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JEAN CHESNEAUX

# PEASANT REVOLTS IN CHINA

1840-1949



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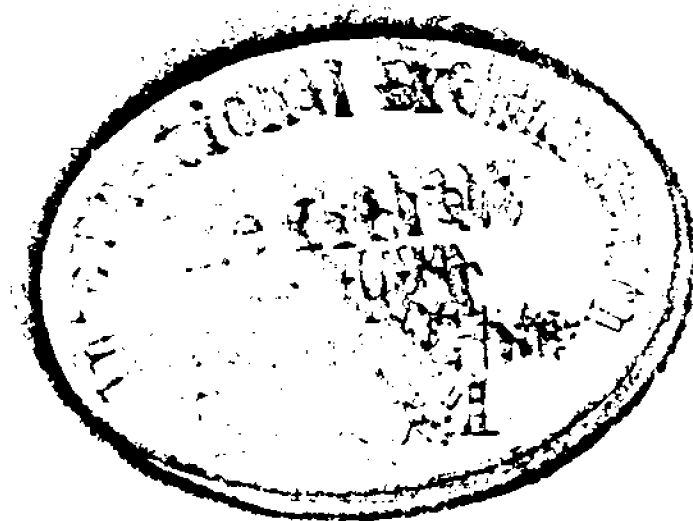
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Jean Chesneaux

Translated by C. A. Curwen



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*Picture Research: Célestine Dars*

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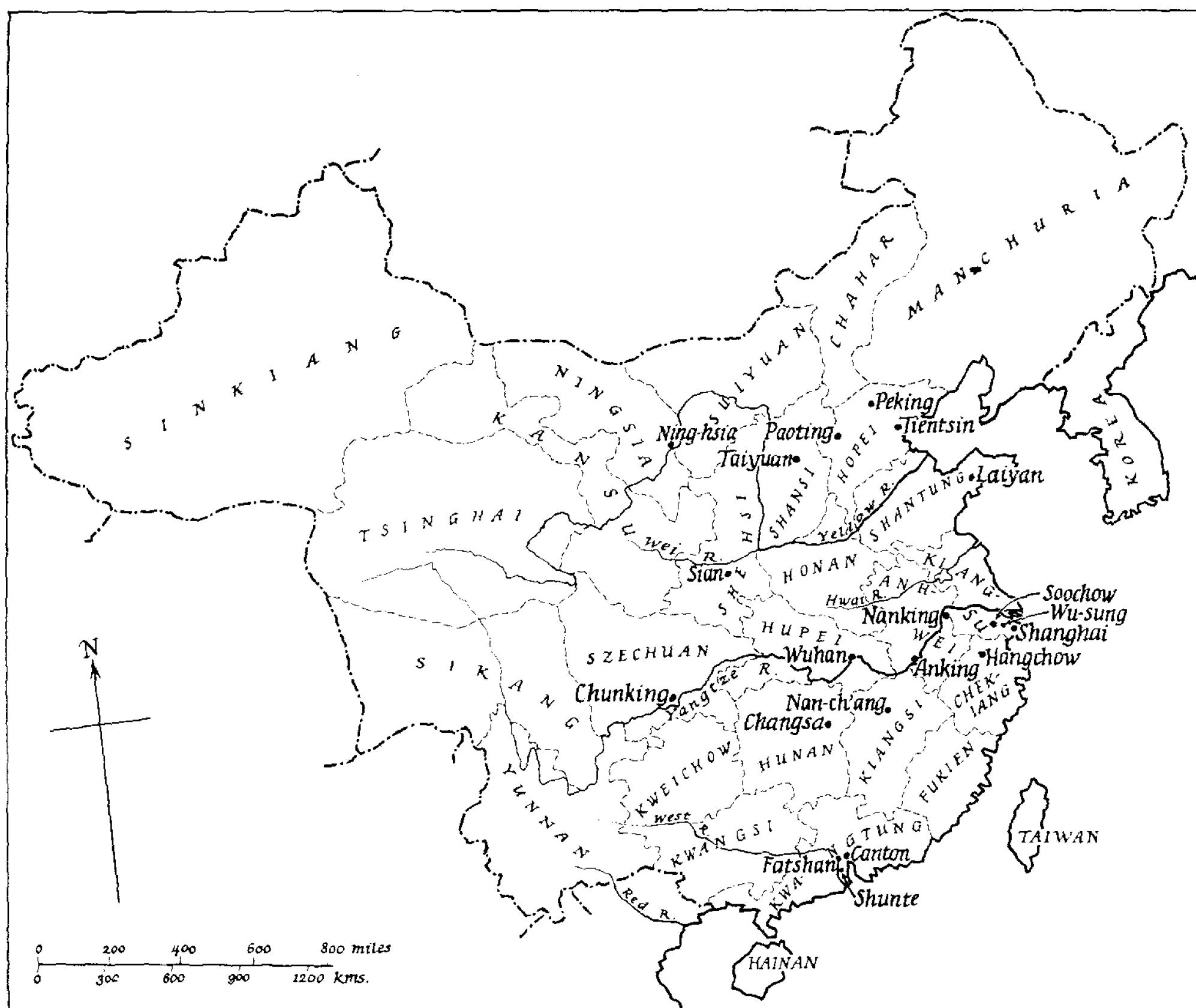
# 1 The Legacy of Peasant Rebellion in Pre-Modern China



Most of the great pre-industrial societies of the world have experienced explosions of 'peasant fury' and remember with fear and admiration such famous peasant rebels as Wat Tyler and the Lollards in England, the 'Jacques' of Beauvaisis and the 'Croquants' of Normandy, Stenka Razin and Pugachev in Russia, Thomas Münzer and his bands of starving peasants in Germany. But no country has had a richer and more continuous tradition of peasant rebellion than China.

Century after century, the long history of imperial China was punctuated by peasant revolts: the 'Yellow Turbans', the 'Red Eyebrows' and the 'Bronze Horses' at the beginning of our era, those against the Sung dynasty in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and against the Ming in the seventeenth – to mention only the most important. The tradition was a rich one not only in the sense that peasant rebellions were frequent and often on a large scale, but also because it remained very much alive in the minds of the peasants of China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was not just an inert tradition from the dead past, but a dynamic element in living history, in the great waves of agrarian revolution which shook China from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.

The peasant rebellions of ancient China have long been neglected by Western historians, who were themselves dependent upon traditional Chinese historiography which, as Etienne Balazs said, was 'written by scholar-officials for scholar-officials'. In the eyes of the mandarins, the defenders of the political order and of landed property, peasant rebels were no more than bandits. The Chinese term for them, *fei*, is an even more pejorative expression than its European equivalent. The 'bandit' is so named because a 'ban' has



1 Map of China, showing the provincial boundaries and chief cities.



been pronounced against him, a sentence which isolates him from other men and makes him an outlaw. The Chinese term, however, denies him even the right to exist, since the character for *fei* is also a negative particle in classical Chinese grammar. Each man receives a name (*ming*) which defines his place in the social order; but the *fei* is one who does not exist in the eyes of good society. The historian does not need to know him, for he is concerned with the actions of the great and with the social structure which they created. This bias has survived for a long time among Western historians of China, who first discovered her history through the imperial annals, translated by the Jesuits in the seventeenth century. It is not without significance that one of the best known and best documented works of Western sinology dealing with the history of China between the mid-seventeenth century and 1911 is entitled *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*.

Traditional Chinese historiography, based as it was upon Confucian political theory, tended to recognize the existence of peasant revolts only in cases where they succeeded in overthrowing one dynasty and founding another. Chinese society was founded upon respect for the established order, an order in which each man accepts his destiny and is content to exist only as a constituent element in a certain social system. Harmony between the social and cosmic orders is thus assured, and the Mandate of Heaven guarantees the overall harmony of the world. This harmony can be disrupted, however, and the emperor, the holder of the Mandate, may be proved unworthy. Removal of the Mandate from him (*ke-ming*) is announced by omens, by climatic disturbances, by corruption in the bureaucracy, by the degeneration of dikes and canals, and particularly by the growth of rural unrest. Such were the signs which foretold the fall of dynasties. Popular discontent might be powerful enough to bring about the downfall of an emperor and his evil ministers. Often it was the leader of peasant rebels who assumed imperial power and re-established Confucian legitimacy by means of popular rebellion. The traditional political order was sufficiently strong to reintegrate even its adversaries within its own system of thought, and assign them a role in the smooth functioning of society. Peasant revolts, far from

threatening the principle of established order, are finally accepted as functional, as capable of restoring order in troubled times. They acted as safety-valves, able to restore to the world the benefits of the Heavenly Mandate.

One does not have to look far to find the reason for such frequent and dynamic peasant revolts as there were in ancient China; it existed in the bitter hardship of peasant life. Work on the land was meticulous, incredibly patient and skilful; it left profound traces of social activity upon the countryside particularly when, in order to meet the needs of rice cultivation, it involved irrigation and the preparation of perfectly level plots of land, often by means of terracing. Yet in spite of this, the Chinese peasantry never managed to conquer its natural environment: uncertain rainfall, recurring droughts, floods, typhoons, epidemics and locusts frequently caused poor harvests and famine.

Traditionally the peasants lived in village communities which still survived at the beginning of the twentieth century. Each community had its own elders, its own customs, fiscal and economic responsibilities – particularly for the organization of water resources – its festivals and its temples. The need of the peasants for communal structures is also shown by the vitality of clans, the members of which claimed common descent and had mutual rights and obligations. But these forms of peasant solidarity – the village, the clan and the family – were eroded by social differentiation within the villages themselves, by the antagonism between poor peasants and landlords. The land was very fragmented and cultivated in 'microfundia'. Ownership, however, was concentrated in the hands of rich families, who appropriated the major portion of what the peasants produced. Land rents, which commonly exceeded half the harvest, at a fixed or proportional rate, were collected in kind or in silver, and were supplemented by a whole series of customary dues and *corvée* exactions. The peasants were economically dependent upon the rich gentry, the 'masters of the land' (*ti-chu*). Even when a peasant was nominally owner of his own parcel of land, he was still dependent upon the landlord as his 'superior', as an arbitrator, as an intermediary with the fiscal and administrative authorities, and also as a money-

lender. Rural society was not organized into great seignorial estates, like those of the Prussian junkers or the English squires, but the basic texture of society was the same. Even if the characteristic institutions of European feudalism, such as serfdom, were not present, the term 'feudalism' in its wider sense is not inappropriate. There was, nevertheless, a profound difference between Chinese feudalism and that of medieval Europe, not so much in the different ties of dependence imposed upon the peasants, but in the role of the state. In European feudalism the state had little significance and essential public functions were delegated to the lord. In China the state was all-powerful, and the peasant was as much exploited by the public demands of state and bureaucracy as he was by the individual greed of the landlord. In spite of the early appearance of private ownership of land, this socio-political structure, inherited from 'Asiatic' society, which Joseph Needham has aptly called 'bureaucratic feudalism', remained very stable.

The power of the Chinese ruling class was derived as much from its exercise of a social function as from its control of the land. The literati, or scholar-gentry, enjoyed a monopoly of education; they had the power of the state behind them, they imposed taxes (greatly to their own profit), administered justice and exercised control over the economy through the salt monopoly, by the supervision of taxation and markets, and by public works. Except in times of major dynastic crisis, the peasants were entirely excluded from participation in the affairs of the country. For the peasantry, the symbol and the centre of state power was the *yamen*, the office and residence of the local official and his subordinates. It was also the court of law, prison, barracks, arsenal and treasury, and, since taxes were usually collected in grain, a granary as well. In the Chinese countryside, the state *yamen* was the equivalent of the private feudal castle, a comparison which underlines the difference between Chinese and European feudalism. It was the *yamen* which the peasants sacked and burned when they rose up in rebellion.

The threefold subjection of the peasant – to nature, the landlord and the *yamen* – was further aggravated by the population explosion which took place in China after the end of the eighteenth century.

2 One clan family occupied this 'umbrella' house in Amoy as late as the first years of the twentieth century, evidence of the persistence of traditional clan structures.





In 1770 the population of China was 230 million; in 1830 it was 394 million. These are unreliable official figures, but they are enough to indicate the trend. Since the amount of cultivated land did not increase proportionally, large numbers of peasants were thrown off the land and forced into vagabondage. This marginal and restless section of the population played an almost negligible role in production except in so far as it provided a reserve of cheap labour; but it constituted a potential political force, the strength of which was considerable in times of trouble.

In a year when the harvest was bad, when a landlord was particularly rapacious or an official too authoritarian, there might be a revolt. The forms of agrarian struggle varied. Sometimes defiance would be individual, and a peasant would go off to join the bandits in the hills. Sometimes discontent would be widespread yet still limited to acts of defiance when it came to paying taxes or rents, or to minor incidents, such as a protest against a particular case of extortion. But in times of famine or economic crisis, real explosions of rebellion might occur, when the *yamen*, or even troops and convoys, were attacked, officials and landlords killed. Sometimes powerful undercurrents of unrest swelled into veritable peasant wars, lasting for several years and affecting entire provinces. Such were the rebellions of Fang La and Wang Hsiao-po at the end of the Sung dynasty and the rebellions at the end of the Ming, in the mid-seventeenth century.

The peasant risings of ancient China were fundamentally spontaneous, expressing a profound desperation and a confused search for a better life. It is possible, nevertheless, to trace a common historical denominator in the role of the secret societies, which provided them with a kind of ideology, with leaders and with a basic form of organization. Their ideology was egalitarian. A peasant rebel leader at the end of the T'ang dynasty (AD 618-906) announced himself to be 'the great general sent by Heaven to defend equality'. From what little the official chroniclers have seen fit to record, it is clear that the terms *t'ai-p'ing*, Great Peace, and *p'ing-chün*, Equality, appear again and again in the slogans and on the banners of peasant rebellions. They called for a violent struggle against the powerful, the rich and



3 A group of street beggars, a common sight in late nineteenth-century China.



the exploiters: 'When the officials oppress, let the people revolt!' – 'Attack the rich and help the poor!' The peasant ideology of revolt is full of religious feeling and nostalgia, looking back to a time of primitive justice, just as the Lollards in the fourteenth century or the Rhenish peasants of the sixteenth looked back to the days 'when Adam delved and Eve span'. The memory of past dynasties such as the Ming, the last national Chinese dynasty, was idealized, and in the nineteenth century its memory was revived in defiance of the Manchus who had overthrown it two centuries earlier. The religious element was expressed in the invocation of Heaven to restore justice, which showed the influence of Confucian ideas; but peasant revolts were above all fed by popular and dissident cults associated with Taoism and Buddhism. They were permeated by Buddhist millenarianism inspired by the Maitreya Buddha. For a time they were influenced by Manichaeism and exalted the principle of light against darkness. Chu Yuan-chang, the leader of a peasant rebellion against the Mongol Yuan dynasty in the fourteenth century, belonged to the White Lotus sect, of Manichaean origin, and the name of the new dynasty which he founded, the Ming (which means 'light' in Chinese), originated in the esoteric vocabulary of the Manichaeans.

The majority of peasant rebels were naturally recruited among the peasantry itself, but their leaders often came from other social strata. They might be ruined artisans from the margins of rural society, where men were more mobile than the peasants themselves because they were free from the servitude of the farming seasons and the day-to-day work on the land; Fang La, for instance, the leader of the great rebellion at the end of the Sung, was a bankrupt lacquer merchant. They might be stevedores, boatmen, pedlars or labourers; they might be *éléments déclassés* from the intelligentsia (what Frederic Wakeman calls 'lumpen-intelligentsia') – literati who failed the examinations, non-conformist or dissident intellectuals, Taoist or Buddhist monks, geomancers, itinerant medicine vendors, and so on. Some were even discontented members of the ruling class, 'black sheep' of respectable families, the ambitious and the adventurers, fond of intrigue and avid for notoriety.



Though the process of peasant revolt was by its very nature sporadic, the existence of the secret societies provided an element of continuity. It was from the secret societies that leaders emerged when there was a sudden outbreak of revolt, and they also served as refuges in case of defeat and in the interval between crises. Though these societies were not specifically peasant, they had many adherents among the urban poor, and they contributed greatly to the temporary successes of peasant revolts.

The innumerable secret societies of China fall broadly into two groups. The White Lotus and its affiliated societies, mainly in the north, including the 'Righteous and Harmonious Fists' (Boxers), the 'Big Sword Society', the 'Eight Trigrams', the 'Society of Observance' (*Tsai-li Hui*) and so on, were predominantly religious. The Triad system in the south was more political. It included the 'Society of Heaven and Earth' (*T'ien-ti Hui*), the 'Society of the Three Dots' (*San-tien Hui*) and the 'Society of the Three Harmonies' (*San-ho Hui*), which were probably different names for the same organization. The slogan of the Triads – 'Overthrow the Ch'ing and restore the Ming!' – has a distinctly national flavour: it called for an attack against the Manchus as foreign invaders. But it also implies a struggle against the imperial authorities as such. The Ming was a Chinese dynasty, but Ming loyalism was a kind of nostalgia, and part of the peasant and even of the millenarian tradition. The term '*hung-mi*', which means 'rice of the Ming', after the founder of the dynasty, and which frequently appears in the vocabulary of these secret societies, refers to the rice which will reward the faithful partisans of the fallen dynasty; but it is also the rice of 'abundance' (*hung*), the rice which will relieve the misery of the people.

Secret societies were directly involved in all the peasant rebellions in Chinese history. As early as the second century, the peasant war which overthrew the Han dynasty was led by a Taoist sect called the Yellow Turbans, whose esoteric canon was called the '*T'ai-p'ing-ching*' – the Classic of Great Peace. 'In peace time', declared a leader of the White Lotus when he was taken prisoner by imperial troops at the beginning of the nineteenth century, 'we preached that by reciting sutras and phrases one can escape the dangers of swords and