THE TRADITION OF INNOVATION:
A CHINESE NEW RELIGION

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In June 1958 Holmes Welch became aware of the existence of a Chinese "new religion" when he was taken to its headquarters in the New Territories of Hong Kong. During the year that followed he visited its local branches, photographed its rites, acquired a copy of its basic scripture, and spent many hours questioning its leaders and followers. One of these was a young man, Huang Li-shan, who had married the daughter of its founder and now administered its affairs. Huang Li-shan was not his legal name, but a style he had chosen so as to be Alexander Huang in English. With him Welch had ten long interviews, the last of which took place in May 1959.

Welch wanted to publish the material he had collected, but it bristled with problems. This was a syncretic religion that drew its ideas and terminology not only from Buddhism and Taoism, but also from the existing syncretic religious systems in which Chinese religious innovation has been so richly displayed. It seemed to Welch that he must learn more about all of them before he could write about one of them, but he did not have the time to do this. So for more than a decade the material he had collected lay in a file; and, to the best of his knowledge, nothing was published in Western literature about this new religion. In June 1978 Yü Chün-fang discovered its existence in Taiwan and shared her findings with Welch. They decided to publish what they had learned as soon as possible.*

Its name was and is "The Holy Teaching of Heaven's Virtue" (T'ien-te Sheng-chiao). It was founded in 1899 by a four-year-old boy, resurrected from death after three days. First let us trace his career; summarize the cosmological and theological tenets on which he based it; describe the organization and rites of his church in 1958-59; then in 1976-78, by which time it had begun to flourish in Taiwan too; and finally offer some assessments.

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The Founder (chiao-chu) was Hsiao Ch’ang-ming, born January 3, 1895 in Le-chih, which lies about a third of the way between Chengtu and Chungking in west China. His parents were ordinary peasants, neither particularly rich nor poor and having no special religious commitment. The first four years of his life were normal. Then he died. As usual in the case of young children, his parents decided to give him a quick and simple burial, which took place three days later. When his coffin was about to be lowered into the grave, they opened the lid for a last look. To their amazement they saw him move. He got out of the coffin and walked home. This happened on June 20, 1899.

Once they were back in their farmhouse, he informed his parents that he had received Heaven’s Mandate to come down and save mankind from suffering and misery. The gods had instructed him to found a new religion, the Tien-te Sheng-chiao, and to cure disease by the methods of essence, breath, and spirit (ching, ch’i, shen). His parents did not believe him and would not let him leave home to carry out his mission. After waiting in vain one or two years for them to change their minds, he slipped away and began to live in temples and in the houses of friends and converts. Though he was only five or six years old, he was able to heal the sick, to write poems, and tell extraordinary tales about the gods. More and more people became his disciples, convinced by his healing powers and by his superhuman knowledge. He could answer all questions, including those put to him by skeptics and scholars about philosophy, religion, the arts, and the beginning of the world. Some time after his eighth year he moved to Changsha in Hunan province, where he established the headquarters of his church. Gradually branches were set up in Hankow (for Hupeh province), in Nanchang (for Kiangsi province), and other cities. By 1923 he had more than a million followers. His religious commands were strictly obeyed by the hierarchy he established.

Although he is said to have been able to read and write as soon as he was resurrected, he received little or no formal education. Therefore he often had a hard time remembering Chinese characters; he would write the wrong ones or write the right ones in the