SECRET SOCIETIES IN CHINA.

SUN WÉN'S ARREST.

The recent arrest and imprisonment of Sun Wén at the Chinese Legation raises an interesting question, and one which doubtless will be settled with due regard to diplomatic forms and personal considerations. But the immediate incident is connected with a matter of far greater importance in the eyes of the Chinese Government than the mere question of diplomatic jurisdiction. What Disraeli said of Europe is still more true of China. The whole empire is honeycombed with secret societies, and if the agents of the Government are to be believed, Sun is not only an active member of the "White Lily" Association, but is a prominent leader of that very revolutionary body. The "White Lily" Association is second in importance only, both as regards numbers and objects, to the Koloa Hui, and has lately shown a disturbing activity in the neighbourhood of Canton. Both societies present unspeakable terrors to the official mind, and at the outbreak of the late Chinese and Japanese war the emperor's Government viewed with the greatest alarm the possibility of an insurrection on the part of the Koloa Hui and other societies associated with it. If the "Hui" had risen in the central provinces at the same time that the Japanese attacked the north-eastern frontiers of the empire, there can be little doubt that, had Europe abstained from interfering, the fate of the Ts'ing dynasty would have been that of the numerous imperial houses which have in succession ruled over the destinies of the empire. Fortunately for the Ts'ings, the Koloa leader, who is now enjoying the congenial climate of a certain South American Republic, issued a mot d'ordre that not a man was to move, and the existing order of affairs was preserved.

This want of action showed, from the society's point of view, a lack of zeal in the cause and power in the field; and no doubt the fact that the members are scattered over widely separated portions of the empire does to a certain extent weaken the central authority. The "White Lily" Association, on the contrary, concentrates its forces in particular districts, with organised branches planted in congenial environments, and not by any means always appearing to the outer world under the same title as that of the parent society. "The Vegetarians," for instance, who lately committed such ruthless murders on English missionaries in the neighbourhood of Foochow, form part of this confederation, and would, with other affiliated leaguers, be ready to be summoned to the ranks in case of an uprising. The original home of this society was in the north of the empire, and more particularly in the Province of Shantung, where its active presence occasioned much anxiety to the mandarins some years ago. But of late its leaders have turned their attention to the south-eastern provinces, and notably to the neighbourhood of Canton. As is not uncommonly the case with secret associations all over the world, the ostensible aims of the "White Lily" Society are purely philan-
thropic, and in some of their primitive rites and ceremonies there would almost seem to be traces of some early and debased form of Christianity, possibly Nestorian. In the promotion of the benevolent objects which they profess, their chiefs regard themselves as commissioned by high Heaven to regenerate the empire, and their zeal ever prompts them to raise the standard of revolt against the tyranny of corruption, cruelty, and wrong under which the unhappy subjects of the emperor habitually suffer.

It cannot be denied that, owing to the general maladministration of the country, China offers a thoroughly congenial soil for the growth of all sorts of illegal combinations. Under oppression and tyranny secret societies spring into life as weeds grow on a rubbish-heap; and so iniquitous and cruel is the political system of China, that it is only by combination that the people are able to resist the more flagrant wrongs which the mandarins seek to impose upon them. In some provinces, where large family clans exist, the members band themselves together under the patriarchal head of the tribe, and succeed in resisting the illegal, and sometimes even the legal, exactions of the local authorities. In Fukien, for example, the Chang clan numbers something like 10,000 persons; and so well are they organised that the emperor's writs only run among them by the consent of the elders. Such a combination unquestionably presents a difficulty in the government of the province, and the luckless mandarins, finding themselves powerless to enforce the usual exactions from the members of the clan, are driven to impose even heavier burdens on the still more luckless people who are left outside the protective influence of the potent tribe.

Failing these social associations, the people are driven by misrule to combine in secret societies. Throughout the long course of Chinese history the existence of these "Hui," or associations, has been recognised and recorded. At various times they have adopted different titles. We read of the "White Lily" sect, the "Yellow Caps," "The Society of Heaven, Earth, and Man," the "Triad Society," the "Hung League," the "Kolao Hui," and countless other associations. More often than not these bodies have been started as benevolent societies, but almost invariably, certainly in the cases of those we have named, the philanthropic zeal of the founders has degenerated into political fanatism. Some of the greatest political changes in the empire have been due to their action. The Mongol dynasty, established by Jenghiz Khan and his followers, mainly owed its downfall to the energetic action of the Hung League; and it is beyond question that had it not been for the support that we gave to the Government of China in its struggle with the T'ai Fings, who trace their origin to the same secret society, the present Manchu dynasty would have shared the fate of the Mongol emperors.

At the present time the Kolao Hui is numerically the most powerful secret society in China. Its members number upwards of a million, and its organisation is in theory as nearly perfect as the loose ideas possessed by Chinamen on such a subject can make it. It is a direct descendant of the Hung League, the universality of which is expressed by the symbol, composed of parts signifying "a mighty flood," which is employed to write
the word Hung. This society was governed by three chiefs, who were known as the "Ko" or Elder Brothers. For reasons best known to themselves—probably the hostility of the mandarins may have had something to say to it—it was considered advisable to change the name of the "Hui," and the title "Kolao," derived from the epithet of the chiefs, was adopted in its place. From the illegal and secretive nature of the society it is difficult to get at particulars concerning it, but it is an open secret that the southern and central provinces form the main centres of its activity, while the provinces of Hunan, Huukien, and Canton are especially honeycombed with its branches. Although, however, it is not easy to gain access to direct information with reference to its present proceedings, we are able, from the knowledge acquired of the doings of the society which gave it birth, to describe its general features. "Faith" and "Righteousness" are the watchwords inscribed on its banners, in bitter mockery of the ends and conduct of its proceedings. The claims put forward by the leaders to religion and morality have at various times induced the Chinese Government to relegate all religious sects other than Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to the category—hateful to bad Governments—of political, and therefore dangerous, organisations. Under the influence of this confusion of ideas the heavy hand of persecution has more than once fallen upon Christian communities; and in his celebrated commentary on the maxims of K'anghi, the Emperor Yungching classed Roman Catholicism with the "White Lily" and other sects as dangerous associations. It was in the reign of this sovereign that the Hung League, the forerunner of the Kolao Hui, took a new lease of life. The iniquitous cruelty and exactions of an infamous judge in Fuhkien set the spark to the powder of discontent, which is always ready for an explosion in the Flowery Land, and the destruction by this man of a celebrated Buddhist temple was the moving cause which prompted the five priests who survived the outrage to raise the standard of revolt.

When the minds of men are excited by wrongs and by a desire for revenge, heaven graciously, according to legend, vouchsafes portents for the encouragement of the oppressed. On this occasion the fugitive priests, on approaching a river, saw a white porcelain censer floating on the stream. On taking it from the water they found inscribed upon it the legend, "Overturn the Ts'ing and restore the Ming dynasty." Recognising this as a confirmation of the justice of their cause they proceeded on their way, and were yet further braced up for their enterprise by discovering a miraculous sword inscribed with the same mystic words. As the priests drew recruits to their standards it became necessary to choose a claimant to the imperial throne whose pretensions they might champion, and in a youthful descendant of the last emperor of the Ming dynasty they recognised a representative of their cause who bore all the supernatural marks of a heaven-born ruler. As a first step towards organisation ten lodges were formed, which were variously called "The Blue Lotus Hall," "The Phoenix District," the "Hall of Obedience to Hung," the "Golden Orchid District," "The Hall of our Queen," "Established Law District," "Blended with Heaven Hall," "Happy-Border District," "Extensive-Conversion Hall," and the
“Dike West District.” The sites for these and the other lodges which were subsequently established were carefully chosen with a view to concealment, and were situated for the most part in obscure mountainous and wooded districts. The more inaccessible the spot, the better suited it was for the meetings of the conspirators. The following is a description discovered by Professor Schlegel of the entrance to a lodge in the province of Shantung:

“A stone road leads to the first pass, called the Heaven-Screen Pass. Past this is the Earth-Net Pass. Next comes the Sun-Moon Pass, at which pass each brother is obliged to pay one mace and two candoareens (about one shilling). After this pass comes a stone bridge over a river, which leads to the Hall of Fidelity and Loyalty, where are the shrines of the five ancestors, flanked on the right by a council room and on the left by the court: here the brother must produce his capital (three Hung cash) and diploma. From this goes a long road along the mountain-chain Huiling, girded on the one side by the mountain and on the other by the sea. At the end of this road is the outside Moss Pass, called also the Pavilion of the Black River. Thirteen Chinese miles farther on is the Golden Sparrow frontier, so called on account of the name of the mountain at whose foot it lies. Past this are four buildings: over the front one are written the words, ‘To extend the empire let righteousness flourish.’ The second one is called the Palace of Justice, with the civil entrance to the left and the military entrance to the right. The lodge follows immediately.”

It is not always, however, that such a well-concealed meeting place can be discovered, and it often happens that the brethren have to meet in large and crowded cities. In such cases the formal lodge is dispensed with, and the meetings are held in the houses of the presidents, or in other convenient buildings. The recruits to the ranks of the Kolao Hui are commonly gathered from the dregs of society,—time-expired soldiers, unemployed work-men, and professional thieves form the familiar substrata of the various lodges. In furtherance of their objects, which are for the most part disorder and rapine, modified by a keen anxiety for their own safety, these ragged regiments find it necessary to improve their personnel by enlisting as many house-holders as possible into their ranks. This is done in several ways. If a man who is regarded as a desirable recruit resists the overtures and enticements of members of the lodge, steps of a stringent nature are taken to arouse in him a sense of the danger he entails by resisting the commands of the league. In such a case the householder may possibly find on his table on his return home from work a note bearing the stamp of the society, ordering him to be taken to himself at a certain hour to a given place, and threatening the murder of himself and family if he should dare to refuse or venture to give information to the authorities. Occasionally, when desirable, a stratagem is employed to entice the recalcitrant recruit into some secluded spot, where he is surrounded by members of the Hui, who compel him vi et armis to accompany them to the lodge. Outposts and guards keep a strict watch over the approaches to this arcane retreat, and the appearance of policemen and soldiers following in the wake of neophytes is signalled to headquarters with such speed that the aims of the invaders are almost invariably frustrated.

On arrival at the “City of
Willows," as the lodge is called, the recruits are marshalled before the vanguard of the lodge, who, having made himself acquainted with their names and addresses, orders the brethren to form "the bridge of swords." At the word of command the brethren, with the precision of soldiers, draw themselves up into opposing ranks, and drawing their swords, which are of steel on the one hand and copper on the other, cross them in the air so as to form a bridge or arch. Beneath this militant gateway the new members are led by one of the initiated, and thus, in the mystic language of the society, "pass the bridge" which separates the world of loyalty from the camp of disaffection.  

The recruits are next introduced to the interior of the lodge, where they are instructed in the objects of the society, and where the iniquities of the present Government are emphatically denounced. Having been primed with these essential items of initial knowledge, they are brought into the council-chamber under the charge of the vanguard, who, as their sponsor, replies to the questions of an extremely lengthy catechism which are addressed to him by the president. The catechism is curiously arranged, and the answer to each question is confirmed by a quatrain of poetry. For instance, the second question runs thus, "What business have you here?"

"I am bringing you numberless fresh soldiers, iron-hearted and valiant, who wish to be admitted to the Heaven and Earth Society."

"How can you prove that?"

"I can prove it by verse.

"The course of events is clear again, and sun and moon harmonious;
The earth extends to the four seas, and receives four rivers. We have sworn together to protect the throne of Chu; And to help it with all the power of man."

To the ordinary mind these lines do not convey any conclusive argument. To the initiated, however, they are doubtless convincing, and they serve as a password in virtue of the acrostic they form, the first characters of the lines being T'ien Ti Hui Jen, or men of the T'ien Ti League—in other words, of the Hung League. In the same way the four first characters in the following quatrain, which confirms the vanguard's answer to the next question, repeat the watchword of the society, "Overturn the Taing and bring back the Ming." When the weary vanguard has answered the hundred and eleven questions which fall to his lot, the president directs that the recruits who express themselves willing to join should be admitted to the ceremony of affiliation; and at the same time he passes sentence of death on those who decline membership. It probably very rarely happens that this decree has to be pronounced. Chinsmen are not commonly made of that stern stuff which induces men to endure persecution rather than belie their political faith. To their supple minds it appears infinitely preferable to make the best of both states—sedition and loyalty—by accepting membership with the lips while their hearts are far from it, to facing the danger of death in defence of an abstract belief. The processes of washing

2 The founder of the Ming dynasty.
3 Thian Ti Hwul.
the faces of the recruits, of divesting them of their ordinary clothes and attiring them in white garments of the shape peculiar to the Ming dynasty, are next performed, to the accompaniment of an intolerable deal of very bad poetry. Then follows a prayer addressed to the gods, which concludes with the following petition:—

"All the benevolent in the two capitals and the thirteen provinces have now come together to beseech Father Heaven and Mother Earth; the three Lights, Sun, Moon, and Stars; all the gods, Saints, Genii, Buddhas, and all the Star Princess, to help them all to be enlightened. This night we pledge ourselves and vow this promise before Heaven, that the brethren in the whole universe shall be as from one womb, as if born of one father, as if nourished by one mother, and as if they were of one stock and origin; that we will obey Heaven and act righteously; that our faithful hearts shall not alter, and shall never change. If a just Heaven assists us to restore the dynasty of Ming, then happiness will have a place to which to return."

The oath, which is almost as long as the catechism, is now read to the recruits, who listen on their knees to the thirty-six articles of adjuration which bind them, under dire pains and penalties, to be incurred here and hereafter, to be faithful to the league, to be true and just in all their dealings with their brethren, to live on friendly terms with the priests of Buddha and Tao, to assist brethren in every difficulty, whether they be in the right or in the wrong, and at all times to be prepared to stand by the league at all hazards. In confirmation of this oath the recruits, having partaken conjointly of tea, are presented with a large bowl filled with wine, over which each man pricks his middle finger with a silver needle, and allows the resulting blood to pour into the vessel. This mixed chalice is passed from hand to hand, and is partaken of by all. After having thus served its mundane purpose, the copy of the oath is burnt in the furnace, that its smoke may ascend into the presence of the gods as a witness against any false or perjured recruits who may hereafter desert the standards of the league.

The president next presents every member with a diploma printed on linen, on the back of which the name of the holder is written in cryptographical symbols. This diploma serves a double purpose: it is a sign of membership, and it is also held to possess talismanic powers almost as potent in times of pressing danger as those of fern-seed. With the possession of the diploma the recruit becomes a full member of the association; and he is still further fortified by being presented with the laws of the society, which, like the other documents, certainly do not err on the side of brevity. His first duty is to make himself acquainted with these; and it is also incumbent on him to learn the secret signs and mystic sayings by which the brethren are known to one another in the world. He thus learns to lift his teacup with three fingers, to place his feet in certain positions, to wind his handkerchief in a particular way round the point of his umbrella, and to ask and answer questions which are bewildering in their non-sequiturs. He is expected also to have the slang terms of the Hui on the tip of his tongue. He learns to speak of the mandarins as "the enemy," of Government troops as "a storm," of men

as "horses," and of the common objects of daily life in strangely disguised terms.

It is impossible to study these rites and ceremonies without recognising a strong resemblance between them and some of those of the Freemasons. "The Bridge of Swords" is common to both societies, as are also the formation of lodges and their orientation. In both societies the members are entitled brothers, and confirm their oath with blood. During the ceremony of affiliation the recruits both among the Freemasons and the Hung League attire themselves in white garments and go through the form of purification by washing. In the Chinese lodges the triangle is a favourite emblem, and lamps, steelyards, and scales form part of the ordinary paraphernalia. It is curious to observe also that the three degrees of Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master among the Freemasons find their analogues in the Sworn-Brother, Adopted-Brother, and Righteous Uncle in use in the Chinese society.

Such are some of the regulations of the Hung League, and presumably of its offshoot the Kolao Hui. Of all the secret societies in China, this last, besides being the largest, is the most revolutionary in its aims. As has already been said, however, the Hui are not all on the same lines, nor devoted to the same objects, but may, speaking generally, be divided into two classes—the Religious and Seditious. The former of these, though using religious terms as pass-words, and adopting religious formularies, depart, as regards many of their dealings, in a marked and complete manner from all objects which can in any way be associated with the cause of religion. Being, however, mutual aid societies, and being unconnected with political movements, they attract less of the attention of the mandarins than their more revolutionary congenitors. An attack on the dynasty is an attack on the provincial authorities, and these men are engaged in a death-struggle with the threatening disturbers of the peace. They have no such bitter hostility against societies like the "Fuhkien Hui," which has its headquarters in the province of Fuhkien, or the "Golden Lily Hui," which flourishes in Szech'uan. The existence of these and many other similar associations is well known to the provincial authorities, who not infrequently are called upon to deal with the leaders in matters relating to the civil obligations of the brethren. Their organisations are an open secret, and we learn, for example, from a semi-official native statement, that the members of the Golden Lily Hui are arranged under four military flags. Those residing in Hupeh, Hunan, and Kiangsi are marshalled under the white flag; those in Kwangtung, Kwangsi, and Fuhkien under the black flag; those in Yunnan, Kweichow, Shensi, and Kansu under the red flag; and those in Szech'uan under the yellow flag.

At the present time, supported as China is by the European nations, even the most dangerous of these societies do not threaten any immediate peril to the State; but China's difficulties will always be their opportunity, and if the time should ever come when China may again have to face a foreign foe, not the least part of her danger may possibly arise from enemies within her own household.