CHAPTER SEVEN

FAILED PROPHECY AND GROUP DEMISE:
THE CASE OF CHEN TAO

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In the summer of 1997, approximately 140 emigrant members of a little-known Taiwanese UFO group, Chen Tao, appeared in Garland, Texas (near Dallas) and declared the site a holy place where God would descend from heaven. In December, the group’s founder and prophet, Hon-Ming Chen, announced that God would appear on TV Channel 18 six days before the date to warn Earth’s inhabitants of the coming tribulation. On March 25, the failure of a divine appearance prompted Master Chen to retract his prophecy. However, on March 31, Chen called a press conference to minimize the disconfirmation and announced that God had pushed the apocalyptic date back to 1999. The group departed from Garland in May, and a remnant of approximately 35 members relocated to Lockport, New York. The authors traveled to Lockport in the summer of 1999 to interview Master Chen and observe the group. At that time, group members dismissed the importance of the failed prophecies and remained confident that the ancestors would soon arrive in planes from their home under the Great Lakes. Shortly after this time, financial troubles forced members to find work to support the mission. Within a few years, Chen Tao disintegrated, and members returned home to Taiwan.

Given the numerous case studies that document the ways in which groups have survived and even thrived after the disconfirmation of prophecy, the history of Chen Tao represents a highly unusual case. Contrary to the findings of Festinger, Riecken and Schacter (1956) and subsequent studies that reveal that groups typically survive prophetic failure through a readjustment process to cognitive dissonance, we have here a case study of failed prophecy in which the group collapsed. In this chapter, we explore the serial disconfirmation of prophecy that preceded the disintegration of Chen Tao. We suggest that failed prophecy may have weakened the charismatic relationship between prophet and devotees to which the leader reacted by imposing significant changes in group
structure. We also consider the cultural obstacles faced by the group whose members did not speak the language nor fully appreciate the difficulty of an extended stay in a foreign land. Finally, we argue that the case of Chen Tao demonstrates the importance of considering structural and cultural factors and conditions that may alter the outcome of a group's response to failed prophecy.

Research Literature on Failed Prophecy

Just over fifty years ago, Festinger, Riecken and Schacter (1956) published *When Prophecy Fails*, a case study of a small religious group whose leader had predicted that the world would be destroyed by a massive flood. At issue was the question of how religious and other groups respond to the failure of prophecy. Festinger and his associates infiltrated the group to see what would happen when the flood that "Mrs. Keech" predicted did not come. Common sense suggests that, when faced with overwhelmingly disconfirming evidence, individuals will experience a weakening of faith in the worldview that led to the false prediction. But as is now well known, Festinger and his associates found that Mrs. Keech and her followers responded to the failure of prophecy not by abandoning their beliefs but by increasing their proselytizing activity on behalf of their beliefs. Festinger went on to formulate the theory of cognitive dissonance which argues that people will resist changing beliefs to which they are committed and that they may respond to the cognitive dissonance stemming from a contradiction between two cognitions or between cognition and behavior in unexpected ways.

Most scholars who have undertaken subsequent case studies of failed prophecy have pointed out that increased proselytization is not the only—or even the most common—reaction to the dissonance produced by failed prophecy (Zygmunt 1970, 1972, Weiser 1974, Melton 1985, Dawson 1999, Stone 2000). Zygmunt (1972) posits that the three most common reactions to failed prophecy are (1) reworking the prophecy so that the basic prophecy remains intact while the date is moved to either a definite or indefinite point in the future, (2) assigning blame for the failed prophecy to sources within the movement or outside it and redirecting movement activities, and (3) affirming that the prophecy has in fact been fulfilled, but not perhaps in the way people may have expected. Melton (1985) argues that the most common response to failed prophecy is Zygmunt's third option, in which the group reinterprets the prophecy in a