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Red Turbans in the Trinity Alps: Violence, Popular Religion, and Diasporic Memory in Nineteenth- Century Chinese America

ROBERT G. LEE

Spectral Chinamen hover silently over the history of the California gold rush. These men in their thousands who arrived from the Pearl River Delta left no testimony of their lives in California; their white neighbors made only cursory observations of their comings and goings and subsequent histories that do acknowledge their presence fail to help us understand how these men might have imagined their lives in California. This essay reads remnants left scattered across the California landscape—couplets carved on the entrance of a Daoist temple, a devotional to Guandi, the god of war, and a handwritten notebook containing the initiation ritual of the Hongmen sworn brotherhood—as “sites of memory.”¹ Read against the grain of published white accounts and the backdrop of the history of South China, these shards of evidence between memory and history enable us to imagine a web of social violence, embodied ritual, and social practice that constituted the *habitus* of Guangdong workingmen in the California gold rush.²

The Weaverville War: What Franklin Buck Saw

Toward the end of August 1854, several hundred Chinese fought each other with swords, spears, pistols, and rifles on the outskirts of Weaverville, a mining town at the northern edge of the California gold fields. The pitched battle that summer in the Trinity Alps was one of many between Chinese up and down Gold Rush country in the 1850s that drew from deep wells of animosity among men from Guangdong that stretched from the Pearl River Delta to the Sierra Nevada foothills.

On the eve of what the local papers called “Chinese War,” Weaverville was the center of placer mining at the northern edge of the California gold fields. When the

town first counted its inhabitants in 1852, the census found only a handful of Chinese among its denizens, but by 1854, almost one in every three persons living in Trinity County had been born in South China. The twenty-five hundred Chinese who lived in the Trinity County were only slightly fewer than the Chinese who lived in San Francisco.³ Like most other gold rush communities, the Chinese community in and around Weaverville was mostly male, mostly young, and mostly miners.

Although the Chinese tended to work tailings, there was some resentment of the apparent success of Chinese miners in extracting profit from these abandoned sites. While many white miners saw the Chinese as competitors, merchants and shopkeepers such as Franklin Buck tended to see the Chinese as an important asset to the local economy. Buck's general store was about to show a profit and he saw the Chinese as very much a part of a new prosperity. As Buck wrote to his sister in Vermont, "John Chinaman (frequently multiplied) is one of my best customers. There are thirty or forty of them and today they have come to town in force. One of them wrote me a sign in Chinese."⁴ In May 1854, Buck commented on the prosperity brought by the local Chinese community:

[Chinese] ... are among our best customers and certainly the best foreigners we have. They buy lots of provisions, chiefly rice, flour, lard, codfish, tea, etc; drink whisky and smoke like other people. I rode down to the river yesterday. There are three hundred of them on one bar that has been worked out by our people and they are perfectly satisfied if they make two or three dollars per day. (138)

Buck was excited that Chinese had rented a saloon and set up a gambling house with seventeen tables in one room. Although Buck confessed to being mystified by the variety of the games being played, he was greatly impressed by the volume of business: "When these tables are surrounded by two or three hundred Chinamen, all talking at once, the noise is equal to that made by a cotton mill in full blast" (140). And as Buck observed, the Chinese of Weaverville were not only miners but had become prosperous townfolk as well.

The lower part [of town] is all occupied by Chinese. They have four stores, four gambling saloons and a restaurant. They bid fair to outnumber the Americans in a short time. There are probably 1000 in town and in the vicinity, also four women. One of them has a Celestial baby, the first Chinese child I ever saw. Some of these China gamblers and merchants have plenty of money and actually lay over us a long way in fine clothes and high living. (123)

Trinity County was abuzz with rumor and activity as the contending parties, calling themselves “Hong Kongs” and “Cantons,” gathered their forces and armed themselves with traditional Chinese weapons of war, rifles, and revolvers. Just what the labels “Hong Kong” and “Canton” meant, however, was a cipher. Buck noted that the Hong Kongs wore red headscarves and were mainly men he recognized, while the Cantons wore black headscarves and appeared to be newcomers to Trinity County. A few days before the battle, Buck took it upon himself to visit each camp, about a mile apart, and later confessed that he had tried in vain to find the cause of the conflict or the identities of the warring factions. “Some say one party is the imperial and the other the rebel, the same as in China. Each party claims to be Canton men and each call the other Hong Kong men, ‘no good.’ Another [story] is that it arose about six bits at a gambling table. Now you know just as much as I do about it” (103).

After weeks of preparation and several days of dueling parades, the opposing armies fought a brief but bloody battle on the outskirts of town while a curious crowd of two thousand or more looked on. The outnumbered Hong Kongs maneuvered to block an anticipated Canton flanking movement with a phalanx of white onlookers. Using their revolvers, the Hong Kongs quickly put the Cantons into full retreat. Eight Canton and six Hong Kong men died on the battlefield as well as one white onlooker, variously described as a “Swede” or a “Dutchman,” who was killed by other white spectators after he shot indiscriminately into the ranks of the Chinese.⁵

Weaverville was only one of a string of pitched battles among the Chinese in the Sierra Nevada gold fields between 1854 and 1856. In the fall of 1854, some five or six hundred Cantons and Hong Kongs fought in the streets of Sacramento, which resulted in one fatality, an untold number of wounded, and the arrest of twenty leaders. In nearby Marysville, which had the third largest Chinese community in California, leaders of its Canton faction met with the local press to condemn the Hong Kong group as ruffians and troublemakers (*Daily Evening Bulletin*, 1). The largest battle between Hong Kongs and Cantons took place in September of 1856 at an encampment called Chinese Camp in the Tuolumne County foothills just south of Sonora. Chinese Camp was so named after some five thousand Chinese miners had settled there after being driven out of the nearby Salvado Camp in 1849. In San Francisco, *The Daily Evening Bulletin* reported that between a thousand and twenty-five hundred Hong Kong and Canton fighters battled over what was ostensibly a moved boulder and a disputed mining claim (*Daily Evening Bulletin*, 1). News accounts differed on the numbers of combatants, but observers agreed that in the “Great Battle at Chinese Camp,” the “Hong Kongs used Chinese weapons and gongs” while the Cantons deployed some one hundred and fifty rifles that they had carted in from San Francisco, demonstrating, in the words of one reporter, “some degree of civilization” (*Daily Evening Bulletin*, 1). The outgunned Hong Kong army fled the field after the Cantons shot down their leader and two others and mutilated the bodies. In the aftermath of this battle, it was reported that the Hong Kongs professed to be defending the imperial authority while it was the Cantons who were identified as rebels (*Daily Evening*

Bulletin, 1).

To Franklin Buck, sympathetic and interested enough to have visited the war camps of each side, and to white reporters with only a passing interest in yet another gaudy tale of the Gold Rush, the labels “Hong Kong” and “Canton” were sobriquets familiar enough for otherwise faceless racial others. For the warring Chinese companies, “Hong Kong” and “Canton” were labels convenient for foreign consumption that obscured complex conflicts of class, ethnicity, and place, forged in a bitter struggle for survival that divided lineages and villages in the Pearl River Delta and were re-enacted in the Sierra Nevadas.

The Civil War in the Pearl River Delta

Almost without exception, Chinese Californians in the 1850s came from eight contiguous districts in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province. Historian L. Eve Armentrout-Ma estimates that of the twenty-five thousand or so Chinese who lived in the gold mining districts, forty percent had come from the Xiangshan (now Zhongshan) district located adjacent to Macau on the alluvial plain where the Tan and Xi rivers spill into the Pearl River Delta. Another forty percent had come from the four semi-arid and predominantly farming hill districts (Xinhui; Xinning, now Taishan; Kaiping; and Enping) in the Tan River catchment called the *siyi*, to the west of the Pearl River Delta. About eighteen percent were from the *sanyi*, the three more urban and more prosperous districts on the West River adjacent to Canton (Panyu, Nanhai, and Shunde). Finally, about two percent were ethnically distinct Hakka whose villages were scattered across the Pearl River Delta but concentrated in the *siyi* districts.⁶ Despite their physical proximity, the topography and social history of the delta created distinct identities and deep divisions of class, dialect, and custom.⁷

Although agriculture, industry, and robust trade had made the Pearl River Delta immensely prosperous throughout the largely peaceful seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by the early decades of the nineteenth century the social ecology of Guangdong had slipped into crisis.⁸ It is likely that the population of the province doubled between 1786 and 1882.⁹ This population growth was uneven across Guangdong, with the Pearl River Delta districts experiencing the most dramatic growth. For example, Taishan, one of the four *siyi* districts, experienced a fourteen-fold increase in just over two hundred years, reaching about two hundred thousand in 1838. Over the next eighty years, the population of the district would quadruple again to eight hundred thousand. This explosive pressure led to increasingly bitter struggles between clans and lineages hungry for arable land. The 1886 Xinning gazetteer reported fierce conflicts between and within lineages over land rights, particularly over the rich reclaimed delta “silt fields” (*xiatian*).¹⁰ The resulting proliferation and rise and fall of market towns also disrupted rural life and dislocated traditional social relationships.¹¹ The volatility in foreign trade, especially after the introduction of opium, was another crucial factor in disrupting the economy of mid-nineteenth

century rural Guangdong.¹² The hemorrhaging of silver in payment for opium led to disastrous inflation that bore heavily on the peasant economy. While taxes and rents were denominated in silver, rice and other produce brought in increasingly worthless copper coin. By the late 1840s, the cost of silver had risen to three times its official value.¹³ The phrase *yin gui, qian jian*, expressing the rising cost of silver in comparison with the falling value of copper cash, abounds in the memorials sent to the capital by local officials concerned about the opium trade as both an economic and social crisis.¹⁴ Furthermore, the costs and indemnities associated with the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) added the burden of tax surcharges. To this yoke was added the weight of a corrupted tax structure in which millions of hectares of farmland went unreported, allowing large landlords and powerful clans to avoid taxation and to charge exorbitant rents.¹⁵ Local gazetteers complained of the sale of lands by thousands of small holders seeking shelter from the crushing tax burden and the reinvestment of commercial capital into absentee landholding and usury.

Lineage feuds and vendettas (*xue dou*) had long been a prominent feature of the Guangdong countryside.¹⁶ Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, local officials voiced their complaints about the larger lineages running roughshod over weaker lineages in a constant struggle over land and water rights.¹⁷ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, social banditry had become a common feature of the Guangdong countryside as networks of piracy, smuggling, processing, and distribution that accompanied the illicit opium trade provided an alternative means of livelihood for peasants, peddlers, and laborers who saw their real income being gradually but unmercifully whittled away. Despite attempts by authorities to suppress the sworn brotherhoods, heterodox cults, and banditry, by 1850 some seventeen bandit and pirate groups, some with a thousand or more members, operated openly in the Pearl River Delta.¹⁸

Blood feuds, banditry, and secret society activity in Guangdong were given an ethnic dimension due to a long-standing antagonism between those calling themselves Punti (*bendi*) or “local” Han people whose ancestors had settled in Guangdong towards the end of the Tang Dynasty in the eighth century and Hakka (*kejia*) or “guest” people, also Hans, who had migrated from central China in later centuries. The Hakka retained the language, clothing, marriage and burial customs, and foodways of their central China homelands and were governed by different administrative and tax regulations that also kept them separated from their Punti neighbors. The terms “guest” and “local” are misleading descriptors for the two communities. In the demographic turbulence of nineteenth-century Guangdong, it was often the Punti who were the newcomers in some districts where there had already been a Hakka presence for two centuries. Regardless, the fierce contest between the Punti and Hakka particularly over rents and arable land often resulted in violence. This was particularly true in the *siyi* districts west of the Pearl River where many Hakka clans had settled.¹⁹

The long-simmering social tensions in the delta burst open in the summer of

1852. On the heels of successive years of oppressive surtaxes levied to pay for the Opium War and imperial campaigns to suppress the Taiping rebellion on Guangdong's southern border with Guangxi province, summer floods destroyed the rice harvest in the Pearl River Delta, leaving tens of thousands destitute. The following year, thousands of boatmen, day laborers, and dockworkers were left without work as tensions with Britain led to a sharp decline in trade at Canton.²⁰ Guangdong's swelling "floating" population of vagrants, landless tenants, impoverished peddlers, unemployed boatmen, and day laborers pushed the long-existing social fissures in Guangdong society to the breaking point. In the spring of 1854, members of the Hongmen brotherhood styling themselves "the Red Turban society" rose in the hill districts around Canton. Originating in Fujian province in the late eighteenth century, the Hongmen, often called the Triads in the West, can be described as a decentralized network of unsanctioned sworn brotherhoods that drew its membership chiefly from relatively powerless groups in South Chinese society for mutual support. The Hongmen brotherhood deployed both messianic religious messages as well as nativist anti-dynastic ideologies while developing a successful predatory tradition.²¹ The Red Turban rebellion was particularly strong in the *siyi* and *sanyi* districts of the Pearl River Delta where the Hongmen brotherhood had long been entrenched among a growing working class. An estimated two hundred thousand rebels were said to be active in the districts around Canton.²²

By May and June of 1854, a loose alliance of Hongmen brotherhood lodges, bandit gangs, and itinerant opera companies under the Red Turban banner had seized control of eight prefectural towns and large swathes of the countryside around Canton. On July fourth of 1854, just prior to the battle at Weaverville, the Red Turban rebels seized control of Foshan, a prefectural capital of two to three hundred thousand souls, well known for its pottery kilns, iron forges, and cloth and papermaking industries. The city, already known for its martial arts teachers, was also home to many of the magnate lineages with vast holdings in the delta and a dazzling array of literati figures.²³ Considered one of the four most remarkable market towns (*ming zhen*) of late imperial China, Foshan was second in importance only to Canton itself and its capture marked a huge victory for the Red Turban rebels. The occupation of Foshan was also the high-water mark of the rebellion. The rebels had neither a well-coordinated military strategy nor a cohesive ideology through which they could hold power. Nevertheless, it took two years before gentry organized local militia and imperial troops were able to regain control of the rural districts. In the ensuing "pacification," between half a million and a million suspected insurgents were reported to have been put to death across the Pearl River Delta.²⁴

By 1856, the Red Turbans in the Pearl River Delta had been crushed and rebels and their sympathizers were being slaughtered in the villages of the *sanyi* and *siyi*. The reactionary terror brought the long-simmering but largely localized conflict between Punti and Hakka to a boil. Many Hakka fighters had been recruited to the imperial cause and Hakka militias had taken a leading role in suppressing the Red Turbans.²⁵

Subsequently many Hakka tenants used the government's reliance on Hakka villagers for their militia to seize land from their defeated neighbors or withhold rents from Punti landlords. For the next decade and a half, the Punti and Hakka clans and villages in Guangdong would fight each other in a war of ethnic cleansing that was particularly fierce in the *siyi* districts. By conservative estimates, another half a million lives were lost in fourteen years of ethnic warfare.²⁶

That the Hongmen-led rebellion in the Pearl River Delta should also draw blood in the California foothills should not surprise us. In 1850, a San Francisco branch of the Hongmen was the first social organization to be established in the United States by Chinese immigrants. As it had in the Delta, the Hongmen brotherhood in California attracted principally single men who had left home in search of opportunities elsewhere. For these men, both old and new homeplaces were characterized by economic and social dislocation and a high degree of intra-community conflict. In California, Hongmen lodges offered help in securing employment, a social community, and better than average protection in a forbidding environment since they were often the only organizations in this period to maintain full-time paid warriors who could be deployed in a fight. L. Eve Armentrout suggests that in the first two years of its existence in California, the Hongmen had probably no more than six hundred members and possibly even as few as two hundred.²⁷ The 1850s, however, saw a marked growth in immigration and consequently in the numbers of Hong members and lodges. Many of the *siyi* immigrants who arrived in the aftermath of the Red Turban uprising were already Hongmen brothers who established new lodges in California or joined already existing ones. By the 1880s, the reform advocate Liang Qichao, a Xinning native, reported that the numbers of Hongmen membership had exploded to "several tens of thousands."²⁸ The Red Turban veterans from the *siyi*, anti-Manchu and often bitterly hostile to the Hakka, were often also resentful of the conservative merchant-dominated *sanyi* clan and district associations.

The war between "Cantons" and "Hong Kongs" at Weaverville may have appeared inexplicable to Franklin Buck and his neighbors, but for the thousands of Guangdong men who fought each other in the Sierra foothills between 1854 and 1856, the stakes were high and clear. Whether the battles at Weaverville, Sacramento, and Chinese Camp were an extension of the Red Turban rebellion or simulacra is an open question. There is little evidence to show that Hongmen lodges, bandit groups, or opera companies in the Pearl River Delta were directly connected with the bands of red-scarved warriors in California or that the black-scarved fighters in California had ties with gentry-led militias in Guangdong. Nor is there any indication that the outcomes of these battles in California had any significance for revolt in Guangdong. It is nevertheless suggestive of the existential nature of the struggle that these men, seven thousand miles from home, identified themselves with, put on the garb of, and fought under the banners of rebellion and imperial order.

In Weaverville, the Hong Kongs were men who had come from the Xiangshan district (now Zhongshan) adjacent to Macau who had organized themselves into the

Youngwo (Yunghe) association.²⁹ The Youngwo men with their red head scarves were reported to have represented themselves as Red Turban rebels while their Canton adversaries, men from the three wealthier *sanyi* districts adjacent to Canton, organized themselves into the Kwongchow (Guangzhou or Canton) association and, in Weaverville, represented themselves as the forces of the imperial order. In this case, class differences were marked by language differences, as the Canton men spoke a standard urban and more refined Cantonese than the Youngwo men, who spoke a rural version of the dialect. At Chinese Camp two years later, the differences were more broadly ethnic as the “Hong Kongs” were Hakka men who declared themselves protectors of the Qing dynasty while the “Cantons” were Punti men who clung to the banners of Red Turban rebels.³⁰ Preparing themselves for what they may well have imagined as a last stand of their now transnational rebellion, the Red Turbans of Chinese Camp issued a public challenge to the Hong Kongs with a particular vehemence:

There are a great many now existing in the world who ought to be exterminated.... [I]t is our intention to drive you away ... [W]e mean to fight you and expel you all from your localities.... [G]o in your houses, shut the doors and hide yourselves, and we'll kill every man of you that we come across. Shame! Shame! ³¹

The God of War brings Civic Virtue to the Barbarian Frontier

Two years before the Hong Kongs of Trinity County went to war against the interloping Cantons, they built a Daoist temple aptly named Yulin *miao* (Temple in the Misty Forest), one of dozens of Chinese temples built across California in the 1850s.³² Nestled in the Trinity Alps, seven thousand miles from the Pearl River Delta and far beyond the reach of imperial power, the Yulin temple was a physical manifestation of an alternative Chinese symbolic order. Weaverville's Chinese, like all who “stepped beyond the shore” before 1869, were, in the eyes of the Qing government, disloyal and subject to execution. In such circumstances, they might have imagined their new surroundings as a *jianghu*; literally translated, a place of rivers and lakes. The *jianghu* is a metaphor for the imagined social netherworld beyond the ambit of Confucian regulation imposed by imperial power. Populated by displaced people, outlaws, exiles, and heroes like those valorized in the hugely popular sixteenth-century romance *Shui Hu Zhuan* (Water Margin), the *jianghu* is imagined as a space of spiritual as well as physical exile, a diasporic space that develops its own social hierarchies and moral order that at once challenges and mirrors orthodoxy.³³ The presence of the Hongmen brotherhood in the Trinity Alps, or for that matter much of the rebellious Pearl River Delta, was a manifestation of the *jianghu* as a social reality.

Early accounts of Weaverville discuss the temple's establishment but do not

reveal much more about its organizational activities. Better-documented histories of temples in San Francisco and Marysville suggest that clan or district associations sponsored the building of the temple with funds solicited from the local Chinese merchants and business owners; in this case it may have been the Chinese proprietors of Weaverville's saloon and gambling houses.³⁴ In addition to providing a space for communal religious celebration and individual worship, temples often hired the poorer young men of the community to perform in processions playing the roles of the temples' guardian deities. In addition, temples often had close and complicated relationships with local sworn brotherhoods and boxing academies. To this day, such organizations often march and perform martial rituals in birthday processions of various deities or saints.³⁵ The socio-political character of the temple would have been underscored by occasional visits of Cantonese opera troupes that had begun to tour California in 1852.³⁶ Originating in Foshan and Canton, itinerant Cantonese opera companies were not only a popular form of entertainment, but represented a significant socio-political force as well. The opera troupes were a significant part of the demi-monde of travellers, vagabonds, and migrants in nineteenth-century Guangdong, crisscrossing the Pearl River Delta in shallow draft "red boats" and openly practicing martial arts as part of a regional repertoire of popular and rebellious heroism. The red boat opera companies led by the Hongmen brother Li Wenmao were among the largest and most successful of the Red Turban bands.³⁷ After the rebellion was put down, Cantonese opera was banned in Guangdong for some thirty years, forcing opera troupes to travel across the expanse of the Cantonese diaspora in search of their audiences.

A couplet over the entry to Yulin Temple reads: "Moral benevolence fills the realm, loyal braves protect the nation" (*Deze man tianxia, chongliang wei guojia*). The terms of this couplet offers a clue to understanding the diasporic imaginary of those who prayed here. In the context of mid-nineteenth century Chinese California, the couplet juxtaposes *tianxia*, the idea of a universal moral realm, to *guojia*, a political state. A common but narrow translation of *tianxia* has been "celestial empire," which references the reach of imperial power but fails to capture the term's cosmological significance. The fundamental dialectic in the Daoist tradition is the creative tension between chaos and order held together by the principle of encompassing the opposite, a determination of the last instance as it were, in which order exercises hegemony over chaos. In this context, we might understand *tianxia* to refer to the universe (*taiji*) that can be brought into order from primordial chaos (*wuji*). In Daoist and Confucian traditions alike, such a moral order is not produced by the imposition of the raw political power of the state (*guo*) but rather flows outward from the ethical cultivation of the individual. In this reading, the *jianghu*, the disordered diasporic borderland situated in the Trinity Alps, can be brought into the ordered realm of *tianxia* through the application of heroic virtue. Commonly rendered "country" or "nation," *guojia* references a more secular and bounded political unit. In the context of mid-nineteenth century Chinese California, *guojia* might be understood to reference a less

formal but more intimate set of communal affiliations than the modern nation state.

For Chinese workingmen in Gold Rush California, cosmological *tianxia* and secular *guojia* came together in the figure of the deity Guandi, whose statue was centrally placed on the main altar of Yulin Temple. The most celebrated deity in the Chinese diaspora, Guandi is a protector deity and the patron of travelers and merchants, whose likeness is virtually everywhere in nineteenth-century Chinese California, from statues in large temples in San Francisco to paintings and posters in small wayside altars and shrines scattered across the California countryside.

Guandi is the apotheosis of the Han dynasty general Guan Yu (died 220 AD), whose mythic status as protector of the nation was enshrined in the late Ming dynasty and retains an aura of ethnic nationalism. Guandi's legendary courage and loyalty, along with those of his sworn brothers, Zhang Fei and Liu Bei, are celebrated in the Ming dynasty epic *Sanguo Yanyi* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) and throughout Chinese popular culture.³⁸ The Peach Orchard Oath in which the sworn brothers pledge their loyalty to restoring the Han dynasty and the rule of virtue is the archetypal oath of Chinese sworn brotherhoods and is closely echoed in the Hongmen initiation oath.

Over the course of his career as a deity in both the Confucian and Daoist traditions, Guandi's divine interventions in the quotidian tribulations of ordinary people is widely celebrated. At the same time, Guandi's mythic persona has often been appropriated by heterodox sects, social groups, and class strata in conflict with the state. At the same time the state has also turned to Guandi as a standard bearer of civic virtue and personal loyalty.³⁹ Since one of the temple's functions was to administer symbolic justice, the temple was built on the template of an imperial administrative office and its deities arrayed as a court. Guandi's position at the right hand of Yu Huang (the supreme deity) in the Yulin Temple pantheon is arranged in a symbolic reflection of the imperial bureaucracy. As divine prime minister, Guandi embodies an alternative Confucian moral universe (*tianxia*) in the absence of the actual Confucian state (*guojia*). Guandi's hagiography is particularly attractive throughout the diaspora as it begins with his humble origins as a bean curd seller, his flight from home as an outlaw, and the accumulation of charismatic power through the cultivation and exercise of orthodox righteousness. His story ends with his death by execution as an ever loyal warrior.⁴⁰ As the legendary protector of Han civic virtue, Guandi models the embodied possibility of rectifying a corrupted power structure and bringing the diaspora into the realm of moral order.

Death and Rebirth in the Performance of Diasporic Brotherhood

The oft-stated goal of the Hongmen brotherhood was to bring down the (foreign) Qing dynasty and to restore the (native) Ming dynasty; one of its mottos was: "To raise the red banner [of the Ming] is to follow the mandate of heaven and follow the Dao."⁴¹ Brotherhood, however, provided more than ideological inspiration for a better day or

physical protection from one's enemies; its most important service was as a surrogate lineage. Historian Lee McIsaac points out that Confucian orthodoxy made maintaining the lineage through filial duty and the production of heirs the defining role of the Chinese male—a role made difficult, if not impossible, by diaspora.⁴² Sworn brotherhood enabled men from the war-torn Pearl River Delta to redefine their roles as heroic Han (if not orthodox Confucian) males in the *jianghu* frontier through a ritual of death and rebirth.

The Hongmen initiation, based on the brotherhood's myth of origins, is a ritual of death and rebirth that displaces the experience of economic and social violence into a narrative of diaspora and renewal. The Hongmen myth of origins, woven into the fabric of popular culture in South China is a classic tale of diaspora. In the eighteenth-century origins myth, the warrior monks of the Shaolin temple are called on by the emperor to save *tianxia* from barbarians from the west, (*Xilu fan*, likely referring to the Oriat Mongols).⁴³ After a victory over the barbarians, the monks are betrayed by jealous court ministers. The five monks who survive the temple's destruction are scattered to the Four Seas, only to return as the mythic founders of the Hongmen brotherhood and commanders of a new army of native Han revival. The calamity of barbarian invasion is an apocalyptic vision central to the Chinese messianic tradition and reflected in the much-repeated mantra of the brotherhood's intention to destroy the foreign Qing and restore the native Ming dynasty. Referencing the ethno-nationalism of the *Xilu* myth, the brotherhood is tasked to restore an ancient and authentic social order "based on the principles of the Zhou dynasty."⁴⁴

The *Xilu* myth establishes an adoptive diasporic lineage, substituting surname lineages broken by war and separation with the fictive but regenerative Hongmen lineage. The Hongmen initiation oath is accompanied by the drinking of blood mixed with wine, creating a new consanguinity. This is followed by passing through a gate of knives that symbolically cuts remaining ties to the "old world." At the heart of the rite are symbolic funerary and rebirth performances. At the beginning of the ceremony, the initiate is disrobed and redressed in mourning sackcloth and then recites a verse in which his "black silky hair must be unbraided to serve the Ming prince," a symbolic unleashing of male power as well as a sign of ethnic Han resistance to the Manchu insistence on the queue as sign of fealty. Here, in the death of the old, the initiate's body is made to unlearn the habit of ethnic subordination. The initiate's exterior transformation is completed with the change of shoes from cotton shoes to straw sandals. The cotton shoes (*ru xie*) are identified with the scholarly tradition while the straw sandals that mark the identity of Hong Society brothers are identified with common labor and are meant to lead the wearer onto a path of righteousness and moral rectitude. The complete change of costume symbolizes the death and rebirth of the initiate into an alternative millenarian narrative. In a final enactment of rebirth, the initiate is ordered to crawl from between the legs of the master, entering into the new homosocial and diasporic lineage (*Hongmen Shouce*, n. p.).

From its opening passages that catalogue the transmission of rituals, hand

signals, and body postures, the initiation notebook asserts a lineage between the Hongmen brotherhood, the Shaolin Temple, and a Hong boxing tradition. Hong boxing is now closely identified with Foshan, the city captured by the Red Turbans in 1854. Foshan had been a center of martial arts practice since the early nineteenth century and many of its well-known boxing academies claim to have played active roles in leading the Red Turban uprising. The practice of martial arts was not immune to the Punti–Hakka conflict in Guangdong. Hong boxing with its wide, low stances and powerful arm strikes was practiced among Punti fighters, while the southern Praying Mantis style (*nan tanglang quan*) with its high stances, quick hand movements, and low kicks was practiced by the Hakka and sometimes called Hakka boxing.⁴⁵ Martial arts historians Benjamin Judkins and Jon Nielson note that all five of the major Punti family martial arts styles share a common *Xilu* myth of origin and certain Hongmen ritual practices while the Hakka-identified boxing styles do not.⁴⁶

In the Hongmen initiation ritual the centrality of the martial arts tradition to the brotherhood's ideology is made explicit in the following exchange:

Vanguard: ...Hong Boxing is from the Shaolin Temple; I have mastered a variety of the martial arts. In anticipation of a renaissance that will certainly be created by the restored Ming, eight thousand Hong brothers cannot wait to show their martial arts.

Master: What was given priority in the Shaolin Temple?

Vanguard: Hong boxing. The vigor of Hong boxing is well known throughout the Four Seas; it was hidden inside the Shaolin Temple. Once all the subtle techniques are developed; they can be used to protect the lord in the future.⁴⁷

Such martial arts training involved long hours of physical training, including repetitive ritualized fighting scenarios that involved the recitation of mnemonic narratives in the forms of poems and songs that contained powerful received memory. Fighting, which, as Franklin Buck witnessed in Weaverville, included the public enactment of martial ritual in competing parades as well as actual combat, nurtured an embodied ethnic identity in its practitioners.

In the largely bachelor society of gold rush California, the Hongmen brotherhood provided a ritual alternative to the exercise of Confucian male power through reproduction. Much of the martial arts discourse in the initiation text celebrates the staff (*gun*) as the central totem of male charismatic power. The staff was the principle weapon of the Shaolin monastic army; its use was a highly developed martial discipline long before the codification of the temple's boxing techniques in the eighteenth century.⁴⁸ In the Hongmen initiation rite, the staff embodies the

transmission of ancient charismatic power from the brotherhood's mythical monastic past into its secular present through ritualized memory. The initiate recites: "[T]he Hongmen staff is preserved for the Hongmen family to destroy the traitors.... Our loyalty is to the Hongmen staff, which will annihilate traitors. Let us raise the Hongmen staff, brothers!"⁴⁹ The staff itself is said to contain the brotherhood's collective memory carved into its length. With its inscribed esoteric messages, the staff acts as another mnemonic device for the initiate to remember the moral hierarchy of the new world about to be born. The initiate is asked to recall that peonies, symbols of female beauty and sexuality, "in full blossom and red peony flowers in bud," and the pine tree, a symbol of male longevity, "which has succeeded in meeting a thousand years of challenges," are carved on the mid-shaft of the staff. "These [carvings]," the initiate repeats, "are used as secret signs for recognizing our heroes [sworn brothers]" (*Hongmen Shouce*, n. p.). Conversely, the staff is an instrument of punishment that makes tangible the Hongmen's alternative code of ethics for the secular chaos of the *jianghu* world.

Initiation into the Hongmen with its received memory of calamity, loss, dispersal, rebirth, and renewal provided rebels from the Pearl River Delta a powerful antidote to the pain of their defeat and exile on the California frontier. In a passage late in the text, the master and initiate reenact the legendary scene at the Red Peony Pavilion where the surviving Shaolin monks are said to have sworn their oath of loyalty to the Ming dynasty. In this passage, the millenarian aspect of Hong Society ideology reveals itself not only in its opposition to the Qing, but in the assertion of a radical rejection of Confucian social hierarchy. The initiate is admonished: "By studying the classics in the Red Flower Pavilion, we are prepared to discuss the affairs of state. It has been the case in history that only poor families can produce filial sons; similarly, only from social turmoil can capable men emerge" (*Hongmen Shouce*, n. p.). This admonition at once recalls the pain of history, poverty, and social turmoil. At the same time, it joins the mission of the restoration of moral order to *tianxia* and to the politics of defending the social community (*guojia*), putatively a task that only the sons of the poor can complete.

These sites of memory—temple, catechism, and ritual text—reveal hidden transcripts that help to show us how workingmen from Guangdong navigated a transpacific frontier marked by displacement and social violence and drew on reservoirs of memory and ritual to negotiate a sense of place and identity. While they left us few if any written accounts of their struggles, against the backdrop of bloody struggles that stretched from the Pearl River Delta to the Sacramento Delta, they enacted diasporic narratives—superscribed onto popular religion, performed in the initiation rites of sworn brotherhood, and embodied in the practice of martial arts—that enabled them to construct identities and lives in a frontier far beyond the aegis of imperial authority.

Notes

For consistency's sake I have rendered Cantonese terms into Putonghua transliterated in Pinyin Romanization. To avoid confusion, I have used Canton instead of Guangzhou. The Hongmen brotherhood is also known by its more formal title Tiandihui (Heaven and Earth Society) and in English, the Triads. Scholarship and reporting on the group has used all of these titles; since Hongmen is commonly used throughout South China and the Americas, I have used Hongmen throughout.

¹ The catechism, *Guandi Shengming Zhen Jing* (The True Sutra of Lord Guan), printed in Foshan in 1870, and *Hongmen Shouce* (Handbook of the Hong Society), a handwritten, undated, and unpaginated notebook, were recovered from abandoned Chinese temples in the 1930s by my uncle, Samuel D. Lee, and left in the care of my parents after his death in 1974. On sites of memory, see Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations*, no. 26 (April 1, 1989): 7–24, doi:10.2307/2928520.

² See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ Frances Kidwell, *The Effects of the Anti-Chinese Legislation in Weaverville, California, 1860-1868*. M.A. Thesis, California State University, Chico. 2002. Eve Armentrout-Ma, "Urban Chinese at the Sinitic Frontier: Social Organizations in United States' Chinatowns, 1849-1898," *Modern Asian Studies* 17, no. 1 (1983): 107–35.

⁴ Franklin Augustus Buck, *A Yankee Trader in the Gold Rush: The Letters of Franklin A. Buck* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), 133.

⁵ *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), October 27, 1856.

⁶ Armentrout-Ma, "Urban Chinese," 113.

⁷ See Philip Kuhn, *The Chinese Among Others, Emigration in Modern Times*, (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2008), 36–37 et passim for a treatment that puts emigration from Guangdong in the context of the global Chinese diaspora. The present study differs in detail.

⁸ On the prosperity of Guangdong in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor, State and Lineage in South China* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 233–50.

⁹ Zhongping Yan, ed., *Zhong Guo Jin Dai Jing Ji Shi Tong Ji Zi Liao Xuan Ji*, (Selected Statistical Materials on Modern Chinese Economic History) reprint (1974) (Beijing, 1955).

¹⁰ Fu Hai He, *Xinning xianzhi*, originally published Foshan 1890 (Taipei: Taiwan Students Bookstore, 1968), 11–12.

¹¹ John R. Watt, *The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China*, *Studies of the East Asian*

Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 103–04.

¹² Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, Harvard East Asian Series 18 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 29–40, 23.

¹³ See Yu-chuan Wang, “The Rise of Land Tax and the Fall of Dynasties in Chinese History,” *Pacific Affairs* 9, no. 2 (June 1, 1936): 201–20, doi:10.2307/2751407.

¹⁴ Nan kai da xue (Tianjin, China), *Qing Shi Lu Jing Ji Zi Liao Ji Yao*, Di 1 ban (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1959), 478.

¹⁵ Kung-Chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Washington Publications on Asia (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), 84–143.

¹⁶ See Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung*, Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 33 (London, New York: Athlone Press; Humanities Press, 1971); Harry J. Lamley, “Hsieh-Tou: The Pathology of Violence in Southeastern China,” *Ch’ing-Shih Wen-T’i* 3, no. 7 (1977): 1–39.

¹⁷ He, *Xinning xianzhi* 12:14; Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, 421–426.

¹⁸ Jaeyoon Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 3 (2009): 1–35; Laai Yi-fai, Franz Michael, and John C. Sherman, “The Use of Maps in Social Research: A Case Study in South China,” *Geographical Review* 52, no. 1 (January 1, 1962): 92–111, doi:10.2307/213007.

¹⁹ On the Hakka as an administratively defined group, see David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor*, 48–50; on Hakka–Punti disputes over land see He, *Xinning xianzhi*, 12:14; Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China,” 11–14.

²⁰ Jaeyoon Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China,” 1–35.

²¹ See Dian Murray, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

²² Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China,” 6.

²³ On the economic and cultural importance of Foshan, see Faure, *op. cit.* 233–50 et passim.

²⁴ J. A. G. Roberts, *The Hakka–Punti War* (University of Oxford, 1968); Frederic E. Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 183–1861*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Kim cites reports that suggest upwards of a million people were put to death in pacification campaigns following the uprising.

²⁵ On the recruitment of Hakka militia see Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China,” 30. The Red Turban rebellion had a complicated relation to the Hakka-led Taiping Rebellion that had exploded from neighboring Guangxi province in 1850. Early in their rebellion the millenarian Christian Taipings sought alliances with the Hongmen brotherhoods but broke with the more traditional sworn brotherhoods after establishing their capital in Nanjing in 1853. Later Taiping leaders reportedly sent emissaries to recruit the Hongmen leaders in the Pearl River Delta but there is little evidence to suggest that the two rebellions shared ideology or organization. See Thomas Meadows, *The Chinese and their rebellions: viewed in connection with their national philosophy, ethics, legislation, and administration: to which is added, an essay on civilization and its present state in the East and West* (London: Smith, Elder & Company, 1856); William Stanton, *The Triad Society or Heaven and Earth Association* (Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, 1900); Philip A. Kuhn, “Origins of the Taiping Vision: Cross-Cultural Dimensions of a Chinese Rebellion *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19, no. 3 (July, 1977): 350–66; and Vincent Yu-chung and Yung-chung Shi, *Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations and Influences* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1967).

Some Red Turban bands were reported to have joined the rebellion in the North after their rebellion in Guangdong was crushed in 1856. It is also possible that American reporters may have assumed that any reference to Chinese uprisings at the time referred to the widely reported Taiping Rebellion. In any case, if there were Taiping adherents among the thousands of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the decades after the Weaverville War there is little evidence that they brought their distinct revolutionary ideology or organization with them.

²⁶ A major characteristic in this war of attrition between Punti and Hakka was the large-scale sale of prisoners of war into the semi-slavery of the Coolie trade which was active between Macau and points in Southeast Asia, the West Indies, and South America. See Roberts, *The Hakka–Punti War*, 228; June Mei, “Socioeconomic Origins of Emigration: Guangdong to California, 1850–1882,” *Modern China* 5, no. 4 (October 1, 1979): 463–501; Yong Chen, “The Internal Origins of Chinese Emigration to California Reconsidered,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December 1, 1997): 521–46, doi:10.2307/969884.

²⁷ L. Eve Armentrout, “Fellow-Regional Associations in the Ch’ing Dynasty: Organizations in Flux for Mobile People. A Preliminary Survey,” *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 02 (1984): 307–30, doi:10.1017/S0026749X0001444X.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 320. Qichao Liang, *Xin Da Lu You Ji*, in *Jin Dai Zhongguo Shi Liao Cong Kan*, 96–97 (reprint, Taipei: Wen hai chuban she, 1967).

²⁹ H. M. Lai, *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004), 77–78.
<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip049/2003020363.html>.

³⁰ Armentrout-Ma, “Urban Chinese at the Sinitic Frontier,” 119.

- ³¹ *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), October 27, 1856.
- ³² See Douglas McDonald and Gina McDonald, *The History of the Weaverville Joss House and the Chinese of Trinity County, California* (Medford, OR: McDonald Pub., 1986); Mariann Kaye Wells, *Chinese Temples in California* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1971) 36–37, 48.
- ³³ For the idea of *jianghu* in contemporary Chinese working class culture, see Avron Albert Boretz, *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters: Ritual Violence, Martial Arts, and Masculinity on the Margins of Chinese Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 15–16.
- ³⁴ See Wells, *Chinese Temples in California*; Wolfram Eberhard, “Economic Activities of a Chinese Temple in California,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82, no. 3 (July 1, 1962): 362–71, doi:10.2307/597647.
- ³⁵ See Boretz, *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters*, 9–15.
- ³⁶ Lois Rodecape, “Celestial Drama in the Golden Hills: The Chinese Theatre in California, 1849–1869,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (June 1944): 97–116; R. Riddle, *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams: Music in the Life of San Francisco's Chinese* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983); Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- ³⁷ Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China.” 28.
- ³⁸ Guanzhong Luo, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms - San Guo Zhi Yan Yi* (North Clarendon, VT: C. E. Tuttle Co, 2002).
- ³⁹ Prasenjit Duara, “Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (November 1988): 778–95.
- ⁴⁰ *Guandi Shengming Zhen Jing* (The True Sutra of Lord Guan), (Guangdong, China: Foshan, 1870), 3:31.
- ⁴¹ Feiling Davis, *Primitive Revolutionaries of China: A Study of Secret Societies in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1977). 64–67.
- ⁴² See Lee McIsaac, “Righteous Fraternities” and Honorable Men: Sworn Brotherhoods in Wartime Chongqing,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000): 1641–1655, for a similar reading of sworn brotherhoods in communities under stress.
- ⁴³ Dian Murray, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 37.
- ⁴⁴ B. J. ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1998). *Hongmen Shouce*, undated and unpaginated.

⁴⁵ On the body as a site of memory, see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 72–74. Hongjia continues to be a popular boxing style in Guangdong and in Chinese communities in North America, where it is known by its Cantonese name, Hung Gar.

⁴⁶ “Hong Quan” “Kejia Quan,” *Zhongguo Wushu Da Cidian* (Beijing: Renmin Tiyu chu ban she, 1990).

⁴⁷ Benjamin Judkins and Jon Nielson, *The Creation of Wing Chun, A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016).

⁴⁸ Hongmen Shouce, n. d., n. p.

⁴⁹ See Meir Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

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