connections had been cut. The printing of sectarian scriptures was no longer

financed by rich donors but by the small contributions of members who apparently were not wealthy.⁴⁶ The painstaking investigations by government officials in the eighteenth century showed that sect members belonged almost exclusively to the lower classes, the main exception being those whose families had gained wealth and status as sect leaders. For them, of course, the balance was different since they gained considerable material rewards through their sectarian activities, which ordinary members did not. Repression thus worked as a selective mechanism narrowing the social spectrum of membership. The proportion of middle class members lessened markedly while lower class membership became dominant.⁴⁷

Yet repression and persecution also increased the costs of sect membership for common folk. They may have had less to lose, but punishment still was deterrent. High costs made other religious groups more attractive that offered similar rewards without inflicting the risk of punishment. We should expect, therefore, that lay communities connected with orthodox Buddhism grew in membership at the expense of popular sects. Unfortunately, I have not been able to confirm this hypothesis that must await further research.⁴⁸ In any case, the high costs of heterodoxy imposed by government persecution demanded high rewards to be accepted. Many religious rewards could be gained at lower costs from less dangerous forms of religion. There were, however, some religious rewards offered only by heterodox religious groups.

⁴⁶ Cf. Daniel Overmyer, "Values in Chinese sectarian literature," p. 229.

⁴⁷ There were also exceptions to this rule. The *Liamen jiao* 劉門教, which was founded by Liu Yuan 劉沅 in the early years of the nineteenth century, had numerous degree-holders among its members, including over hundred *jushi* 進士 (cf. Ma/Han, p. 1353). It was apparently not regarded as heterodox by the government because it was based on Confucian teachings. Since it was a new movement not deriving from one of the by then older sects, it was possibly judged as a different type of organization. During the nineteenth century the influence of Confucianism generally became stronger in popular religious groups. The reasons for this tendency deserve further study.

⁴⁸ That during the Qing dynasty lay Buddhism was stronger than in any former dynasty is suggested by the appearance of two collections with biographies of the Buddhist laity, the *Jushi zhuan* 居士傳 (in *WVZJ*, vol. 149) and the *Shan niren zhuan* 善女人傳 (in *WVZJ*, vol. 150). These seem to be the first biographical works devoted exclusively to laypersons (Christoph Klein, *Religiose Biographien in ostasiatischen Buddhismus*, Marburg: University of Marburg, Habilitationsschrift, 2001, pp. 164 f.). The *Shan niren zhuan* was the first collection of biographies of Buddhist women since the *Biquni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (1-2003) of 516. For this work cf. Gabriele Goldtuss, "Die Biographien von Laienbuddhistinnen des Pong-Shaosheng," *Newsletter Fianan und China*, 6 (1994), pp. 19-31.

One of them was the promise to belong to the chosen ones who will survive impending catastrophes or attain high status after the transformation of the existing conditions. Surely, these were extreme forms, but it appears that apocalyptic and millenarian tendencies were markedly stronger in the sects of the Qing than in their Ming dynasty precursors. These tendencies did not necessarily culminate in millenarian rebellions, for it was *belief* in one's future betterment that was rewarding, and not violent political action. Yet, since millenarian beliefs were always considered heterodox by the authorities, they increased the tension with the surroundings. Accordingly, the costs incurred by sect membership rose disproportionately for those who were socially well-integrated. Millenarian beliefs were, therefore, attractive only to marginalized people who had low stakes in social conformity: Those who could not hope to improve their situation by conforming to the expectations of the elites because they saw no chances of any improvement, had little to lose by high tension. They had low stakes in conformity.⁴⁹ Sectarian beliefs gave them at least the hope to be finally at the winning side. Hence, certain heterodox beliefs such as millenarianism attracted above all individuals at the lower end of the social scale. Such beliefs had the same selective effect on the social composition of membership as increased repression, since in both cases the tension was heightened. Both factors reinforced each other.

These considerations explain to some extent why the new religious movements founded in late Ming underwent significant changes in membership structure during the eighteenth century. It also explains certain modifications in their beliefs. The described tendencies did, however, not apply to all sectarian groups. There were counteractive forces. Some sectarian groups would attempt to reduce the degree of heterodoxy in order to be less exposed to government repression. They would thus approach common lay Buddhist communities as, for example, *sūtra*-recitation groups. Or they would take roles similar to Buddhist and Daoist priests offering ritual services to the local population. Unless in cases of overreaction by the government, they were not persecuted and therefore appear rarely in official reports. We may be sure, however, that their number was far higher than these reports reveal. In general, sectarian communities whose members had higher stakes in conformity since they were more integrated in the ordinary society, even if they

were common folk, would attempt to reduce tension with their surroundings to maintain exchange relationships.

Stakes in conformity were not constant. They increased, among others, when individuals or groups improved their social status in the surrounding society. Now, there was one type of sect member who often improved their social status. Some sect leaders became very wealthy and they usually transmitted leadership of the sect to their descendants. These families of hereditary sect leaders could amass immense fortunes. Not a few of them attempted to convert the social status they had within sect structures into officially recognized social status. As owners of estates they could be respected members of the gentry if one of their relatives held government office or an official degree. Wealthy people could obtain both by purchase. This is exactly what many sect leaders did. The most striking example are Liu Zuochen's descendants who inherited leadership of the *Shouyuan jiao/Bagua jiao*. They all were local officials by purchase or at least degree holders. Likewise, members of the Gao family, who were leaders of the *Ligua jiao*, had official rank in the early nineteenth century. There were many other such cases. And it was not only the top level leaders of large sectarian networks, such as the Wang family in Shifokou, who had gained some wealth, but also, if on a smaller scale, the leaders of subbranches and less extended sects. Wealthy families, even if they were not part of the gentry, had much higher stakes in conformity than sect members belonging to marginalized social milieus. Government measures could easily deprive them of their whole fortune, which in fact often happened. Hence, such sect leaders had a vested interest in keeping tension with the surroundings at a low level. Common sect members possibly had different interests, which could be a source of schisms when more radical groups separated from the main sect.

This line of argument explains why families of hereditary sect leaders were rarely involved in rebellions. Even in the 1622 *Dacheng jiao* rebellion, leadership was not in the hand of Wang Sen's son Wang Haoxian but of Xu Hongru.⁵⁰ His descendants, the Wang family in Shifokou, would have been the born leaders of the sect networks in Zhili formed in preparation of the 1813 rebellion, had they aspired to

⁴⁹ For the concept *stakes in conformity* cf. Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, p. 190 f.

⁵⁰ Cf. Li Jixian, "Baolian jiaozhu Wang Sen, Wang Haoxian bu shi mengmin qiyi Jingxiu."

be. They preferred instead not to be involved.⁵¹ Likewise, the members of the Gao family, who led the *Ligua* branch of the *Bagua jiao*, kept apart whereas some groups belonging to this branch participated in the rebellion. To be sure, this did not prevent these families from being persecuted as leaders of heterodox sects. It indicates, however, that they were not the driving forces of rebellion. These usually were sectarians with lower stakes in conformity such as Lin Qing.

There were thus two conflicting tendencies of sect development during the Qing dynasty. Groups whose members were mostly socially marginalized people with low stakes in conformity had little reason to reduce tension. They were, therefore, more inclined to accept millenarian teachings, which offered high religious rewards. And they were more likely to participate in violent actions.⁵² Groups whose members had higher stakes in conformity tended to reduce tension and keep it on a moderate level. Usually, successful religious movements persisting over a longer span of time experience some changes of membership. In contrast to newly founded sects whose members are recruited through conversion, established sects have a large, sometimes overwhelming number of members socialized within the movement. In these cases affiliation to a religious group is not prompted by the desire to gain certain religious rewards, such as salvation or rescue from impending catastrophes, but by family tradition. Unless interaction with non-members is starkly restricted, many of these born members will be more involved in the affairs of the surrounding society than their parents. Thus, they have higher stakes in conformity. For a number of reasons, second and third generation members of sects are usually less inclined to sacrifice the mundane rewards that can be obtained through interaction with the ordinary society for the religious rewards offered by high tension groups. Hence, there is a general tendency for religious movements, as they develop, to reduce tension and to become more integrated in the surrounding society.⁵³

⁵¹ It should be noted, however, that among the scriptures transmitted within the Wang family was also a text indicating millenarian expectations.

⁵² For factors influencing the decision to rebel or not to rebel cf. James W. Tong, *Disorder Under Heaven. Collective Violence in the Ming Dynasty*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992, pp. 83–95.

⁵³ For a detailed explanation of the social mechanisms leading to a reduction of tension see Stark/Bainbridge, *Theory*, pp. 267–278. In common sociological language this process is described as movement from sect-like to church-like religious organizations.

It is to be expected, therefore, that the sects of the Qing dynasty, too, tended to reduce tension as their membership shifted from a converted to a socialized base. There is some evidence that this actually was often the case. Most of the sectarian communities did not stand in high tension with their surroundings. Not only is there only a small number of sectarian groups that were involved in actual rebellion during the Qing;⁵⁴ also the number of sectarian groups mentioned in official reports was small when compared to the number of groups that existed in the whole country.⁵⁵ It seems that the rebellions of the Qing were not initiated by sectarian groups consisting mainly of members of the socialized type. Instead, leaders of rebellions usually built their own networks that resembled more new sects than established sectarian traditions transmitted through the generations within families. Hence, while there was a tendency of established sects to accommodate to the surrounding society and to reduce tension, there were on the other hand new sectarian groups emerging that stood in higher tension.⁵⁶ The tendency towards accommodation and tension reduction can be described as a movement from the pole of heterodoxy to orthodoxy. The less a religious group deviates from the norms and values of the surrounding society, the less those who maintain these norms are prompted to repress it. Ironically, it appears that this normal development was to some degree obstructed by the government policy to repress sectarian groups without paying much attention to the differences among them. In this way, even sects attempting to reduce tension remained heterodox and thus in relatively high tension, and were impeded in transforming into mainstream orthodox religious movements.

⁵⁴ It should be noted that official sources often reported that a certain sect “rebelled” (*fan fang*) even if there were no violent actions. Since sect activities were generally outlawed, they could always be taken as violations of the political order if the authorities were searching for such cases.

⁵⁵ That there must have been many more sectarian groups than reported about is evident. In many cases where sectarian activities were uncovered, the investigations could trace their traditions back over several generations. This implies that they formerly remained unnoticed or, what is more probable, were often ignored because they were inconspicuous religious groups. We can conclude that the majority of sectarian groups was usually more or less integrated in the society and had a low degree of tension with it.

⁵⁶ Compare Stark's and Bainbridge's proposition: “Movement of a high-tension religious body towards lower tension creates both a cadre and a constituency for a new sect movement” (Stark/Bainbridge *Theory*, p. 278).

The described processes of tension reduction of established religious communities and the emergence of high tension new sects have been theoretically analysed by Stark and Bainbridge. At present, it is certainly too early to state that their theory can be confirmed by the development of popular sects during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Much more research has to be done with regard to many hypotheses they formulate. However, what we can state is that our knowledge about Chinese religious movements does not falsify the theory, which may, therefore, be a useful guide to define fields of future research.

EPILOGUE

POPULAR RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND ELITE CULTURE

From the Han dynasty down to the end of imperial rule, popular religious movements were part of Chinese religious culture. Although official sources rarely pay any attention to them, unless they were involved in political rebellion, there is sufficient evidence that popular religious movements were more than occasional episodes of religious deviance in a society otherwise dominated religiously by the orthodox traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. The popular religious movements reported in historical sources before the Ming dynasty rather appear as the visible peaks of a religious landscape that mostly remains hidden in the mist of historical oblivion. Like the tip of an iceberg they had a much larger base below the surface, which was the stream of popular religious life. Popular religious culture was a turbulent flow that was difficult to control and to channel into the calmer current of the orthodox traditions. Time and again these turbulences swelled and sometimes they swept away dynasties. But usually they remained deep below the surface without affecting the stream of history.

Much like traditional Chinese historiography, most modern historical studies of Chinese religion concentrate on the traditions of the orthodox teachings. In contrast, empirical research on contemporary religions in China focusing on the grassroots of society has revealed a remarkable vitality of popular religion, while the literate manifestations of religions in modern China attract little attention of scholars. It appears as if religion in traditional China had been dominated by the culture of the intellectual elites, whereas in modern China it were reduced to the popular culture. However, there is little reason to suppose that popular religions were less vigorous in traditional China than they are today, nor that they were much more influenced by the literate traditions of the elite culture. To gain a more balanced picture of Chinese religious history, we have to include those religious traditions that were not part of the elite culture.

Once popular culture is made the object of historical research, it appears that it is far more diversified than the dichotomy of elite and