The Eternal Venerable Mother in Chinese Sectarian Literature

Richard Shek
California State University, Sacramento

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Women could be respected, even revered, figures in a traditional China known for its patriarchal dominance. The official histories often contain biographies of chaste and upright women whose exemplary conduct as mother, wife, widow, daughter, daughter-in-law, and loyal subject is immortalized for all posterity. The mother of Mencius and the Han scholar-historian Ban Zhao immediately come to mind. In popular religion, as well, female deities are worshipped and prayed to for their efficacy and magical prowess. The bodhisattva Guanyin and the goddess-turned-Queen of Heaven Mazu are outstanding examples of these exalted spiritual females. Yet, almost without exception, all these female figures command veneration in part because of their conformity with the orthodox values of filial piety, wifely submission, and unquestioning loyalty. They are paragons of moral rectitude and compassion precisely because they exemplify the traditional expectation of femininity—nurturing and supportive, but never assertive and domineering. Despite the respect accorded them, they are always portrayed in assistive roles, deferring to and under the guidance of other males.

Only one figure defies this mold. She is the Eternal Venerable Mother (Wusheng laomu) in Chinese sectarianism. Making her appearance for the first time in the sixteenth century, the Eternal Mother soon became the most dominant deity in sectarian beliefs. She was worshipped as the progenitor of the cosmos and matriarch of the entire pantheon
of gods and spirits. She presided over the whole heavenly host, giving orders to the gods and the Buddhas, and was in total control of the salvational scheme for the human race. Indeed, at the height of her power, her followers reverentially referred to her as “Mingming shangdi wuliang qingxu zhizun zhisheng sanjie shifang wanling zhenzai” [The Illustrious Bright Lord on High, Limitless in Purity and Vacuity, Most Venerated and Most Saintly, Perfected Mistress of the Myriad Spirits in the Three Realms and the Ten Directions]. In what follows I will trace the development of this mother figure through an analysis of the sectarian texts. I will also provide a full description of her attributes and her characteristics, again relying on the same body of scriptural sources. Finally, I will discuss the significance and the implications of the ethics of this Eternal Mother cult. Before doing so, however, some key terms associated with this Wusheng laomu tradition need to be explained:

**Sectarianism**: It is a religious movement that subscribes to uncanonical deities who supplant the official and established gods as objects of worship. While it sees itself as custodian of authentic religious teaching, it looks upon the established and mainstream religious community as corrupt and decadent, if not altogether evil. Membership in this movement is intensely personal and voluntary, often informed by a sense of the elect. Its core belief usually includes a heightened sense of an impending cosmic change, an eschatological vision of the future, and a millenarian dream of the coming world in which only the privileged few will survive.

**Elect**: Devout followers of a savior-like deity who consider themselves the chosen ones destined to survive the catastrophe at the end of the present age and privileged to enjoy the splendor and glory of the age to come.
**Eschatology:** The expectation of the end, often imminent, of the present age. Furthermore, this end will be accompanied by cataclysmic cosmic changes as well as social-political turmoil. Only the elect will survive it unscathed.

**Millenarianism:** The anticipation of the arrival of a utopian future age ushered in by the savior deity who will bring an end to the current corrupt world. In stark contrast to the ills and maladies of the present age, the millennium will be a time of peace and prosperity, as well as a time of indescribable magnificence and abundance.

**The Unfolding of the Wusheng laomu Belief**

The Eternal Venerable Mother appears exclusively in a specific group of religious texts known as *baojuan* [precious volumes]. Compiled by leaders of various sectarian groups, *baojuan* played a central role in shaping sectarian ideology as well as in ensuring the tenacity of sectarian traditions. Largely overlooked by historians and students of Chinese literature until recently, these “precious volumes” contain a goldmine of information on sectarian beliefs and their transmission through the generations.

Scholars generally agree that the Wusheng laomu motif can be traced back to a group of texts entitled *Wubu liuce* [Five Books in Six Volumes], compiled by a soldier-turned religious leader named Luo Qing and published as a set in 1509. Admittedly, the term Wusheng laomu did not appear in these texts. Instead, the name “Wusheng fumu” [Eternal Venerable parents] was mentioned several times as a synonym for the Amitabha Buddha, known among Pure Land Buddhists for his infinite compassion and his promise of universal salvation to all who would invoke his name with utter sincerity and devotion. In addition, Luo Qing also adopted the term “jiaxiang” [native place] to denote the
original source of all things, and advocated the return to it as the ultimate goal of all pious religious practices. For Luo Qing, the identification of a figurative progenitor of all existences and the final destination of the religious quest was well within the bounds of orthodoxy. But the rich imagery of the terms he used would give rise to a potent sectarian tradition that has lasted with remarkable resilience for the last five hundred years. The mantra of “Zhenkong jiaxiang, Wusheng laomu” [Native place of True Emptiness, Eternal Venerable Mother] would reverberate and echo through various sectarian groups since the sixteenth century and down to our own times.

Indeed, the emotive image of a divine mother who tearfully awaits the return of her estranged and suffering children is so appealing that it did not take long for some sectarianinspired by Luo Qing to propose it.\(^3\) This took place even before Luo's death in 1527, as evidenced by a sectarian text "reprinted" in 1523.\(^4\) The text is *Huangjì jīndān jiùlián zhēngxin guizhén huānxìăng bāojüan* [Precious scroll of the golden elixir and nine lotuses of the imperial ultimate, which leads to the rectification of beliefs, the taking of refuge in truth, and the return to the native place, hereafter the *Jiulián bāojüan*.]\(^5\)

A text allegedly composed during the lifetime of Luo Qing, the *Jiulián bāojüan* represents both a continuation of his main themes and the addition of new ones. Written probably by a follower of Luo Qing's daughter,\(^6\) it makes frequent references to his teaching. The progenitor of all things, for example, is referred to at one point as "Venerable True Emptiness," even though she is more commonly addressed as the Eternal Mother. Moreover, the method of cultivation to prepare oneself for the return to the Native Place is described as *wuwei fa*, a direct echo of Luo's teaching. In deference to
him, the principal expositor of the Eternal Mother's salvational message is referred to in this text as the Patriarch of Wuwei, who is in turn the incarnation of the Amitabha Buddha. This clearly indicates that Luo Qing was regarded with high esteem by the author of the text. The identification of Luo Qing with the Amitabha Buddha is interesting, as Luo himself has repeatedly insisted that when one is truly enlightened, one is the equal of all the buddhas, especially Amitabha, because one embodies the same buddha nature.

Yet the Jiulian baojuan is more than a text that simply repeats or parrots Luo Qing's teaching. It takes Luo's characterization of the ontological ground of being for all things as "Parent or Mother" as a point of departure and ingeniously creates a vivid, emotive, and homey picture of a mother who tearfully awaits the reunion with her estranged children. In a remarkably well-developed form, the Eternal Mother myth, which was later the shared belief of so many Ming/Qing sectarian groups, unfolds mesmerizingly before the reader and the listener. She is portrayed as the matriarch of all the gods, buddhas, and immortals, the progenitor of the cosmos and the myriad things, and the compassionate savior of the faithful. In addition, the text introduces a distinct eschatological scheme not present in Luo Qing's writings. Finally, the text revealed a much more complex sectarian organizational structure, as well as a far more pronounced sectarian mentality. All these will be discussed below.

The Jiulian baojuan opens with the assembly of all the buddhas and immortals called by the Eternal Mother. The gathering notices a distinct fragrance, which is called the Trefoil Nine Lotus Fragrance of the Three Phases (Sanyuan ruyi jiulian xiang). The
presence of this fragrance signals an impending change in the kalpa, as it did on two
previous occasions, when Wuji and Taiji (Supreme Ultimate) took their turn to be in
charge of the world. Whereupon, the Amitabha Buddha is summoned before the
Eternal Mother, who explains to him that he shall descend to earth to save the divine
beings created originally by the Eternal Mother to populate the world. Ninety-six
myriads in number, they are mired in worldly passions and are totally forgetful of their
sacred origin. Four myriads of them have reunited with the Mother when two previous
kalpic changes occurred. Now it is Amitabha's turn to locate the rest of the lost souls and
to bring them back to her. When they do return, they will escape the Three Disasters of
flood, fire, and wind, which will scourge the world.

Unable to disobey this command given by the Mother, the Amitabha Buddha
reluctantly leaves this blissful heaven and prepares for his descent. To better enable him
to identify the divine beings and facilitate their return, the Eternal Mother entrusts the
Amitabha Buddha with numerous "tools", including: hunyuan ce (Roster of
undifferentiated origin), guijia biaowen (Document for returning home), jiulian tu (Nine
lotus diagram), sanji xianghuo (Incense of the Three Ultimates), shibu xiuxing (Ten-step
method of cultivation), touci shizhuang (Oaths of allegiance and submission), and
ming'an chahao (Overt and covert checking of signs).

The rest of the text describes how the incarnated Amitabha Buddha, now
appearing as the Patriarch of Wuji, explains and elaborates on the Eternal Mother's
message of salvation to the faithful. With much verbiage and repetition, this message is
delivered. The following is typical.
From the beginningless Beginning until now, the Eternal Mother has undergone numerous transformations. She secures *qian* and *kun* (male and female), administers the cosmos, and creates humanity. The divine beings are *qian* and *kun*. They come to inhabit the world. Entrapped by passions, they obscure their original nature and no longer think of returning... The Eternal Mother on Mt. Ling longs for her children, with tears welling up in her eyes whenever she thinks of them. She is waiting for the day when, after I have descended to this Eastern Land and delivered this message for her, you will return home to your origin and to your matriarch.

The Amitabha Buddha ends his explanation with the admonition for everyone to "head for Mt. Ling, return home, meet with the Mother, have a reunion between mother and child, and smile broadly."\(^\text{13}\)

In the course of acting as the Eternal Mother's messenger, the Amitabha Buddha gives expression to several noteworthy themes. First and foremost is the three-stage salvational scheme. Historical time, according to this scheme, is marked by three great kalpas, each with its respective buddhas in charge. The past age, the age of *Wuji*, is ruled by the Dipamkara Buddha (Lamp-lighting Buddha), who sits on a three-petalled lotus flower and hosts the Yellow Sun Assembly (*huangyang hui*). The present age, the age of *Taiji*, is under the control of the Sakyamuni Buddha, who sits on a five-petalled lotus flower and convenes the Azure Sun Assembly (*qingyang hui*). The future age, the age of
Imperial Ultimate (huangji), will be dominated by the Maitreya Buddha, who is seated on a nine-petalled lotus flower and summons the Red Sun Assembly (hongyang hui). This scheme establishes the basic eschatology of Eternal Mother sectarianism and promises that the salvation of the believers will take place in the near future.

Secondly, Amitabha's teaching reveals a highly "sectarian" character, warning that only the predestined faithful will be saved, while the unbelieving are doomed. Repeatedly such terms as "fated ones" (youyuan ren), "primordial beings" (yuanren), "remnant sentient beings" (canling), "worthies" (xianliang), and "offspring of the imperial womb" (huangtai) are used to refer to the religious elect who alone will heed the message of the Mother and return to her. The rest of humanity is expected to perish at the time of kalpic change.

Thirdly, the later sectarian organizational pattern and initiation practices are already mentioned in this text. The terms sanzong wupai (Three schools and five factions), as well as jiugan shibazhi (Nine poles and eighteen branches), characteristic of the organizational structure of later sectarian groups such as the Yuandun Sect (Complete and Instantaneous Enlightenment Sect) in the seventeenth century, occur numerous times in this text. Moreover, the practices of "registering one's name" (guahao) and "verifying the contracts" (dui hetong), both performed at the time of initiation by numerous sectarian groups in the Qing dynasty to ritualize and guarantee the salvation of their members, are also mentioned frequently throughout the text.

The Jiulian baojuan thus reveals unmistakably that as the Eternal Mother myth was formulated, the attendant cosmology and eschatology so characteristic of this belief were also developed. At the same time, the sectarian nature of this religion, together with
much of its organizational framework and many of its initiation practices, also made their appearance.

Other successors to the Luo Qing tradition also composed texts that further developed the Wusheng laomu belief. A fifth generation patriarch of Luo Qing’s Wuwei Sect by the name of Sun Zhenkong reportedly compiled the *Xiaoshi zhenkong saoxin baojuan*. In it the entire Eternal Mother myth contained in the *Jiulian baojuan* is repeated. She is referred to either as Wusheng fumu, or Wusheng mu. She is responsible for the creation and the stabilization of the cosmos, as well as the population of the “Eastern world” with her children. Once there, however, her children become mired in desires, lust, and gluttony, and lose sight of their original nature. Out of compassion for the suffering of her children, the Eternal Mother dispatches Patriarch Sun to undertake a universal salvation by calling upon her children to return to their native place, where their Mother awaits them at the Dragon Flower Assembly.¹⁹

Yet another later Patriarch of the Wuwei Sect further contributed to the Eternal Mother belief through a concrete portrayal of her as an elderly woman who incarnates in the human world in order to save her children. Mingkong, the eighth generation patriarch of Luo Qing’s tradition, was the author of several texts that describe in detail this Mother in human form. One such text is entitled *Foshuo dazang xianxing liaoyi baojuan* [Precious scroll relating what the Buddha expounds in the Tripitaka on the meaning of manifesting one’s nature]. In this the Eternal Mother assumes the persona of a blind elderly woman. With a gesture reminiscent of Princess Miaoshan (the avatar of the Bodhisattva Guanyin), Mingkong licks the blind eyes to restore vision to the Mother.
Whereupon he is further queried by the Mother before he is designated as the saving patriarch. Thus begins his mission to save the world with the teaching of the Eternal Mother.20

**Further Development of the Eternal Mother Myth**

These texts were followed by a long tradition of sectarian writings that repeated and expanded on the Eternal Mother motif, although in both doctrine and style there was much diversity. A datable text is the *Yaoshi benyuan gongde baojuan* (Precious scroll on meritorious deeds based on the original vow of the Buddha of Medicine), published in 1543. It echoes much of the language found in the *Jiulian* text, with the same promise of returning home and salvation by the Eternal Mother. Much emphasized is the joy of reunion with the Mother.21 In 1558, the *Puming rulai wuwei liaoyi baojuan* (Tathagata Puming's precious scroll of complete revelation through non-action) was completed by the founder of a Yellow Heaven Sect (*huangtian dao*), whose background and religious awakening bore a strong resemblance to those of Luo Qing.22 The text also preaches the now familiar theme of salvation by and reunion with the Eternal Mother. It contains vivid descriptions of the encounter between Mother and child, and the following passage is representative:23

> When I finally come before the Eternal Mother, I rush into her embrace. Together we weep for joy at our reunion. Ever since our separation on Mt. Ling, I have been left adrift in samsara because of my attachment to the mundane world. Now
that I have received the letter from home, from my Venerable Mother, I have in my possession a priceless treasure. Mother, listen to me! Please deliver the multitudes from the sea of suffering!

In 1562, a text entitled Erlang baojuan [Precious scroll on Erlang] appeared, providing further information on the emerging Eternal Mother myth. Based on the story of Erlang's valiant fight with the Monkey King, a famous and entertaining episode from the classic novel Journey to the West (which, incidentally, was given the finishing touches around the same time), the Erlang baojuan describes the final subjugation of the Monkey King by the semi-divine Erlang, thanks in large measure to the assistance provided by the Eternal Mother. This text also seems to presage the legend surrounding the building of the Baoming Si, Temple Protecting the Ming dynasty, as described below. In it the story of the bodhisattva Guanyin incarnating as a nun by the name of Lü is first being told. According to this text, the nun had tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Emperor Yingzong from fighting the Oirat Mongols prior to his debacle at Fort Tumu in 1449. When Yingzong was restored to the throne in 1457 after his long captivity, he rewarded the nun for her loyalty and courage and built a temple for her, naming it the Baoming Si. The temple had been reportedly in existence since 1462. By the late Jiajing reign (1522-1567), however, it came under the sway of believers of the Eternal mother religion.

In the 1570's, a sectarian group composed primarily of nuns and affiliated with the Baoming Si in the western suburb of Peking created a sizeable corpus of texts to dramatize its intimate relationship with the Eternal Mother. One of the nuns was a
young girl by the name of Guiyuan [Returning to perfection], who produced a set of texts around 1571-73, when she was only twelve years old. Modeling after Luo Qing's collected works, she also named them "Five books in six volumes". The following passage from the *Xiaoshi dacheng baojuan* (Explanatory precious scroll on the Mahayana teaching), one of her five books, is revealing:26

To illuminate the mind and look into our nature, let us discuss a wondrous teaching.
When we return home, there will no longer be any worry.
We will be free and totally unimpeded, for we have probed the most mysterious teaching.
Let us deliver all the infants and children and return them home.
When we return home, the way will be fully understood and immortality will be secured. We sit upon the lotus flower, enwrapped in a golden light.
We are ushered to our former posts; and the children, upon seeing the Mother, smile broadly.
The Venerable Mother is heartened to see you, for today is the time of reunion.
We walk the path of enlightenment to attend the Dragon Flower Assembly.
The children will rush into the Mother's embrace.
They will sit on the nine lotus seat, being free and joyful, with bright illumination all around them.
This trip leads us to extreme bliss; the children, upon seeing Mother, burst out laughing!
Other texts written by this group of Eternal Mother believers at the Baoming Temple include the *Pudu xinsheng jiuku baojuan* [Precious scroll of the new messages of universal salvation from suffering] and the *Qingyuan miaodao xiansheng zhejün Erlang baojuan* [Precious scroll of the perfect lord Erlang, who is of pure origin, teaches the wondrous way, and manifests sageliness].  
 Both of them link the nun Lü, founding abbess of the Baoming Temple and now respectfully referred to as Bodhisattva Lü, with the Eternal Mother. In fact, she is asserted to be the incarnation of the Eternal Mother. This group continued to produce texts well into the seventeenth century, when it was known as the West Mahayana Sect (*Xi dacheng jiao*).

Yet another sectarian group active in propagating the Eternal Mother faith was the Red Sun Sect (*Hongyang jiao*) founded by Han Piaogao, probably in the 1580's. Central to this group's teaching is the doctrine of *linfan shouyuan* [descending to earth to retrieve the primordial beings]. Elaborating on the basic Eternal Mother motif, this group asserted that its founder was the youngest son of the Eternal Mother, who had been sent into the world to help with the salvation of the original beings before the world was to be devastated by kalpic disasters. It contributed to the Eternal Mother tradition by standardizing the three-stage scheme, making it a progression from Azure Sun (*qingyang*), to Red Sun (*hongyang*), and finally to White Sun (*baiyang*). This was the scheme accepted and shared by all Eternal Mother sectarians in the Qing dynasty.

Perhaps by far the most successful and influential sectarian group around the turn
of the seventeenth century was the East Mahayana Sect (*Dong dacheng jiao*) founded by Wang Sen of Northern Zhili.\(^{32}\) Also known as the Incense-smelling Sect (*Wenxiang jiao*), Wang Sen's organization at one point boasted a following of over two million. It was the most systematically organized sect at the time, with a clear division of labor and specific titles for different levels of sect leadership.\(^{33}\) It is interesting to note that this sect subscribed to the *Jiulian baojuan*,\(^ {34}\) as its leaders were found to have in their possession numerous copies of the text each time the sect was investigated.\(^ {35}\) Wang Sen himself was arrested in 1595, was released through the payment of bribes, and arrested again in 1614. He died in prison in 1619. His teaching, however, lived on. The apocalyptic message he taught generated a full-scale rebellion in 1622, headed by his follower Xu Hongru and Wang's own son Haoxian.\(^ {36}\) The rebellion lasted three months, but was ruthlessly suppressed by the Ming government after heavy fighting. Even then Wang Sen's teaching survived this setback, for his descendants continued to be sectarian practitioners and leaders for the next two hundred years.\(^ {37}\)

It was through one of the offshoots of Wang Sen's organization that the Eternal Mother cult was brought to a fully mature form. This was the Yuandun Sect mentioned earlier. Founded by one Gongchang (split-character version of the word Zhang) in the aftermath of the 1622 rebellion, this sect was responsible for the compilation of the *Gufo tianzhen kaozheng longhua baojing* [The heavenly perfect venerable Buddha's authenticated dragon flower precious sutra], the most doctrinally developed text on the Eternal Mother religion in Ming-Qing China.\(^ {38}\) Published in the 1650's, this text contains the most mature form of the Eternal Mother myth. It describes the familiar three-stage
salvational scheme, the Dragon Flower Assembly, the procreation of humanity by the
Eternal Mother, the trapping of her children in the samsaric world, and the joyful return
she prepares for them. It also mentions the organizational structure of sanzong wupai
(Three schools and five factions) and jiugan shibazhi (Nine poles and eighteen branches),
which made their first appearance in the Jiulian baojuan, as already observed earlier. It
stresses the importance of the rituals of "registration" (guahao), and "verifying the
contracts" (dui hetong), as does the Jiulian baojuan. But what is most characteristic
about the Longhua jing is its preoccupation with kalpic disasters, which are asserted to be
imminent. Three disasters will take the form of famines and floods, avalanches and
earthquakes, pests and epidemics. There is a palpable sense of urgency in preparing
oneself for this cataclysmic devastation not present in other texts.

The Eternal Mother cult thus reached its mature form by early Qing. Thereafter,
partly because of governmental vigilance and partly because of the loss of creative
momentum, few new sectarian texts were composed. Sometime in the eighteenth century,
however, the Eternal Mother belief came to be encapsulated in the eight-character chant
of zhenkong jiaxiang, wusheng laomu [Native land of True Emptiness, the Eternal
Venerable Mother]. Thus the vague and hazy ideas that began with Luo Qing finally
reached their culminated form as a creed-like chant, binding all the believers of the
Eternal Mother into one nebulous but potentially powerful community.

When sectarian writing was resumed in fits and starts in the late nineteenth
century, particularly through the bailuan (worshipping the phoenix) techniques, it seldom
surpassed the grandeur and sophistication of the earlier texts. The scriptures of the *Yiguan dao* (Unity Sect) and the *Longhua zhaihui* (Dragon Flower Vegetarian Assembly) invariably portray a teary-eyed Eternal Mother, wringing her hands and anxiously waiting for her estranged children to come home. The following passage from the *Jiaxiang shuxin* [Letters from home] of the *Yiguan dao* is representative:  

In her heavenly abode the Venerable Mother lets out a cry of sadness, with tears running continuously from her eyes and drenching her clothes. This is all because the children of buddhas are attached to the samsaric world. The ninety-six myriads of the imperial womb's offspring know not how to return home... The people of the world are all my children. When they meet with disaster, the Mother is distressed. She dispatches immortals and buddhas to the human world below to set up the great way in order to convert people from all corners. The Venerable Mother cries in a heart-wrenching way. Is there any way to call her children back?

In the preceding pages, the genesis and development of the Eternal Mother myth have been traced in some detail. From a vague and hazy notion that first appeared in 1509, Wusheng laomu evolved into an august Creator of the cosmos, Progenitor of the human race, Almighty Matriarch of the Heavenly Host, and Messianic Savior of the world. At the same time, however, she retained her feminine side by displaying her maternal compassion and her unceasing yearning for her long-lost offspring. She was the almighty deity, at once powerful and
empathetic, resolute yet tender-hearted. She was the ideal savior who combined stern justice with mercy and concern.

**Ethical Implications of the Eternal Mother Religion**

From the perspective of orthodox society and religion, this Eternal Mother sectarianism could be nothing else but heterodoxy. Its worship of a female deity who lorded over all other male gods was irrefutably subversive to the patriarchal authority of mainstream society. In her mature form, the Eternal Mother was no mere goddess who answered people's dire calls for help, as in the case of the Bodhisattva Guanyin or the folk goddess Mazu. Instead, she was matriarch of the pantheon of buddhas, gods, and immortals, as well as supreme savior of the human race. In the mature Eternal Mother cult, her position was even more exalted than that of the Jade Emperor, an assertion against which Huang Yubian, an early nineteenth century official who investigated the sects with much fervor, railed with particular harshness. At her command, awe-inspiring deities such as the Maitreya Buddha would descend to earth to scourge it of all evil elements. Yet her power was tempered by her matronly compassion. In sectarian literature she was portrayed as the concerned mother who tearfully awaited the return of her wayward offspring. Her superiority over all deities, combined with her motherly character, must have formed an extremely appealing image to women who were by and large dissatisfied with their lot in life or unfulfilled in their aspirations. More importantly, the Eternal Mother motif must have provided a sense of equality, worth, and power for the female followers, a feeling denied them by society at large.
Numerous precious scrolls make reference to this equality between women and men. The *Longhua jing*, for example, declared: "Let it be announced to all men and women in the assembly: 'there should be no distinction between you'". Similarly, the *Jiuku zhongxiao yaowang baojuan* [Precious scroll on the god of medicine who is loyal, filially pious, and who delivers people from suffering] proclaims emphatically that "Men and women are originally not different. Both receive the pure breath of Prior Heaven (*xiantian yiqi*) from the Venerable Mother." Finally, the *Pujing rulai yaoshi tongtian baojuan* [Precious scroll by the Pujing Buddha on the key to reaching heaven] voices a similar theme: "In the realm of Prior heaven, there are five spirits of *yin* and five pneuma of *yang*. When men gather the five spirits of *yin*, they become bodhisattvas. When women collect the five pneuma of *yang*, they become buddhas."

Government investigators of these sects often complained about the apparent equality of the sexes embraced by the members. Their meetings, attended by both males and females and taking place often at night, were bitterly denounced for their impropriety and their damage to public moral standards. The accusation of “yejü xiaosan, nannü hunza” [assembling at night and dispersing only at daybreak, indiscriminate mingling of men and women] was frequently leveled against these sectarian groups. The fact that women could intermingle freely with men in sectarian worship was decidedly objectionable to the guardians of orthodoxy. In their opinion, such unsegregated assembly at night was an open invitation to all kinds of immoral and illicit sexual contacts. That women could become elders and hold influential positions in the sectarian organization, a fact noted by many observers, was also a source of consternation for the authorities. Such an iconoclastic attitude towards the relationship between the sexes has
serious implications. Admittedly only theoretical in nature, this alternative view of the
equality of men and women before the Eternal Mother could not help but undermine the
patriarchal authority on which both Chinese society and politics rested.

Of even more fundamental significance is the eschatological millenarianism of the
sects. The one truly distinguishing feature of the belief in the Eternal Mother is its
apocalyptic eschatology. By that I mean an acute, burning vision of the imminent and
complete dissolution of the corrupt, existing world, and its replacement by a utopian,
alternative order. Furthermore, this esoteric knowledge is shared only by a religious
electi whose faith and action will guarantee their exclusive survival from this cosmic
event. Basic to the Eternal Mother belief is the idea of the kalpa (jie), a drastic and
cataclysmic turning-point in human history. Originally a Buddhist notion that marks the
cyclical passage of time on a cosmic scale, kalpa for the Eternal Mother believers
assumed an immediacy and urgency that it originally did not possess. The Ming and
Qing Eternal Mother followers commonly shared the belief in an eventual occurrence of
kalpic crisis. Virtually all the sectarian texts from the sixteenth century on subscribed to
a three-stage salvational scheme in which heavenly emissaries would descend to earth at
predestined times and at the command of the Eternal Mother to deliver the faithful.
While the first two stages, representing past and present, excited little interest, it was the
third stage, the stage to come, that created apprehension and fired the imagination of the
believers. After all, it was their anticipation that the arrival of this third stage would
signal their return to and reunion with the Mother. The third stage, it was widely
believed, would be ushered in by a messianic figure (usually the Maitreya Buddha, but in
some cases the founding patriarchs of the various sects) whose coming would be accompanied by an unprecedented wave of natural and social upheavals so catastrophic that the heavenly bodies as well as human society would be literally torn asunder and then reconstituted. The following description of the horrors and devastation of the kalpic turmoil, related with apparent relish by the compilers of the *Longhua jing*, is illustrative.  

In the *xinsi* year [1641?] there will be floods and famines in North China, with people in Shandong being the hardest hit. They will practice cannibalism upon one another, while millions will starve to death. Husbands and wives will be forced to leave one another, and parents and children will be separated. Even those who manage to flee to northern Zhili will be afflicted by another famine and will perish by the roadside. In the *renwu* year [1642?] disasters will strike again with redoubled force. There will be avalanches and earthquakes. The Yellow River will overflow its banks and multitudes will be drowned. Then the locusts will come and blanket the earth, devouring what little crop that remains. Rain will come down incessantly and houses will crumble... In the *guïwei* year [1643?] widespread epidemics will occur.

Keeping in mind that the *Longhua jing* was compiled during the Ming-Qing transition, and assuming that the specific years mentioned in the text refer to that critical period as the Ming dynasty was about to fall, the devastation and misery described above may indeed be offering an uncannily authentic picture of the real situation itself. Thus the
kalpic change, for some of the sectarians at least, was not an event that might happen in some distant future eons from the present, but was in fact taking place right before their very eyes and confirmed by their own experience! Their overriding concern was to "respond" to this kalpic disaster (yingjie) and to survive it. The urgency for action was understandable.

Equally noteworthy in this apocalyptic vision of the sectarians is the notion of their own "election". Not only was the apocalyptic conflagration impending, it would at the same time separate the electi from the doomed. The Eternal Mother believers were convinced that they belonged to a minority of "saints" destined to survive the cataclysm, which would terminate the existing order. Indeed, they and they alone would inherit the new age that was soon to dawn, when they would enjoy the fruits of reunion with the Eternal Mother. All their religious practices were designed to confirm their election, to ensure their survival in the final moments of this doomed order, and to prepare themselves for the eventual admission into the new one. A corollary of this view was the expected annihilation of the non-believers (the wicked and evil ones) prior to the arrival of the millennium. Since the onset of the new age would confirm the salvation of the elect, it was not surprising that some sectarians would look forward to its early arrival when the saved and the doomed would be separated and the latter would be destroyed and cast away without mercy.

The notion of election figures prominently in sectarian texts. The electi are variously referred to as youyuan ren (predestined ones), huangtai zi (offspring of the imperial womb), and a host of other names. The Longhua jing, in particular, contains a
pronounced theme of election for the Yuandun Sect members. Describing the Dragon Flower Assembly after the kalpa, the text mentions "city in the clouds" (yüncheng) where it will be held. The survivors of the apocalypse will proceed to enter the city gate, where their identity will be individually checked before admission. Those who fail to produce a valid registration or contract will be turned away and cast into oblivion.48

Assured of their salvation, many Eternal Mother followers thus concerned themselves with "the age to come" (laishi), which meant both "the life one might expect after death and the millennium one might experience in this world." When captured and interrogated, these people repeatedly insisted that the principal motivation for their conversion to sectarianism was to "pray for protection in the life to come". They were confident that they would get it too.

This sense of election was evident in many Eternal Mother sects. An untitled precious scroll in Huang Yubian's Poxie xiangbian declared that "All non-believers are destined for hell. Only devout sect members will have direct access to the Celestial Palace, not be condemned to descend into hell." At the time of the Eight Trigrams uprising in 1813, one of the faithful claimed, "In the future, those who are not in our assembly will meet with disasters accompanying the arrival of the kalpa." Another put it more bluntly, "If you join the sect, you live; if you don't, you die." Members of a Yuan Jiao [Perfect completion Sect] in the early part of the nineteenth century held the belief that "when the Maitreya comes to rule the world, there will be chaos for forty-nine days. The sun and moon will alter their course, the weather will change and only those who adhere to the Yuan Jiao will be saved from the cataclysm." It was precisely this exclusionist view of election that made the sectarians stand apart from their local
communities and even kin, their commitment to the existing order came under doubt.

When, and if, they did survive the catastrophic disasters of the kalpa, some sectarians expected to find a radically changed cosmos with a totally different time scale and alternative calendar. The *Puming baojuan* of the Yellow Heaven Sect, the first edition of which probably appeared in 1558, has a vivid description of this new world:

The land is re-arranged; the stars and constellations re-established. Heaven and earth are put in order again. Oceans and mountains are relocated. After nine cycles, the elixir [of life] is refined. Together humans reach the other shore. The compass stops and the two unbroken lines [of a trigram] meet. The eighteen kalpic disasters have run their full course, and the forms of all things are about to change. Eighteen months will make one year, and thirty-six hours constitute a day. There will be forty-five days in a month. One day will have one hundred and forty-four quarter-hours, and eight hundred and ten days form one year...

This vision of a reconstituted cosmos with an altered time scale appears to have been shared by other sectarians as well. During the early Daoguang reign in the Qing dynasty (1821-1851), a White Sun Sect espoused a similar belief in a thirty-six hour day for the new age. Moreover, its members claimed that "The hongyang [red sun] age is about to have run its full course. It is time to prepare for the arrival of baiyang [white sun]. In the present age, the moon remains full until the eighteenth day of each month. When it stays full until the twenty-third day, the kalpa is upon us." The entire eschatology of the Eternal Mother sectarians, represented by the
concepts of kalpa, election, and cosmic reconstitution, was most threatening to orthodox thinking. The notion of kalpa, to begin with, was predicated on the assumption that the existing order, with its ethical norms and socio-political institutions, was finite, mutable, and destined to be replaced. Moreover, the new age promised to be a far better substitute. This kind of thinking might create a frame of mind that expected, even welcomed, the demise of the present age. It would at least render untenable the orthodox claim that "Heaven is immutable, so also is the Way." (tian bubian, dao yi bubian). The notion of kalpic upheaval ran directly counter to this claim of immutability, for it called for total, cosmic, cataclysmic change. The validity of the present age, including the existing moral authority, was at least theoretically undermined, since moral norms must rest on certain assumptions of stability and continuity.

The threat of the kalpa was further aggravated by its urgency. It was expected to take place in the foreseeable future, if not here and now. It was to be accompanied by a series of disasters so severe that the entire realm would become one big chaos (tianxia daluan). To survive it one could no longer rely on one's own efforts alone, but must entrust oneself to a savior or deliverer, follow his injunctions, and completely suspend all personal values and judgment. This abandonment and surrender ran counter to the orthodox teaching which prevailed at the time, made popular by morality books and religious instructions, that one could shape one's own destiny and receive karmic rewards through moral behavior. For some sectarians, this salvational path of conformity to the moral norm was no longer acceptable. They believed instead in redemption through a messianic figure whose deliverance they eagerly awaited. For the guardians of orthodoxy, this sectarian view of messianic salvation meant total contempt for their
teaching and authority.

The idea of election was equally unacceptable to orthodox belief, which subscribed to a universalistic approach to salvation. The infinite compassion of the Amitabha Buddha or of the Bodhisattva Guanyin was believed to be available to all. Similarly, the saving power of Laozi and the other Daoist deities was all-embracing. The sectarian view that sect membership alone could guarantee salvation was thus assailed with vehemence by the orthodox-minded. Huang Yübian thus asked teasingly in his *Poxie xiangbian*: "If those who are practicing heterodox religion are the children of the Eternal Mother, then whose children are those who do not follow such deviant ways?" A few paragraphs later, Huang again attacked this sectarian view: "If indeed there is a compassionate Eternal Mother up in Heaven, she should certainly not be discriminating in extending her saving grace, and should treat everyone equally. Why should she be so partial toward the heterodox sectarians?"

All in all, the sectarian espousal of an eschatology and the attendant millenarianism posed a direct, frontal challenge to orthodoxy. With little to lose and all the fruits of the coming millennium to gain, some sectarians might be psychologically disposed to take drastic, even violent, action to usher in the new era. Seen in this light, Huang Yübian's bitter attack on the sectarian millennial yearning becomes understandable:

For those who do not practice heterodox religion, men till the land and women weave their cloth. Food will be plentiful and clothing will be abundant. Is it not delightful?... The joy of this world is concrete and tangible, while the bliss of heaven is illusory and unreal. The heterodox sects focus their attention on
heavenly bliss, but in the end they lose even the joy of the human world... When they say that they are going to enjoy their blissful paradise, who can prove it?

Concluding Remarks

The Eternal Mother is a sectarian deity whose genesis and transformation, as well as whose attributes and characteristics are amply portrayed in a unique genre of literature known as precious volumes (baojuan). Beginning in the early sixteenth century, this maternal figure had captured the imagination and devotion of generations of sectarian followers who found the mainline gods and immortals unpalatable. She offered them an alternative view of the world and, in doing so, redefined the way society and human relationship should ideally be arranged. To be sure, all these remained at the theoretical level. Sectarians were not revolutionaries. Nevertheless, this Eternal Mother belief did imply “a world turned-upside-down.” Its resilience through half a millennium of government persecution and hostility testified eloquently its lasting appeal to certain segment of the Chinese populace. Baojuan literature and its central heroine undoubtedly deserve more study and appreciation.

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1 The most recent monographic study of this genre of religious literature is Daniel L. Overmyer’s Precious Volumes: An Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). See also Sawada Mizuho, Zoho hokan no kenkyu [A

The motif of the reunion between mother and child may have received inspiration from the Manichaen
cosmogonic story. See Richard Shek’s article on "Maitreyanism, Manichaenism, and Early White Lotus,"
in K.C. Liu and Richard Shek, eds., *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii
Press, forthcoming).

It is more likely that it was the first printing of the text, which had previously existed in manuscript form,

This is one of the most important sectarian texts of the Ming-Qing period. Its influence rivaled that of
the *Longhua jing*, to be discussed later. Apparently the text has another name, *Wudangshan xuantian
shangdi jing* [Sutra of the august lord of mysterious heaven from Mt. Wudang]. Mt. Wudang has been a
major Daoist center since the early Ming. It was associated with the Daoist adept Zhang Sanfeng and the
Ming court's fascination with him. See Anna Seidel, "A Taoist Immortal of the Ming Dynasty: Chang San-
feng," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought* Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed.(New York: Columbia University
Press, 1970), 483-516. See also Mano Senryu, "Mincho to Taiwazan ni tsuite," [The Ming Dynasty and Mt.
Taihe (Wudang)], *Otani gakuho* 38.3 (1959): 59-73; also his "Mindai no Butozan to kangan no shinshutsu
[Mt. Wudang in the Ming and the ascendancy of the eunuchs]," *Toho shukyo* 22 (Nov. 1963): 28-44. For
access to the sutra I would like to thank Susan Naquin, who kindly allowed me to photocopy her copy of it.
She had herself acquired it from Mr. Wu Xiaoling in Peking in 1981.

Her religious name is Foguang. In addition to her brother Fozheng, she apparently carried on her father's
vocation as well, and became a sect master herself. Ma Xisha speculates that Foguang was instrumental in
enabling the Luo Qing tradition to branch off into other major sectarian groups. Ma maintains that
Foguang was the mother-in-law of Wang Sen, founder of the Wenxiang jiao (Incense-smelling Sect) or
Dong Dacheng jiao (East Mahayana Sect) later. Ma even asserts that Wang might have been the author of
this text. See Note #53 below. See Ma's *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi* [History of Chinese Folk Religion]
(Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1992), 552-556. Wang Sen's group was found to have given great
veneration to the *Jiulian baojuan*, even down to the Qing dynasty. Again, see ibid., 585.

See Luo Qing’s *Poxie juan*, section 6, and *Zhengxin juan*, section 12.

It is in this connection that perhaps the *Huangji baojuan* studied by Overmyer makes sense. If the date of
printing of this text was actually the fifth year of the reign of Emperor Zhengde (1510) rather than the fifth
year of the reign of Emperor Xuande (1430) (the difference attributable to a misprint, as both emperors have the word "de" as the second half of their reign name), then the Huangji baojuan can be seen as an intermediary text between Luo Qing's Wubu liuce and the Jiulian baojuan. The three-stage historical scheme in the Huangji text can therefore be incorporated by the Jiulian text.

9 Jiulian baojuan, section 1. The possible Manichaen influence on the Eternal Mother myth can be speculated. Mani's original teaching contains the story of the "Mother of Life" who, having given birth to the Primeval Man, sent him into battle to fight the forces of Darkness. Primeval Man was defeated, his armor of light stripped away, and he lay in a stupor. Later he was rescued by the Living Spirit and was reunited with his Mother in a moving scene. The rest of the Manichaen story involves complicated efforts undertaken to retrieve all the light particles left behind by Primeval Man, leading up to the climactic conclusion of the second Epoch in cosmic history. Although the main thrust of the two myths differs, the Manichaen motif of the rescue of Primeval Man, the union with the Mother, and the retrieval of the rest of the light particles lost in Darkness bear a striking resemblance to the later Eternal Mother story of the return of the primordial beings, their union with the Mother, and the deliverance of other primordial beings still mired in ignorance and suffering. It should be noted that there are scholars who reject any connection between Manichaenism and Chinese sectarianism. See Lian Lichang, "Bailianjiao xingcheng wuguan Mingjiao kao [The formation of White Lotus religion is unrelated to Manichaenism],” Minjian zongjiao [Folk Religion] 1:117-126 (December, 1995). In his Cong Monijiao dao Mingjiao [From Manichaenism to the Religion of Light] (Taibei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1992), the Taiwanese scholar Wang Jianchuan also discounts any influence the Manichaen religion might have had on Chinese sects. See p. 359.

10 The three-stage scheme of time, namely from Wuji, through Taiji, and finally to Huangji, is outlined in the Huangji baojuan discussed by Overmyer in his Precious Volumes, 51-91.

11 Ibid., section 2.

12 Ibid., section 4.

13 Ibid., section 12.

14 Ibid., sections 4, 10, 12. It should be pointed out that earlier in the text, the Amitabha Buddha is referred to as the Future Buddha (sections 1, 2, and 3). It is only later that the more standard version treating the
Maitreya Buddha as the future buddha is presented. It is equally interesting that Amitabha Buddha is at one point called the Sanyang jiaozhu (Patriarch of the Three Suns). See section 2.

15 *Jiulian baojuan*, Prologue, sections 6 and 15.


17 *Jiulian baojuan*, sections 9, 20.

18 Both practices are designed to give the impression of official and bureaucratic recognition of the believers' confirmed status as the saved elect.

19 See Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*, 230-231.

20 Ibid., 232-234.


24 The content of this precious scroll is given brief description by Wu Zhicheng in his "Bailianjiao de chongbaishen 'Wushengmu [The Eternal Mother--a deity worshipped by the White Lotus],” Beijing shiyuan xuebao [Journal of the Peking Normal College] (1986, no.2), p. 46.


26 Quoted in Sawada, Zoho, 47-48.

27 Whether this latter text is identical to the one bearing a similar title but appearing earlier is uncertain.

28 Sawada, Zoho, 278-279.

29 See Richard Shek, "Religion and Society in Late Ming," 276-287. See also Sawada Mizuho, "Koyokyo shitan [A preliminary study of the Red Sun Sect],” in his Zoho, 366-408. Ma Xisha has also written extensively on this group. See his Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi, 489-548.

30 See the quote from Hunyuan jiao hongyang zhonghua baojing in Sawada's Zoho, 397.

31 Actually, as early as 1579, a certain Wang Duo was known to have organized an Assembly of Three Suns between Heaven and Earth [Tiandi sanyang hui] and had a following of six thousand. He was later captured and executed. See Ming shilu [Veritable Records of the Ming dynasty], 83:5a, Wanli 7/1/23.

32 Wang Sen (1542-1619) was originally named Shi Ziran, a tanner by trade. He might have been initiated into the entire sectarian movement through his marriage to the granddaughter of Luo Qing. His mother-in-law might have been Foguang, Luo Qing's daughter.

33 Asai Motoi has undertaken the most thorough study of Wang Sen's sect. His monograph, which is the culmination of over a decade of research and writing, is Min-Shin jidai minkan shukyo kessha no kenkyu [Folk religious associations in the Ming-Qing period] (Tokyo: Kenbun shuppan, 1990). See esp. 133-310. Yü Songqing is also an ardent student of this tradition. See her Ming-Qing bailianjiao yanjiu [Study of White Lotus Religion in Ming and Qing] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chuban she, 1987). Ma Xisha also has substantial chapters on this group and its offshoots in his Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi, 549-652, 859-907. Finally, Susan Naquin also studies the later transmission of the Wang Sen tradition in her “The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in late Imperial China” mentioned earlier, as well as in her

34 In fact, Ma Xisha actually argues that Wang Sen might have been its author. See Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi*, 610-613.


36 For a detailed description of this rebellion, see Richard Shek, "Religion and Society in Late Ming," 352-367. See also Xu Hongru's biography by Richard Chu in *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), Vol. 1, 587-589. Noguchi Tetsuro also has a substantial chapter on this rebellion in his *Mindai byakurenkyoshi no kenkyu*, 255-268.

37 See Yü Songqing, *Ming-Qing bailianjiao yanjiu*, 37-56, 131-162; Ma Xisha, *Qingdai bagua jiao* [The Eight Trigrams Sect of the Qing dynasty] (Beijing: People's University Press, 1989), esp. 36-44.


41 Ibid., 30.

42 Ibid., 97.

43 Ibid., 57.

For the early history of eschatological notions among Buddho-Daoist groups, see chapters 1 and 2 in this volume.


See Longhua jing 2:19; 3:21a-b, 22a-b, 23a-b, and 24a-b. See also the Puming baojuan in Stulova, *Baotszuian o Pu-mine* 10, 63, 130, 207.

Longhua jing 2:15; 3:16b; 4:5b, 8b.


Adopted with emendation from Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion*, 160.


Ibid., 63.

Ibid., 37.