

Chapter 1

Growth and Disorder

Paradoxes of the Qing Dynasty

Originally we were humble people and good subjects, but we became pirates for a variety of reasons. Because some of us were not careful in making friends, we fell in among robbers. Others of us were unable to secure a livelihood or were kidnapped while trading on the rivers and lakes ... In addition, as a result of the famine of the last couple of years, people had nothing with which to maintain their livelihood and as time went on could not help but pillage in order to live. Had we not resisted officials and soldiers, our lives would have been in danger. Therefore, we violated the laws of the empire and wrecked trade. This was unavoidable.

—Petition presented to Bai Ling, 1810¹

Introduction

The creation myths of the Chinese martial arts are full of mysterious mountain temples, ancient military heroes, and long lost truths. In current debates nothing serves to answer questions about a style's "authenticity" as quickly as an argument about its great antiquity. For instance, local lore dictates that many of the modern styles of southern China (including Wing Chun) are descended from the Southern Shaolin Temple, or strongly influenced by its students.

While the famed temple has turned out to be a literary creation, China does have an ancient and vast martial history. It is little wonder that so many modern martial artists look to the past to validate their work. Ancient schools of wrestling, sword dancing, and archery existed

during the Bronze Age and Early Imperial Period. The biographical legends of great swordsmen and assassins passed on by the Han historian Sima Qian have helped to shape the idea of “martial virtue” throughout Chinese history. Many discussions of the Chinese martial arts begin with an extensive investigation of these ancient traditions.

They may also spend chapters exploring the military literature and accounts of the rise of unarmed boxing during the Ming dynasty. This was the era when the ancestors of what we currently think of as the modern Chinese hand combat methods were first being brought together and popularized. If one is interested in the actual connection between the historic Shaolin order and the martial arts, this is the era to investigate.

The archeological exploration of southern China is certainly a fascinating subject. And historical records do indicate that there were distinct schools of boxing in the region during the latter part of the Ming dynasty. Yet the story of the modern Chinese martial arts really begins in the Qing dynasty, a few hundred years later.

The idea of boxing as a popular pastime, a valuable form of military training, and a pathway for self-cultivation first emerged in the late Ming dynasty. Most of the older forms of the art practiced in the south do not seem to have survived the transition between dynasties, or the other social disruptions that the region was subject to, without undergoing fundamental change.

The roots of southern Chinese hand combat, as it exists today, can be found in the unique forms of social and economic organization that emerged during the Qing dynasty. While practitioners drew on an extensive body of preexisting techniques and theories, these were reshaped and embedded in a new set of social institutions to create the traditions that we now think of as “martial arts.” Much of this project happened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the pace of change accelerating towards the end of this era. In fact, the period of 1840 to 1911 is particularly important in the emergence of the region’s unique martial traditions.

The Qing dynasty, founded by northern Manchu tribesmen, was the last and best documented of all China’s imperial governments. In reviewing its records we see essentially two different periods. The first, lasting from the establishment of the dynasty until roughly the turn of the nineteenth century, was characterized by political stability, the expansion of the economy, and a sustained population boom supported by ever-increasing harvests. The one hundred years of the next period (from roughly 1800 onward) continued to see an expansion in both

market size and population, but now these same factors worked against the state, causing internal strain and ultimately political collapse.

In 1600 China enjoyed a higher standard of living than any other state in the global system. Yet in the space of slightly more than three hundred years this position of dominance eroded. The Qing dynasty was ultimately bought down by its own inability to deal with increased domestic pressures and to recognize the growing imperialist threat posed by the West.

These national developments had a critical impact on the world of civilian martial artists. Intellectual ferment at the end of the Ming dynasty helped to create many of the basic ideas that are still taken for granted in hand combat training.² At the same time, this tended to be an elite-driven process that probably could not sustain the enthusiasm needed to bring Chinese martial arts into the modern era. To really understand the evolution of the modern schools that exist today we must consider how hand combat training became a mass phenomenon, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong Provinces. What forces created both the supply and demand for the rapid expansion of a new set of martial arts styles in southern China during the late nineteenth century?

We can better understand both sides of this equation by taking a closer look at the evolving demographic, economic, and political world in which these new styles (including White Crane, White Eyebrow, Hung Gar, Choy Li Fut, and Wing Chun) first emerged. The decline in agricultural wages and expansion of both national and international trade networks ensured that urban population centers would swell throughout the nineteenth century. Workers, paid in cash, had both the leisure time and resources to devote to martial arts training. Being a member of a martial arts school also provided urban employees with a set of connections that could be very helpful in times of unemployment or illness. This newly monetized economy also allowed for a rapid expansion of the pool of professional martial arts instructors.³

The turn toward rebellion, banditry, and even the threat of foreign invasion in the late nineteenth century increased both the demand for martial arts training and the number of individuals ready and willing to provide it. The development of local militia units had a profound effect on the region's social structure and even on the Qing state. New ideas about unarmed combat spread through these networks. Both the political turmoil and the new economic reality of the late nineteenth century led directly to the emergence of the first truly "modern" Chinese martial systems and schools.

The following chapter proceeds in three parts. The first briefly reviews the early history of the Qing dynasty, providing a framework for the detailed discussions to follow. In the second section we turn our attention to China's place in the growing international trade system and the threat of Western imperialism during the last half of the nineteenth century. Many of the most important events reviewed in both the first and second sections actually begin in southern China, our area of geographic interest. Lastly, we turn our attention to Guangdong Province and ask what life was like in Guangzhou and Foshan, two cities that are central to the emergence of Wing Chun and many other southern styles in the 1840s and 1850s. Both of these cities were shaped by the domestic and international conflicts of the nineteenth century, including the First and Second Opium Wars and the Red Turban Revolt.

We argue that the southern hand combat schools that emerged in the late Qing period were essentially adaptive structures responding to the needs of their day. As the power of the central government declined, local gentry found themselves forced to master the martial disciplines so that they could train a militia and maintain social order. As peasants were increasingly forced off the land and into urban work environments, they found themselves facing a new set of threats and lacking any traditional support structure. Practical self-defense was a real concern for this new class of urban dwellers. The outbreak of numerous rebellions, conflicts, tax revolts, and secret society uprisings throughout the nineteenth century ensured an emphasis on brutal practicality that still sets a number of these southern systems apart from other martial arts today.

The Qing in Late Imperial History

The Manchurians, who created the Qing dynasty, were a farming people who lived north of the Great Wall of China. In the generations immediately before the invasion of the south their leaders founded a new independent state, created a script for their spoken language, translated many Confucian texts, and with the help of a number of Chinese citizens (slaves, long-time residents and hired advisors) created their own parallel court structure complete with ministries and administrative processes. Before they ever seized Beijing, the future leaders of the Qing dynasty had already solved one of the great problems that plagued all of the "northern" conquerors. How does one integrate both his own political aspirations and Han Confucian tradition into a single set of govern-

ing institutions? By the time they breached the northern frontier, the Qing already had an efficient state structure in place. This gave them an advantage over the various generals and warlords then vying for the throne.

The Manchu invasion was initially aided by a number of Chinese officers who decided that the new dynasty offered a better chance for peace and stability than the rump Ming state. After quickly overrunning the northern half of the country, opposition to Manchu expansion centered around the Yangtze River basin and half-hearted attempts to prevent the Manchurian armies from crossing this natural barrier.⁴

The Qing responded with a carrot-and-stick strategy. They promised peace and social continuity to those forces that aligned themselves with the new state (including jobs in the civil service or opportunities to take “special” national exams), and utter destruction to anyone who opposed them militarily. In between these two extremes were a large number of former Ming officials who would not immediately serve the Qing, but who did not put up an organized resistance either. In dealing with this group, the Qing used diplomacy, engaging in public works projects to attempt to demonstrate that they had received the “Mandate of Heaven.” The regime even asked dubious scholars to audit their progress or compile important academic works of great cultural value as a way of demonstrating their virtue and ability to rule.

It took the Qing fifteen years to hunt down the last Ming pretenders to the throne, and a little longer to put down the last of the independent generals and warlords that inevitably emerged in these periods. The most important, and famous, of the Ming loyalists was the pirate king Zheng Chenggong, more commonly known in the West as Koxinga (1624–1662). He is also a central figure in many of the region’s later Triad and martial arts legends. As such, it is important to know a few facts about his actual life and career.

Born in Japan to a Japanese mother, Koxinga was the son of Zheng Zhilong, a powerful merchant and pirate who controlled a vast fleet of ships. The Zheng family remained loyal to the Ming dynasty. However, when one of the last remaining Ming princes took refuge in Fuzhou, Fujian Province (a clan stronghold), Zheng Zhilong refused to support a proposed counteroffensive against the Qing forces. The government managed to capture and kill the isolated Ming prince in short order. Worse yet, Zheng Zhilong actually accepted a Qing offer to become the governor of Fujian and Guangdong Provinces, leaving the “family business” of conquest and piracy in the capable hands of his son Zheng

Chenggong. This greatly disappointed the Qing who had assumed that the entire Zheng clan was included in the deal. Zheng Zhilong was taken to Beijing as a hostage and later executed.

The younger Zheng continued to publicly support the Ming dynasty, though he could not send material aid to the sole remaining claimant to the throne in the far southwest. Instead, Koxinga focused on consolidating his own power base, retaking Taiwan from the Dutch in 1662, and using the island as his base of both commercial and political operations. The local tropical landscape finally accomplished what the Qing could not, and Koxinga died of malaria at a relatively young age. He was succeeded by his son Zheng Jing (1643–1682), who abandoned all pretense of Ming loyalty and concentrated solely on piracy and conquest.⁵

While the political loyalties of the Zheng clan are in reality far from clear, what is certain is that the Qing took them quite seriously as a military threat. After protracted negotiations failed to persuade Koxinga to follow his father's example in swearing loyalty to the empire, major military forces were dispatched to crush the rebellious pirate kingdom. In a sign of growing exasperation the Emperor actually ordered the forced evacuation of coastal Fujian and Guangdong (in 1661 and again in 1662) in an attempt to contain the threat posed by Koxinga's fleet. The "Great Clearance" lasted almost a decade and it had a major effect on the local landscape. It imposed a substantial hardship on the people of southern China. When the coastal ban was finally lifted in 1669, the government had trouble convincing people to return to the emptied regions. They even had to offer monetary inducements to recruit settlers.⁶

Some theories claim that the Hakka linguistic minority moved into the eastern and coastal areas of Guangdong following the Great Clearance. This minority group would come into violent conflict with the Cantonese speaking majority during the "Punti-Hakka Clan Wars" that lasted between 1855 and 1867.⁷ Out of necessity, the Hakka people developed a number of martial arts, including Hakka Quan, Southern Praying Mantis, Bak Mei (White Eyebrow), and Dragon Style, which share some important characteristics with Wing Chun. Like Wing Chun they too began to emerge into the public view (usually in Guangzhou rather than Foshan) in the later nineteenth century. We will discuss these systems in greater depth in a later chapter.

Given all of this initial turmoil, it is remarkable that by the 1680s there was essentially no elite opposition to Qing rule. This is an important point to emphasize. The common refrain of "Overthrow the Qing, Restore the Ming," used by so many revolutionary groups in the later

nineteenth century, *was not* a survival of a continuous anti-Qing movement lasting throughout this era. It had nothing to do with imaginary anti-Qing secret societies created in the image of an overly romanticized Koxinga. Rather, this is yet another example of how groups attempt to use history to legitimize their current policy grievances, and in so doing re-imagine the past.⁸ While a calamity, the Ming-Qing transition was no more difficult, and in fact was probably smoother, than many other dynastic changes.

The early years of the new dynasty saw innovative and efficient government and a rapid growth of the state in terms of its economic wealth, land mass and overall population. It was also a time of remarkable political stability with no major internal conflicts arising throughout the 1700s. The fact that there were only three emperors, all gifted and dedicated individuals, probably accounts for much of the success of this early period.

Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) assumed the throne when only fifteen and proved to be a dynamic and vital leader. He loved to hunt and travel throughout the realm (often under the pretense of inspecting major public works projects). He ensured that Han Chinese scholars were brought into the government. At the same time, he expanded and solidified the inner-Asian border, reaching agreements with Russia and taking control of Mongolia and Tibet. He was open to Western learning (brought by Jesuit missionaries) and was more interested in Western ideas about mathematics and science than probably any other emperor.

Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735) had the shortest tenure of the three. Already middle-aged when he assumed office, Yongzheng focused his efforts at putting the nation on a sound financial footing. This included such projects as creating a new uniform tax code and curbing the power of the Manchu hereditary military elites.⁹ Yongzheng also helped to oversee the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Shaolin Temple in Henan.¹⁰

Qianlong (r. 1735–1795) benefited from the vigorous reforms of both of his forbearers. He attempted to play the part of the perfect sagely emperor and was a visible proponent of Confucian neo-orthodoxy throughout the land. He was also deeply concerned with questions of what we might now call “national identity” and tried to root out and destroy any work that referred to the Manchu people as being “alien” or “un-Chinese.” In fact, it seems entirely possible that these two projects were linked, being two different aspects of his attempt to strengthen the state through the creation of a new, coherent, cultural identity.¹¹

Confucian philosophy was favored precisely because it facilitated this sort of linking of identities through bonds of responsibility. Heterodox religious movements (whether Buddhist or Daoist) were problematic in that there was no separation of “church” and “state” in traditional Chinese thought. The Emperor was the head of both the cult and the kingdom. Millennial Buddhist or Daoist arguments about the need for religious reforms, or warnings of the dawning of a new kalpa (a Buddhist aeon), could not be made without at the same time questioning the emperor’s ability, or right, to rule “all under heaven.” Political and religious legitimacy were inseparable. Qianlong became concerned that Shaolin might be harboring heretics during the 1750s within this *specific* ideological context. Direct political revolt by the monks was never really a fear.¹²

While the regime’s incentive to act against heterodox groups is easily understood, the ultimate wisdom of the policy is still being debated. In a number of cases state persecution turned relatively peaceful sutra reading societies, frequented mostly by devout senior citizens, into militant organizations forced underground in order to survive. By disrupting the ties between these new religious movements and other aspects of Chinese society, the government may have actually made them *more* susceptible to political radicalization, and hence a greater threat to the state than they ever would have been on their own. At the same time, some organizations were genuinely dangerous and needed to be controlled. From the time of Qianlong onward, the government took an increasingly hard line toward even moderate Daoist or Buddhist organizations and did everything in its power to advantage a neo-Confucian outlook.¹³

Qianlong’s religious policy also seems to have been part of a broader conservative movement that dominated elite thought during much of the Qing period. Ebrey notes that some Han literati blamed the sensual excesses and cultural “confusion” of the late Ming for the state’s invasion and defeat by the Qing. This conservative turn in Chinese life was complex and affected areas as diverse as family law, poetry, classical painting, and the economy.¹⁴

On the one hand, it was likely advantageous to the development of hand combat as it brought about renewed interest in martial matters among a certain class of young gentlemen.¹⁵ Ensuring the physical “strength” and safety of the nation was seen as a Confucian virtue in this context. Nevertheless, to the extent that it turned China’s gaze inward at precisely the same time that the European powers were beginning

to expand aggressively into Asia, this conservative shift was probably detrimental to the dynasty's ultimate survival.

Whatever its long-term consequences, the cultural and political stability that the Qing brought was a great material benefit to the Chinese people. In 1651, just a few years after the inception of the dynasty, Fairbank and Goldman estimate China's population as being roughly 150 million individuals. By the middle of the nineteenth century the population had climbed to 432 million. By the 1970s that number had increased to 700 million.¹⁶

It should be noted that while the number of mouths to feed was increasing throughout this period, the amount of farmland was more or less fixed. While it was possible to reclaim land from lakes through elaborate construction projects, and hills could be further terraced to allow for more efficient use, these projects can take a long time and yield relatively little new farmland. By the early nineteenth century all available land was under cultivation. Sustained population growth was only made possible by increasing the per acre yield through the more intensive use of irrigation, fertilizer, and human labor.

At some point, as the land-labor ratio skews in favor of the latter, we must hit a point of diminishing returns for each additional unit of farm labor. By the mid-Qing the average family was only farming an acre or two. This drove the efficiency, and ultimately the wages, of agricultural workers down. There were simply too many hands trying to work too little land. While the population increased throughout this period, it is more difficult to guess when standards of living actually rose.¹⁷ For a great many people, standards of living probably dropped during the middle of the nineteenth century, leading to the paradox of economic growth without development.¹⁸

This demographic shift had a dramatic effect on Chinese society. The peace and prosperity of the eighteenth century contributed almost directly to the Malthusian misery of the nineteenth. As farm size decreased, more sons were left without a livable inheritance. Increasingly, these individuals were pushed into elaborate systems of tenancy, but even that was not a secure existence. Large numbers of young men with few prospects of marriage found themselves entering urban areas looking for jobs in handicraft industries, or as dockworkers or porters. Others, especially in the south, took directly to the sea becoming sailors, fishermen, smugglers, or pirates. Trade with the West, centered in Guangzhou, was one bright spot in this otherwise bleak economic picture. Wealth and employment was created along the southern trade routes, though not

even this could absorb all the surplus labor. These demographic and economic factors contributed directly to the breakdown of the Confucian social order that the state was trying so hard to promote.

Rebellion in the Qing Dynasty

As standards of living dropped, old social structures were disrupted, and the government found itself powerless to aid the ever-growing population in times of famine or natural disaster. Unmet expectations led to rumors that the “Mandate of Heaven” was slipping away, or that the state was facing an “end of days” millennial, or demonological, crisis. Such fears would lead to an escalating pattern of rebellion and violence throughout the nineteenth century.

The first of the serious outbursts was the White Lotus Rebellion (1794–1804). This uprising was started by a millennial Buddhist sect that was popular with the poor peasants living in the hilly and highly inaccessible regions of Hubei, Sichuan, and Shaanxi Provinces. The government had to develop a novel strategy that employed newly constructed walled villages, forced population transfers, and demanded a reliance on popular militias rather than the official Manchurian “Banner Armies,” to overcome this threat. Suppressing the violence took years and cost tens of thousands of lives.

In 1813, members of another Buddhist sect, the Eight Trigrams, rebelled closer to the capital. At least 100,000 rebels actually managed to seize several cities, and they even entered the Forbidden City in Beijing, before the uprising was put down in bloody fashion. Up to 70,000 people may have died in the Eight Trigram uprising and its aftermath.¹⁹

This uprising also bears careful consideration as it is characterized by large-scale collaboration between religious sectarians and martial artists. This trend becomes more common as the nineteenth century progresses. One of the three leaders of the revolt was named Feng Keshan (“King of the Earth,” 1776–1814?). He was a professional martial arts teacher and practitioner of Meihuaquan, or Plum Blossom Fist. While minimally interested in the religious ideology of the group, Feng was devoted to revolution and he was able to mobilize an entire network of followers through his martial arts associations. Plum Blossom boxing was commonly demonstrated and taught in the markets in Shandong and Henan Provinces. Its study was quite widespread.²⁰ Practitioners made use of “plum blossom poles” to perfect their footwork and balance

(a training aid also used in Wing Chun). Shaha notes that this was one of the styles being taught at the Shaolin Temple.²¹ While there is no evidence linking Feng Keshan to Shaolin, he is a good example of the sort of individual that the government was worried about in their eighteenth-century redesign of the monastery.

Martial artists in the Eight Trigrams movement also relied on special magical techniques to make themselves invulnerable in battle. Government records indicate that many of them practiced a technique known as the “Armor of the Golden Bell.” In order to perform the technique one first had to burn incense, write a charm on a piece of paper, burn the paper, mix its ashes with water or wine, and then drink the mystical concoction. A series of ritual taboos were associated with the practice, but if correctly performed this technique was said to make one impervious to swords, spears, and in some cases even firearms. Esherick notes that the technique seems to have originated with wandering Daoist priests (who sometimes taught martial arts as part of their profession).²²

This example further serves to illustrate exactly why the government feared the mixing of popular religious movements and the study of martial arts. Heterodox beliefs in invulnerability magic simply made the mix all the more volatile and dangerous. Religious sects would occasionally use martial arts groups as recruiting devices, but it is not always clear how close the relationship was between these two aspects of the organizations. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why there is still so much confusion about the relationship between martial arts and Chinese religious practice today. Even in the nineteenth century it was a very complicated and fluid subject with many different groups and styles coming to various accommodations.²³

As great as the destruction was in these early uprisings, their numbers pale in comparison to the death toll generated by the Taiping (or “Great Peace”) Rebellion. Spreading across much of China between 1850 and 1864, this conflict saw the destruction of six hundred cities and the deaths of up to 20 million individuals. The inspiration for the rebellion came from the south in an area that had seen much social disruption, both in terms of the Opium War and penetration by Christian missionaries. A collapse in the price of tea and the opening of new trade ports also conspired to put huge numbers of southern laborers out of work in an area best known for its secret societies, lineage feuds, and simmering ethnic tensions.²⁴

Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) mobilized and shaped these latent social tensions. An educated individual of Hakka origin, he had failed

to pass the civil service exam. This is not surprising. Even though the total population had skyrocketed, the number of positions in the civil service remained fixed. By the late Qing, only 1 percent of applicants actually passed the national exams. This lack of social mobility among the educated elite was yet another source of tension and resentment in the nineteenth century.

Leaving behind his original ambition, Hong became a charismatic religious leader. In his first major vision (1837) he was visited by an old bearded man and a younger middle-aged figure who greeted him as “younger brother.” Hong was instructed by the pair to fight demons.²⁵ As ter Haar has argued, the concern with a demonological apocalypse was a regular and growing feature of Chinese popular religion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In the traditional Chinese view, best articulated by the “Classics of Mountains and Seas,” the term “demon” was quite flexible. It could refer to explicitly other-worldly beings, such as those found in Buddhist cosmology, but it was also applied to the strange, barbaric, and misshapen subhumans who were thought to live beyond the “four mountains” and “four seas” that defined the ordered realm of China proper. Given that the state had been invaded from the north, was being ruled by a foreign dynasty, and that a new set of imperial powers were making their presence felt along the eastern and southern coasts, Hong’s China was quite literally a land beset by “demons.”²⁶ It did not take much of a religious imagination to see apocalyptic events on the horizon if something was not done.

If this were all that had happened, it is likely that Hong’s movement would simply have ended up like many of the other once popular, but now forgotten, millennial Buddhist and Daoist sects of the later Qing. However, after running across a missionary pamphlet he had received several years earlier, Hong decided that the two men in his vision had in fact been the Christian deities, and that he was Jesus’s “younger brother” tasked with a special mission for China.

Hong then turned to Christian missionaries to learn the basic technology of their religion, including new ways of worship, baptism, and prayer. He was attracted to the strict fundamentalist strain of the Old Testament, especially the parts about monotheism, destroying “idols,” and the need for moral rejuvenation, including the banning of drinking, opium smoking, and the practice of female foot binding. His earlier demonological concerns were likewise reworked and the Manchurians now became the physical incarnation of the Christian “devil” that he had been sworn to destroy.

By 1851 Hong had 20,000 supporters whom he ordered to collectivize their property. He declared himself ruler of the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" and made known his intention to overthrow the state. His forces scored a number of victories in their early years and ethnic Hakkas, secret society members, and other actors who had fared poorly under the Confucian order, swelled their ranks. In 1853, they took the city of Nanjing which was defended by a force of 5,000 Banner troops. All the ethnic Manchurians in the city, including upward of 35,000 elderly men, women, and children, were rounded up and executed by gruesome means including drowning, burning, and bleeding, befitting their status as "demons."²⁷

In Nanjing, Hong set up a new government which immediately called for land equalization, equality between men and women, and a new social system based on both his teachings and unique reading of the Christian Bible. Nevertheless, the situation stagnated through a combination of greed and incompetence and not much more was accomplished over the following decade. They failed to win gentry support for their social reforms, and while the Taiping government appealed to Western Christians for aid it was decided that they were only superficially Christian. The Western powers found them entirely too brutal and corrupt to support. Great Britain, which had tried to maintain neutrality for most of the conflict, ultimately sided with the Qing dynasty. For instance, when the Taiping army tried to seize Shanghai in 1860 and 1862, it was the Western powers that organized the defense of the city. In this later period, the Taiping military and civil leadership factionalized and they did not fight as effectively as they could have given their immense numbers.²⁸

The rebellion was ultimately put down through the efforts of Zeng Guofan, a civil servant who managed to personally raise an army in his home province of Henan. Following the pattern established in the Opium War, he recruited local Confucian scholars as his officers. These individuals had a clear stake in the system and would likely fight to defend it. The turn toward a local, gentry-led, militia system was yet another manifestation of the conservative bent in late Qing political thought.

These local scholars were responsible for recruiting, training, and drilling the peasant-soldiers. This was often a major logistical undertaking as weapons had to be produced, food and rations needed to be stored, and insurance systems had to be put in place. Confucian schools often served as drilling grounds or the headquarters for the various units, leaving no doubt about the values that the militia was to fight to uphold.²⁹

It took a decade, but ultimately Zeng's army defeated the Taipings, captured Nanjing, and quite literally left no survivors in their wake. This form of military organization, developed a few decades previously in Guangdong to deal with the British, and then perfected in the campaign against the Taipings, remained common throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the early Qing period, a rough balance of power had been established between the central government (which created policies), the local gentry (who carried them out) and the masses (who paid for all of it in taxes, and might revolt if pushed too far). Alliances might be formed between any two of these groups on a given issue, assuring that no one player was able to exploit the system as a whole. This three-way balancing act was one of the things that reinforced the social and economic stability of the early Qing era.

The success of the militia movement fundamentally reordered Chinese society. As the Banner armies consistently failed in combat, the central government lost an important power base for dealing with the rest of society. It was clear that they could no longer offer basic defense or security, let alone timely famine relief. As these tasks devolved to the local gentry (who did have the wealth and connections to carry them out) the imperial government lost power and China became increasingly decentralized. In the south the gentry also tended to be the local landlords. This increase in their political influence capped off the demographic boom that allowed them to raise rents and amass huge amounts of economic power. Both the Qing dynasty and the non-educated population as a whole were the long-term losers in this power struggle.³⁰ Martial arts instructors, mercenaries, private security guards, and those who could offer their services to these new structures were among the winners.

The Taiping Rebellion is one of those few defining moments that clearly changed the course of a nation's history. With 20 million dead, it was, and is likely to remain, the largest and most destructive civil war in human history. It is interesting to compare it to the roughly contemporaneous American Civil War in order to better understand China's military thinking and level of technology.

Fairbank and Goldman characterize the American Civil War as history's first truly modern war, and the Taiping Rebellion as the world's last, and bloodiest, traditional conflict. Let us begin by parsing out exactly what the authors mean by this. Some of their insights will have important implications for our later discussions of armed conflict between China and the West.

At the start of the Taiping conflict, in the early 1850s, both sides were woefully under armed by modern standards. Most soldiers in both the rebel and Imperial armies were armed with only a spear and a sword. The cavalry was weak and lacked sufficient horses and, while there were a number of cannons on the battlefield, they were a hundred years behind their European counterparts. Both sides used matchlock muskets, but neither army could equip more than 20 percent of their forces with these firearms. Under these conditions, most engagements ended in hand-to-hand combat, and the higher *esprit de corps* of the Taiping units was often a deciding factor in their early victories.

After a few years the situation in China looked very different. Large numbers of muskets, and even cap-lock rifled arms, began to make their appearance. Western advisors and mercenaries were increasingly employed by both sides to improve the performance of their artillery. As the battlefield got hotter, both armies discovered the advantages of fighting from entrenched positions, just as was the case in the American Civil War. While spears, bows, and swords remained fixtures on the battlefield, the Imperial and Taiping armies of the 1860s looked, on the surface, much more similar to their Western counterparts than they had at the outset of the conflict.

Yet the quality of the weapons alone did not define the effectiveness of the Chinese military. Cutting-edge rifles and cannons could be bought in large numbers and deployed quickly. Whole ordinance factories could be purchased for a price. Yet other critical pieces of the puzzle were still missing. There were no academies to train Chinese artillery officers to the same level of expertise as their European counterparts. There was no dedicated medical corps following the Imperial army. While China did set up factories to make advanced weaponry and ammunition, it did not have efficient market and transportation structures to move this material around the country. Nor did it have the engineers to make the factories run effectively.

China did not fail in its competition with the West because its soldiers did not know how to use rifles. By the second half of the nineteenth century firearms were a well-entrenched aspect of China's martial life. Soldiers, mercenaries, bandits, and private security firms all had and used firearms. Deeper institutional factors, not specific weapons technologies, were responsible for China's problems with the West. While it is tempting to turn to quick, single-variable explanations of China's inability to deal with the threat of imperialism, any such theory is bound to fail. Technological, economic, social, and political factors all conspired

to complicate China's global position. Students of martial studies must remember that China's modern schools of hand combat were all created in the era of firearms.

Western Imperialism and the Qing Response

One domestic disaster after another monopolized the attention of the Qing dynasty for much of the nineteenth century. However, the realm also faced a new foreign threat unlike anything it had yet seen. China responded inadequately to the challenges of Western imperialism because, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it did not yet understand the full scope of the global transformation that was then underway. Whether it liked it or not, China, through its trade in silk, tea, cotton, sugar, porcelain, spices, silver, and later opium, had become a critical player in the international global economic system. The great powers would not, and could not, continue to ignore it. The once central realm of the "Middle Kingdom" was about to find itself on the periphery of a much larger and more dangerous commercial world.

The ultimate roots of China's failure to come to terms with the Western world might lay in Confucianism's utter disdain of merchants, commerce, and anyone whose actions are motivated by greed rather than a desire for public service. No "independent" markets existed in imperial China. Instead, the state attempted to tightly control trade and then use the profits that merchants generated to advance public goals.

While there were always groups of Confucian scholars who specialized in financial matters, in general, both the Ming and Qing dynasties woefully neglected the management of their currency and trade situation. Though earlier dynasties had mastered sophisticated financial technologies like paper currency and deposit banking, neither the relatively weak Ming nor Qing states were even able to mint and circulate their own silver coinage. Taxes were paid with "ounces" of silver whose value in copper currency fluctuated significantly.³¹

Further complicating the economic situation was the fact that the Qing had banned all private international trade as being too socially disruptive. All foreign trade was routed through the "tribute" system in which a foreign power would send a delegation to Beijing bearing extensive diplomatic "gifts" (really exports), and after making a public show of accepting the Emperor's beneficent leadership, would in turn receive a

rich cargo of Chinese “gifts” (imports) in return. The number of tribute missions was often limited to once a year, or once every three years.

At base, this was a political rather than a primarily economic system. It was important for the Chinese to awe their guests with their superior silks, ceramics, and other goods. The system worked well in terms of restricting the overall flow of trade and cementing relationships with other minor Asian powers. It also meant that China did not profit as much from its trade as it could have since it was always running a structural trade deficit. Lacking access to open lines of communication and the news that markets always bring, the Chinese government was left unaware of the scope and depth of changes in the world economic system.

While the tribute system may have been sufficient for managing relationships with minor states like Korea, it had real limitations when it came to dealing with the major European powers and their desire for trade. Great Britain in particular developed an insatiable thirst for Chinese tea and porcelain to serve it in, and English merchants discovered that they could sell Western cloth, yarn, and other consumer goods as well. However, the Qing government drastically restricted the scope of this trade, limiting all English trade to the southern port city of Guangzhou (referred to by the English as Canton). European traders were not allowed to actually live in the city, but instead occupied a number of “factories” (really warehouses and offices) in their own quarter during the trading season. Each foreign ship that arrived was indemnified and assigned to a family in the Canton Cohong (the merchant guild) for processing.

The British sent a diplomatic mission in 1793 led by Lord George Macartney that attempted to convince the Emperor to accept an official diplomatic mission and open trade practices based on published tariff rates, already a standard practice in Europe and the Americas. In effect, the United Kingdom was inviting the Chinese state (an important trade partner) to join the international community. The Qianlong Emperor dismissed the offer claiming that China already had “all things,” and as such could have no possible need for European goods.³²

This statement was not entirely accurate. The Chinese government wanted one British good desperately. That was silver. The government had an almost insatiable appetite for foreign silver as a means of compensating for its declining tax revenues and as a way to continue to support the military (which was very expensive, if not entirely effective). Importation of European goods were restricted not because the Chinese

people were not interested in them, but to force England to continue to pay for all its imports in silver (most of which was mined and minted in Latin America), thereby creating a structural trade imbalance that stretched across three continents.

In the early days of the Chinese trade, it is unlikely that this mercantilist policy had much of an impact. But by the nineteenth century Chinese silks, porcelain, and tea were major trade goods all over the world. As an ever-greater percentage of the world's silver supply was funneled into China, the UK began to face the very real prospects of a currency crisis. This monetary imbalance set the stage for the Opium War.

Unscrupulous British merchants had discovered that there was one good that Chinese markets were willing to buy from the West, despite a number of government injunctions. That was the addictive drug opium, grown in large quantities in India. By 1838 the British were shipping 40,000 chests of the substance to China a year, almost all of it entering through the Pearl River Delta and Guangzhou.

The Chinese government was appalled. Opium created major social problems as addiction rates soared. That foreign merchants would attempt to win personal profits by destroying the health of the nation seemed to confirm all of the Confucian warnings against commerce. Further, the trade in opium totally reversed China's position in the global silver market. Now, rather than being a net importer of silver, the state was becoming a net exporter, finding itself facing exactly the same monetary dilemma as the United Kingdom a few years earlier.

In the late 1830s, the imperial court decided to do something about the opium trade in the south. They sent new officials to the region who, on their behalf, arrested large numbers of Chinese collaborators and drug addicts. They also seized and destroyed huge amounts of the drug. Foreign merchants were forced to sign pacts that they would no longer trade in opium in exchange for the right to trade in China at all.

While this was not a huge problem for some merchants, those that specialized in the opium trade were facing financial ruin. The major opium trading firm Jardine, Matheson and Company sent representatives to London to lobby for war, and even offered to loan the government ships and navigators to force the Chinese markets open.

Despite the conclusions of many Marxist historians, the British government was not overly swayed by these arguments and it did not go to war to secure the drug trade. After decades of neglect, there were many diplomatic, monetary, and trade matters at stake. War was seen as

the best option for forcing a confrontation with the Chinese in which they would have to come to the bargaining table and deal with the English as equals, rather than through the insulting tribute system. The opium conflict was simply the straw that broke the camel's back.

Whatever the political justification, both sides sensed the inevitability of conflict and started to prepare for war in 1839. Chinese officials installed large numbers of cannons in the forts that protected the Pearl River, and they laid chains across the estuary leading to Guangzhou, anticipating that the brunt of the attack would fall there. Local gentry across the Pearl River Delta received reluctant imperial permission to assemble and train peasant militias that were only too willing to "expel the barbarians." Unfortunately, these countermeasures were not entirely successful.

The more experienced British simply sailed further upstream, seized two other port cities, shut down trade on the river, and disembarked troops who threatened Guangzhou itself. Sensing defeat local Chinese officials agreed to negotiate, concluding the first of what would come to be known as the "unequal treaties." Local officials ceded Hong Kong to the British and agreed to pay them the cost of their expedition (calculated at 6 million Mexican silver dollars). They also allowed British merchants to take up residence in Guangzhou itself and agreed that in the future there should be direct diplomatic meetings between officials.

This was an agreement that ultimately satisfied no one. The Emperor exiled the Governor for even allowing the war with England to come to a head, and the official who negotiated the treaty was immediately arrested and hauled to Beijing in chains. The Chinese insisted that the new governor who had been appointed was not constrained by the agreements of his predecessors. The British commanders in the region were not amused by this new approach to international law and spent years attempting to impress on the Chinese government the need to live up to their prior treaty agreements, no matter who happened to be in office. The question of whether or not foreigners could take up residence in Guangzhou became particularly charged and led to the emergence of what was later known as the "Entry Crisis."

For their part, the British public felt that not nearly enough had been done to secure their country's commercial position given the vast expense of mounting the expedition in the first place. The next year, in 1841, they sent twice as many soldiers (10,000), seized several coastal cities including Shanghai, and besieged Nanjing. The Qing dynasty was

forced to sign another (although not the last) treaty at bayonet point. The Cohong was to be abolished, a public tariff of 5 percent was to be imposed on all goods, “Most Favored Nation” trade status was to be honored (essentially forcing free trade on the Chinese), British subjects were only to be tried under British law, and the total Chinese war debt was raised to 21 million ounces of silver. China was also forced to open five additional ports to British trade. Soon other European powers were maneuvering for treaty ports of their own. Even Japan was able to seize territory by the end of the nineteenth century.³³

Given the ultimately disastrous outcome of the Opium Wars, one would not think that great narratives of national strength would arise from this period. Nevertheless, some saw reason for hope in the growing village militia movement, which really got its start in southern China. Guangdong Province, because of fierce competition for scarce land and other resources, had a long history of family lineage organizations (which could own land corporately) raising militias and carrying on armed feuds with each other.³⁴ Instability in the economy made unemployment a real problem, and it was not uncommon for unemployed, or underemployed, workers to supplement their income with either banditry on land or piracy along the coasts and rivers.

The local gentry had experience in raising and training militias to deal with these problems. The threat of foreign invasion, and the clear incompetence of national Banner troops, who often caused more damage to the countryside than they prevented, strengthened this movement and won it carefully circumscribed imperial approval. For its part, Beijing was simply happy to see the raising of reliable troops that it did not have to pay for, thereby lowering overall budget expenditures.

The militia movement received a major boost from the “San Yuan Li Incident” in May of 1841. The historical record is mixed as both sides claim victory, and while Chinese folklore records the incident as a major victory with huge numbers (possibly “hundreds”) of casualties, the British remember it as only a minor skirmish that happened in the middle of their march out of Canton after having, once again, defeated the city.

On May 24, as part of the 1841 campaign, the British military commenced its second attack on Guangzhou in as many years. The Chinese government had recently increased the number of cannon forts around the city. However, once the British infantry succeeded in overrunning these positions they were able to bombard the Chinese with their own artillery. The city surrendered once again (paying 6 million ounces of