Front. Hist. China 2011, 6(3): 347–369
DOI 10.1007/s11462-011-0133-0

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Prosperity and Its Discontents: Contextualizing Social Protest in the Late Qianlong Reign

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Abstract Studies of the Qing history have tended to overstate the prosperity of the Qianlong period (1736–95), while taking the ensuing Jiaqing period (1796–1820) as the crisis-ridden beginning of dynastic decline. To challenge such a simplistic and somewhat misleading interpretation, this article reappraises the late Qianlong era by examining the dramatic combination of social protest which largely defined this period. It focuses on the structural and conjunctural origins of these upheavals and uses them as a prism to investigate the changing state-society relationship. This study conceptualizes the late Qianlong upheavals as a profound crisis of an overextended empire whose political development had become unsustainable. In addition to facing the formidable challenges of an expanding society, the late Qianlong state was crippled by the emperor himself and his aggressive efforts to concentrate power in his own hands.

Keywords Qianlong, crisis, social protest, empire building, political sustainability

During the closing decades of the Qianlong reign, the Qing empire confronted a formidable array of social protests on many fronts, including the Wang Lun 王伦 uprising (1774), the Lin Shuangwen 林爽文 rebellion (1787–88), the Miao Revolt (1795–97), the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1805), and South China piracy (1790s–1810). This cluster of upheavals not only produced a convenient historical rupture that separated the prosperous high Qing and the tragic post-Opium War periods, it also represented a crucial juncture in world history

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which contributed to the great West-East divergence circa 1800.[1]

The present study attempts to reappraise this watershed period in Qing and world history through the lens of social protest. It will contextualize the escalating crises in a broader framework of long-term and short-term changes during the late 18th century. Given the scale and diversity of such changes, my analysis here is broad-brushed and largely based on secondary literature. It is primarily devoted to a critical overview of the late Qianlong reign and its major dynamics of change.

A Brief Discussion of the Five Upheavals

Wang Lun Uprising of 1774

The Wang Lun rebellion was inspired by imperial China's most influential sectarian group—*Bailian jiao* 白莲教 (the White Lotus Teachings)—which first appeared in the Song dynasty.[2] Starting in western Shandong in October 1774, this rebellion was the only major instance of social protest that occurred in the core area of China during the late Qianlong reign. Although it survived for just a month and involved only a few thousand people, the significance of this rebellion should not be underestimated. Susan Naquin calls it not only "the first crack in the smooth façade of the high Ch'ing," but also the real beginning of White Lotus millennialism in the 18th century.[3] Thereafter this sect came under increasing government suppression which further changed it from a largely peaceful popular cult to a key organizational vehicle for uprisings against the state.

As a tipping point in this dramatic transition, the Wang Lun rebellion became "the first of a series of revolts inspired by heterodox ideologies" during the mid- and late Qing period. It set off alarm bells in Qianlong's sensitive mind, convincing him that the dynasty was the target of a wider sectarian plot. The

[1] It should be noted that the Qianlong-Jiaqing upheavals were just part of a massive wave of simultaneous crises that stretched across China and Europe at the turn of the 19th century. They coincided with the beginning of Europe's "Age of Revolution" from 1789 to 1848, as E. J. Hobsbawm called it. See Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789 to 1848* (New York: Mentor, 1962); Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Kenneth Pomeranz, "Their Own Path to Crisis? Social Change, State-building, and the Limits of Qing Expansion, c.1770–1840," in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760–1840* ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[2] B. J. Ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 243.

[3] Susan Naquin, *Shantung Rebellion: the Wang Lun Uprising of 1774* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 148.

government responded by gradually tightening its control over White Lotus activities, which provoked a much more violent reaction throughout central China in the 1790s. Therefore, the Wang Lun uprising can be regarded as a "[prototype] of the Jiaqing rebellions, though on a lesser scale."[4]

Lin Shuangwen Uprising of 1787–88

Unlike the previous case, Lin Shuangwen's rebellion was not a sectarian movement near the empire's political center of Beijing. It was an uprising motivated by one of China's most famous secret societies, the *Tiandihui/Triads* 天地会 (Heaven and Earth Society), in the maritime periphery of Taiwan. This uprising was not only the largest revolt in the island during the Qing dynasty, it was also the first significant historical manifestation of Triad activity in China.[5] Founded in the 1760s, *Tiandihui* was originally, as David Ownby argues, a mutual-aid organization in deprived frontier areas with little political aspiration.[6] As with the earlier Wang Lun and later White Lotus uprisings, a major element giving rise to this violent rebellion was relentless government persecution. It also involved an ethnically charged confrontation between Han Chinese settlers and aboriginal tribesmen in Taiwan.[7]

The Lin Shuangwen uprising started in January 1787 and was crushed within a year. To commemorate this hard-earned frontier victory, Qianlong celebrated it as his eighth great military achievement. However, it should be noted that, during the suppression campaign, the Qing state for the first time had to recruit commoners as *xiangyong* 乡勇 (local braves) to supplement insufficient government armies.[8] This expedient strategy of local militarization was again widely used in later campaigns against the Miao, White Lotus and Taiping rebels throughout the 19th century. Four years after Lin Shuangwen's rebellion, Qianlong formally outlawed the "Heaven and Earth Society" as a seditious organization and sought to exterminate it through ruthless persecution.[9] The

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Wen-hsiung Hsu, "The Triads and Their Ideology Up to the Early Nineteenth Century: A Brief History," in *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* ed. K. C. Liu and Richard Shek (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 329.

[6] David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 5.

[7] Lin Shuangwen himself migrated from Fujian to Taiwan in 1773. Wen-hsiung Hsu, "The Triads and Their Ideology Up to the Early Nineteenth Century," 329.

[8] Alexander Woodside, "The Ch'ien-Lung Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China.* vol. 9, part 1: The Ch'ing Empire to 1800, ed. Willard J. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 269.

[9] Ibid., 330; Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China,* 5.

ambitious emperor, according to Ownby, even went so far as to try to eradicate the "very practice of *hui* 会 (secret society) formation" in Fujian and Guangdong. These heavy-handed measures and unrealistic policies greatly politicized the *Tiandihui* and provoked desperate resistance from its members. Consequently, the 1790s saw protracted conflict between the Manchu state and brotherhood associations along the Southeast coast,[10] some of which intermingled with the acute piracy problem in this period and region.

The Miao Uprising of 1795–97

The last year of the Qianlong reign saw the rise of the Miao revolt across the Hunan-Guizhou border. It was partly an ethnic conflict triggered by the large influx of Chinese settlers into this part of southwest China, which exerted great pressure upon the *miaomin* 苗民 (the Miao indigenes). The only known handbill from the period shows the Miao's strong animosity toward the uninvited outsiders: "The Miao fields are now completely occupied by the Han people. If you help us to burn and kill the guests, we can recover our lands for cultivation and become officials."[11]

This rebellion was also a significant case of indigenous resistance to state expansion into the frontier regions. It largely resulted from the process of *gaitu guiliu* 改土归流 which forcefully replaced native chieftain system with direct central rule. Such efforts of political integration fueled rapid Han Chinese migration to thinly populated minority areas, directly provoking the widespread ethnic conflicts that touched off the rebellion.[12] As Donald Sutton holds, the Miao revolt can be seen as "a delayed response" to aggressive state-making efforts throughout the 18th century.[13] The uprising became so formidable that the government had to hurriedly mobilize almost all available military forces from the neighboring provinces, especially from Hubei, Sichuan, and Shaanxi.[14] It thus helped create a power vacuum throughout central China, which provided a golden opportunity for the rise of the White Lotus rebels in 1796.

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[10] Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China,* 5, 26, 108.

[11] 驱逐客民, 以复故地. *Qing Tongjian: Jiaqing* [A chronological history of the Qing dynasty: jiaqing reign] ed. Dai Yi and Li Wenhai (Taiyuan: Shanxi chubanshe, 2000), [hereafter QTJ-JQ], vols. 11–12, 4728; see also Donald Sutton, "Ethnic Revolt in the Qing Empire: The Miao Uprising of 1795–1796 Reexamined," *Asia Major*, vol. 17, no.1 (2005), 115.

[12] Ibid., 109.

[13] Ibid., 110.

[14] Suzuki Chusei, *Shincho chukishi kenkyu* [History of the middle Qing period] (Toyohashi: Aichi University Research Institute on International Problems, 1952), 142–43.

The White Lotus Rebellion of 1796–1805

On January 11, 1796, ten days into the Jiaqing reign, the White Lotus Rebellion broke out in Jingzhou 荆州 prefecture of western Hubei. In the following year it quickly swept through four other provinces: Henan, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Gansu. After unsuccessful efforts to take control of fertile lowland areas like the Jianghan 江汉 plain, most rebel forces had retreated, by the end of 1797, to the Han River highlands in the three-province border region of Hubei, Sichuan and Shaanxi. Thereafter, this huge mountainous area became the major center of operations for the White Lotus insurgents. It took the joint efforts of the central army, provincial forces, and local militias nine years to put down this uprising, the largest in Qing history prior to the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64). Moreover, the government spent almost 200,000,000 silver *taels* on the protracted suppression campaign, making the most costly military operation in which the dynasty had ever engaged.[15] Contemporary official Gong Wensheng bemoaned in his wartime diary that, not without exaggeration, "No calamity in history had been as disastrous as this one."[16]

Like most crises during this period, the White Lotus Rebellion was largely a defensive reaction against aggressive state-making efforts in the late Qianlong reign. According to Blaine Gaustad, there was a sharp hardening of state policy toward the White Lotus sect as a whole after Wang Lun's uprising in Shandong.[17] The Qianlong emperor called this sectarian organization "*xiejiao zhong zhi xiejiao*" 邪教中之邪教 (the most heterodox of the heterodoxies), and vowed to extirpate it once and for all.[18] This relentless government attempt at suppression, however, turned previous sporadic, peaceful White Lotus activities into more militant, unified, and widespread movements of a mass character. It also pushed many leaders of the sect out of the north and into central-western China. From the 1780s on, they arrived in the Han River highlands and traveled around as itinerant preachers and traders. These northern religious teachers, with

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[15] Wensheng Wang, "Social Crises and Political Reform during the Jiaqing Reign of Qing China, 1796–1810s," in *From Early Tang Court Debates to China's Peaceful Rise* ed. Friederike Assandri and Dora Martins (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 46–47.

[16] Gong Wensheng, *Congrong oubi* [Occasional jottings of military career], in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* [Collectanea of materials on modern Chinese history] (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1990), no. 3, introduction.

[17] Blaine Gaustad, "Religious Sectarianism and the State in Mid Qing China: Background to the White Lotus Uprising of 1796–1804" (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 31.

[18] *Qinding jiaoping sansheng xiefei fanglüe* [Imperially authorized account of the pacification of the three provinces sect rebels] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), [hereafter QDJPSSXF], vol. 391, 54.

indispensible help from their local disciples, launched fervent crusades to convert frontier people. They found the three-province highland region a great recruiting ground, thanks to its fuzzy administrative boundaries, its robust tradition of social protest, and the destabilizing socioeconomic changes taking place through the high Qing period.

The active proselytizing crusade provoked a strong response from the late Qianlong period which launched a massive manhunt for White Lotus leaders during the 1790s. As "one of the old emperor's last campaigns and the most ruthless,"[19] it greatly threatened the sectarian organizations across central-western China. Several hundreds of sect leaders and believers were captured and executed in Hubei, Sichuan and Shaanxi, while many more were imprisoned or brutalized.[20]

To make the matters worse, local officials and their subordinates took this ferocious campaign as a license to exploit local people.[21] The *yamen* runners and clerks carried out a family-by-family search; those who failed to pay a substantial bribe were arrested as sect members, and many of them were tortured to death. Injustice and cruelty reached such extent that it provoked massive, widespread popular discontent in central-western China.[22] Taking advantage of this agitated situation, White Lotus leaders stepped up their proselytizing efforts and called for outright military revolt against the state. Forced to pay or die, many people had no choice but to rise up for self-preservation during this extraordinary time of hardship.

South China Piracy, 1790s–1805

Exploiting the power vacuum caused by this mounting inland strife, large well-organized Chinese pirate fleets ravaged the coastal frontier of southeast China under the sponsorship of the newly unified Vietnamese state (the Tayson regime).[23] They had conceived a scheme to join forces with the White Lotus rebels to overthrow the alien Manchu dynasty. By attempting to establish a maritime regime, the sea bandits turned their local petty enterprise into a political movement with much larger ambitions. Furthermore, the secret sponsorship of

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[19] K. C. Liu, "Religion and Politics in the White Lotus Rebellion of 1796 in Hubei," in *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* ed. K.C. Liu and Richard Shek (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 293.

[20] QTJ-JQ, vol. 151, 4716.

[21] Shixiangcun jushi, *Kanjing jiaofei shubian* [An account of pacifying sectarian rebels] (Taipei: Tailian guofeng chubanshe, 1970) [hereafter KJJFSB], 97.

[22] *Jiaqing shangyudang* [Imperial edicts of the Jiaqing reign] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000) [hereafter JQSYD], vol. 4, 62, 132.

[23] Wei Yuan, *Shengwu ji* [Chronicle of imperial military campaigns] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), vol. 8, 354.

Chinese piracy by the Vietnamese tributary state presented a veiled challenge to Qing suzerainty, making this qualitatively different from earlier piracy problems. The British also tried to push their own commercial and geopolitical interests in China by occupying Macao in 1802 and 1808. For almost two decades, the Qing state had to deal with its most serious maritime threat since the conquest of Taiwan in 1682.[24]

Contextualizing the Crises

Rebellion was a recurrent theme throughout Chinese history. Yet it took a particular matrix of structural changes and conjunctural developments to create such large-scale and long-lasting turmoil during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition. What drove disparate social groups to rebel against the state around the same time? The answer lies primarily in a combination of social, ecological, economic, and political changes during the first half of the Qing dynasty. The escalating social protest during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition, in other words, cannot be understood apart from the larger context created by China's deeply ingrained problems and long-term challenges before 1800. This article focuses on the structural origins of the extraordinary crises from both state and societal perspectives. It also examines such conjunctural factors as the specific sociopolitical conditions of the late 18th century and their relationship with Qianlong's personal political orientation.

Qianlong as a Fortunate Emperor

When the succession of crises reached its zenith in the 1790s, Qianlong had been the paramount ruler of Qing China for almost sixty years. The phenomenal spate of empire-building that had taken place under his predecessors made it possible for him to greatly develop the machinery of a centralized bureaucratic state. From a structural point of view, this was one of the most critical political changes in Qing history. As Harold Kahn puts it, "K'ang-hsi (Kangxi 康熙, r.1662–1722) in his long reign consolidated Qing dynastic grip on the country, Yung-cheng (Yongzheng 雍正, r.1722–36) tightened up the imperial control of administration, and Ch'ien-lung (Qianlong, r.1736–95) profited from their success."[25] These three vigorous empire-builders together created an age of flourishing prosperity

[24] Wensheng Wang, "White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Social Crises and Political Changes in the Qing Empire, 1796–1810." (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Irvine, 2008).
[25] Harold L. Kahn, *Monarchy in the Emperor's Eyes*: *Image and Reality in the Ch'ien-lung Reign* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 7.

dubbed the high Qing period.

Qianlong had the good fortune to inherit a great empire from his Manchu forebears at a favorable historical juncture, which enabled him to carry the dynasty to new, greater heights of accomplishment. Qianlong strove to enhance his arbitrary monarchical power by modifying inner-court institutions in order to displace or circumvent the constraining influence of the routinized outer-court bureaucracy.[26] He greatly personalized his power by keeping it concentrated within a small circle of trusted advisors, the *Junji dachen* 军机大臣 (Grand Councilors). He also promoted the despotic use of imperial power by those who acted in his name, especially by the rapacious minister Heshen 和珅. Hence, Qianlong became arguably "the strongest ruler in Chinese history"[27] and his extraordinary reign epitomized the height of monarchical authority. But how did this high degree of centralized state and imperial control come to be dissipated? And why did the late Qianlong reign become one of the most chaotic periods in Qing history?[28]

To answer the questions above, it would be helpful to start from the general process of political negotiation which directly influences the interaction between state and society. Essentially, politics is the complex, ever-changing combination of behaviors and relationships on the part of different strategic actors during their "struggle for control over scarce resources."[29] It entails an ongoing process of (re)negotiation that seeks for optimal distribution of power, wealth, and prestige among various forces to ensure a sustainable sociopolitical order. All political problems, historic or contemporary, are concerned with the eternal question of control and allocation of resources. It is because of this interest intermediation and power negotiation that society and state do not split apart or destroy themselves. Sometimes, however, this process fails, and subsequently crisis breaks out.

This study employs the concept of sustainable political development to reevaluate the process of empire-building in the late Qianlong reign and its implications for the subsequent Jiaqing period. Sustainable politics, in my view, depends on (re)creating a viable and dynamically stable set of relations between

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[26] H. Lyman Miller, "The Late Imperial State," in *The Modern Chinese State* ed. David Sharmbaugh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28.

[27] Woodside, "The Ch'ien-Lung Reign," 230.

[28] Richard Lee Kuen Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion" (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1979), 28.

[29] Peter A. Hall, "The Role of Interests, Institutions, and Ideas in the Comparative Political Economy of the Industrialized Nations," in *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* ed. Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178.

different political actors and social forces at various levels.[30] Given their absolute authority, the Manchu monarchs played the most important role in building and maintaining a sustainable political system. As Richard Lee Kuen Jung points out in his study of the Wang Lun and Lin Shuangwen uprisings:

> The ideal context of imperial control involved a certain amount of equilibrium, a state of symbiosis, between the throne and those elements on whom the emperor was dependent for carrying out the imperial will. Under this balanced state, those who served the empire as officials and as informal local leaders, the gentry, were granted compensation-titles, positions, financial reward, including tax exemptions—commensurate with the contribution each made to the extension of imperial control in the empire. As long as such compensation was adequate to the needs of the bureaucrats and the gentry, there seems to have been little recourse to abuse of position or privilege, and the overall aspect of peaceful tranquility in the empire during the early Qing period seems to bear out that there was such a working equilibrium.[31]

Yet this kind of political balance, Jung further asserts, broke down in the late Qianlong reign, and this led to the emperor's loss of control over much of officialdom and local society.[32] Jung singles out two sets of factors most responsible for this momentous change: the bureaucrats' sense of politico-economic insecurity under Qianlong's arbitrary, autocratic rule; and the economic insecurity felt by all elements of society as a result of the unprecedented transformations during the high Qing period.[33] To better understand these interacting variables and conjunctural circumstances, we should situate them in some big structural changes.

Population Growth

As China moved into the mid-18th century, the empire faced old and new challenges on many fronts. On the societal side, the single most important structural change was explosive population growth, which remained "the most striking feature of Chinese social history in late imperial and modern times."[34]

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[30] Political sustainability, in essence, is a tensioned yet *balanced* relationship between the state and society. See Wang, "Social Crises and Political Reform during the Jiaqing Reign of Qing China," 46–47.

[31] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 29–30.

[32] Ibid., 5.

[33] Ibid., 30.

[34] Susan Mann Jones and Philip Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," in *The Cambridge History of China* ed. John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), vol. 10, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, part I, 108.

The Qianlong reign, in particular, saw China's population more than double, from about 143 million in 1741 to 313 million in 1794. The peak period of this accelerated growth, according to Ping-ti Ho, was between 1740 and 1775, the period only a generation before the Miao, White Lotus, and piracy disturbances.[35] Ramon H. Myers and Yeh-chien Wang locate the highest annual population growth rate in the period between 1779 and 1794.[36] Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski, more specifically, contend that the demographic growth rate reached its peak around 1800.[37] Their different data notwithstanding, most scholars might agree with Ho's argument that "by the last quarter of the 18th century there was every indication that the Chinese economy, at its prevailing technological level, could no longer gainfully sustain an ever-increasing population without overstraining itself."[38]

The Qing Empire certainly overworked itself in order to pay the bill for the demographic boom. Many significant sociopolitical developments, including trans-regional migration, frontier reclamation, and territorial expansion, had combined to "put the expanding population to productive use."[39] The spread of New World crops like maize, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and yams to highland peripheries—what Ho calls a "revolution in land utilization"[40]—also played a key role in creating greater subsistence security.

These efforts, however, did not create "the new kind of economic and political growth whereby that population might be absorbed."[41] Since the amount of arable land failed to keep pace with the demographic growth, "the land-population ratio had sunk precariously low by the last decades of the

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[35] Ping-ti Ho, *Studies on the Population of China, 1368–1953* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 23, 264, 270, 278; Based on Ho's research, Lin Man-houng highlights two major periods of growth. The first is the 1740s, when the population grew an astonishing 45 percent in one decade; the second is the 1780s, when the increase was over 25 percent. See Lin, "From Sweet Potato to Silver: The New World and 18th-century China as Reflected in Wang Hui-tsu's Passage about Grain Prices," in *The European Discovery of the World and Its Economic Effect on Pre-industrial Society, 1500–1800*: *Papers of the Tenth International Economic History Congress* ed. Hans Pohl (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990), 308.

[36] Ramon H. Myers and Yeh-chien Wang, "Economic Developments, 1644–1800," in *The Cambridge History of China* ed. Willard J. Peterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), vol. 9, part 1, 570–72.

[37] Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 107, 223.

[38] Ho, *Studies on the Population of China*, 206.

[39] Ibid., 109; see also Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 109–10.

[40] Ho, *Studies on the Population of China*, 145–48.

[41] Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 110.

Qianlong reign."[42] Four *mu* of farmland per capita, according to Eduard B. Vermeer, appeared to be about the minimum necessary for survival in South China during the Qing dynasty.[43] Yet in the 1780s, Guangdong had only 1.67 *mu* of cultivable land per person, which made it "one of the most land-hungry provinces of the empire."[44] Philip Kuhn takes such tension between land and people as one of the most important elements of peasant misery and the "prime mover" of the 1790s crisis.[45] This land hunger caused ecological degradation and placed intensified, unprecedented pressures upon accessible natural resources.[46] Growing market demand, fueled by the development of domestic and foreign trade, further promoted the overexploitation of resources, especially in frontier areas.[47]

This was nonetheless not a uniquely Chinese problem. As Mark Elvin suggests, pre-modern economic growth often pushed beyond the limits of a sustainable co-existence with the rest of the natural world.[48] Due to the unavoidable ecological strains of population and economic growth, different parts of the early modern world sooner or later faced the same fate of labor intensification and environmental crisis. Without a great influx of resources from the outside world, especially from the New World, England could hardly have escaped the "Malthus Population Trap" and taken off into sustained industrial growth. The rise of a modern economy could not be fueled merely by the extension of market exchange. Overseas colonization and imperialism also played a crucial role in this process. This is one of the key points that distinguished Western Europe from China.

Inward Colonization and Malthusian Impasse

To relax increasing pressure on accessible resources, the Qing state strived to encourage "inward colonization" in the sparsely populated peripheral areas

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[42] Philip Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 7.
[43] Eduard B. Vermeer, "Population and Ecology along the Frontier of the Qing Dynasty," in *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History* ed. Mark Elvin and Liu Ts'ui-jung (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 270.
[44] Dian H. Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast, 1790–1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 28.
[45] Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State,* 6.
[46] Anne Osborne, "The Local Politics of Land Reclamation in the Lower Yangzi Highlands," *Late Imperial China*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1994), 1–10.
[47] Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[48] Mark Elvin, "The Environmental Legacy of Imperial China," *China Quarterly*, no. 156 (1998), 738.

within China proper. The 18th century, in particular, saw "China's greatest age of internal migration."[49] By absorbing a flux of immigrants from crowded lowland areas, mountainous borderlands offered a safety valve for pressures that might otherwise have been directed towards the central government. This expedient solution was mostly successful in alleviating the ecological crisis in core regions.

The Han River highlands in the three-province border region of Hubei, Sichuan, and Shaanxi, for instance, were among the latest areas in China proper to be colonized. Unlike the Miao frontier discussed earlier, there was no aboriginal non-Han population in this mountainous area.[50] The first strong wave of upland reclamation was brought to an end by the late Ming peasant uprisings centered in this area. During the first half of the subsequent Qing dynasty, the sparsely populated Han River highlands further deteriorated into a wild unsettled territory.[51]

But this bleak picture changed dramatically in the closing decades of the Qianlong reign, which saw the beginning of a new assault upon the highlands. Economic downturn, overcrowding, and natural disasters in the long-settled basins and valleys of central-south China drove waves of poor settlers into the Han River highlands, even though these high hill prefectures had limited arable land. According to ShaanGan governor-general Bi Yuan 毕沅, migrants first came to the upper highlands around the year 1773.[52] In 1778 alone, over one hundred thousand refugees from Hubei and Hunan arrived in Hanzhong 汉中 prefecture of Southern Shaanxi as "*xinmin*" 新民 (new people).[53] According to the contemporary official Yan Ruyi's 严如煜 investigation, 70–80% of Hanzhong's population were immigrants in 1814. This percentage reached as high as 80–90% in the Shaanxi-Sichuan border area at the turn of the 19th century.[54]

With such a massive influx of people, the population of the Han River

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[49] Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, 6.

[50] QDJPSSXF, vol. 391, 190; *Qing zhongqi wusheng bailian jiao qiyi ziliao* [Materials on the five-province White Lotus Uprising of the mid-Qing] (Suzhou: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1981), [hereafter QZQWSBLJ], vol. 4, 38.

[51] Yan Ruyi, *Sansheng shannei fengtu zashi* [Miscellaneous records of local customs in the mountain areas of the three provinces] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936) [hereafter SSSNFTZS], 23.

[52] Ts'ui-Jung Liu, *Trade on the Han River and Its Impact on Economic Development* (Taipei: Institute of Economics, 1980), 137.

[53] Eduard B. Vermeer, "The Mountain Frontier in Late Imperial China: Economic and Social Developments in the Dabashan," *T'oung Pao*, vol. 77, nos. 4–5 (1991), 311; *Jiaqing junjichu lufu zouzhe* [Grand Council draft memorials, Jiaqing period] [hereafter JQJJCLFZZ], 03-2844-038, 03-2059-038.

[54] *Jiaqing gongzhong zhupi zouzhe* [Imperially rescripted palace memorials, Jiaqing period] [hereafter JQGZZP], 04-01-02-0066-019.

highlands expanded exponentially, putting increasing pressure on the unfertile land. Official data of registered population in such long-established counties as Xing'an 兴安 and Xixiang 西乡 showed a six-fold increase from 1700 to 1823. As for more recently developed mountain counties such as Pingli 平利, Xunyang 洵阳 and Shiquan 石泉, the increase was as much as thirty- to one hundred-fold.[55] Such massive internal colonization undoubtedly led to an expansion of cultivated acreage. Yet without technological advances of a transformative nature, the High Qing state still faced a "Malthusian impasse." Internal migration helped to alleviate the ecological pressure on pre-modern economy, but it could not break the fundamental resource restraint.

After the close of China's northwest external frontier during the 1770s, most new arable land was obtained from the reclamation of internal peripheries in the upper and middle Yangtze highlands. This type of upland settlement, due to its initial high return to capital and labor, provided much of the economic growth and frontier vitality in the Qianlong reign. By the end of the 18th century, however, the previously "underexploited niche" of mountainous borderlands had begun to become saturated.[56] Worse still, the huge influx of Han Chinese immigrants into these peripheral areas provoked intense competition with indigenous ethnic minorities, which directly triggered such disturbances as the Lin Shuangwen and Miao rebellions.

From the local people's vantage point, more social-administrative services were needed than the Qing government could provide in such regions as the Han River highlands. Despite the existence of centralized rule via the *junxian* system, local officials in those remote lands of mountains and forest were spread dangerously thin. Due to the great distances involved, law and justice could not be properly administered and social order could hardly be maintained. As Shaanxi governor Ma Huiyu 马慧裕 wrote to the Jiaqing emperor:

> Because this area [the High River highlands] is located in the midst of ten thousand mountains, its land is indeed barren and unproductive. Its government network is spread much thinner in comparison with that of lowland cores. Some frontier departments or counties govern an area as wide as a thousand to two thousand *li*. Local officials thus can hardly keep close control over such regions.[57]

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[55] Vermeer, "The Mountain Frontier in Late Imperial China," 306.
[56] Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 109; see also Osborne, "Highlands and Lowlands: Economy and Ecological Interactions in the Lower Yangzi Region under the Qing," in *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History* ed. Mark Elvin and Liu Ts'ui-jung, 203.
[57] QDJPSSXF, vol. 393, 475.

The Han River highlands had thus become one of the dynasty's largest administrative black holes by the late Qianlong reign. In the early 19th century, two of the most famous statecraft officials—Yan Ruyi and Wei Yuan 魏源—suggested that a *xingsheng* 行省 (special province) be established to govern the entire High River highlands as one integrated political jurisdiction. They felt that only through this drastic administrative restructuring could peace and security be effectively ensured; but such a radical reform proposal was not put into practice.[58]

Taking advantage of the weak state presence and indistinct jurisdictional interstices, various informal politico-military organizations sprang up to run the Han River highlands. A range of non-state and anti-state groups mushroomed in the area, controlling the widely dispersed mountain societies. They thrived on weaknesses in the overextended administrative and social control system, which partly explains why violent social protests were "more readily ignited in the recently-settled border regions than in the densely-crowded deltas and valleys."[59] These crises were caused not by a collapsing state, but often by the failures of an increasingly aggressive government attempting to control floating populations and resources in the frontier regions. The late Qianlong state could not be said to have lost control over such peripheral areas because it had scarcely gained such control in the first place.

In the case of the White Lotus Rebellion, the sect played a leading role in integrating a rebellious network of forces across the Han River highlands. Their ideology functioned as a medium for the diffusion of unorthodox or seditious values to a variety of defiant subgroups, each of which might appropriate them in distinctive ways to enhance their own interest and power. According to the investigations of high officials like Nayancheng 那彦成, Taibu 台布 and Hengrui 恒瑞, half of the Sichuan, Hubei, and Anhui migrants in the highlands were White Lotus believers.[60] Apart from sectarian members, rebel forces also included "such ruffians and outlaws as the *guolu* 啯噜 of Sichuan, the *laohu* 老户 of Nanshan, the *pengmin* 棚民 of Xiangyang 襄阳 and Yunyang 郧阳 in Hubei, and the salt smugglers along the Han and Yangtze rivers, as well as counterfeiters from various provinces."[61] Such a motley assortment of subversive forces reflects the fluidity, heterogeneity, and lawlessness of frontier society in the Han River highlands at the turn of the 19th century.

The Qianlong-Jiaqing transition also saw the proliferation of sub-bureaucratic (gentry) and extra-bureaucratic (clerks and runners) personnel as well as the rise

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[58] Wei, *Shengwu ji*, vol. 10, 451; Yan, SSSNFTZS, 36.
[59] Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 132.
[60] QDJPSSXF, vol. 394, 627.
[61] Shixiangcun jushi, KJJFSB, 14.

of *xiangyong* or *tuanlian* 团练 (elite-controlled local militias).[62] Such unpredictable and militant forces, useful as they were for the state, could easily convert to rebels and become new organizational vehicles for local protests. By the end of the White Lotus rebellion, over half of the rebels in many areas were former *xiangyong*.[63]

The aforementioned structural problems posed unprecedented challenges to a limited and minimal state. As Philip Kuhn notes, "By the mid-18th century, China's expanding, dynamic society and economy could barely be contained by its static political framework."[64] Susan Mann Jones and Kuhn argue that a key "dilemma of the Chia-ch'ing [Jiaqing] administration was an underlying complex of social problems that overwhelmed the organizational capacities of the Qing bureaucracy. Central among these was the ratio of resources to population."[65] Seen from this perspective, a basic cause of the late Qing rebellions was "an expanding population, without … the new kinds of economic and political growth whereby that population might be absorbed."[66] This kind of structural contradiction, in my view, had already loomed large by the late Qianlong reign.

Territorial Expansion

If population growth was the overriding structural change of the High Qing society, territorial expansion was another striking feature of this era. Joseph Fletcher holds that Manchu military expansion was one of the three 18th-century changes that set the course of China's subsequent history, along with demographic growth and the growing European presence.[67] Thanks to Qianlong's much celebrated *Shiquan wugong* 十全武功 (Ten great military campaigns), Qing territory expanded dramatically and reached its greatest extent in the 1770s. One of the largest territorial expansions in world history, Qianlong's conquest of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Mongolia for the first time brought

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[62] Frederic Wakeman, "The Evolution of Local Control in Late Imperial China," in *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China* ed. Frederic Wakeman and Carolyn Grant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 18.

[63] *Jiaqing junjichu suishoudang* [Register of documents as they came to hand the Grand Council logbook] [hereafter JQJJCSSD], Dec. 16 and 24, 1803, 321; see also JQJJCLFZZ, *Shanhou shiyi dang* [Archives on remedial arrangements], Dec. 16, 20, 24 and 26, 1803.

[64] Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, 22.

[65] Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 108.

[66] Ibid., 110.

[67] Joseph Fletcher, "Ch'ing Inner Asia c.1800," in *The Cambridge History of China* ed. John K. Fairbank, vol. 10, part 1, Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911, 35.

all of these inner Asian regions under the sovereignty of a central government.[68]

The growing size of the Qing Empire and its population, however, was neither accompanied by corresponding expansion in the number of field officials nor supported by a commensurate increase of political resources allotted for local administration. The key problem of Chinese frontier-making, as Owen Lattimore suggests, is that "the range of military striking power exceeded the range of ability to conquer and incorporate."[69] This structural limitation of the Chinese polity, in my view, became increasingly acute during the latter half of the 18th century.

After the conquest of such external frontiers like Tibet, Xinjiang, and Mongolia, the Qianlong Emperor gradually shifted his focus to China proper, trying to strengthen central control over such internal frontiers as the Han River highlands. By the end of his long reign, imperial policy toward this interprovincial mountainous region had changed from *laissez-faire* to a tightening grip on its floating population and resources. In 1782, for instance, the government began to carry out decade-long cadastral survey in five mountainous counties of southern Shaanxi, trying to bring hidden land under state taxation.[70] In the meanwhile, it also enacted draconian policies against the bandits, salt smugglers, and coin counterfeiters in northeast Sichuan and Hubei,[71] and prohibited new settlement in the *Nanshan* 南山 (South mountain) area of south Shaanxi.[72] Increasing government pressure pushed various frontier groups to ally with the similarly hard-pressed White Lotus sectarians and to step up their anti-state operations across the Han River highlands.

The cost of projecting power more than intermittently into such frontier spaces was unacceptably heavy for a pre-modern agricultural state. With administrative resources remaining largely unexpanded, it was increasingly difficult for the overburdened government to secure more than a tenuous control of the Han River highlands. Qianlong's unrealistic ambitions of taming the unruly frontier societies only mobilized their discontented segments into the political arena, pushing them into trans-regional or even transnational rebellious movements like the piracy disturbance at the turn of the 19th century. The scope of imperial rule, having become overextended during the 18th century, became paralyzed or even collapsed in many of China's peripheries during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition.

The Qing Empire was thus overburdened not merely by its territorial or

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[68] Nicola Di Cosmo, "Qing Colonial Administration in Inner Asia," *The International History Review*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1998), 288.
[69] Owen Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928–1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 487.
[70] JQJJCLFZZ, 03-2059-038.
[71] QDJPSSXF, vol. 392, 139.
[72] QZQWSBLJ, vol. 2, 378.

population growth. The more direct challenge arose from Qianlong's inflated ambitions of asserting firm control over the increasingly agitated society through highly interventionist policies. His short-handed government stepped up its demands upon the frontier communities without improving state services to them. Thus, as Wei Yuan noted, more urgent problems appeared in the internal peripheries than in the external ones.[73]

After the disastrous war with Burma (1765–70), facing with escalating domestic crises in his late reign, Qianlong grudgingly decided against further empire-building adventures and ostensibly withdrew from his more unrealistic goals. He proclaimed a more conservative notion of "*chiying baotai*" 持盈保泰 ("sustaining prosperity and preserving the peace") as the overarching mission of the regime. Yet, driven by a burning desire to perpetuate his image as an unparalleled sage-ruler, Qianlong in fact maintained the momentum of empire-building toward the end of the 18th century.

Nevertheless, his capacity for effective sociopolitical control began to break down during this crisis-ridden period, largely as a function of overambitious attempts to push empire-building beyond a supportable limit. These impractical efforts included interventionist foreign policies toward tributary states like the Tayson Vietnamese regime, as well as relentless campaigns to control White Lotus and Triad activities, and to crack down on salt smuggling and coin counterfeiting. The disparity between state ambitions and state capacities grew wider and wider, and had reached a startling degree by the 1790s. This serious disjunction between state "image" and "practice," to use political scientist Joel Migdal's terms,[74] placed unprecedented pressures on an inexpansible local bureaucracy and on an increasingly agitated frontier society. Profoundly affected by such pressures, sociopolitical actors at all levels sought to fashion effective strategies of survival—usually at the expense of others less capable of defending themselves. Following Migdal's approach of historical anthropology, it would be helpful to differentiate the major components of state and society and focus on the different pressures various sociopolitical forces encountered and their major sources of conflict.[75]

The worsening ratio of resources to population size, as already noted, had

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[73] 心腹患甚四支，内讧急于边陲。Wei, *Shengwu ji*, vol. 9, 375.

[74] Joel Migdal conceptualizes the state as containing two interlocking elements: image and practices. Though these two elements sometimes overlap and reinforce each other, they are at odds most of the time. Mainly produced and maintained by state ritual, policies, and laws, "image" denotes the singular, ideal picture of what political regimes should be. "Practices" refer to the various performances of state actors and agencies in the actual governing process. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How State and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16–17.

[75] Ibid., 97.

inflamed a wide range of socioeconomic crises that undermined the high Qing order. This problem impacted the political realm as well. Even though the civil service examination system provided the primary "ladder of success"[76] in mid- and late imperial China, it proved unable to bridge the growing gap between "the relatively small and almost static size of the formal bureaucracy and the continuing expansion in numbers of educated degree-holders who wanted positions in that bureaucracy."[77] This widening structural disparity released more and more "free floating resources" into society that could be utilized in different ways. Some of the politically frustrated degree holders, so-called "evil *sheng-yuan* 生员 or rotten *chien-sheng* 监生," became troublemakers in non-state or anti-state activities.[78] According to C. K. Yang's studies, it was "the ruling stratum and its supporting forces"—like disaffected gentry and landlords—"which led most of the incidents of social unrest during the 19th century."[79]

The latter half of the 18th century was especially plagued by such an "upward mobility crisis."[80] As Jones and Kuhn put it, "Pressure upon existing channels of social mobility undoubtedly contributed to the characteristic pattern of political behavior in Ch'ing China, the patronage network, in which patron-client relationships were made to bear more than their usual burden in the workings of the government."[81] Bureaucrats at all levels were engaging in a sort of survival politics, driven by increasing rivalry and factionalism, as pursuit of political interest and resistance to excessive imperial demands brought about the development of corrupt patronage networks in competition for limited state rewards.

The politics of survival during the late Qianlong reign was shaped by the insecurities to which officials were subject as they struggled with the perpetual problem of overly competitive political careers. Such anxiety reached its peak during Heshen's regency due to the officials' onerous burden of having to provide *jingong* 进贡 (tribute gifts) and *yizuiyin* 议罪银 (self-assessed fines) to secure patronage. The contemporary political culture called for a high degree of self-defense on the part of the bureaucrats through faction-building, bribery and extortion.[82] In most of the big corruption cases during the late Qianlong period,

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[76] Ping-ti Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*: *Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).
[77] Woodside, "The Ch'ien-Lung Reign," 300.
[78] Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 110.
[79] C. K. Yang, "Some preliminary Statistical Patterns of Mass Actions in Nineteenth Century China," in *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China* ed. Wakeman and Grant, 200.
[80] Woodside, "The Ch'ien-Lung Reign," 238.
[81] Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," 110–14.
[82] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 66.

officials had been forced to embezzle due to the extortion of higher officials like Heshen acting in the emperor's name.[83]

Thus, as contemporary scholar-official Hong Liangji 洪亮吉 observed in his famous letter to the Jiaqing emperor, ethical standards, administrative regulations, and the judicial system were gradually emasculated by dismal political realities.[84] With no guarantee of security, hard-pressed officials were subject to whimsical changes of imperial will, and this prompted them to exploit their positions and abuse their privileges. Yongzheng had instituted *yanglian* 养廉 (allowances for nourishing virtue) to counter official corruption, which succeeded in eliminating some measure of official dishonesty. By Qianlong's time, however, the inflationary effect of the population explosion had largely eroded the benefits of the *yanglian* system.[85] With the establishment of the *yizuiyin* system and other forms of imperial extortion, local officials began to use *yanglian* as fines or non-routine compensation for local administration. Mounting imperial pressure and economic distress compelled local bureaucrats to extort from the defenseless, in the interest of meeting their own legitimate or corrupt obligations.

County-level officials were especially troubled by the lack of funding for local administration. As Hong Liangji continued to write in his letter:

> The district officials say plainly to the people: "The reason I am doubling and redoubling your taxes is that the expenses of the *yamen* at various levels are going up higher and higher from day to day and year to year." What is really going on is that the magistrate is taking advantage of the authority vested in him by his superiors to extract money from the people: half of what he collects goes to higher echelons but he keeps the other half for himself.[86]

Modern scholarship offers an even more bleak view:

> It is a well-established consensus that under the Qing's revenue sharing system the lion's share of overall state tax income was claimed by the central government. The share of the local government in the land and head taxes, according to Madeleine Zelin and Chen Zhiping, was 15 percent to 21 percent. Out of this small portion of local revenue, only 1/3 or less was earmarked for

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[83] Corrupt officials included Wang Ganwang, Chen Huizhu, Wulana, Pulin. See Huang Hongshou, *Qingshi jishi benmo* [The records of Qing history from beginning to end] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian: 1986), vol. 34.

[84] Susan Mann Jones, "Hung Liang-Chi (1746–1809): The Perception and Articulation of Political Problems in Late Eighteenth Century China" (Ph.D. Diss., Stanford University, 1972), 167–74.

[85] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 53.

[86] The translation is from Jones, "Hung Liang-Chi," 176.

> the expenses of local needs; the rest was spent on administrative tasks assigned by the central government. As a consequence, the local government, especially at the county level, did not even have enough money for basic local expenses such as small-scale relief efforts, construction and repairs of city edifices, and keeping sufficient staff for daily administration work.[87]

Since local fiscal revenue was so tenuous, officials were forced to resort to all kinds of *lougui* 陋规 (illicit fees) and extortions to keep things going.[88] With limited personnel and financial resources at their disposal, they relied increasingly on a symbiotic relationship with sub-bureaucratic functionaries like the *yamen* clerks and runners. Similar to the "entrepreneurial brokerage"[89] in the Republican period, the Qing state depended on such informal, predatory intermediaries to carry out its functions at the local level, but was unable to control them. While assuring a minimum measure of imperial control and service in local society, this exploitative coalition led to rampant corruption and administrative malpractice, especially in newly-settled internal frontier regions.

This problem escalated out of control in the late Qianlong reign, provoking many defensive social protests during this period. Hong Liangji showed great sympathy for the White Lotus rebels, echoing their widespread slogan "*guanbi minfan*" 官逼民反 (It was the officials who forced the people to rise up). In his eyes, the real origin of this uprising was not seditious sectarian teaching but extreme government persecution. As he bitterly observed in 1798: "Nowadays, the evil of local prefects and magistrates is a hundred times what it was one or two decades ago." Hong blamed this rapid deterioration of civil administration almost wholly on Heshen, who had abused imperial power for more than two decades. The corruption of local officials, in my view, should not be taken as a manifestation of mere selfishness, but was largely a defensive reaction or survival strategy in a political economy of structured scarcity and irresistible top-down pressure.[90]

The gentry were in no better situation. As Hong continued:

> Why do I say that moral standards are declining? The gentry are gradually losing their sense of integrity and compassion. The common people are steadily falling away from the rules that should regulate their lives. The fault,

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[87] Jeou Yi Aileen Yang, "The Muddle of Salt: The State and Merchants in Late Imperial China, 1644–1911" (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1996), 184.
[88] JQSYD, vol. 4, 426.
[89] These *yamen* runners and clerks were not on the government payroll, so they had to sustain themselves with the customary fees collected in the course of their administrative chores. Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
[90] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 59.

however, lies with the gentry and not with the common people.[91]

Under such circumstances, official corruption and local brutality reached its culmination during the Heshen regency (1780s–1799). Those illegal practices, on the one hand, undermined imperial authority and contributed substantially to the emperor's loss of control over the empire. On the other hand, they alienated popular support and spurred the emergence of rebel movements.

Hong Liangji's first-hand observation and astute analysis does not go far enough, I think. He singled out Heshen's faults and the corruption of local officials as the cause of the revolt, overlooking a deeper origin of the sociopolitical tensions—the Qianlong emperor himself. In addition to the major structural challenges examined earlier, Qianlong's unrealistic attempts to exert firm control over the government and the populace in the late 18th century contributed to a pervasive sense of politico-economic insecurity among the officialdom which eventually created forces inimical to imperial authority.[92]

The systems of excessive imperial control, as Jung puts it, "failed to guarantee survival to those responsible for implementing them, and the officials and gentry consequently used whatever privilege and prestige they received to empower them to secure their own economic and social survival."[93] Hence, not surprisingly, the late Qianlong reign was increasingly beset by "disobedient" officials and unruly factions, which compelled the aging ruler to turn to inner-court confidants like Heshen to regain control. This effort backfired when the imperial favorite's meteoric rise caused serious political disequilibrium in court politics and pushed the Grand Council, the highest Qing decision-making organ, into deep institutional crisis.[94]

Official abuse of power translated into a burden of unbearable hardship on those lower down the sociopolitical ladder. This burden eventually reached the peasants, who could pass it on to no one. They had no choice but to engage in all forms of political contention, including outright military rebellion. Hence the late Qianlong social protests were often manifestations of local self-defense precipitated by the state efforts to extend control over the empire.[95]

Conclusion

After thirty years of extraordinary successes, the Qianlong emperor's

[91] Jones, "Hung Liang-Chi," 170.
[92] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 34.
[93] Ibid., 86.
[94] Wang, "White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates."
[95] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 138.

state-making projects fell out of step with the inexorable social, economic, and political transformations taking place in his huge and diverse empire.[96] As the cluster of crises in the late 18th century shows, the overburdened state proved to be incapable of containing the forces that emerged out of these sweeping structural changes. Furthermore, the aging emperor had centralized imperial power by strengthening the vertical control of the administration through the inner court under the leadership of Heshen, but this centralization was achieved at the expense of horizontal integration and the deterioration of local governance.[97]

To sum up, the irony in the story of the late Qianlong upheavals is that "the imperial impetus toward control led in unexpected ways to the breakdown of imperial control, despite the successful suppression of the rebels."[98] The power and image of the state were crippled by the paramount ruler through his efforts to concentrate power in his own hands and his aggressive attempts to maintain control over an increasingly complex and densely populated society. Qianlong developed a governing style bent on seeking far-reaching state and monarchical control, but he lacked the means—or the desire—to foot the financial, political, or social bill.

Consequently, the late Qianlong state, though characterized by the most heightened form of despotism in Chinese history, was short in its reach to the population it ruled and ineffective in mobilizing its resources. The fragile balance between various sociopolitical forces collapsed, and a serious disjuncture between the state and the society came into being, which paved the way for a cascade of uprisings during the late 18th century. In responding to these challenges, the Qianlong government encountered unprecedented obstacles from its own bureaucracy.

A critical yet often overlooked dimension of the late Qianlong crises, in my view, is that the transaction costs of sociopolitical control reached unacceptable and unsustainable heights due to aforementioned structural transformations. Moreover, the emperor's flamboyant governing style exacerbated latent systemic problems, making it difficult to enlist compliant behaviors from the bureaucracy or the populace. As official corruption, malfeasance and patronage plagued the system, both central and local governments became more and more costly to run. Meanwhile, internal rebellions broke out with increasing frequency and severity, and the military campaigns to suppress them proved to be enormously costly.

These changes above suggest that a major bottleneck to sustainable political

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[96] Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (New York: Longman, 2009), 164.
[97] Jung, "The Ch'ien-Lung Emperor's Suppression of Rebellion," 98.
[98] Ibid., 5.

development had appeared during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition. The implementation of the emperor's will and the reproduction of the empire had become increasingly contingent on the capacity of the power brokers at various levels to use material and political incentives to enforce acquiescence. This all-consuming political process grossly inflated the operational costs of Qing empire-building, making it unsustainable by the late Qianlong period. The resulting incongruity between state image and practices was not greatly reduced until the successful crisis management and conservative political reforms of the Jiaqing reign. How this change came about is a key question that awaits further research.

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