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SOCIETY

EUROPEANS and Americans encountering China in the nineteenth century frequently described its society and culture as “stable” over long periods of historical time, or, more perniciously, as “stagnant.”¹ For Western civilization—on a mission to bring its unique experience of progress to the vast backwaters of the world—this was a convenient myth. Stagnation, unfortunately, found its way into standard histories of late imperial China during the last half of the twentieth century not only in the West but also in China. In the People’s Republic, “stagnation” dovetailed nicely with “feudalism,” while in Taiwan it supplied a suitable contrast with American “modernization” that so enamored the Nationalists. This view of late imperial stagnation still finds adherents today.

To be sure, many elements of society remained relatively constant or were even strengthened during the Qing, providing continuity with China’s imperial past. These included patrilocal marriage, patrilineal kinship, partible male inheritance, the centrality of the household unit, sedentary agrarianism, land ownership, and the civil service examination system—the fundamental dividing line between elite and commoner. And Western observers who increasingly took “machines as the measure of men” were probably not wrong to find in the Great Qing empire little evidence of basic technological innovation. Yet the notion of Qing stagnation was illusory. Within a time frame paralleling the “early modern” period in the West, Qing society experienced many small and not so small changes that amounted, altogether, to a structural transformation. By the fall of the dynasty in 1911, and even by the Opium War of 1839–1842, China was a different society from the one that experienced the crisis and conquest of the mid-seventeenth century.

Population Growth and Movement

The most striking change from the beginning to the end of the Qing empire was increasing population density. Both sides of the Eurasian continent began to experience “modern population growth” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, due in part to the introduction of hardy New World food crops such as potatoes, sweet potatoes, and peanuts. These countercyclical crops served as brakes on starvation during harvest failures of the more preferred staples, rice and wheat. Following the seventeenth-century crisis, China’s population growth resumed and shortly began to accelerate. A consensus estimate might place the population in 1700 at about 150 million, roughly the same as it had been a century earlier under the Ming. By 1800 it had reached 300 million or more, and then rose further to perhaps 450 million at the outbreak of the Taiping rebellion around 1850. By 2000 China’s population exceeded 1.25 billion.²

Like its late-Ming antecedent and its European counterpart, the early Qing’s rapid growth certainly owed something to declining mortality. The spread of potatoes and peanuts to the interior, aided by zealous local and provincial officials, staved off death from malnutrition. Smallpox, the great killer of the seventeenth century, was controlled through widespread inoculation. And improved birthing techniques and childcare practices, disseminated by a professionalized cadre of doctors and midwives and by commercially published medical handbooks, played some role in reducing infant mortality. But probably the most important element in China’s population growth was a drop in the rate of infanticide, which had been largely but not exclusively applied to girls. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, with the establishment of domestic peace and the opening of new lands and opportunities for livelihood, Qing subjects deliberately relaxed their practice of killing or abandoning newborns, though they returned to it again some time in the nineteenth century. While intensified contraception practices were slowing population growth in Europe during the twentieth century, ever more successful government anti-infanticide campaigns in China during the same time removed this traditional “preventive check” on the size of the population, with dramatic consequences.³

In Europe, which underwent structural changes in the economy from agriculture to manufacture, the areas of greatest population growth were major cities and the surrounding countryside. In China it was the reverse. Population growth was negligible in the Qing’s most urbanized and pop-

ulous region, the Yangzi delta, even in periods when the rest of the empire was growing rapidly.⁴ But settlement burgeoned in remote borderlands and highland areas, because these regions offered the best opportunities to improve one's livelihood by clearing and farming large tracts.

What this suggests, of course, is not merely population growth but also movement out of already crowded regions and into new lands of opportunity. The Qing regime deliberately contributed to an unprecedented westward migration by abrogating most of the Ming's legal prohibitions on geographic mobility (prohibitions already ignored for the most part during the Ming's last century or so) and providing positive incentives such as tax holidays, seed grain, and livestock. Sichuan's fertile Red Basin, which had been greatly depopulated by the bloodbaths of Zhang Xianzhong in the late Ming, produced a vacuum effect: "Huguang filled up Sichuan, and Jiangxi in turn filled up Huguang," in the words of the early nineteenth-century scholar Wei Yuan. By the 1720s the province's population was 70–80 percent non-native, and as much as 85 percent a century later. The social-cultural mix within Qing Sichuan was consequently complex and fraught with tension.⁵

Once long-inhabited areas of China proper had been resettled by the early eighteenth century, Qing subjects began streaming into the empire's frontiers, converting marshland and forests into Chinese-style sedentary farmland. As we have seen, throughout most of the 1700s millions of Han Chinese moved into the southwest (today's Yunnan and Guizhou provinces), braving tropical diseases to which they lacked immunity in order to farm the region's fertile valleys and mine its mountains for copper and other valuable metals.⁶ In eighteenth-century Taiwan as well, Qing constraints on colonization were frustrated by an intense land hunger, aggravated by profit-making opportunities for commercial rice cultivation to feed the chronically grain-deficit mainland areas just across the straits. Effectively, over the course of the mid-Qing, Taiwan became socially and economically incorporated into Fujian province.⁷

After the Qing's conquest of the northwest New Dominion (Xinjiang) in the 1750s and 1760s, the Qianlong court launched a deliberate policy of agricultural colonization, in part to guarantee a stable grain supply for the large contingent of troops stationed there and in part to alleviate population pressure on the central provinces. The colonies came in many forms: East Turkestani Muslims, bannermen, and Han Chinese; military colonies, penal colonies, and colonies of free civilians. Government incentives to homesteaders consisted of land grants, free tools and seeds, loans of cash, and livestock. By the middle of the nineteenth century,

some 3,600,000 *mou* (approximately 600,000 acres) of land in Xinjiang had been converted to settled agriculture.⁸

In the Jurchen ancestral homeland in the northeast, Han migration was at first much slower than in the northwest. Prior to 1668 the court promoted colonization of Liaodong, and in the 1670s and 1680s sent some colonists into the frontier territories of Qilin and Heilongjiang. But most migration into Manchuria came about in defiance of imperial law. In the first year of his reign, Qianlong—acknowledging the scope of the problem—declared the leasing of Jurchen lands to Han civilians illegal. But by the late nineteenth century, even minimal attempts to enforce this edict were abandoned, and from the 1890s through the early twentieth century 25 million people migrated from Shandong and Hebei to Manchuria—one of the greatest movements of people in modern times.⁹

The Qing migration into frontier regions was paralleled by movement into newly reclaimed environments within China proper. The traditional pattern of Chinese agriculture, which favored cultivation of plains and river valleys, had left the empire's considerable highlands to indigenous peoples or to bandits, smugglers, and other marginal types. A Ming prohibition on highland residence had carried over into the early Qing, but like other bans on geographic mobility, it was honored more in the breach than the observance and was gradually revoked under the Qing. Consequently, the eighteenth century was the period when Chinese civilization moved decisively uphill. One attraction of the mountains was their metal deposits, particularly copper and lead to meet the rapidly commercializing economy's demand for coin. The result was a full-fledged mineral rush throughout the empire in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. But a more pervasive compulsion was, again, the hunger for new farmland.

The early settlers who moved into highland areas along provincial borders in central and south China and flanking the Han River in the northwest often practiced a shifting agriculture—they cut down trees and sold them for timber or charcoal, burned the remaining vegetation in place for fertilizer, and then moved on to adjacent areas for the next growing season. Their slash-and-burn practices and other forms of mountain livelihood progressively distinguished upland settlers from their lowland neighbors, with whom they lived in a tense reciprocity. They became known as “shed people” (*pengmin*), because of the mats they carried on their backs and erected as temporary shelters. Though ethnically Han, they were something of a denigrated social caste.¹⁰

Another wave of migration was made possible by wealthy land de-

velopers who contracted with the administration to reclaim very large swaths of highland and then subcontracted with smaller entrepreneurs to strip the tract into sections and prepare it for cultivation. The same parcel of farmland might thus acquire multiple layers of ownership with multiple collectors of rent.¹¹ Individual households were recruited to do the actual farming. Dry-field crops such as sweet potatoes were usually the first to be grown because they were well suited for hillsides, but wherever possible flat terraces were eventually cut into the slopes to allow wet rice cultivation (Fig. 9).

The impetus for land reclamation came essentially from the private sector, but around 1730 the Yongzheng emperor—justifiably alarmed by the need to expand the food supply to feed a growing population—launched a campaign designed to motivate his field officials to compete with one another to reclaim new land. With five- or ten-year tax holidays as an incentive, these officials added over a million new arable acres

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Fig. 9 Terraced hillsides.

to the registers during Yongzheng's reign. One predictable result was a flurry of false reporting and the assignment of uncultivable land to local households in order to record it as reclaimed. When the tax holidays expired, a further crisis arose because the new tax burden (made heavier by nonexistent or nonproductive lands on the registers) had to be distributed among the jurisdiction's farm households.

One attempted solution was to ferret out genuinely productive land that had been illicitly reclaimed by these farmers in the past and then assign the new tax burden to these formerly untaxed parcels. But this, of course, set into motion another round of corrupt practices. With the accession of the more cautious and self-consciously "magnanimous" Qianlong emperor in 1735, the court decided to strike a large percentage of the new acreage from the tax registers altogether. Several officials, including the governor of Henan province, were dismissed for their imprudence in the reclamation campaign. But the court announced its continued support for legitimate land reclamation, offering in some cases permanent tax exemptions for newly cultivated small parcels of land within existing settlements.¹²

Without question, the frenzy of agrarian land reclamation greatly increased the empire's food output, and to the end of the eighteenth century supported a population growth spurt without a per capita decline in food consumption. But an unanticipated and disastrous consequence of land reclamation was ecological decay. Deforestation led to massive topsoil runoff, which not only made the land progressively less fertile but silted up river channels, raising the riverbed, constricting the banks, and causing floods. Although the Yellow River and other waterways running through the sandy soil of the north China plain had presented a chronic flood threat for millennia, the well-channeled Yangzi and other rivers of central and south China had not. But the wholesale ecological deterioration of the mid and late Qing changed this for all time. The problem was compounded by the dramatic constriction of central China's two largest lakes, the Dongting in Hunan and the Boyang in Jiangxi. These and other lakes historically served as floodwater receptacles for torrential snowmelt from the highlands, when the river channels could not handle the sudden volume of water. Over the course of the Qing, as land-hungry farmers constructed polders (dikes) in order to claim parts of the lake bed for rice cultivation, the capacity of these natural receptacles to mitigate flood damage was greatly reduced.

From the late eighteenth century on, the administration was aware

of its growing ecological problem and periodically—following a major flood—would condemn and destroy the new reclamation projects thought to have caused the catastrophe. One of the first instances came in 1788, when the Yangzi's dikes burst in western Hubei, prompting the Qing administration to seize and destroy a privately reclaimed island in the river. But over time the compulsive drive for new arable outstripped any government efforts to constrain it.¹³

Land and Labor, Debasement and Servitude

Generally speaking, and without making allowance for the considerable regional variation that certainly existed, we can posit some broad trends in the concentration of landholding during the late imperial period. At the beginning of the Ming, land was held in the form of large manorial units. The first Ming emperor, who had come to the throne in part as an agrarian reformer, broke these estates up under a “land to the tiller” policy that ushered in an era of small freeholding proprietorship. But over the course of the Ming, the trend was toward reconcentration in the hands of fewer owners, though not in the same form as before. One key method was commendation, whereby a small farm household, unable to meet the increasing tax burden on its land, would sign over ownership to a more prosperous neighbor (or one enjoying gentry tax breaks) in exchange for freedom from tax obligations and a permanent lease on its former property. By the early seventeenth century, perhaps the majority of the empire's farmland was owned by what modern scholars call “rentier landlords” and was worked and managed by small households of commoners.

The conquering Qing declined to follow the Ming founder's example in undertaking systematic land reform, ultimately choosing instead to acknowledge the Han elite's economic dominance in exchange for their acceptance of the Qing conquerors' political legitimacy. However, the peasant wars of the Ming-Qing transition had done their part to improve the position of tenant farmers. Many landlords, fleeing the volatile countryside, abandoned their holdings or sold them off cheaply. By reducing population pressure, warfare increased the value of labor relative to land. One result was a revival of small freeholding proprietorship. Another was that labor-hungry landlords granted willing and capable tenants permanent tenancy rights or surface ownership of land, conditional only on payment of rent. This arrangement gave tenants a sense of security and

an incentive to make capital improvements and experiment with new crops. The resulting agricultural productivity over the course of the Qing kept pace (roughly) with the era's rapid population growth.

The continual movement of rural elites into towns and cities and into various professions allowed many tenant households to exercise a great deal of autonomy in crop selection and other managerial decisions. In certain prefectures of the lower Yangzi region, and perhaps elsewhere, an agency known as the landlord bursary found tenants and collected rents for urbanized landlords, who often had no idea who was actually farming their land or even where those properties were located.¹⁴ The benefits to tenants of this relative freedom may have been largely offset by the impact of population growth, however, which once again raised the value of land relative to labor and consequently drove rents ever higher. In certain especially hard-hit regions, the mid-nineteenth-century rebellions and their associated depopulation may have reversed this effect, recreating the conditions of the early Qing and inclining labor-starved landlords to offer very favorable terms to capable tenants. One scholar has argued that a labor shortage in the wake of the Taiping rebellion of 1851–1864 may have had repercussions as late as the 1920s and 1930s, impeding the efforts of the Communists to incite tenant rebellion in the lower Yangzi region.¹⁵

The economic realities of landlordism and tenancy were complicated by issues of personal status. While the vast majority of ordinary subjects of the Great Qing empire were free commoners (*liangmin*), not everyone enjoyed this standing.¹⁶ There existed two basic alternatives to “free” or “good” (*liang*) status: membership in a debased status group, and one or another form of personal servitude. Both debased and servile persons were legally ineligible to sit for the civil service examinations like ordinary commoners, and in judicial hearings their rights and obligations were differently understood by the court (though even servile individuals, despite their status as “half-human, half-chattel,” were held personally competent to obey the law). In customary practice, debased and servile persons were excluded from marriage with free commoners and were obliged to bow or otherwise acknowledge their inferiority in social situations. Over the course of the Qing, the imperial court and the bureaucracy moved to merge more of debased and servile people into the broad population of free subjects of the throne, but it did so in fits and starts, and by the end of the imperial era it had still not eliminated the two categories altogether.

The caste-like status of debasement was assigned to tattooed criminals, prostitutes, female adulterers, the penetrated party in homosexual male unions, and other individuals identified as social deviants. But certain hereditary groups, most of them occupation-specific, existed in various discrete localities which were also classed as impure. These included the professional musician-dancer families of Shanxi, the beggars of Suzhou, and various boat-dwelling fisherman households along the south-east coast. Altogether, the number of debased subjects was probably never more than a minute segment of the Qing population, and membership was often quite negotiable. Economically successful households could buy their way out of this category over the course of several generations.

The number of imperial subjects living in some condition of servility was certainly much greater, the true percentage being obscured by the fact that the category itself was nebulous, with many kinds of servitude being outright illegal under Qing statute. Servile status existed at every level of the economic hierarchy. For example, all members of the Eight Banners—including many of the highest officials in the empire—were by definition slaves of their banner headman and ultimately of the emperor. In the process of conquering north China, moreover, as the Qing carved out imperial, princely, or official manors out of lands left fallow during the late Ming rebellions, workers on these estates all became bondservants—but so too did the estate overseers, who could be very wealthy and powerful individuals indeed. Over the first century and a half of the dynasty, much of the land belonging to these manors became effectively privatized and often fell into possession of the overseers. Former estates gradually grew into agrarian villages, and resident households became in practice free owner-cultivator or tenant households.¹⁷

Probably a still greater number of servile persons were products of indigenous Han Chinese arrangements inherited from the Ming or even earlier. Among these were a relatively small number of household slaves, plus much larger numbers of hereditarily unfree farm laborers and enserfed tenant farmers. Rebellions of just such groups had contributed to the Ming collapse, but they were still around in the early Qing, although substantially reduced in number. Rumors that the new regime was committed to their universal liberation spawned the occasional local bondservant rebellion in the Qing's first decades. Such rumors were false, and indeed the forging of the new regime's throne-gentry alliance grew in part out of its demonstrated willingness to help landlords suppress uprisings

of their servile labor force. Nevertheless, the early Qing reigns were dotted by government efforts to manumit various segments of the empire's unfree population.

In the 1680s, for example, the Kangxi emperor launched a program whereby indentured servants on government estates might purchase their freedom and become commoners. Throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, judicial officials at all levels of the bureaucracy, with court approval, moved progressively to narrow the categories of agrarian hirelings whose personal freedom might legally be restricted by their employers. Various formulas were experimented with to distinguish the free from the unfree: how many years the worker had been in the master's employ, whether the worker lived in a separate household or lodged in the master's own house, whether the workers' forebears were interred in the master's family cemetery, whether or not an employment contract existed, and, if so, whether it stipulated a date for the expiration of service.¹⁸

But it was the vigorously state-making Yongzheng emperor who most directly attacked the problem of debasement and servitude. During the first years of his reign in the late 1720s, he legislated aggressively to have various local pariah groups such as musicians and fishermen accorded full legal rights as Qing subjects, and also to manumit agrarian bondservants. Much has been written about the Yongzheng emancipation campaigns, and their breadth has sometimes been overstated. What the emperor himself said was that he wanted to *protect* the sanctity of the bond between master and servant—the canonically approved differentiation between superior and subordinate—but that to uphold such relationships where they were legitimate it was first necessary to identify and correct instances where such servile arrangements were improperly imposed.

Chief among the latter, in Yongzheng's view, was agrarian tenancy, which in the vast majority of cases was and ought to be a freely contracted arrangement allowing farm households to acquire managerial rights over a leasehold and to leave that leasehold upon the expiration of their contract if a more favorable situation arose. In other words, tenancy was less a status arrangement than a pragmatic device that allowed land and labor to consistently be put to their most productive use. How effectively Yongzheng was able to enforce his views throughout the empire remains unclear. In the reigns of Qianlong and his successors, in any case, there was little follow-up action. In scattered pockets such as Anhui's Huizhou prefecture, servile tenancy remained significantly widespread.¹⁹

Ethnicity

In the multinational Qing empire, ethnic identities were matters of open debate to an extent they had likely not been at any previous time in imperial history. Among the many reasons for this, foremost was the fact of rule by an avowedly non-Chinese house, along with very public disagreement within the court itself on the rulers' own ethnic character. Second was the tremendous imperialist expansion undertaken by the Qing, which more than doubled the Ming territory and bequeathed to post-imperial China the headaches of ethnic separatism. And third was the filling in of peripheral and marginal areas within the inner heartland, which had been claimed as part of the empire for nearly two millennia but which had until the early modern era been only sparsely populated by persons who understood themselves to be Han Chinese.

The new necessity of confronting culturally diverse populations within the expanding confines of "our empire" presented Qing subjects with a profound challenge of alterity ("otherness") not unlike that experienced by early modern Europeans encountering the peoples of the New World. Was what distinguished the Chinese from the barbarian or savage simply a package of cultural practices—such as eating with chopsticks, practicing sedentary intensive agriculture, living in a patrilineal-patrilocal family system, properly burying one's dead and offering them ancestral sacrifice, and (at least for the elite) striving to achieve literacy in the Chinese written language—or were there, as Wang Fuzhi had argued in the era of the dynastic transition, more essential biological ("racial") differences between us and them?

This question of course had profound implications for the possibility of assimilating or "civilizing" these exotic populations. Should one attempt to educate them through intensive elementary education programs, such as that introduced in Yunnan in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, or was this project fruitless or even undesirable? Was intermarriage to be encouraged or rather prohibited, on the grounds that devolution of Chinese into renegade half-breeds or racial traitors was the more likely outcome than elevation of the savage? Were indigenous peoples infinitely diverse, as the ever more sophisticated Qing ethnographies seemed to suggest, or were they effectively all alike, an undifferentiated "other" that could be homogenized into the category of Miao?

Just who were these bizarre creatures: were they truly "people" (*min*) or another species altogether, as hinted at by the use of snake, dog, or

other animal radicals in the Chinese characters invented to transcribe their names? If they were indeed people, albeit primitive ones, did this suggest, as the sixteenth-century Yunnanese exile Yang Shen had proposed with a radical hint of cultural relativism, that *min* was not really a singular category—there were actually multiple *min*, some presumably yet to be discovered? Or did their existence argue instead for a single scale of human evolution, in which case these primitive peoples must resemble the way we Chinese had looked in the distant past? Were their cultural practices simply pitiful or contemptible, or was there something in them of the “noble savage,” to be wistfully admired if not emulated? The proliferation of illustrated albums of aboriginals (a Qing equivalent of *National Geographic*) seemed to suggest that this might be the case.²⁰

And, if these savages were indeed the ancestors of Han Chinese, was it not remotely possible that something had been lost as well as gained in the course of the civilizing process? This was suggested by one Chinese observer of Taiwanese aborigines in the 1820s. Deeply affected by the cultural malaise of the troubled Daoguang era, with its economic depression, recurrent natural disasters, and ominous threat of European expansion, he argued that the rampant commercialization of contemporary society had corrupted our inherent propriety and that we should “get back to fundamentals, like the ancients,” along the model presented by these noble primitives.²¹

Even among populations that all agreed were essentially Han Chinese, there was debate about whether certain of them were truly *min*—persons of full competence. One such group, comprised largely of boat-dwelling fishermen and peddlers along the Fujian and Guangdong coasts, were known as Dan. Although physiologically and linguistically indistinguishable from their agrarian neighbors, the fact that they did not have title to onshore property, did not possess graveyards to properly inter their ancestors, and were popularly associated with female prostitution made them unsuitable marriage partners for members of polite local society, and had gradually forced them into the status of a distinct and despised cultural group. It was said that the Dan were descendants of a later wave of the prolonged southern migration from north and central China that had occurred over the early and mid-imperial eras, but more recent scholarship suggests that it was less the date of arrival than the simple matter of relative success or failure at acquiring good farmland when they got there that initially determined whether or not a given household would be labeled Dan.

Yet Dan status, too, was mutable and negotiable. If a boat-dwelling household through its economic success in commerce or even piracy succeeded in acquiring property—"getting landed"—it might be only a matter of a generation or two before it shed its Dan label. Close inspection of elite genealogies in the Fuzhou area suggests that at least some lineages emerged from Dan roots during the Qing. Grafting their own patriline onto another one of impeccable *min*-hood, and even explaining away the awkward fact of a differing surname by positing male adoption of a forebear several generations earlier, newly wealthy families were able to claim descent from the earliest southern migrants from China's prestigious central plain; as such, they could not possibly have been Dan. Like other identities in the culturally fluid Qing empire, this was at bottom a product of local consensus; if you could convince your neighbors you were not Dan but *min*, then that was what you were.²²

Somewhat comparable was the case of the Hakka ("guest households"), so named to distinguish them from the "host people" (*bendi ren*) among whom they lived in south China. The Hakka probably did descend from a later wave of southern migrants, and through centuries of intermarriage and isolated living gradually developed a somewhat distinctive physical appearance and cultural identity based on dialect, cuisine, and social practices such as the rejection of female footbinding. Having settled largely in the highlands (the only land readily available in the south at that late date), they developed technologies suitable to their ecological niche, including forestry and the cultivation of tea, indigo, and tobacco. They lived in tense mutual accommodation with their lowland neighbors, with whom they traded for grain.

The mid-Qing was a favorable era for the Hakka. Not only were their products in demand, but the mining boom of the Yongzheng and early Qianlong reigns opened new livelihoods for those already long-adapted to highland living. A Hakka diaspora thus fanned out from its initial center in Guangdong's Mei County to upland areas throughout the southeast, including Taiwan, and newly wealthy Hakka men began to acquire examination degrees and enter the empire's cultural elite. Though the group had been around for centuries before this, it seems to have been only in the eighteenth century that the label "Hakka" itself began to acquire broad currency, and only in the early nineteenth century, under the leadership of the new Hakka literati, that a transcendent and proud cultural identity was forged among the geographically dispersed Hakka population as a whole. They became politically active and eventually

played a central role in both the Taiping rebellion and the Republican Revolution of 1911.²³

Of course, in the geographically mobile Chinese society of the Qing era, ethnicity could be based on nothing more than local origin and, under the right circumstances, could lead to social marginalization. In the great middle Yangzi entrepôt of Hankou, merchants from Shaanxi, though among the richest men in town, were marked off by costume, cuisine, and ghettolike residence patterns and were held in suspicion by their neighbors for their dour and reclusive conduct. In the riverport city of Xiangtan, “guest merchants” from Jiangxi were attacked by crowds of local Hunanese in 1819 during a performance of their distinctive Jiangxi-style opera. And in the rapidly growing treaty port of Shanghai, in which migrants from well-off Jiangnan areas such as Ningbo, Wuxi, and Suzhou made up the urban elite, poorer immigrants from northern Jiangsu province were identified as an inferior cultural group. Denigrated because of their coarse “Subei” dialect and rustic ways, they were systematically channeled into the most menial and ill-paying jobs and suspected of sedition and collaboration with the Taiping and later the Japanese. Though “Subei” identity had no significance in northern Jiangsu itself, once it had been constructed by others in Shanghai, it became a unit of collective identity and eventually collective pride.²⁴

One of the most objective markers of ethnic marginalization in the Qing empire was reduced access to the examination system. The distribution of scarce examination passes provoked as much conflict between settled mainstream populations and their culturally stigmatized neighbors as did major economic disagreements. This particular issue was consequently a special focus of imperial ethnic policy. The assimilation-minded Yongzheng emperor, for instance, set up special Miao exams in Yunnan in the 1720s in order to foster an indigenous literati elite, and in 1734 he set aside special quotas for non-Han peoples on exams in Guizhou. In the wake of a 1723 rebellion in Jiangxi of shed people—largely but not exclusively Hakka—over their exclusion from local examinations, Yongzheng declared that landholding shed people were fully eligible to sit for the exams. In the hope of assuaging the hostility between them and the host population, however, he designated separate quotas for passes by the two groups—in effect reifying the notion that shed people were somehow distinctive.

In an edict of 1729 the emperor declared Dan and other stigmatized populations to be ordinary commoners (*fanmin*), with all the privileges

that accrued to this status, including examination candidacy. But over the first decades of his reign, Yongzheng's successor gradually eliminated nearly all such affirmative action policies. In 1771 Qianlong went so far as to modify his father's 1729 *fanmin* edict to specify that the right to sit for the examinations would accrue to formerly stigmatized groups only four generations after they became taxpaying property holders.²⁵

Women and Men

Gender roles in the Great Qing Empire were in constant flux. Discussing his married life in the late eighteenth century, for instance, a government secretary from Suzhou named Shen Fu wrote:

It was almost three in the morning when I returned [home]. The candles had burned low and the house was silent. I stole quietly into our room to find my wife's servant dozing beside the bed and Yün herself with her make-up off but not yet asleep. A candle burned brightly beside her; she was bent intently over a book, but I could not tell what it was that she was reading with such concentration. I went up to her, rubbed her shoulder, and said, "You've been so busy these past few days, why are you reading so late?" Yün turned and stood up. "I was just thinking of going to sleep, but I opened the bookcase and found this book, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*. I had often heard it spoken of, but this is really the first time I had had a chance to read it. The author really is as talented as people say" . . .

Yün's habits and tastes were the same as mine. She understood what my eyes said, and the language of my brows. She did everything according to my expression, and everything she did was as I wished it. Once I said to her, "It's a pity that you are a woman and have to remain hidden away at home. If only you could become a man we could visit famous mountains and search out magnificent ruins. We could travel the whole world together. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"²⁶

The relationship of Shen Fu and his wife was far from the coldly instrumental form of marriage often taken as typical of Chinese society in past times. Expressed most simply, they were "in love," and in the kind of companionate marriage that emerged during the late Ming. But they were probably not typical of married couples in the mid-Qing.²⁷ In the

predominant form of spousal union at that time, women were systematically subjected to the many restraints embodied in a Confucian moral system designed by and for men. They were more likely to suffer infanticide; they were severed from their natal family at marriage and became effectively the property of their husband's parent's household; their only legal grounds for divorcing their husbands were severe physical mutilation or the attempt to sell them into prostitution, while husbands could dismiss their wives for such failures as excessive talkativeness; their rights of inheritance and property ownership were severely restricted; they were confined to the inner quarters of their homes and denied mobility and sociability; their practice of binding their daughters' feet to make them more marriageable caused severe pain and restricted physical movement throughout life; and so on (Fig. 10).²⁸ But Shen Fu and Yün's marriage had itself been an arranged one (at age fourteen for both of them), and though they were urban, literate, and of the gentry class, they were by no means part of the economic elite. Yet they enjoyed a romantic union of the kind we usually think of as Western and middle-class.

One thing conspicuously absent from Qing companionate marriage, by comparison with its earlier manifestation in the late Ming, was the inspiration provided by the courtesan culture. In famous late-Ming pleasure quarters such as the Qinhuai riverfront in Nanjing, sojourning males encountered a model of refined, literate female companion that some sought to emulate in their marriage partners. But by the early Qing the romanticized courtesan culture had gone underground, if not departed altogether. As part of its defense of fundamentalist Confucian family values and its attempt to put the genie of "cultural revolution" back into the bottle, the Qing court in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries cracked down hard on sexual permissiveness as manifested in prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, and rape. In this project it enjoyed real but only temporary success.²⁹ By the Qianlong reign, if not before, red-light districts such as the "flower boats" on the canals of the wealthy salt-trade city of Yangzhou had once again become empire-wide meccas of courtesanship in its most elegant and fashionable form.

Meanwhile, in more economically diverse port cities such as Tianjin, Hankou, and Chongqing, the recovering sex trade became big business, serving all strata of the commercial and transport male labor force with a finely-graded hierarchy of prostitutes. Eventually, with the mushrooming growth of Shanghai in the late nineteenth century, the two trends overlapped. This treaty port became a city of prostitutes, ranging from

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the print version of this title.]

Fig. 10 A Chinese woman, 1870s. Courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

immiserated streetwalkers to nationally famous emblems of femininity, sophistication, and cultural cosmopolitanism, whom male patrons worshipped, compulsively gossiped over, and treated with elaborate ritual deference.³⁰

A particular flashpoint in the shifting terrain of gender roles in the Qing empire, especially in the eighteenth century, was the cult of widow chastity. The practice of child or early adolescent betrothal, combined

with a high incidence of early mortality, added up to a significant population of youngish widows. Usually, these women had already moved into their husband's parental household prior to his death, and this family now bore the burden of supporting an individual who could never fulfill her intended function, which was to bear her husband and his patriline a male heir. On the other hand, given the society's unbalanced sex ratio (owing mostly to infanticide but also to death in childbirth), a still-attractive female, regardless of whether she had been betrothed in the past, might command a hefty brideprice were she sold to a new husband.

Mindful of this powerful incentive to commodify young widows, and viewing widow chastity as a synecdoche for all other relationships of devout filiality (including loyalty to the throne), the Qing court launched a program to bestow honors (such as the right to erect a ceremonial arch) on those families who resisted the temptation to sell off their superfluous daughter-in-law and chose instead to underwrite her virtuous widowhood. In culturally marginal areas such as the southwest, imperial officials used widow-chastity campaigns as a vehicle of civilization and a means to eradicate "barbaric" marriage practices such as the levirate (according to which a man is obligated to marry the childless widow of his dead brother in order to father children and preserve his brother's line). But in wealthy central regions such as Jiangnan, many elite families began to use imperial acknowledgment of widow chastity in the social competition with their neighbors for status, and the throne came to view this behavior as unseemly. Especially in cases where honors were extended to families of chaste widows who committed suicide at the time of their husband's death, the authorities increasingly suspected that such actions might have been coerced and argued that widow suicide, however selfless, still showed an immoral lack of respect for human life. Gradually, then, the court tempered its enthusiasm for the widow-chastity cult and offered awards more sparingly.³¹

New intellectual trends such as the evidential research movement contributed to doubts about what constituted virtuous widowhood. Skeptical of Song Neo-Confucianism in general, scholars such as Wang Zhong began to challenge Cheng Yi's famous dictum that it would be better for a widow to starve to death rather than remarry. Noting that such sentiments were not backed up by new research into the realities of classical antiquity, they contrasted the excessive demands of ritual propriety with commonsense human compassion and came down more often than not on the side of the latter.³²

A major stimulus to the changing and contested constructions of gen-

der during the Qing was the historically unprecedented incidence of male sojourning. In a variety of ways, being left alone at home for extended periods gave women considerable leeway for action.³³ Wives of absent husbands expanded their role as household financial managers. Elite women continued the kinds of artistic pursuits that had become fashionable in the late Ming, especially writing (and occasionally publishing) poetry. And new arenas of female sociability continued to open up. The conventional norms that prevented Shen Fu and his wife from getting out together and seeing the world (constraints they both lamented) still pertained but were also increasingly violated in practice, as conservative reformers repeatedly noted with alarm. Women left the inner quarters to attend local opera performances and temple festivals and, worse, they increasingly formed pilgrimage societies to tour famous sacred sites in the company of other restless women like themselves.³⁴

While Shen Fu welcomed the opportunity to read and discuss popular novels like *Romance of the Western Chamber* with his wife, other males were far more skeptical of female literacy. The eighteenth-century debate over education for women ran along strikingly similar lines to that over education for non-Han peoples at the frontiers, and indeed featured some of the same individuals. Critics claimed that educating women was a waste because their minds were too unsophisticated to grasp the essential meaning of the classics. Educated females would in fact prove more of a liability to society than a benefit, since they would just read pulp fiction and other trivia and have their horizons needlessly broadened beyond their proper domestic sphere.

Advocates of literacy held that all human beings were imbued with rational principle (*li*) and hence educable, and thus it was an offense against Heaven to systematically exclude any category of persons from educational opportunity. Since in the contemporary world women were rapidly becoming literate anyway, the best way to channel their reading tastes in a productive direction would be to afford them full access to the classical curriculum. And in an argument strangely echoing that for “Republican motherhood” in the antebellum United States, Qing reformists pointed out that in most cases it was the mother who provided her son his formative literary and moral training, and that educated mothers produced better-educated sons. As the activist official Chen Hongmou (1696–1771) concluded, “The process of civilization begins in the women’s quarters.”³⁵

Around the same time, the ideal of the “talented woman,” which had

been out of favor since early Qing rulers and elites repudiated the socio-cultural permissiveness of the late Ming, gradually regained public acceptability. A probable turning point came with the notoriety of Yuan Mei (1716–1797), a highly successful professional writer and celebrated libertine who energetically promoted the poetry of the various female members of his circle at Nanjing. By the early nineteenth century, the highly educated woman had become a noncontroversial staple of at least some segments of elite society, modestly but confidently discussing both cultural and political issues with prominent male scholars. And over the course of the century women reasserted their position in literature, as writers, critics, and readers within an expanding sphere of prose fiction.³⁶

Another arena of gender contestation was female footbinding. Shortly after the Qing conquest, the new regime prohibited this centuries-old Chinese practice, as a counterpart to its mandate that Chinese men and boys adopt the queue. Meeting social resistance on both fronts, the court decided that the queue fight was worth the cost, but footbinding was not. In fact, this mutilating practice probably became more widespread over the course of the Qing, working its way down the economic spectrum from its initial confinement to the leisured class. Whereas some families viewed the education of their daughter as a means of attracting a more desirable husband, many more families saw footbinding as an essential practice to secure a good marriage partner.

Certain groups such as the Hakka and—in apparently declining numbers—Manchus themselves eschewed footbinding as alien to their own cultural tradition. By the time the Qing empire entered its final decade, however, antipathy to footbinding had become a *cause célèbre*, and Natural Foot Societies began to spring up in many localities. Kang Youwei and other reformers—almost exclusively male—identified the practice not only as uncivilized but also as an enormous waste of the labor and energies of half the population, a perfect emblem of the dysfunctional nature of all of “old China.”³⁷

The Qing Gentry

In the classic mid-twentieth-century rendition of traditional Chinese rural society, class structure in the countryside consisted of but two contrasting groups: “peasants” (*nongmin*) and “gentry” (*shenshi*).³⁸ Beguiling as this simple picture might be, there were in fact a great many other social groups out there—merchants, peddlers, artisans, clerics, and espe-

cially transport workers. Even within these two major “classes,” the interests of individuals and subsets were as often at odds as they were in harmony with one another. And this complexity within each group was increasingly exacerbated over the course of the Qing.

The English term “gentry” is misleading, calling to mind the red-coated fox hunters in novels by Henry Fielding and Jane Austen. But the term’s application to China is not entirely without reason. Though the Qing gentry were not in possession of hereditary noble rank, they—like the British social group from which the name was drawn—were a landed elite upon whom imperial privileges were conferred and from whom a commitment to the management of local affairs was expected. In China as in England there had once been a true peerage or aristocracy, traces of which remained into the early modern period, but this group had been largely replaced by these newcomers as the dominant social force in the countryside. The displacement of an aristocracy of birth by a gentry based on personal educational achievement was initially a function of the late Tang and Song court’s decision to grant the civil service examination system the decisive role in access to bureaucratic office and hence upward mobility.³⁹ But a more dramatic rise of the gentry may have come in the sixteenth century, when they stepped up their involvement with economic commercialization and local management. This development made them unquestionably the dominant rural class.⁴⁰

Like their British counterparts, the Qing gentry were practitioners of a cultural-political style that was equally at home in the countryside and in the city. In his public role, a member of the Qing gentry was an imperially recognized male scholar and civil servant who had passed at least one level of the civil service examinations, held a degree, was legally entitled to wear gentry robes, was eligible for official service, and, though not necessarily an official himself, could talk to officials as an equal. Not infrequently in the Qing, the gentry were “retired” officials who had served in one or two brief appointments in their youth and then returned home for the bulk of their adult life to bask in the glory of this status. In his much broader private role, a member of the rural gentry was a large-scale landholder and part of a “great household”—he was, in other words, the local elite. In this private realm the term “gentry” included not just adult male degree-holders but their wives, descendents, and certain of their collateral relatives, as well as many patrilineal families that had at one time in the past (or perhaps never) produced a degree-holder.⁴¹

The Qing gentry were defined primarily by their lifestyle—they were

more refined and leisured than commoners, and more likely to be carried in a sedan-chair than to travel any significant distance on foot. They were usually more literate, and by the late Qing they regularly wore eyeglasses to prove it. They could afford to have art objects in their homes—a piece of porcelain, for example, with no practical utility other than to be admired for its beauty. For the upper gentry, connoisseurship of these “superfluous things” was an emblem of status.

Though many people in the local community might belong to common surname groups, gentry were far more inclined than their neighbors to participate in formal lineage organizations. For the major rituals of life passage—weddings, funerals, burials, ancestral sacrifices—they were more likely to adhere to the orthodox (and expensive) dictates of the twelfth-century Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi. Where commoners might engage in the cremation of deceased family members or invite an indecorous (but often highly entertaining) shaman or exorcist to officiate over a funeral, the gentry used these occasions to bolster their cultural hegemony—we are more orthodox and straitlaced than you and so have the right to enjoy a greater degree of wealth, along with your deference and obedience. Funerary and wedding ritual handbooks prescribed ceremonies of varying levels of complexity and expense, allowing households to calculate just what degree of ritual propriety they could afford. The performance of these family rituals also allowed gentry lineages to solidify their boundaries and establish internal hierarchies by deciding whom among those with the same surname to invite and where to place them in the seating arrangement. A major reason for the heated debates among Qing philologists over the authenticity of ancient ritual texts was precisely such practical issues as how to organize and stratify local society.⁴²

Over time, the narrower category of civil service degree-holder and the broader category of local elite merged. One reason was that those who passed the exams and secured official appointment often did well financially by this—that was the idea, of course—and invested their new wealth in land near their native home. Another reason was that degree-winners were nearly exclusively drawn from the leisured and economically comfortable group in the first place, since these families could afford to invest years in the education of their sons. And when a poorer household happened to produce a successful examination candidate, he would quickly marry into a wealthy neighboring family that may not have enjoyed this precise asset. A final commonality of interest that further cemented the two groups, if they did not overlap sufficiently before-

hand, was the system of tax breaks given to both degree-holders (legally, as a mark of status distinction) and to great households (extra-legally, by local authorities, as a means of enlisting their aid as tax farmers).

The examination system was founded on the myth that diligence in farming, combined with assiduous study, was the formula for examination success. But far more frequently than they admitted, the degree-holding gentry who were not drawn from the literati class itself had a family origin in trade rather than agriculture, which is why, for example, the commercial diaspora headquarters of Huizhou prefecture, Anhui, or the silk-producing town of Nanxun, Jiangsu, did unusually well in the examination sweepstakes. In not a few cases, the gentry's forebears were powerful local "strongmen"—militia and vigilante leaders who parlayed their entrepreneurship of violence into success for their descendents as civil literati.⁴³

The best idea of just who the gentry were as a social class—and a useful guide to where some of the fault lines within the group may have been drawn—can be derived from examining their sources of income.⁴⁴ The largest resource was private investments, first and foremost in land but also in pawnshops and other forms of usury (as the lending of money with interest became increasingly important over the course of the Qing) and in the growing commercial sector, where participation by degree-holders was formally illegal. Then came what might be termed their "official" income. If they were serving as bureaucrats, this included their salary, *yanglian* supplement, and various forms of "squeeze." If they were students in a county or prefectural school, it included a possible state stipend. But of growing importance over the course of the late imperial period were varying types of income-producing jobs that exploited the gentry's primary capital asset, its literacy.

Members of the local elite might serve as family tutors or schoolteachers. This had long been a means for a failed office-seeker to eke out an income, and in Ming and Qing fiction the impoverished village schoolmaster was a stock, often comic, figure.⁴⁵ In the booming nineteenth-century port of Hankou, a popular joke claimed that hanging out a shingle over one's door with the word "Teacher" had a double benefit: it was sure to attract students, plus, as an advertisement of the occupant's poverty, it kept beggars away. Nevertheless, with the rise in popular literacy from the late Ming on, there was a growing economic niche for this profession. More eminent scholars might sell their literary skills in the expanding marketplace of commercial publishing: as authors or ghostwriters, compilers of examination aids, writers of prefaces that served a function simi-

lar to today's book-jacket blurbs. They might even sell their name to a list of reputable "proofreaders" for potential best-sellers.⁴⁶

A growing number of gentry served as private secretaries in the entourages of sitting officials. Larger numbers derived incomes from service as managers of lineages, temples, guilds, or long- or short-term local community enterprises such as irrigation systems, relief dispensation agencies, and various civil construction projects. Especially in the late nineteenth century, they filled managerial posts in the mushrooming number of bureaus that collected and dispensed irregular taxes, contributions, and solicitations to finance peacekeeping and postrebellion reconstruction.⁴⁷

Certain of these gentry-managers looked more and more like professional engineers, most notably in hydraulics. Other gentry members involved themselves in the increasingly professionalized fields of medicine and law. Private legal advisors—a great many of them, if one believes the complaints of contemporary officials—were referred to as "litigation masters" or "litigation thugs," depending less on the agenda of the individual litigator than on the attitude of the speaker. While the Qing legal code did not contain any explicit reference to civil litigation and officials nearly universally condemned it, civil lawsuits gradually became routine, and the Qing state grudgingly advertised itself as willing to hear them, for a price. Not only did this act of "benevolent governance" preclude more violent means of private conflict resolution, but the very act of filing a legal complaint was a *de facto* endorsement by the litigant of the state's legitimacy. Acting as a "litigation master" was formally illegal after 1725—in the view of most bureaucrats the chief intent of such persons was to prolong the suit until all parties were bankrupted and no longer able to pay—but the state's own actions turned it into a growth industry.⁴⁸

All of this incipient professionalization was an elite counterpart of the occupational niche-seeking that commoners likewise pursued with ever greater specialization over the course of the Qing. The interest-orientation of the individual might vary greatly, depending on the particular mix of income sources upon which he drew. By the end of the dynasty, if not well before, it was probably unreasonable to speak of a coherent gentry "class."⁴⁹

For those who wished to sidestep the rigors of examination on their way to elite status, an alternative path was to purchase their degrees outright. The sale of gentry rank to wealthy commoners for a "contribution" of cash or grain was first systematically employed by the Kangxi

emperor during the early years of his rule in the 1680s. Under his successor, Yongzheng, the sale of degrees became a regular method not only of financing the government's response to natural disasters or pressing military needs but also of restocking the expanding system of ever-normal granaries. Many Qing literati applauded this system, not only as a means of underwriting legitimate administrative costs without raising taxes but also as a way of facilitating the upward mobility aspirations of manifestly successful subjects. A still larger number, however, decried the trading of degrees for contributions as diluting the moral integrity of the literati class. Responding to these critics, the Qianlong emperor severely curtailed the practice during the first decades of his reign, as part of his systematic reversal of the overly strict state-making initiatives of his father. However, by the second half of the eighteenth century the mushrooming expenses of Qianlong's military adventures persuaded him to resurrect the auction of degrees with unprecedented vigor. By 1800 there were an estimated 350,000 holders of purchased degrees in the empire, and that number would spiral upward as the government became more fiscally strapped in the nineteenth century.⁵⁰

Similar oscillations marked the throne's policies toward the privileges of gentry rank. As part of his program to reaffirm the throne-gentry alliance, the Kangxi emperor ordered that degree-holders accused of crimes be exempt from local criminal prosecution and turned over instead to the county education commissioner for "counseling." Yongzheng eliminated this practice, but Qianlong reinstated it. On the fiscal front, the Yongzheng emperor in the mid-1720s eliminated the privileged tax categories of "official household" and "scholar household" and restricted the gentry exemption from *corvée* obligations to members of the degree-holder's immediate household, rather than a wider circle of relatives. Again, his successor—who consistently saw local literati less as challengers to centralized authority than as partners in its exercise—with self-conscious "magnanimity" reversed these decisions. The Qianlong emperor's reinstatement of gentry privileges remained Qing policy throughout the rest of the dynasty.

Family and Kinship

One of the most striking features of the Qing period is the compelling power of patrilineal kinship, both culturally and socially. People deeply believed that the success or failure of any individual was centrally determined by the paternal guidance he received. In northeastern Hubei, for

example, local sources throughout the Qing reprinted over and over the letter written to his son by a local Ming-era patriarch, away in official service at Beijing. He wrote in part:

To Zou Han, son of my principal wife, Madame Yang:

I have been away from home now for nearly two years. The affairs of our home area; our relatives, neighbors, and friends; the comings and goings of people; our houses, irrigation works, trees, and crops; the prosperity of your elder brother's family; the health of the younger children—about all of these things I have heard very little. Although you have written me once or twice, you only give me the general picture of things . . . Your conduct is so slovenly and lackadaisical! A young man who treats his own parents this way will certainly not know how to behave toward relatives and neighbors . . .

You read almost nothing, and your experience of life is terribly shallow . . . You do not know how to live harmoniously with our neighbors, nor how to treat the aged with veneration, nor to show consideration to those in distress, nor to show compassion to those stricken with grief. You don't know how to reject those who would be bad examples for you, nor how to emulate those who are good. Neither do you know how to reciprocate those who are gracious to you, nor how to shun those who would do you harm . . . When you drink wine you don't know your limit. Your words on such occasions are wild and reckless, without either courtesy or forethought. When drunk, you act without regard for who is watching, and spend money heedless of what is reasonable and proper . . . You eat without proper etiquette, making yourself a laughingstock among polite society . . .

You fail to grasp the essentials of what is necessary to raise our family fortunes and status. Don't you understand that success in agriculture requires hard work—that raising farm animals requires feed and water, and raising crops requires planting and sowing? In the same way, raising children requires education and moral instruction. Our home must be kept clean and in good repair, the inner and outer must be kept segregated, and entering and leaving properly regulated. At nighttime, avoid gambling. In bountiful years, avoid extravagance. Avoid wasting time. Ensure that our hired workers are warm and well-fed, and that our household retainers are treated with compassion and respect . . .

In financial matters you must watch what other households do,

and pay your taxes accordingly. Pay hired laborers according to the dictates of compassion. In every single matter you must match expenditures to income. You cannot give too much thought to this! You must always keep the improvement of family fortunes foremost in your mind, lay aside what will be needed to pay our taxes, and anticipate the possibility of harvest shortfalls. Always calculate for the long-term, not simply on the basis of present conditions!⁵¹

According to local people, this kind of parental oversight was the formula for a family's, and the entire locality's, continued prosperity.

To further aid in this project, the Qing witnessed the full triumph of the type of kinship group known as the patrilineage—in older English-language sources often translated “clan”—as the major organizational device for local society. It was initially the outgrowth of a transformation in Chinese society during the Song dynasty that historians term the “localist turn.” When the civil service examination replaced aristocratic preferment as the major vehicle for staffing the imperial bureaucracy, elites gradually responded by altering their marital practices, their identity, and their loyalties. Instead of intermarrying within a broad quasi-aristocratic empire-wide elite, they forged systematic marital alliances with other wealthy families within their own native place, and in the process established the interests of the locality as paramount in their consciousness. What emerged were tightly intermarried township or county-level lineages that either individually or collectively sought to patronize, protect, and dominate their native turf. The construction of local lineages of this sort took place over a long period of time but reached a frenzy during the Qing era, when these prominent families became the basic building blocks of local society.⁵²

Why such a heavy emphasis at this particular time? One factor was intellectual. Following the wave of experimental free-thinking exemplified by Li Zhi and the social vogue of Buddhist and Daoist piety during the late Ming, the early Qing witnessed a zealous (and often competitive) return to Confucian orthodoxy. Whether this took the form of adhering to the prescriptions of the ancient Five Classics or the competing Four Books of the Song, lineage organization seemed to be a Confucian mandate. The elite's recoil from the social liberalism of the late Ming, along with the bloody class warfare that seemed to have been its outcome, led them to search for more effective means of imposing social discipline on their neighbors, and lineage-building provided one answer. But kinship

organization was not merely a reactive or defensive social strategy, it was an aggressive one as well. The Qing consolidation, with its demographic explosion and economic boom, seemed to offer both greater competition for resources and enormous opportunities for advancement to those who had effective organizational means to secure them.

Though ostensibly based on biological descent, Qing lineages were by no means facts of nature: they were deliberately crafted human artifacts. The first act in their creation, usually on the part of a later-generation member who had made good economically or in official service, was to identify an older “founding ancestor”—often but not always the first forebear of the surname group who had moved into the family’s present locale of residence. Precisely how far back in time one went to find this man, and how many of the branch lines of his descendants one chose to include in the organized lineage, was not specified, allowing for considerable flexibility in designing the parameters of membership. Not infrequently, lineages through some process of internal negotiation continually redefined these limits more broadly or more narrowly, depending on just whom they wanted to acknowledge as kinsmen.

Lineage leaders could be highly creative in selecting their founding ancestor, even postulating changes of surname along the way in order to stake their claim to prestigious origins.⁵³ Once the founder had been agreed upon, specific generational characters were assigned to each successive male generation: the character *hong*, for example, might be included in the given name of all males ten generations after the founder, the character *chuan* in all of the eleventh generation, and so on. A written genealogy was compiled, and often but not always professionally printed, to include the lineage’s history, biographies of illustrious ancestors, a chart of all members in each generation, regulations to govern members’ behavior, and often sitemaps and copies of title contracts for collective property. Finally, an ancestral hall was built to serve as lineage headquarters and locus of the annual ancestral sacrifice, at which time all members would be present and seated in finely differentiated hierarchical order.

Besides serving as an instrument for elites’ control over their commoner neighbors, lineage organization offered many additional attractions. One was to diversify the membership geographically and occupationally. Though rooted in one locality, for example, lineages might choose to keep as members households who had migrated or sojourned to other areas, if having representation in that area appeared beneficial

for commercial or other reasons. The ownership of collective property was another benefit of lineage organization. Although some very prominent lineages held little collective property beyond the ancestral hall itself, for others the lineage was important first and foremost as a vehicle for capital mobilization and management. In some Guangdong lineages, the lineage operated as an inheritance scheme equivalent to the European entail. To avoid the downward mobility of partible inheritance over successive generations, the lineage held title to virtually all the property of its member households, and shares in the collective, income-generating lineage estate rather than real property itself were divided by sons upon their father's death.

In many parts of the empire, lineage trusts were established to provide endowment income for maintenance of the ancestral hall and conduct of ancestral sacrifices, but very frequently their actual purposes went well beyond this. In some places they took the form of charitable estates that provided poor relief for indigent members of the lineage, or, in portions of the Yangzi delta, for the entire residential community regardless of surname.⁵⁴ In extreme cases such estates were established by multiple surname groups acting collectively. In the absence of an effective system of bank credit, lineage trusts were also probably the single most important means of mobilizing capital for large investments. With the lack of a limited liability incorporation law, these well-endowed funds usually did not operate businesses themselves but instead extended credit to individual entrepreneurs, usually members of the lineage.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, lineage trusts financed the capital-intensive reclamation of coastal rice paddy land in Guangdong's Pearl River delta and the very large and complex salt mining enterprises in southern Sichuan.⁵⁵ The trusts involved in operations such as these usually did not represent all members of the lineage but rather a specific group of investors who set aside capital in the name of a selected ancestor within the descent group (there could be many such trusts within a single lineage) and bought and sold shares in this trust much like any security within a modern capital market. Ancestral piety, in other words, acted with increasing transparency as moral cover for ideologically suspect speculative investments.

Qing officialdom held an ambivalent view of lineage organization. Because lineages were so supportive of the Confucian orthodoxy that was the bulwark of the imperial state's own legitimacy, they had to be applauded in theory; and in practice, regional officials often depended on

lineages' charitable and even entrepreneurial activities to maintain the welfare and livelihoods of people in their jurisdiction. In some cases during the Yongzheng and early Qianlong reigns, provincial officials even delegated juridical authority to lineage headmen as a means of relieving the strain on county magistrates of excessive criminal proceedings. But lineage power was at best a mixed blessing. Left unchecked, lineages could bully or even enslave their neighbors, as they routinely did in Guangdong, or they could engage in escalatingly violent feuds with one another, as they did in Fujian. Their entrepreneurial activity could be counterproductive to the larger economy, as when one western Hubei lineage's collective reclamation of a riverine sandbar for a rice paddy led to calamitous flooding throughout the middle Yangzi valley.⁵⁶

Sometimes descent groups simply grew too large for the central government's comfort, setting up multitownship or even multicounty higher-level lineage organizations, as they did in Jiangxi and Hunan. In such cases Qing officials might set aside their support for ancestral piety and break up kin groups, confiscating their collective assets on the grounds that the groups were not legitimate products of common descent but rather "unrelated households that happen to share a common surname."

Philanthropy

The Qing passion for founding lineages was but one manifestation of the remarkable wave of popular organization-building that characterized the early modern era in China. This was seen in new kinds of business enterprises, merchant and artisanal guilds, and native-place associations for sojourners. It encompassed revived scholarly academies, fraternal societies, and religious organizations spanning the gamut from orthodox to heterodox. All of these responded in their own ways to the greater competitiveness for scarce resources in a densely populated society, to the anomie generated by greater personal mobility and the Qing admixture of cultures, and also to the sense of opportunity afforded by the economic complexity of the times.

One of the most distinctive Qing-era expressions of the passion for organization-building was in the area of philanthropy.⁵⁷ Turning away from Buddhist and toward orthodox Confucian ideologies to underpin this activity, Qing society clearly articulated the concept of a "public" or "communal" sphere, as opposed to a "state" or "private" sphere, as both the agent and the beneficiary of philanthropic activism. Its increasingly

sophisticated, depersonalized, and bureaucratized forms of charitable organization represented a shift in goals from moralistic or exemplary action to practical ministration to the manifestly serious needs of a growing and complex population.

Perhaps the pioneering model of local charitable activity, dating from the Ming but surviving into the early Qing, was the Buddhist *fangsheng hui*, an association formed to accord its members karmic merit by purchasing and liberating captive fish, birds, or other small animals. A more functionally expansive type of organization constructed on this model, which enjoyed a wide vogue during the late Ming especially in lower Yangzi commercial cities, was known as the benevolent society (*tongshan hui*). The expressed purpose of such societies was to minister to the moral well-being of their members, known as “friends of the association,” rather than to cure the ills of the society as a whole, but they often took on such social missions as poor relief as a way to cultivate Buddhist or, increasingly, Confucian virtue.

With the return of competent government during the High Qing, the court vigorously sought to enter the arena of local charity. The Yongzheng emperor made mandatory in all counties the kinds of orphanages and poorhouses that had begun to appear on local initiative, and he also tried to standardize their activities. Though their finances might fall under the “public funding” entries in the county government’s account ledgers, actual support came most often from private contributions or bequests rather than from fiscal collections. Though these organizations served a very real social need by providing poor relief, they made no attempt to take full responsibility for the local indigent population but instead tried to provide an official model of how private interests ought to act toward the less fortunate in their midst.

A new style of organization gradually emerged in the early nineteenth century that would come to be known generically as the benevolent hall (*shantang*). Unlike orphanages and poorhouses, these institutions were fundamentally nongovernmental organizations, though they were usually registered with the local administration. They emerged in commercial cities of the Yangzi valley and along the coast, first in the 1820s but with much greater frequency in the turbulent years of post-Taiping reconstruction. Financed and managed by local merchants and urban property-holders, benevolent halls originated in local firefighting associations, lifeboat agencies, and societies to gather and inter corpses found on city streets. They added to these functions others such as operating gruel

kitchens (initially in the wake of floods or other natural calamities but increasingly during normal winters), dispensing medical aid, and in some localities sponsoring local peace-keeping militia.

Shantang were financed by scheduled subscriptions of their sponsors and by the proceeds from their endowment portfolios of urban rental properties. Management moved from voluntary service on the part of sponsors themselves into the hands of quasi-professionals. The benevolent halls' clear goal was to take care of all who needed their services so that the very profitable local commerce could function smoothly the growing presence of an underemployed class of urban poor. Although most benevolent halls took a specific neighborhood of the city as their operational horizon—frequently a neighborhood dominated by sojourners from a particular area of origin—in many cities they gradually worked out a means of mutually coordinating their activities and ultimately formed umbrella organizations on a municipality-wide level during the final decades of the century. This was Qing organization-building at its most impressive and dynamic.