Front. Hist. China 2016, 11(4): 510–531
DOI 10.3868/s020-005-016-0031-8

RESEARCH ARTICLE

David Faure, **Xi He**

The Secret Society's Secret: The Invoked Reality of the Tiandihui

Abstract This essay examines two sets of reports in the Qing-dynasty Jiaqing and Daoguang periods (respectively 1796–1820 and 1821–45) in order to understand better the perceived reality of the Tiandihui. The first set, found among the papers of Jiangxi governor Xianfu (1809–14), allows a comparison of a criminal gang that invoked the Tiandihui ceremony with one that did not. The second set includes the diary of Taihe county magistrate Xu Dihui (in office from 1824) that recorded various events which came to be reported to the senior officialdom as having been conducted by secret societies. By collating the incidents as reported in the diary and memorials to the emperor, the authors argue that the pressure of the administrative process was responsible for the ultimate acquiescence by the Hunan governor Han Wenqi (in office 1825–29) in the perception of an indisputable connection of the incidents with secret societies. Moreover, both sets of reports show that participants in secret-society ceremonies and officials who suppressed them knew that the acclaimed networking of the Tiandihui as implied in its folklore was very far from the reality.

Keywords Tiandihui, Jiangxi, criminal gangs, brotherhoods, secret societies, diary

> The story that has been handed down about the Hongmen does not totally lack historical clues. It was a necessary step in historical development for it to become folklore. It is not wrong to assert that the Tiandihui began from the end of the Yongzheng period, but it can also be said that it began from the Kangxi period.
>
> —Xiao Yishan[1]

[1] Xiao Yishan, "Tiandihui qiyuan kao," 16a.

David Faure[a] (✉), Xi He[b]
Department of History, Chinese University of Hong Kong, NT, Hong Kong, China
E-mail: [a]dfaure@cuhk.edu.hk, [b] hexi@arts.cuhk.edu.hk

> Membership of a Triad group was part of a social survival strategy, which entailed joining a network of mutual support and sharing in an exclusive body of ritual and narrative lore. This lore was essential in the construction of a Triad group and provided Triad members with the cultural and religious identity that they needed in a hostile world.
>
> —Barend ter Haar[2]

> In Taiwan and in southern Fujian the Tiandihui of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries seems to have been largely a rebellious organization, and in Guangdong it became chiefly a vehicle for robbery. But in the western Fujian–eastern Jiangxi region the Tiandihui intermingled with local cult, lay Buddhism, and a range of magico-religious practices, and appears to have functioned as a variety of popular religion. Tiandihui members in this region continued to engage in robbery and criminal violence, and there is one case of attempted rebellion, but evidence from this period and region leaves no doubt that people were drawn to the Tiandihui not primarily by dreams of violence or rebellion but by the promise that the Tiandihui could provide supernatural protection from natural and human dangers.
>
> —David Ownby[3]

Introduction

How may historians understand the "secret society" of nineteenth-century China? They no longer believe it was characterized by a single structure, but has the understanding of it as constituted by "networks" of "groups" added much analytic insight? And if "secret societies" did not survive as "groups" in the decades in-between the Lin Shuangwen 林爽文 rebellion (1786–88) and the Taiping rebellion (1851–64), did they merely survive as "lore"? Surely, Qing dynasty officials, looking for culprits (sometimes on a witch hunt), sought "groups" and the reports of the "groups" contained "lore." Why did the "groups" deploy the "lore"? This article argues that the reason might lie in the manner by which legitimacy supported by written words, deities and magic, might come to be viewed and reenacted in a world that was increasingly oriented towards an imagined reality.

We take as our starting point the common belief, perpetuated by contemporaries and then by historians, that after the Lin Shuangwen rebellion the Tiandihui 天地會 spread. David Ownby believes that the spread from Taiwan to

[2] Barend ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads*, 3.

[3] David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China*, 26.

Fujian in the Jiaqing-Daoguang period might be attributed to its suppression in Taiwan, its taking root on the mainland, and its functioning "largely as a vehicle for a body of religious practices, which I [Ownby] ultimately interpret as a form of magical inducement useful to the marginalized men who continued to constitute the core of Tiandihui membership."[4] Zhuang Jifa noticed that among those arrested for association with the Tiandihui many had moved from one province to another, he concluded that it served migrants in their struggles against established incumbents.[5] Such functional interpretations of secret-society membership pervade the historical literature, and although the notion that secret-society membership must serve some function is ingrained in contemporary reports, we nonetheless believe historians need to go beyond that so as to apprectiate the Tiandihui not as a network that might provide any function, not even as an idea that might provide functions, but as an idea assumed to be real and functional by participants in its ceremony, even when they knew it was not.

This article is divided into two parts. In the first part, we compare two trial cases, one associated with the Tiandihui and the other not, to explore how invoking the story of the Tiandihui made any difference to the organization of local groups. In the second part, we explore how official perception changed as reports of a Tiandihui incident filtered through the imperial bureaucracy.

In the first part of the essay, we want to point out that, although culprits brought before magistrates often said that they had joined the Tiandihui because it offered protection, offering protection was a function not only of the Tiandihui but also of many and sundry groups: temple associations, fictitious brotherhoods, families and lineages real and pseudo, boxing societies, guilds, and many more. It should be clear that far from introducing brotherhood to south China, the Tiandihui arose out of the widespread belief that brotherhoods might be established on religious grounds rather than adoption or blood ties. Therefore, the question has to be asked why invoking the history and practices of the Tiandihui was appealing to people who already had other means of organizing protective networks. In other words, the question is not what functions the Tiandihui might have served but what extra functions it added to the existing repertoire of tntelary strategies. In answer, we might say the Tiandihui provided a colorful ceremony, and also, that the evocation of brotherhood within the Tiandihui went beyond any immediate, particular group. Buying into the Tiandihui tradition by performing its ceremony, however, came at a price: participants who subscribed to the Tiandihui tradition bought into

[4] Ibid., 130.

[5] Zhuang Jifa, "Qingdai Min-Yue diqu de renkou liudong yu mimi huidang de fazhan," separately paginated.

a conspiracy theory that turned them from common criminals into political rebels. Nevertheless, criminality could only be transformed into sedition with the connivance of the imperial bureaucracy for recognizing it as such. So, in the second part of this essay, we turn our attention to the bureaucracy as a participant in the invocation of the reality of the Tiandihui as a network. We believe that hardened officials and their secretaries who wrote the official documents from which historians have drawn most of their conclusions on the Tiandihui were not readily susceptible to the conspiracy theory that was posited in the invocation of the Tiandihui legend. Yet they took it for real, and the reason for that, we argue, rested in the nature of bureaucratic government itself.

By good fortune, we happened to have come across the documents cited in this paper that allowed for a detailed analysis of several incidents in the history of Tiandihui insurgence. The texts all pertain to the Jiaqing–Daoguang reigns (say 1800 to mid-1820s) in central Jiangxi province. They belong to the period when Ownby thought the Tiandihui was spreading from Fujian and Taiwan to other provinces. As far as we know, they have not been previously examined in any detail in Tiandihui history research.

A Brotherhood as Compared with a Group Invoking the Tiandihui Tradition

The texts in the first two cases are included in a set of bound manuscript volumes held in the Harvard-Yenching Library and made available on the web. They record the draft memorials of Jiangxi Governor Xianfu 先福 (see Fig. 1).[6] The first case describes a brotherhood in which the traditions and symbols of the Tiandihui were not invoked, and the second case—groups founded by exploiting the Tiandihui ceremony.

In the first case, 67 people were arrested in Jinxian county of Nanchang prefecture, of whom 50 were found to have taken part in "forming societies" (*jiehui* 結會).[7] They were followers of one Xiao the Bad Feet (Xiao Lanjiao 蕭爛腳). Bad Feet was a sedan-chair carrier who hailed from Ningdu, up in the hills in southern Jiangxi. In 1801, he had been found ganging up with 22 people and entering into a brotherhood. When that was discovered, he went on the run as a beggar, but in 1802, joined another brotherhood of 32 people. The reports state

[6] Given the title *Zougao*, Harvard-Yenching Library, ms, n.d., n.p.

[7] "Zou wei shenming danfei jieci jiehui geqing dingni juzou," vol. 3, no pagination.

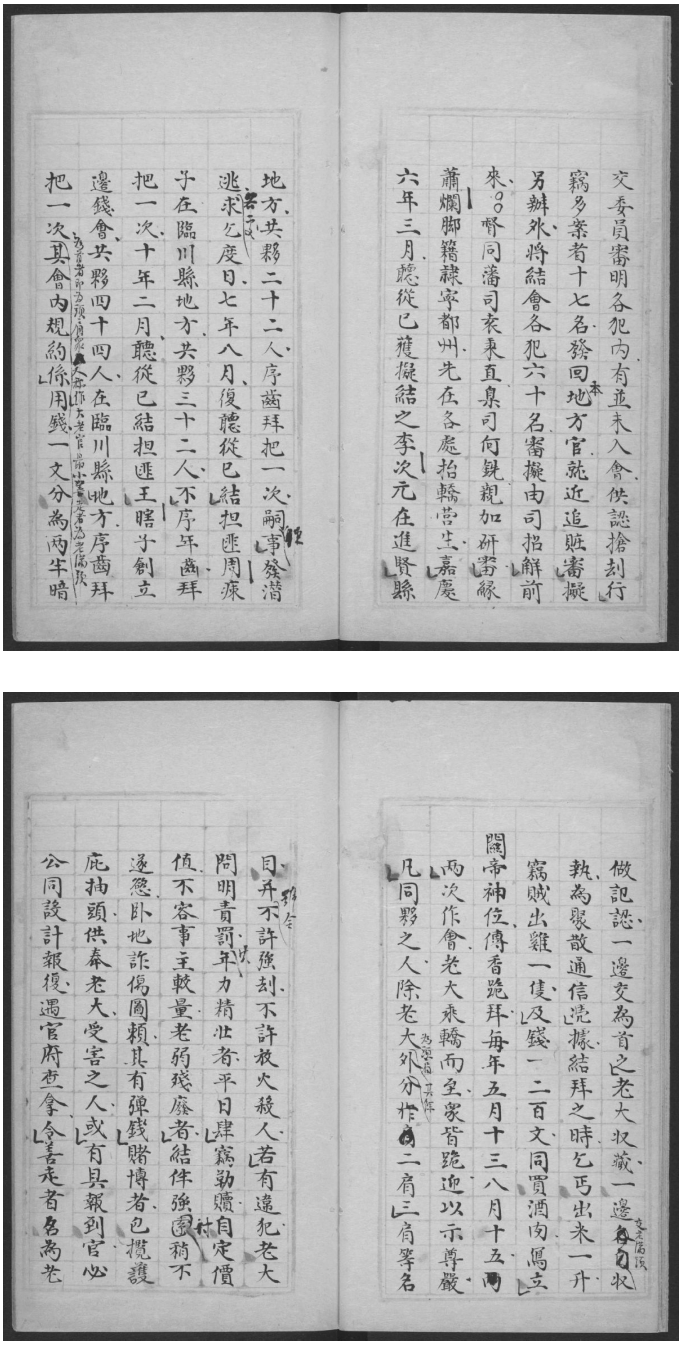

Fig. 1 Pages from Governor Xianfu's Draft Memorials
Source: *Zougao*, Harvard-Yenching Library, ms, n.d., n.p.

specifically that the first brotherhood, but not the second, practiced ranking by age (*xuchi baiba* 序齒拜把). This was a point of law, members of brotherhoods in which ranking accorded with age were punished with lighter sentences. Frequent reference to this legal standard shows it to be a basic assumption in official texts.[8] In 1805, at the instigation of Blind Man Wang, Bad Feet set up a half-cash society in Linchuan county (Fuzhou 福州 prefecture) and another brotherhood that recognized the ranking by age. The society was so named because members broke a one-cash coin into two halves, one of which was kept by the head of the society (*laoda* 老大) and the other by the head of the subordinate gang (known as the *lao mantou* 老滿頭). At the brotherhood ceremony conducted in front of a tablet of the god Guandi 關帝, on top of 100 to 200 cash, beggars provided a *sheng* 升 (0.01 *shi*) of rice and petty thieves a chicken. Every year on two occasions, on the 5th month 13th day and 8th month 15th day, the society head would come in a sedan chair and all knelt to welcome him. The society ruled that under penalty of the head's punishment no member would rob, kill or burn. They were free to steal, kidnap, lie on the ground pretending to be wounded (so as to extort money), and to offer protection for gambling dens. They took revenge on all who informed on them to the authorities.

In 1806, Bad Feet had gathered many beggars around himself and so wanted to set up his own society. He gathered 39 people and made himself headman. They dripped chicken blood into liquor and drank it, and set up the half-coin arrangement as Blind Man Wang did. In 1809, he gathered 66 people to set up a group in which he was again headman. In 1810, he set up yet another group of 40 people, following regulations used in the previous year. Bad Feet stayed in an inn run by a dismissed yamen clerk, paying 1,500 cash (*wen* 文) a month and, in addition, 100 cash out of every 1,000 cash of stolen goods that he and his group sold. When arrested, all the culprits were punished according to the law prohibiting "drinking blood and forming a brotherhood among people of different surnames," the magistrate taking note of whether they were engaged in brotherhoods, whether the brotherhoods recognized ordering by age, and whether the group exceeded 20 people. The most severe punishment meted to them was exile to border areas in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi.

The second case had to do with a village feud in Longquan county (present-day Suichuan county) in Jiangxi province. The facts presented in the memorial are as follows. One Yang Xuegui 楊學貴 was engaged in a feud with people of the Xu 徐 surname over a grave site. Yang was involved in a secret society. While plotting revenge, he and his people were arrested by the villagers (*xiangmin* 鄉民). Following the lead into Yang Xuegui's engagement with the secret society,

[8] *Qinding Da Qing huidian shili*, 779: 13a–b.

officials uncovered a vast network. As a result, 250 people were arrested.[9]

The secret society was brought to Longquan in 1811 by a man named Lu San 盧三, also known as Broken Nose Flower. He recruited a disciple in Chen Jichuan 陳紀傳, who was known to Lan Laosi 藍老四, both Chen and Lan being shop-keepers in Dafen 大汾 market in the county. In the fourth month of that year, Lan Laosi persuaded Li Kuisheng 李魁升 to join the secret society by telling him that Chen Jichuan had many disciples and that by joining the society, he would gain protection. Moreover, they said that if he collected a piece of red cloth and a handbill (*huatie* 花帖, literally "flowery pronouncement") from Chen, he might himself gather disciples and collect money. Li Kuisheng thereupon became Chen Jichuan's disciple. He gave Chen 3,000 cash, while Chen paid for incense and candles and set up an altar on which was placed Wan Tixi's 萬提喜 spirit tablet, it being noted also that Wan was none other than Monk Hong the Second (Hong Er 洪二)who was considered a founder of the Tiandihui. Elements of the ritual that were conducted are familiar to students of secret-society history: there were small colored paper flags inserted in a rice-filled bushel, a "bridge" that was made from a piece of cloth that the disciple had to cross, and as he crossed the "bridge," the master (in this case, Chen Jichuan) chanted the line, "Those who are loyal and righteous go under the bridge, those who are not die under the sword." A cockerel was killed and its blood was sprinkled in liquor and drunk by master and disciple. Li Kuisheng was given the red cloth and handbill as evidence (*ju* 据) for him to recruit disciples. He was taught the chant, "Each time you open your mouth you do not wander from the text, and each time you show your hand you do not depart from 'three'," a line that signifies the secret finger signals known to members of the Tiandihui and by which they recognized one another.

By the next month, Li Kuisheng was, indeed, recruiting his own disciples. The report named 13 of them, including two soldiers, an occasional yamen runner, and Yang Xuegui, the man who was named in the village feud, each of whom paying him 600 to 700 cash. As in his own initiation ceremony, Li set up an altar with a spirit tablet, a "bridge," drank liquor, and taught the signifier chant. Meanwhile, Chen Jichuan had recruited at least 20 people who each gave him 500 to 600 cash and Lu San himself had also recruited 18 people who each paid 1,000 to 2,000 cash. Some 15 people among the disciples, in turn, recruited disciples of their own, all having received money for doing so. Nevertheless, only two of them had been given the red cloth and handbill, the others merely knew how to conduct the

[9] "Zou wei jiehui feitu zhanshan rangming yu tu jiaozhong baofu nahuo shouhuo duo ming shenming banli gongzhe juzou," vol. 2, no pagination; *Tiandihui*, vol. 6, 331–50. The ms version of the memorial in *Zougao* differs from the submitted memorial as recorded in *Tiandihui* only in editorial details. Two discrepancies are noted in footnotes 11 and 12.

ceremony and recite the verbal chant. At least two of the people who took part in the ceremonies were described as "not having reached one year of age." It was also reported that Li Kuisheng and Chen Jichuan were known as "big brothers" (*dage* 大哥), and that people who joined the secret society maintained contact among themselves.

In the seventh month, Yang Xuegui's mother died. He was too poor to give her a proper burial, and, so, he was persuaded to bury her at what turned out to be a controversial grave site. The details illustrate the wheeling and dealing that must have made up the everyday life of many a Chinese villager. One Zhong Gaocai 鐘高才 had been a tenant of a landlord of the Luo 羅 surname, whose property was located adjacent to the properties owned by people of the Xu surname. Luo and Xu had formerly been embroiled in a territorial dispute when Xu set up some graves on Luo's property. The dispute had been adjudicated by the magistrate who required both parties to mind their own properties. As if taking a leaf from Xu's book, Zhong, Luo's tenant, was setting up Yang Xuegui to encroach upon Xu's property by burying his mother within Xu's boundary. To assist Yang to get on with the burial, Zhong and his associates helped themselves to a coffin from the local coffin shop and gave it to Yang. On a designated day, Yang went with Zhong and others to dig a grave "thirty feet in front of Xu's ancestral grave." When Xu knew about it, he went with his nephew to argue with them. Yet, "out of fear for the large number of people in the association," Xu agreed to tolerate the single grave that was being dug on condition that Yang would write him a loan deed. Zhong intervened arguing that the land belonged not to Xu but to Luo. At this point, Xu brought his own men and the two groups started fighting. There were people wounded on both sides, but one man from Zhong's party died immediately, another died the day after and a third a week after that.

Three days after the fight, Zhong went with the relatives of the two dead men (the third had not yet died) to see Li Kuisheng and Chen Jichuan at Dafen market. Li wanted revenge, and Chen agreed. Thereupon, Chen instructed one of the dead men's relatives to report the homicide to the magistrate so that the bodies might be examined (*fuxian baoyan* 赴县报验), and Zhong to write letters to nine disciples to ask them to gather people to meet at Dafen market, so that they might carry the bodies of the dead men with them to seek revenge from Xu's family. They agreed. When Xu learnt about that plan, he took his family into hiding. His kinsmen as well as other people in Dafen market were also alarmed. Because the magistrate was occupied elsewhere, the local people took matters into their own hands, gathered a militia and arrested fifty of the would-be attackers, including Zhong. They were delivered to the county government as the magistrate, having learned about the incident, returned to the county city. The case was reported up the administrative echelon, to the Ji'an prefect and the Nan'gan circuit intendant, who dispatched troops to the county to supplement local forces. The intendant

reported to the provincial governor, who himself took charge of the investigation and conducted the final trial.

There was a reason for the governor's personal concern. The case reported immediately to the imperial court was commented upon by the Grand Council and an imperial edict had been issued ordering him to investigate and to arrest all the principal instigators. Moreover, it supported the governor's request for the assistance of the Guangdong and Fujian provincial governors to discover the whereabouts of and bring to justice Lu San, whose disciples Chen Jichuan and Lan Laosi had disseminated the secret society's presence among the disputants of Longquan county. Nevertheless, while the court demanded strong action, it also warned that the governor should ensure local officials not to disturb ordinary law-abiding people. In other words, his remit was to limit the impact of the investigation as he brought the principal culprits to justice.[10]

The governor reported that the trial of the culprits found that the instruments which took the lives of the three men were everyday implements and not military weapons. Even the books found in Li Kuisheng's house contained only "popular terms related to boxing practices" and not "statements that were obstructive or illegal." Nevertheless, among various "registers, talismans and handbills" (*mingbu* 名簿, *fushu* 符書, *huatie* 花帖) was an incriminating document hand-copied by Zhong Gaocai and given by Chen Jichuan to one of his followers. It bore the lines "Monk Wan Tixi, who in that year, took part in the uprising in Sichuan and Gansu and passed [the teaching] to [people] at Gaoxi 高溪, Huizhou 惠州, Guangdong, who divided into the five segments (*fang* 房), and Fang Dahong 方大洪." On its back was written the date "*Tianyun* year 1, *xin* month and *wei* day 天运元年辛月未日." Some names were specified indicating people who were present at a ceremony, having served as guarantors, or having received the document.[11] Zhong Gaocai had confessed that the line had been copied, date and all, from an original handbill shown him by Chen Jichuan, and when he asked Chen what it was all about, he was told that "it was said that it was passed down in the association and it was not known if the personal names or place names were real." Other people were interrogated. Those people named (some by their religious names) were identified. Some people who were said to have signed the bill were illiterate and their names had been signed by Zhong. The governor found that Li

[10] Comments from the Grand Council are noted in *Zougao*, op. cit. vol. 3, 1a–7b, but are not apparent from the memorial cited in *Tiandihui.*

[11] The document is cited in *Tiandihui* 6: 340–41. The *Zougao* ms notes that other texts recorded the year "Shuntian" and includes an explanation deleted from the draft, namely that in local dialect, "*yun*" and "*shun*" were homophonous and that the term "Tianyun" might simply be the two characters "Shuntian" reversed.

Kuisheng was guilty of plotting a revenge by causing a disturbance in Xu's house, joining the Tiandihui by becoming Chen Jichuan's disciple, passing on a handbill to his own disciples, and, moreover, writing letters to numerous people to ask them to take part in the revenge, even though the revenge did not take place as planned. He found Zhong Gaocai guilty of joining a secret society, attempting to occupy land that had already been claimed by an owner, instigating someone to conduct a burial there without authority, thereby causing the death of three persons, and penning the treasonous statement on the handbill. He sought imperial approval for both Li and Zhong to be sentenced to death by decapitation. He sentenced one other culprit to death by strangulation, less for being a member of the association—for he had not collected a handbill—than for forging paper money and adopting disciples, and 59 other people to exile in Heilongjiang.

In comparing the two cases, one might say the Tiandihui provided an edge over the common brotherhood ceremony, or that of the half-cash group because of its colorful ceremony. Participants in the ceremony did not have to be taught the brotherhood and certainly not how to run protective rackets. When it came to the crunch, the Tiandihui did not provide the manpower that its vast supposed networks were meant to be able to gather. Nothing in the record suggests that these groups invoking the Tiandihui were meant to be any more permanent than the beggar gangs. But notice the way in which innovation had its place: when Blind Man Wang introduced the half-cash insignia, it took one year for it to be copied by Bad Feet, and it took only one ceremony for neophytes like Chen Jichuan and Li Kuisheng to grasp that the same text that incorporated them into the Tiandihui could be employed for the recruitment of new members and the collection of their membership dues. If there was any difference between Blind Man Wang's half-cash and Broken Nose Flower's Tiandihui handbills, it must be that cash was everywhere, whether or not they were issued by the emperor—for many would have been forged—but the handbills came with a tradition. Tradition had to be acquired by its own carrier. The idea of legitimacy was built into the master-disciple relationship which characterized the Tiandihui tradition but not the half-cash. But the legitimacy the Tiandihui granted, ironically, was that of a seditious tradition. As participants in the Tiandihui in Jiangxi in the Jiaqing-Daoguang era had no intention to rebel (whatever the original intentions of Lin Shuangwen's disciples in Taiwan), how could that seditious tradition be made real?

Confronting Tiandihui in the Imperial Bureaucracy

To summarize the argument so far, we may say that the name "Tiandihui" did not appear in Qing-dynasty records until the Lin Shuangwen rebellion in Taiwan.

Thereafter, upon investigation, Qing officials found that ceremonies associated with the Tiandihui were conducted in Fujian and adjacent provinces. The ceremonies, which served to associate the idea of brotherhood—an idea indigenous to many parts of south China prior to the appearance of the Tiandihui—with the Tiandihui tradition, were predicated on the existence of Tiandihui as networks of people bonded in groups. Both Qing officials and later on the historians who read their records, including Ter Haar and Ownby, realized that the solidarity of the networks was more fiction than fact. Yet, they were in a bind to come to terms with how a fictitious network could have spread unless it was carried by people who succeeded in forming groups. Given the lack of a language to describe this phenomenon, that is, the spread, not of an organization, nor even an ideology, but of a ceremony, officials and historians turned functionalist. They argued that the Tiandihui served inherent needs for protection and might blend, chameleon-like, with popular religion. Explaining the spread of the Tiandihui by appealing to its "function," nevertheless, does not circumvent the presupposition that those "functions" must serve some groups of people. The literature on Tiandihui activities in the decades following the Lin Shuangwen rebellion, therefore, on the one hand warns of reading the Tiandihui as a substantive organization, and on the other, speaks of it as being made up of groups and networks. The reality is that there were groups of people said to be cells of the Tiandihui, when no Tiandihui as an umbrella organization had ever existed except in the imagination. The people who preached the existence of that super-arching organization were spreading a hoax. But it was a deadly hoax, because the imperial government believed that the hoax could be turned into the reality of rebellion and it threw its weight behind efforts to put those people in jail or in exile, if not always to death. The Tiandihui was a conspiracy theory, taken to be real, by people who had the power to impose real consequences.

The reality given the conspiracy theory of the Tiandihui can be traced through the imperial archives, but historians have not always been careful in showing how that reality was itself a product of the bureaucratic process. The imperial archives, it must be understood, were very high-level government reports, written and commented upon by court and senior provincial officials. As reports filtered through officialdom to reach the archives, they had been reconstructed at every level to cater to policy initiatives and political reactions. The diary of Magistrate Xu Dihui 許迪惠 (see Fig. 2) is important for precisely this reason. By comparing the magistrate's diary entries and his superiors' reports to the emperor, we may sense the intervention of the bureaucracy in making the conspiracy theory credible in a Tiandihui instance, now in 1826, also in Jiangxi province.[12]

[12] "Xu Dihui riji," 53: 439–524.

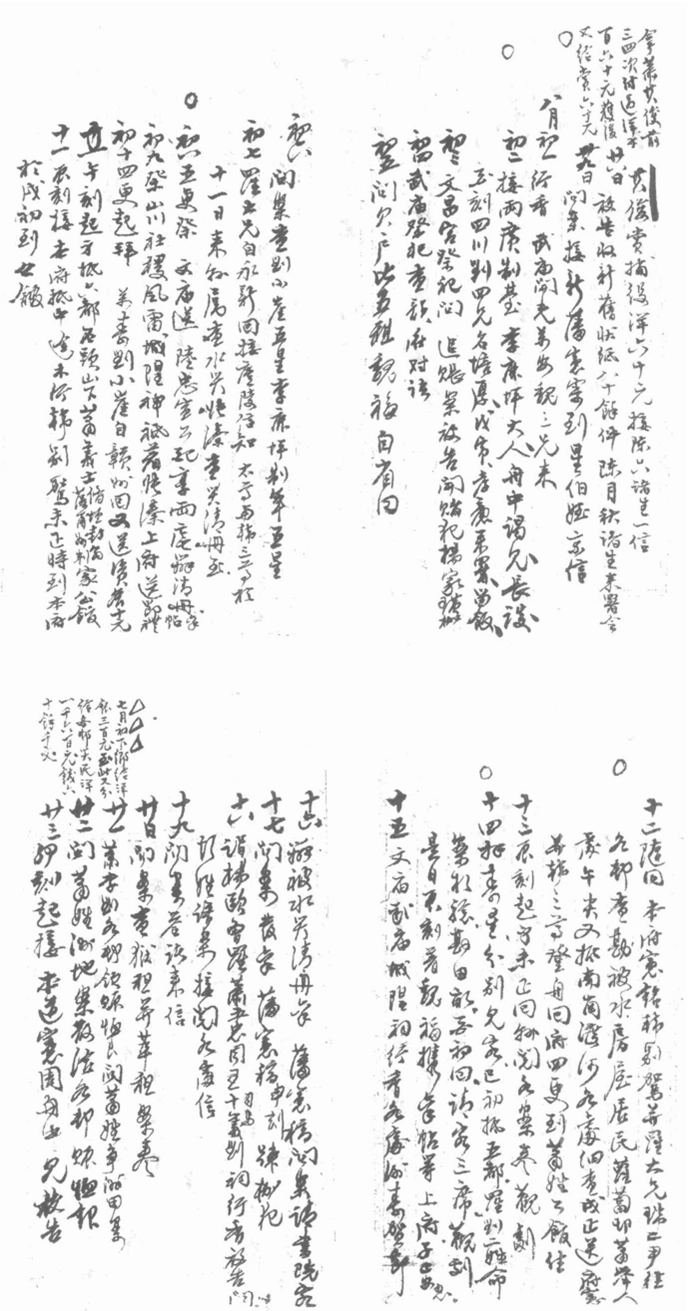

Fig. 2 Pages from Magistrate Xu Dihui's Diary

Source: "Xu Dihui riji," ms, n.d., n.p., repr. in Guojia tushuguan fenguan, eds., *Zhonghua lishi renwu biezhuanji*. Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2003, vol. 53.

Magistrate Xu Dihui was posted to Taihe 泰和 county in Jiangxi province in 1824 quite near Longquan county, where the local feud at Dafen market described in the previous section had morphed into the conspiratorial Tiandihui some fifteen years earlier.[13] Surely, magistrates had to deal with law and order, and Magistrate Xu had his share of homicides and robberies to investigate. More of his time, it would seem, was spent on collecting the land tax, much of which was in arrears. He travelled to villages quite often, personally pressing village elders to pay up. Yet, in the evenings, he had time to read, apparently for leisure, the *Ming History* (*Mingshi* 明史) and the popular miscellany, *Strange Tales of the Present and the Past* (*Jingu qiguan* 今古奇觀). He frequently entertained, for he had visitors from outside the county and friends within. The diary does not give the impression of a hard-pressed official overtly worried about a conspiracy taking place among the people who came under his purview, but of a competent man who knew how to go about his job. Although there was not a mention of that in his diary, geomancy must also have been prominent in his conversation with his friends and acquaintances. He was such a reputable geomancer that in 1830 the Daoguang emperor sent for him while he was still posted in Taihe.[14]

On the 28th and 29th days of the second lunar month in 1825, as noted in his diary, he tried five "secret society bandits" (*huifei* 會匪), that is to say, members of secret societies, and he released three of them and imprisoned two. On the 13th day of the sixth month, an arrested criminal found guilty of secret-society activities passed, under guards, through his county. On the 2nd day of the seventh month, a secret society-man by the name Xiao 蕭 was reported to him and he ordered his arrest. On the 22nd he received a report that Xiao had been arrested. On the 1st day of the ninth month, he went briefly to Ji'an prefectural city and was received by the provincial governor who was passing through. That must have been Governor Cheng Ge 成格, who was being transferred to another post, for in another ten days, he was received by the in-coming governor, Han Wenqi 韓文綺, who was passing through his county to assume the governorship in the provincial capital. Magistrate Xu noted that Han asked him about customs and conditions in Taihe county, and he answered all the questions. This was the first of several meetings he had with senior provincial officials over this year and the next. More will be said about Han Wenqi because on the basis of what magistrate Xu told him, Han reported on Jiangxi secret societies to the imperial court and introduced administrative and legal measures.

What Governor Han might say to the imperial court would come in the future.

---

[13] Also see Robert Antony's article in this issue for Tiandihui connections with the Chen family in 1802 in Boluo county, Guangdong. The Chens of Boluo originated from Taihe county.

[14] *Qing shilu, Daoguang reign*, 169: 36b.

In 1825 and the first half of 1826, however, Magistrate Xu's diary shows that he had much more on his mind than anything to do with secret societies. It was a dry year in 1826. On the 3rd day of the fifth month, he noted briefly that the villagers were entering the city to pray for rain. On the 11th, he received the shocking news that a flotilla of eleven salt-carrying junks had sailed down the river without stopping at the customs stations, sounding their gongs and firing their guns as they did so. In face of this gross act of defiance, the magistrate himself went after them with the county troops and local militia, finally catching up with them at a place by the name of Shukouzhou 蜀口洲. Guns were fired and the salt smugglers disbursed after they had spent their rounds. The troops captured seven boats, but not knowing how to steer them, ran them aground as they rowed them back to the county, a substantial portion of the salt they carried becoming wet in the process. Magistrate Xu noted in the margins of his daily entry that the troop commander died from his wounds. Four smugglers were arrested. Another margin note reminded himself that the event was deserving of a poem in commemoration. Barely two weeks passed, on the 25th, the diary recorded an unrelated but also shocking event: "five to six hundred" villagers dashed all the way into the middle compartment of Magistrate Xu's office (the yamen) carrying their god with them in a sedan chair. They hovered in the room for several hours wrecking the furniture. The magistrate was due to leave by boat that night but cancelled his journey and his luggage had to be taken off the boat. The next day, someone came to the yamen with a basket of "precious things" that the magistrate described as little pellets said to be the *sarira* (or, crystalline remains) of cremated monks to be used in prayers for rain. The excitement passed. Over the next few days, Xu sold rice from the county granary at discount as relief for high prices.

On the 4th day of the sixth lunar month, the diary noted, very briefly, that the Zhang 張 surname lineage in the fourth district reported they had been robbed by secret-society bandits. The magistrate added on the side the name of a bandit, which was Xiao Qijun 蕭其俊. On the 7th, a second report came from the fourth district on secret societies making trouble. On 24th, news came that Xiao Qichun, the secret-society bandit, had been arrested. The magistrate noted in the margin that Xiao was guilty of homicide and arson, a "horrendous criminal among secret-society bandits." The news of Xiao's arrest was obviously inaccurate, for on 26th, 27th and 28th, the magistrate interrogated Xiao's relatives, and ordered that Xiao be arrested. He also noted that one Wang Yaokai 王耀開 had confessed he was a secret-society member. He did not note if Wang was connected to Xiao.

Nothing very much happened for a month. On the 23rd of the seventh month, the magistrate went to the prefecture to see the provincial salt intendant and other senior officials. While there, he was informed by letter of Xiao, the secret-society bandit's arrest. On the 26th, he interrogated the salt smugglers after having seen the salt intendant. He returned to the county that night to find that Xiao had already

been put in prison. On the 27th, the magistrate paid 60 silver dollars to the runners for Xiao's arrest, and added a margin note to say he had already paid several times, his payments adding up to 160 dollars. On the 1st day of the ninth month, he was back in the prefectural city. Something obviously important was happening, for he met there the circuit intendant, the prefect, the former prefect, the magistrate of Longquan county nearby, and on the 2nd day was taken to see the provincial administrative commissioner who must have come from the provincial capital. The administrative commissioner had numerous meetings with him. The commissioner left on the 13th and magistrate Xu returned to his county on the 14th. A week later, on the 21st, 22nd and 23rd, he noted in his diary that he was revising the county history.

The 1826 edition of the Taihe county history includes the following paragraph. The county history must have gone to press in the several months after magistrate Xu made his revisions:

> In the fifth month of the sixth year of Daoguang, the year of *bingxu*, it was dry and the price of rice was high. Occasionally, groups coming from southern Ganzhou using the name of the Tiandaohui 添刀會 secret society enticed the foolish people in the hill areas such as Dongmian 東沔 valley and Donglang 洞閬 valley into robbery. Magistrate Xu Dihui in coordination with the garrisons captured them and arrested the leaders after investigation. They were dealt with individually with meticulous care to details. The people were pacified.[15]

One would not have thought from his diary entries that robberies in the hills near up-river Ganzhou constituted Xu's main concerns, but we have no idea what he was telling the provincial administrative commissioner a week before he wrote that paragraph.

We do know what the provincial administrative commissioner wrote after the meeting, for we can follow the events that unfolded from memorials to the emperor and the papers of senior officials.

The reason the provincial officials had become concerned with events in Taihe arose from a memorial dated the 7th lunar month of 1826 from censor Xiong Yutai 熊遇泰, whose home county was Xinjian in Jiangxi, quite near Taihe. We know little about censor Xiong. In his memorial, which dealt with local disorder near his home county, he said secret societies were disturbing the peace and requested the emperor to order an investigation. He cited as evidence that hundreds of knife-wielding secret-society members had gathered together. He also

---

[15] *Taihe xianzhi*, 12:15a.

cited a case of robbery of more than 10,000 taels of silver at Majiazhou 馬家洲 in Taihe, near Shukouzhou where in the fifth month in 1826 magistrate Xu's troops caught up with the salt smugglers who had dashed through the customs check point. Censor Xiong must have known about the incident because he said,

> I have heard that the secret-society bandits have been in league with salt smugglers. In Majiazhou of Taihe, and Baidu shi 白渡市 of Wan'an [which we have not been able to identify], salt smugglers are everywhere. They find support in the knife societies (*daohui* 刀會), and, firing guns, they dash past customs stations down the river.[16]

The term that we translate here as "dashing" past the customs station (*chuangguan* 闖關) appears characteristically in reference to the incident of 1826 that had happened only two months earlier.

The censor's memorial timed very well with a report from the unexpected quarters of the commander of the cosmopolitan infantry (*bujun tongling yamen* 步军統領衙門) in the same year. The commander reported that a certain Ma Xieyin 麻燮寅, a prison commander in-waiting, had, against established procedure, presented to him a petition for transmission to higher authorities outlining eight needed reforms for the times. While the full-bore commander expressed disapproval of the act taken by the in-waiting commander, he reported the item in the petition that he thought pressing, that is, in Wan'an county the customs stations guards were looting from passing boats rather than carrying out their guard duties, and that Majiazhou of Taihe county was well-known as a lair where salt-smugglers hoarded and sold smuggled salt, organized gambling, kidnapped and raped women. The imperial court referred the cosmopolitan infantry commander's report to the Grand Council for investigation under strict terms that the investigation should be taken seriously and not dealt with in empty words (*kongyan* 空言).[17]

The instruction from the Grand Council addressed to Jiangxi governor Han Wenqi and surveillance commissioner Qiu Shutang 邱樹棠 was dated the 26th day of the seventh lunar month, 1826.[18] Knowledge of censor Xiong Yutai's memorial must, therefore, have prompted the meeting with the prefectural and county officials in Ji'an prefecture only days before the instruction arrived. The Grand Council demanded the provincial governor and surveillance commissioner to investigate, tighten up the gathering of information from the villages and post

---

[16] *Qing shilu, Daoguang reign*, 101:40a–41b.

[17] Ibid., 111: 23b–24b.

[18] *Jiaqing Daoguang liangchao shangyu dang*, 31: 255–56.

more military officials on the ground to be ready to suppress any disorder.

The governor must have taken action immediately, for, by the ninth month of 1826, he memorialized in reply to the Grand Council. Point by point, he accounted for the incidents that censor Xiong alluded to. There was no robbery of 10,000 taels in Taihe county and, although there were salt smugglers, they did not have secret-society connections. The emperor commented after reading the memorial that it was right that the governor took the investigation seriously and his attitude was to be commended.[19]

Yet, imperial attention attracted official action that the provincial governor had to carefully fend off in 1827. In the first month, the governor general of Jiangsu, Anhui and Jiangxi memorialized. He advised that the official in charge of the customs station where smugglers could slip through should be dismissed. He had received reports from his military officials that numerous stations in Jiangxi were particularly prone to such misgivings, naming the Majiazhou salt smugglers in particular.[20] Governor Han replied in the third month with respect to prison commander in-waiting Ma Xieyan that he had investigated the accusations about the salt smugglers of Majiazhou and could now confirm that they were false. He added that "even though I have now found that there was no such incident," he had instructed local officials to take special precaution.[21] In the fourth month, the governor general returned with another memorial demanding that additional customs stations be added at Majiazhou and other places.[22] Meanwhile, the records of the Jiangxi surveillance commissioner, published from the 1820s, show ample evidence that the provincial government took steps to strengthen river patrol, itself a complicated undertaking involving financial contributions and redistribution of personnel.[23]

However, the memorials did not stop. In the seventh month of 1829, another censor, Wang Zengfang 王赠芳, memorialized on the subject of secret societies in Ji'an prefecture in Jiangxi province. These people terrorized the population on the main river route from Ganzhou. Moreover, "on the whole" (*dadi* 大抵), most salt smugglers of Jiangxi were secret-society bandits. Although referred to separately as "salt smugglers" and "secret-society bandits," they caused similar harm to the people by wielding knives and forming secret societies. As their numbers grew, ordinary people were pressured into joining them and they infiltrated the troops

---

[19] Han Wenqi, *Han Dazhong cheng zouyi*, 9: 40a–49b (rep. vol. 498); and *Qing shilu, Daoguang reign*, 106: 24b.

[20] *Qing shilu, Daoguang reign*, 113: 17b–18a.

[21] Ibid., 115: 32b–33a.

[22] Ibid., 117: 26a–b.

[23] *Xijiang zhengyao*, 54: 177–235.

that were sent to suppress them. Local officials should be told now to execute such bandits as soon as they were arrested, to strengthen the patrol on the river, and issue a pardon to all those people who had been pressured into joining secret societies on condition their neighbors would guarantee their good conduct.[24]

At this point, provincial governor Han gave in. Apparently following the principle that he might join the opposition if he could not beat it, his response to the censor's criticism was to acknowledge that there were secret societies in Jiangxi. As for the salt smugglers who crashed the customs house, but for some escapees, they had also been arrested. Because even the escapees would have lost their fortune when the salt they were carrying was confiscated, it would be understandable that some of them would have joined bandit gangs. The governor no longer argued that the salt smugglers were different from the secret societies, but pointed out that since 1826, he had arrested more than 200 people found to have been members of secret societies, salt smugglers and robbers. He reiterated his achievement not only in arresting them, but in prevention, that is to say, by strengthening the river patrols and organizing bonds of collective responsibility among neighborhood and lineage groups.[25]

It did not take another year for further criticism to arrive. In 1830, censor Cheng Huancai 程煥采 memorialized against precisely the measures that governor Han had put in place, for the village and lineage heads were all colluding with one another and extorting the common people on false accusations. In the meantime, in 1829 governor Han had been transferred from Jiangxi. Answering that charge was now somebody else's problem.

Historians mine the published "Veritable Records" (*Qing shilu* 清實錄) and now also the imperial archives for data but they need to pause to consider how the bureaucratic process that produced the archives might itself have burnt its mark on them. They do not, as a rule, have access to details from the county to corroborate the very high-level reports that were entered in the imperial archives. Not surprising, reports many hands removed such as those made by censors Xiong and Wang pass into the history books, despite the governor's protests, and despite the chasm of discrepancy between their general remarks and the details of the magistrate's diary.[26] If readers have found the details of all those reports tedious,

---

[24] *Qing shilu, Daoguang reign*, 158: 36b–37b; and Wang Zengfang, *Shenqi yuzhai wenji*, 1: 10b–11a.

[25] Han Wenqi, *Han Dazhong cheng zouyi*, 12: 72a–75b (rep. vol. 498).

[26] Among citations of the two memorials as evidence of collusion between secret societies and salt smugglers are Tomi Saeki, *Shindai ensei no kenkyu*, 159–60; Dai Xuanzhi, *Zhongguo mimi zongjiao yu mimi huishe*, 743–44; Zhuang Zhifa, *Qingdai Tiandihui yuanliu kao*, 94; Hu Zhusheng, *Qingdai Hongmen shi*, 214.

we make no apology. They should ponder how, without the tedious details, they could possibly have made sense of the senior bureaucratic reports on which most of what they think they know of the Tiandihui have been based.

Conclusions

Tiandihui studies deal with "secret societies" (*mimi huishe* 秘密會社) as a typology. Given that approach, historians should be familiar with all the types of events described in the documents presented in this article. Bad Feet Xiao ran a protection racket of beggars and petty thieves, but he himself as racket boss came in a sedan chair ceremonially to his group. The Tiandihui was different in that its legends were predicated upon a treasonous motive. The half-cash society sanctified their activities in front of Guandi, but the Tiandihui did so in front of Wan Tixi. Like ceremonies conducted for all group activities, the brotherhood ceremonies were bundles of folklore and religious traditions. It is true that Longquan county was the sort of area that would have been occupied by tenants coming in from the outside and so the dispute over the grave could well have involved conflict between established landed interests and immigrant "tenants." People such as Bad Feet were arrested with the paraphernalia of their trade and rituals, and stories came up about the locality being infested with secret societies. As local reports made their way up the administrative network (far more effectively than through the village networks), the charge of sedition came to be associated with the vital resources that were recognized for keeping the empire running: the grain supply, the salt trade, local taxation. The imperial government was capable of publicizing alarming information over a larger area than any village tradesman might.

We think the people involved knew rather well what they were doing, and they were not only following traditions. The man who wanted a free coffin and a grave to bury his mother was easily induced to be the trigger that tested the patience of incumbent land-owners in the maintenance of a land boundary, even if that meant he had to go through a ceremony which he little understood. The man who egged him on had much vested interest at stake, and the brotherhood was formed less for protection than to strengthen his hand in a boundary feud. If they appealed to the Tiandihui tradition in knitting their gang together, it was because the beauty of the Tiandihui's legitimacy lay in its adhering not to the persons who collected disciples but to the tradition itself, as maintained in its colorful ceremonies, the written texts, the rehearsed responses to questions leading to the telling of its history, against which the half-cash was poor competition. "Belief" is the wrong word to use in the context. The ceremony has to be taken back to a state of mind in which theatre was not performed to be watched, but to be engaged in, to transform reality itself, so that one participated, not as a member of an audience, but as an

actor in making performance possible, the audience being none other than the god sitting on the spirit tablet in front of which it was performed. Culprits in the Tiandihui case asked but received no answer as to whether anyone knew anything about Wan Tixi. That did not matter. What mattered was that, like all ritual, the ceremony had to be conducted correctly. At one level of understanding, therefore, the Tiandihui was no more than a brotherhood, but at another level, it was the brotherhood of brotherhoods. The brotherhood was conducted among men who entered into a common experience of a new reality of a constructed family. The brotherhood of brotherhoods, on the other hand, had to be an abstract idea that was invoked for the ceremony. Therein lay the Tiandihui's secret. There was no other Tiandihui than the ceremony. So, when the letters went out, all they did was to alert the government. No ready army of Tiandihui men would have responded. The brotherhood was all that it was, a short-lived moment of comradeship, sometimes designed for a purpose, sold on an idea of permanence sanctified by history itself. Like a ponzi scheme, the secret society collapses when members put it to the test. Yet, once the emperor had indicated his attention, like the queue-cutting alarm of 1768 that Philip Kuhn reconstructed so well, officials found that it paid better to acknowledge the alarm and to indicate that they had heeded the need to put order back in place than to deny that it had ever existed and expose what might be construed to be their reluctance to take imperial security seriously.[27] Many officials who were involved first-hand in the reporting process that generated those half-truths must have known better than to believe in them, but, like participants in the ceremonies of the Tiandihui, they were caught in the web of make-believe where belief itself no longer mattered. The Tiandihui's reality lay not in what participants, villager, or official believed to be real, but in the assumption of reality that consigned their participation in its rituals to deadly legal consequences. It was not belief but compulsive assumption that lay at the heart of the Tiandihui's secret. Future studies of the Tiandihui should make that clear: the Tiandihui is dead, long live the Tiandihui!

Acknowledgements The authors acknowledge research grants supported by the GRF 445411 "Local Society in Ji'an Prefecure, Jiangxi Province, from the Yuan to the Ming Dynasty" and "The Historical Anthropology of Chinese Society," the Fifth Round of Areas of Excellence (AoE) Scheme, The Research Grants Committee, HKSAR.

[27] See Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers*. Relevant also is Ter Haar 1992, which shows that the "White Lotus" label imparted historical reality to local religious traditions in Ming and Qing times giving them a sense of unity which is not borne out by detailed studies of either their teaching, organization or activities.

References

Dai Xuanzhi. *Zhongguo mimi zongjiao yu mimi huishe* (China's secret religions and secret societies). Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1990.

ter Haar, Barend. *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1998.

———. *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

Han Wenqi. *Han Dazhongcheng zouyi* (The memorials of Han Wenyi), np, nd, rep. in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995.

Hu Zhusheng. *Qingdai Hongmen shi* (The history of the Hongmen (secret society) in the Qing period). Originally published in 1927. Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1996.

Jiaqing Daoguang liangchao shangyu dang (Archives of imperial edicts of the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods), ed. by Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000.

Kuhn, Philip. *Soulstealers: the Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Ownby, David. *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China, the Formation of a Tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Qinding Da Qing huidian shili (Precedents and regulations of the collected statutes of the Great Qing dynasty). 1886. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe,1995.

Qing shilu, Xuangzong Cheng huangdi shilu (Veritable records, the veritable records of the Daoguang emperor) (abbrev. *Qing shilu, Daoguang reign*). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986.

Taihe xianzhi (Gazetteer for Taihe county). 1826.

Tomi Saeki. *Shindai ensei no kenkyu* (A study of salt administration in the Qing period). Kyoto: Toyoshi kenkyukai, 1956.

Wang Zengfang. *Shenqi yuzhai wenji* (The essays of Wang Zengfang), 1854.

Xiao Yishan. "Tiandihui qiyuan kao" (A study of the origins of the Tiandihui). In Xiao Yishan, *Jindai mimi shehui shiliao* (Historical sources of secret societies in the modern period). Beiping: Guoli Beiping yanjiuyuan, 1935; rep. Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1965.

Xijiang zhengyao (Summary of administration in Jiangxi), nd, Jingli si cangban, ed. by Jiangxi anchasi yamen; rep. in *Wan-Qing sibu congkan*. Taizhong: Wentingge tushu youxian gongsi, 2011.

"Xu Dihui riji." ms, n.d., n.p., repr. in Guojia tushuguan fenguan, eds., *Zhonghua lishi renwu biechuan ji* (Biographies of Chinese historical personalities), vol. 53. Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2003.

Zhongguo renmin daxue Qingshi yanjiusuo, *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan* eds. *Tiandihui* (The Tiandihui) (abbrev. *Tiandihui*). Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1987.

Zhuang Jifa. "Qingdai Min-Yue diqu de renkou liudong yu mimi huidang de fazhan" (Population movement in Fujian and Guangdong and the rise of secret societies in the Qing period). In Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, eds. *Jindai Zhongguo chuqi lishi yantaohui lunwenji* (Proceedings of the Conference of the History of Early Modern China). Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1989.

———. *Qingdai Tiandihui yuanliu kao* (A study of the origins of the Tiandihui in the Qing dynasty). Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1981.

"Zou wei jiehui feitu zhanshan rangming yu tu jiuzhong baofu nahuo shouhuo duoming shenming banli gongzhe juzou" (Memorial on a case of secret society bandits gathering people for revenging a homicide brought about by the alleged occupation of a grave site for which the headman and accomplices have been arrested and tried). In *Zougao*, vol. 2.

"Zou wei shenming danfei jieci jiehui geqing dingni juzou" (Memorial on the trial of coolie bandits forming secret societies). In *Zougao*, vol. 3.

Zougao (Draft palace memorials). Harvard-Yenching Library, ms, n.d., n.p.