taken by the upright Han official Lin Zexu, was contrasted in the
collective memory of Chinese with the traitorous sellout of the nation by
the Manchu Qishan and the chief Qing negotiator at Nanjing, Qiying. A
new sentiment began to emerge, which we might call “instrumental anti-
Manchuism,” an attitude based less on racial animosity than patriotic
zeal. In this new view, if China was to defend itself effectively against the
encroaching West, the alien Qing rulers first had to go.⁶⁶

REBELLION

IN CHINA during the Qing era there was an idealized Confucian view of
the operation of society, and also a pragmatic world in which these nor-
mative prescriptions were put into practice through the agrarian regime,
family system, ritual performance, and myriad forms of interpersonal eti-
quett. Both the ideal world and the real world valued order, stability,
precedence, and social harmony, yet both existed alongside another reality
in which violent disorder was commonplace. Even during the “pros-
perous age” of the eighteenth century, Confucian prescriptions served, in
essence, as mechanisms for coping with an underworld of willful disor-
der—a brutal domain teeming with bandits, clandestine fraternal associ-
ations, millenarian sects, and rebels.¹

Individuals, families, and communities routinely flowed into and out
of this underworld, for Qing society, despite its rigid appearance, was ex-
ceptionally fluid. These deviant groups often had alternative, heterodox
ideologies and organizational structures every bit as finely tuned as those
of orthodox Confucian society, and—in an era of small government—of-
icials were forced from time to time to rely on them to achieve their
goals, in the same way they routinely relied on more traditional groups
such as lineages and guilds. Indeed, the Qing were masters at this kind
of co-optation. All types of deviance grew more prevalent from the
late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, as robbers, rebels,
and religious sectarians became the chief beneficiaries of the Qing state’s
decline.
Bandits

Despite considerable overlap among types, we may think of Qing heterodoxy in terms of a rough typology, the first type being bandits or, more properly, local bandits (tu/fei). Men (and occasionally women) went into banditry for a variety of reasons: as a survival strategy in a world of diminishing per capita resources, as a shortcut for upward social mobility, and as a way to right the perceived wrongs of society. Banditry had existed alongside the official administration and conventional society throughout imperial history. If we imagine the grid of local administration as a loose network of military camps located in the most hospitable and populated areas of the terrain, bandits occupied the interstices between these camps—mountains, forests, and swamplands. When administrative scrutiny became too intense in one jurisdiction, they deliberately crossed borders into another. In what David Robinson has characterized as an “economy of violence,” the forces of order—both official armies and private militia under local strongmen—existed in easy symbiosis with these outlaw groups, each opponent using the other to justify its continued existence and showing considerable willingness to cross over to the other side under advantageous circumstances.²

Local banditry was chronic, but its intensity was inversely proportional to the short-term economic health of the surrounding society. Probably the great majority of bandits expected to discontinue their looting once a subsistence crisis abated, and for this reason they usually preyed on communities other than the one into which they expected to reintegrate. As the maxim went, “A rabbit doesn’t eat the grass around its own nest.” Indeed, one community’s bandits might be another’s local militia or crop-watching society. Bandits operated in bands, usually small. In most cases they had no ability to link up beyond the locality, and no systematic program that might give them an organizational permanence. But small bandit groups were capable of growing to impressive numbers in the hands of a talented leader.

In Qing times a highly developed and persistent set of cultural models swirled around banditry, and these were by no means exclusively negative. Central to the self-image of most bandits and some rebel groups (such as the mid-nineteenth-century Nian) was the cultural ideal of the baohan or “tough guy.”³ As much or more than the ideal of the successful scholar, this role model served to socialize young boys and construct their sense of Chinese masculinity. Though it was probably most compelling in the lower classes, the tough guy model held an attraction for sons of the elite as well. The baohan cherished personal honor and male comradeship and deprecated as weakness both sexual indulgence and the pursuit of material wealth. He valued the ability both to inflict and to withstand violence, often simply as entertainment for its own sake.

This model had antecedents in antiquity—for, example in the lives of the “knights errant” celebrated by the Han historian Sima Qian—but by Qing times its most authoritative literary embodiment was the sprawling sixteenth-century novel The Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan), a standard edition of which had been compiled and partly written by the late-Ming iconoclast Li Zhi. It found an institutional locus in the thousands of martial arts academies and clubs that dotted the Qing landscape. With the growth over the course of the dynasty of an unemployed bachelor population lacking the stabilizing influence of home and family, the baohan model’s natural constituency expanded as well. Efforts by elites and officials to depurate or criminalize such men as “bare sticks” or “thugs” did little to diminish their romantic appeal to young men.

If the tough-guy model was ubiquitous among Qing males (and surely some females as well), a trope more narrowly appealing to practicing bandits was that of the “greenwood” (lulin).⁴ Strikingly resonant with the English model of Sherwood Forest, where Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men hid out, the greenwood in late imperial China was the mythical habitat of “social bandits,” men supposedly forced into outlawry by the corruptions of local officials and dedicated to righting the wrongs of society by unconventional, often violent, means. An icon of this behavior was the Southern Song general Yue Fei, martyred for his refusal to follow the court’s weak-kneed policy of appeasing the northern barbarians.

Like Yue Fei, late imperial social bandits were often presumed to embody Confucian teachings, albeit in a more muscular and arguably more authentic form. Frequently, the goals of social banditry were stated in deeply orthodox terms: loyalty, filial piety, female chastity (paramilitary groups such as the twentieth-century Red Spears routinely carried out attacks on local adulterers), and love for the people. In theory, social bandits did not despise officials per se but merely corrupt or lax officials who did not live up to their duties of public service. (Think of Robin Hood’s attitude toward the Sheriff of Nottingham.) Not infrequently, successful social bandits ended up being recognized by the true ruler (like Robin Hood’s Good King Richard) and ended up as officials themselves, as did several of the bandit leaders I have written about.
In practice, many outlaws no doubt took on the role of social bandit to cloak their nakedly predatory behavior. As with ordinary bandits, their ideological underpinnings were weak, and most such groups melted away upon the death, retirement, or capture of their leader.

"Secret Societies"

Many gangs, particularly those with strong social-bandit ideologies, overlapped with more lasting organizations that historians have often referred to as "secret societies." But whereas social bandits espoused a violent form of Confucianism, these so-called secret societies adhered more or less consciously to heterodox values. Typically, they professed not to worship the gods, ghosts, and ancestors of popular religion, and they organized themselves through linkages other than patrilineal kinship and common native place—the cement of conventional late imperial society. In Chinese, the term for secret society, mimi shenhui, is a modern usage rarely found in Qing-era discourse, and many Western scholars today are dubious about the usefulness of the concept. "Secrecy" was by no means always a salient characteristic of these groups, and other differences among them appear more pronounced than the qualities they shared. Most significantly, we usually tend today to see fraternal associations and religious sects as fundamentally distinct forms of organization and belief. Still, there were enough commonalities uniting all such groups that mutual borrowing and blurring of the lines between them was increasingly routine over time.

Socially, most "secret" groups explicitly resisted the hierarchical organization of orthodox society, which compelled deference to state officials, lineage and generational elders, and property holders. In some instances, they offered alternative forms of discipline, regimentation, or hierarchy, based on degrees of indoctrination and initiation into cultic lore, on master-disciple ties, or on fictive kinship or brotherhood. In other instances, they replaced hierarchical relationships with more egalitarian ones, such as membership in a community of coequal believers in some deity or other. Much like nativized Islam and Christianity with which these societies coexisted, they were often tightly congregational—a trait much distrusted by imperial authorities and one that contributed in no small part to the groups' felt need for secrecy. Many, but hardly all, such groups denied the prescriptions of orthodox society for gender hierarchy, and in some of them women played active leadership roles.

Spiritually, many "secret" groups adhered to an apocalyptic or messianic belief that they were harbingers of a new and better order, both cosmically and socially. This was especially true for groups reflecting Maitreyaan Buddhist, Manichean, or White Lotus ideologies, which conceived of the world as progressing through successive ages of increasing corruption, occasionally renewed through millenarian interventions in which the true believers—often identifiable by their strict regimens of vegetarianism and sexual abstinence—would take the lead. This kind of belief was functionally similar to the millenarian sectarianism that arose within the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic belief systems of the West. But such apocalyptic impulses were not confined to sectarian devotees of Buddhism or other imported religious traditions but had been pervasive in native Chinese popular religion since antiquity. During the Qing, long-held and pervasive beliefs in malevolent spirits spawned radically messianic demon-smashing, world-cleansing paradigms among otherwise seemingly orthodox groups—and under the direction of a charismatic leader, these urges might prompt them into political rebellion, such as that of Ma Chaozhu on the Anhui-Hubei border in 1750-1752.6

Politically, many "secret" societies shared a strong Han protonalism and an antipathy to Manchu rule. This sentiment drew on a collective memory of the role played by popular organizations in the Han-led rebellions that overthrew the Mongol Yuan in the fourteenth century. The importance of this factor before the last years of the dynasty is extremely difficult to assess, however, for two nearly opposite reasons. On the one hand, the self-congratulatory internal histories generated by such groups toward the end of the Qing and afterward stress this as a factor in their early organization far more than most scholars would credit. On the other hand, the taboo on official acknowledgment of anti-Manchusm throughout the dynasty means that our best source of information about these societies—the correspondence generated by administrators charged with their suppression—likely systematically understated that sentiment as a basis for their organization.

What seems clear is that practical reasons for organizing a secret society were usually more important than ideological ones. Probably the most basic rationale was mutual aid, administered through a local chapter or lodge. Members were expected to sacrifice for one another, come to one another's defense, and help one another in need. Leaders performed concrete services for their constituents, such as medicinal healing, providing access to jobs, or teaching martial arts. While local chapters were
held together by collective self-interest, they were usually linked into larger networks that seemed to cohere on the basis of shared ideology or eschatology, such as anti-Manchuism or millenarianism. Self-interest versus ideology became more or less compelling depending on the particular moment.

The flexible hold of ideology on secret societies meant that they were vulnerable to co-optation not only by the Qing state but also by other forces such as local property-holders (as with the Red Spears) and highly ideologized twentieth-century political movements. Sun Yat-sen, for example, sought to mobilize the Triads for his republican revolutionary ambitions. His Nationalist Party successor, Jiang Jieshi, very effectively co-opted the Green Gang—which, despite its nationalist claims, was also successfully appropriated by the Japanese in the 1930s as a tool of their occupation of central China.7 The early Communist Party sought, with erratic success, to win over the Red Spears and the Society of Elder Brothers.

The most significant divergences among “secret” societies have been found between fraternal associations and religious sects. But given their often considerable overlap, it might be better to view the two less as mutual alternatives than as poles of a spectrum, with each individual case varying in its level of secretiveness and heterodoxy. Local associations of farmers or workers calling themselves fraternal organizations date at least to the late Ming. In the Great Divide highlands on the Hubei-Hunan frontier, for example, an organization known as the Village Benevolent Association appeared in the 1630s to provide mutual protection from bandits and marauding anti-dynastic rebels. Eventually falling under the leadership of aggrieved bonshadans, the association itself rose up and killed several local landholders.8 Echoes of this kind of highly localized activity occurred in the Qing, as with the Iron Cudgel Association organized in 1755 by certain tenant-farmers of Fujian to resist rent payments and terrorize their landlords in a local market town. On the urban front, the fraternal organization of Suzhou cloth calenderers killed their labor boss in the 1720s and plotted to burn down the city’s major textile warehouses.

All of these seem to have been sporadic and highly localized groups that came together for specific ad hoc purposes. But a more enduring type of fraternal organization emerged in the late seventeenth century and took more definite form by the middle of the eighteenth. This seems to have been something new to the Qing—a product of socioeconomic

forces specific to that era. Its context was the intense and systematic settlement and land reclamation in southeast China, Taiwan, and Sichuan. While much of the migration to these areas was sponsored by large lineage organizations able to mobilize the capital and labor necessary to stake out, defend, and develop the best new farmland, significant numbers of less advantaged single males migrated to these regions as well. To protect themselves as best they could from the predations of the large lineages, these bachelors organized associations based on oaths of sworn brotherhood, with the practical purposes of sharing farm tools, guarding their fields, extending mutual credit, and burying the dead. Through the Yongzheng and early Qianlong reigns most of these fraternal organizations remained nameless, but gradually they began to give themselves euphonious titles like Father and Mother Society. The more entrepreneurial of such groups eventually linked up with others at the regional level, combining their muscle not only for self-protection but also for racketeering.

The most expansive of these fraternities became known as the Heaven and Earth Society, or Triads. Founded in 1761 by Zheng Kai in Fujian’s Zhangpu county—which was both an epicenter of lineage feuding and a major jumping-off point for emigration to Taiwan—the Triads reexported to the mainland the smuggling activities, armed quarrels, and propensity for intermittent uprisings they had nurtured on the Taiwan frontier. Less than three decades after its founding, the society mounted a full-scale rebellion in Taiwan under the leadership of Lin Shuangwen, which cost the Qing some ten thousand combat deaths and merited inclusion as one of the Qianlong emperor’s self-professed Ten Great Campaigns.9

Somewhat analogous to the Triads was a sprawling Mafia-type organization that seems to have developed in the 1740s in Sichuan. Known initially as the Guluhui, the group’s long-gowned members were single males who had immigrated as part of the Qing’s orchestrated resettlement of the province following the genocidal campaigns of Zhang Xianzhong. The group seems to have been somewhat less agrarian and more urbanized than its counterparts along the southeast coast. From the outset it was also deeply involved in racketeering, especially salt smuggling. When the Guluhui encountered the Triads some decades after its founding, it adopted the notion of sworn fraternity and rechristened itself the Society of Elder Brothers (Gelaozhui). Still later it began to absorb various religious beliefs from the region’s White Lotus sectarians. During the
broad militarization of the mid-nineteenth-century Taiping campaigns, the Elder Brothers made deep inroads into anti-Taiping military forces. It was rumored that some outstanding anti-Taiping generals such as Zeng Guofan and Zuo Zongtang were secret members of the society.\textsuperscript{10}

An even more striking case of merger between mutual aid societies and religious sects was the so-called Green Gang. It began as an occupational association of Yangzi River and Grand Canal boatmen involved in the Grain Tribute Administration, which offered retirement assistance to those too old to work or short-term aid to those who fell ill or were injured on the job. At some point in the late seventeenth century it merged with or appropriated a pre-existing Buddhist sect called the Luo jiao, which had been founded by the patriarch Luo Jing in the early sixteenth century and which maintained a network of temples in and around Hangzhou prefecture. Green Gang boatmen began practicing the Luo jiao ritual and appropriated the sect’s temples as hostels for its members. Increasingly wary of the subversive teachings of the sect, however, the Qianlong emperor finally moved in 1768 to raze its temples and confiscate their endowments. At this point the Green Gang became more fully a clandestine organization and eventually metamorphosed into an underworld mob in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11}

The White Lotus Rebellion, 1796–1805

At the other end of the spectrum from bachelor fraternities like the early Triads were the various sectarian groups usually subsumed under the label White Lotus. These were all more or less millenarian or apocalyptic groups that combined elements of folk Buddhism, Manicheism, and devotion to the monotheistic Eternal Mother. Whereas fraternal associations, even those that eventually adopted elements of White Lotus belief, were exclusively male, sects were open to women and very frequently incorporated entire village communities into its structure. Like fraternal associations, many White Lotus groups were orientated toward martial arts, but instead of using swords and other sophisticated weaponry, sectarians—whose local leaders were as likely to be boxing teachers as priests—prided themselves on their skill in manual combat and their invulnerability to weaponry, which they attributed to their devotionalism and regimens of personal hygiene, including vegetarianism and sexual abstinence.

White Lotus sects were essentially diffuse and local, with little in the way of a centralized religious hierarchy or systematic theology. A sprawling cadre of priests traversed provinces throughout the countryside to proselytize and tend to various local congregations. They preached from a proliferation of sacred texts, some of which circulated fairly widely while others were produced by the individual leader himself. At times, White Lotus sects shared temple precincts with fully orthodox Buddhist or Daoist cults. Although the wider population often viewed them with suspicion or contempt, they tended to be openly evangelical. They went underground only in response to official campaigns of repression, which came and went according to the whims of incumbent officials and the court’s oscillating fears of social instability. And although their millenarian beliefs had a definite anti-establishment bent, their proclivity to uprisings varied greatly according to the individual teacher and the degree of imminence assigned to the coming apocalypse.\textsuperscript{12}

Out of this northern sectarian tradition emerged the devastating White Lotus rebellion at the turn of the nineteenth century. As was the case in the Wang Lun rebellion of 1774, official pressure more than any other factor drove the sectarians into rebellion. The mounting wave of bureaucratic investigations, spurred by the Qianlong court, growing out of the emperor’s new awareness of just how threatening sectarian activity could be, seems to have played a direct role in fomenting this uprising two decades later. Another factor was rural immiseration in the Han highlands, the result of decades of ecological deterioration. Yet a third determinant was fiscal exploitation by clients of the Heshen faction at court, which had not been a concern two decades earlier when Wang Lun rebelled.

Even so, specific features internal to the local tradition of the Han River highlands made these sectarians, more than their co-believers elsewhere, inclined to active rebellion. There were two distinctive patterns of White Lotus organization in northern and northwestern provinces during the late eighteenth century. The plains were dominated by the Prime Chaos tradition, whose stable priesthood with its scriptural canon, tended to keep a low profile to protect well-established congregations from prying official eyes. The more diffuse religious practice of the highlands, by contrast, was traceable to the Dragon Flower Association of Shanxi, whose founder, Zhang Jindou, had been arrested and executed during the Yongzheng reign for plotting the massacre of local landlords. By the late eighteenth century, this sect was in the hands of a number of charismatic proselytizers who tended to write their own scriptures, actively compete with one another for followers, and teach a more incendi-
ine aimed at rebellion. Despite attempts to unify these two tradi-
y rarely cooperated with each other, and this proved to be the
the rebellion broke out in the first year of the Jiaqing reign.13
ual “outbreak” of the rebellion was rather fuzzy. In 1793 Qing
it had been dispatched to Nepal to protect Tibet from Gurkha-
ersion were redeployed to the Han River highlands, to be joined
later by other troops that had been suppressing a Miao rebel-
estern Hunan. The ostensible goal in amassing these forces was
ify persecution of sectarians and stamp out smuggling and pro-
ickets in the hands of local bandits. The intensified official cru-
mediate and counterproductive results for the peace of this
litarianized region, and in 1796 the first of several linked sectarian
ok place in Jingzhou prefecture of western Hubei. Two corrupt
 of the Qing military force, including Heshen’s brother Helin,
ong the early fatalities of the campaign. The suppression of the
fall to local officials under the command of Sichuan’s governor-

cornerstone of this counterinsurgency effort was a draconian
earth policy developed by a number of strategic advisors in
the Fujianese Gong Jinghan and the Hunanese Yuelu Academy:
Yan Ruyi. The idea was to withdraw all the highlands’ crops
stock into designated strategic villages, turn these villages into
orts, organize their separate militia into linked-village leagues,
ually encircle, starve out, and exterminate the rebels. One can
see how this strategy might have driven locals into the rebels’
 according to Yan’s fellow Yuelu alumnus Wei Yuan, after sev-
 of hard fighting, this innovative strategy—and not the tactics of
er and Green Standard forces—ultimately defeated the White
Maybe so, but the sectarian rebellion was never as large as the
ld commanders claimed it was, and most of the rebel leaders were
captured fairly quickly. By early 1799, when the retired Qian-
per died and Jiaqing assumed his personal rule, fewer than two
actual sectarians were still alive and fighting.14
le despite several announcements of victory, the new emperor was
to wind down the campaign. Because so much of the fighting on
ment side was undertaken by mercenaries paid through chan-
trolled by local military officials, and because the Qing’s own
the region were being paid bonuses for engaging in combat, the
ility establishment had much to gain and little to lose from pro-
ong the war through every possible deception, and that is what they
spired to do. It took more than five years for the frustrated Jiaqing to
end the charade. Not only did the White Lotus rebellion represent a mile-
stone in the Qing’s continuing loss of control over its military, but it pre-
vented the court from redeploying its forces to combat the pirate threat
along the southeast coast or to resist the looming threat of British aggres-
sion and domestic rebellion. Moreover, this needless war crippled, per-
haps once and for all, the central administration’s financial capacity. The
Treasury surplus that had accumulated during the Qianlong reign was en-
tirely spent putting down this trumped-up war.15

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, 1850–1864
Roughly half a century after the White Lotus rebellion wound down, an-
other massive cataclysm, this time originating in the deep south, yet more
seriously challenged the survival of the Qing empire. Perhaps no event in
Qing history, even the Opium War or the revolution that ultimately to-
pelled the regime in 1911, has attracted more attention—or more politi-
cized treatment—from historians than the Taiping rebellion. From the
1950s through the 1970s, Taiping historiography was a front in the in-
tense ideological conflict known as the Cold War. The Taiping rebels
erved as a surrogate for Chinese Communists and as such became a
touchstone for each individual scholar’s attitude toward the People’s Rep-
ublic of China.

In the PRC itself, the rebellion was the focus of an enormous corpus of
historical writing in which the Taiping “revolutionary movement” was
portrayed not only as a war of Han national liberation against the Qing
but more basically as the prototypical “peasant uprising” against the
landlord class and the feudal political administration they supported.
The fact that the Taiping briefly promulgated a program for collectiviza-
tion of land made them even more attractive to Chinese Marxist scholars,
who explained away the sect’s idiosyncratic Christian beliefs as the “su-
pertition” that had doomed all movements prior to the clearheaded rev-
olutionary theory of Marx, Lenin, and Mao.16 On the Western and Na-
tionalist Chinese side, even the best Cold War scholarship on the Taiping
found it necessary to thoroughly condemn a movement that the Commu-
nists had appropriated as their own. They dismissed the collectivization
schemes as insincere (even at times denouncing the Taiping vision as to-
talitarian) and insisted that the movement was not really a revolution but
simply another anti-dynastic rebellion, albeit one that very nearly succeeded.17

The gestation of this movement in the region around Guangzhou was no coincidence, since in many ways it was an outgrowth of the Opium War fought there a decade earlier.18 Following the British invasion of the late 1830s, the Triads had been the greatest beneficiary of disruptions to local society and to orthodox channels of authority, and recruitment into the fraternal association had been extremely successful during the following decade. But the Triads had been deeply involved in opium smuggling during the years when Canton monopolized importation, and with the shift of the trade to northern ports after 1842, these highly organized racketeers, along with the rest of the southeast, experienced massive unemployment. In addition, local militia units that had been mobilized to combat the British during the war also became idle and began to suffer from the economic downturn. Having kept their arms, these militiamen turned to banditry.

Finally, the Canton region in the 1840s seems to have seen the emergence of an anti-Manchusianism of a new kind, based on a theory of betrayal. Local people readily contrasted the success of hearty Cantonese farmboy militias against British landing parties, most famously at Sanquanzhui, with the failure of Qing officials to keep the barbarian at bay. It was easy to suppose a conspiracy of traitorous Cohong merchants with the Manchu overlords to sell out the good Han people—it did not escape notice that both the staff of the Imperial Household Department that raked in the profits of the opium trade and the negotiators of the surrender at Nanjing were Manchus, whereas the stout local gentry militia leaders and the heroically defiant Lin Zexu were Chinese, and southern Chinese at that. The heroism of the latter had been fatally undermined by the craven weakness of the former. In order to protect the fatherland from the foreign devils of the West, the Manchus had to be overthrown. This early stirring of Chinese nationalism was a very fruitful tool of early Taiping recruitment.

The originator of the Taiping movement was one Hong Xiuquan (1813–1864), a Hakka village schoolteacher whose family had migrated in recent generations into the highlands around Guangzhou. Hong’s initial aspirations were quite orthodox: he passed the local level of the civil service examination and on three separate occasions during the late 1830s he sat for the provincial-level examination at Guangzhou. Like many other candidates who found this path to upward mobility increas-

ingly congested, he failed all three times. Hong’s reaction to this disappointment was, however, unique. During his first trip to the city for the provincial examination, he had been handed a Christian missionary tract, in Chinese translation, which he kept but did not read with any seriousness. As the strain of failure mounted, Hong recalled his book and turned to it again, interpreting its contents in original ways that came to him in a series of dream visions. During these supernatural events, Jesus spoke to Hong and persuaded him that he was Christ’s younger brother. In 1843, with a friend who had also read and been influenced by the tract, Hong baptized himself.19

Over the next decade, he and a group of friends and relatives moved peripatetically throughout the highlands of Guangdong and neighboring Guangxi, preaching and forming congregations of what they called the Society of God Worshippers. Many of their converts were fellow Hakka—highland residents of Han descent who believed that Han populations in the lowlands had ostracized them for being late arrivals in the long southern migration of the Han people from the north China plain.20 Other converts came from marginalized occupational groups such as charcoal burners and boatmen, from former pirates driven ashore by the actions of the British navy to clear the waterways for trade, and Triad smugglers and racketeers. Although the Taiping ideology was basically different from that of the Triads, the two groups shared the belief that southerners were the “true” Chinese, since northerners had been contaminated by centuries of mixed blood from Inner Asian conquest dynasties. Like most Chinese, Hong also believed in flesh-and-bone-devouring demons who must be smashed, and like many Triad leaders, he carried a demon-slaying sword.21

For more than a decade, Hong continued to produce scriptures and reveal his visions to his followers, whose numbers steadily grew with the sect’s fervent proselytizing. Although the Taiping occasionally fell afoul of the conservative local gentry, for the most part they blended in with surrounding society. Gradually over the course of the 1840s, Hong decided that Confucius was not his ally in the campaign to smash idolatry but rather his major doctrinal enemy, and that agents of the Manchu Qing regime were also demons to be destroyed. In mourning for his father’s death in 1849, he began to eschew the legally mandated queue and grow his hair long. In June of the next year, at the height of a regional famine, Hong raised the flag of rebellion.

The Taiping were not the first to use an eschatology imported from the
manhunt for all Qing soldiers, civil servants, and sympathizers, eventually extending this to “criminals” and other social undesirables. They evicted the surviving urban population from their homes and housed them in twenty-five-person dormitories, keeping women and men in separate parts of the cities. They commandeered as much private wealth as they could lay their hands on, storing it in centralized treasuries for the service of God and his Taiping agents. The trade of the city was shut down, and the population was impressed into Taiping armies or into service as bearers for their troops. During the eastward march that followed, many of these elements were enshrined in a central planning document, The Land Regulations of the Heavenly Dynasty (Tianchao tianmou zhida). The expropriation of private farmland and collective labor in agriculture were decreed but only haphazardly and ineffectively implemented.22

The great urban center of Nanjing, the newly declared Heavenly Capital, was the site of Hong’s greatest social experiment. Nanjing remained largely calm, quiet, and, according to Western visitors, strikingly clean in the midst of the surrounding chaos and genocidal warfare.23 It was the God Worshippers’ great opportunity but also a great challenge, for the urbane local residents who survived the city’s capture despised their occupiers. Even setting aside their outlandish beliefs, the Taiping were seen as déclassé, uncouth, and unrefined—befitting their Guanzhong and Hakka origins. Their coarse tastes in food, garish clothing, and delight in painting their houses with bright primary colors and adorning them with pictures of elephants and tigers were juvenile and savage, clear demonstrations of their unfitness for rule.

In a strenuous effort to convert the Nanjing population to their faith, the Taiping burned almost all the city’s great Buddhist and Daoist temples to the ground, smashed their statuary, and defrocked or killed their priests. Confucianism fared somewhat better—the conquerors allowed that some of the classical canon might still be usefully read, albeit in Taiping redaction, and locals noted that the newly installed Heavenly bureaucracy drew its titles from the Rites of Zhou. The population was commanded to attend massive open-air sermons, where brightly colored banners streamed on all sides, to observe the Saturday sabbath and the new solar calendar, and to pause for prayer each morning and evening.

More dedicated still was the Taiping effort to remake Nanjing’s economy and society. Buildings were seized and converted into guan (institutes). This basic communal unit of residence and production superseded
The household, shop, guild, and temples on which Nanjing society had been built. Guan were divided by occupation (bakers, weavers, bricklayers) or by specialized function (firefighting, medical provision). Each had its own collective treasury and its own place of Christian worship and was overseen by a lower official known as a corporal. All property was theoretically public, to be distributed as necessary by Taiping authorities, and an ultimately unsuccessful effort was made to demonetize the urban economy. Over the decade of Taiping rule, the problem of provisioning the city grew ever more acute.

The greatest and most sustained popular resistance was occasioned by Taiping efforts to remake the gender and family system. Based on their ideology of gender equality, the occupying forces outlawed footbinding and prostitution (formerly a mainstay of Nanjing's economy), encouraged women to roam freely through open streets, and promoted female officials. But they also mandated strict chastity and gender segregation. Female guan, like their male counterparts, were occupationally specialized into traditionally sanctioned women's work such as weaving and tailoring and also hard physical labor such as porterage and construction. Husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters reportedly camped out en masse in front of the confines of their loved ones and wailed incessantly. By 1855, faced with the evident failure of this three-year experiment, the Taiping authorities backed down and abolished gender segregation in the Heavenly Capital.

At the height of the Taiping crisis, the Qing court found itself presented with an unwonted distraction—a second wave of European invasion. At first it paid little attention, in order to concentrate on the apocalyptic challenge posed by the Heavenly Kingdom. But before long the foreign invasion mushroomed into a threat unparalleled in the more than two-century history of the Great Qing empire.

The Second Anglo-Chinese War

British merchants and officials in China had become increasingly dissatisfied with the degree of commercial activity allowed under the Treaty of Nanjing and by resistance on the part of local authorities to direct penetration of the interior. Gradually they convinced themselves that the solution to their problems would be a formal exchange of ambassadors and the permanent residence of the British ambassador at the imperial capital of Beijing. This would allow China—finally, belatedly, and forcibly—to take its place among the “family of nations.”

The British pretext for pressing their claims militarily while the Qing was inconveniently embroiled in civil war came with the Arrow incident of October 1856. The Arrow was a lorch, a refitted European commercial hull with Chinese sails, owned by a Chinese merchant from Hong Kong and lying at anchor outside Canton. More than a decade after the Opium War, this city remained a festering sore in relations between the Qing and the British. Local officials and the urban population had staunchly and successfully resisted the actual admission of foreigners into the town—though they had routinely entered the other ports opened by the Treaty of Nanjing. The interests of the two governments at Canton, moreover, were represented at the time by two especially hotheaded individuals, Imperial Commissioner Ye Mingzhen (heir to a middle Yangzi pharmaceutical fortune) and British Consul Harry Parkes.

The outbreak of the war involved a bewildering series of lies, exceptions, and ambiguities. A Cantonese constabulary force had boarded the Arrow to arrest the Chinese crew for importing opium. In the process, Parkes claimed, the police had insulted the Crown by hanging down the Union Jack, although subsequent investigations revealed that the flag had not been flying at the time. The British captain—claimed to have been on board, though he later admitted he was not. The Arrow's British registry had expired and the ship was no longer entitled to British protection, though Parkes hid this fact from the Chinese and from British Admiral Seymour, who peremptorily opened hostilities by bombarding Canton city.

The uproar at home over the large number of Chinese civilian casualties temporarily dissipated Parliament and brought down the government. And yet the British pursued the fighting, largely because British Prime Minister Palmerston had been planning this war for months. The true casus belli was opium, which had become absolutely central to Britain's China trade, its Indian colonies, and its home economy. Despite its victory in the Opium War, Britain had never succeeded in getting the Qing to lift the legal ban on opium imports, and just three months prior to the Arrow affair Commissioner Ye had proclaimed a “final and complete rejection” of British requests for legalization. War seemed like the only option.

Eventually, the British government dispatched James Bruce, Lord Elgin,