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Cover Illustration  A painting commemorating the *Huanghua gang* martyrs by the Famous Lingnan School painter He Jianshi 何劍士, Xiu Jinhua, *Huanghua gang gongyuan* [The Huanghua gang Park], Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu Chubanshe, 2001, p.53.
Unquestionably the most famous Chinese "secret society" was the Heaven and Earth Society (Tiandihui 天地會), better known in the West as the Triads. It began sometime during the eighteenth century, most probably either in Guangdong 广東 in Huizhou 惠州 or Chaozhou 潮州 prefecture or in Fujian 福建 in Zhangzhou 漳州 prefecture. The earliest known mention of the name Tiandihui, however, was in 1786 with the eponymous Lin Shuangwen 林爽文 Rebellion in Taiwan 臺灣. This was the first verifiable Triad rebellion. The leader of the rebellion, Lin Shuangwen, was something of a gangster or local bully, who had engaged in a variety of criminal activities ranging from petty theft and gambling to armed affrays. Lin, however, was not the originator of the Heaven and Earth Society.

A traveling cloth seller named Yan Yan 廖炎, who had come from Zhangzhou, had brought the Triads to Taiwan in 1784. He had been initiated in the previous year by Chen Biao 陳彪, an itinerant healer from Guangdong, who had taught him the secret codes, hand signals, and lore of the Heaven and Earth Society. Lin Shuangwen was one of several of Yan Yan's disciples. Interestingly, after his arrest in 1788, Yan Yan described the Heaven and Earth Society as a "religious teaching" (jiao 教). In his confession he explained that "everyone who enters the society has to establish an incense altar and under crossed swords they swear an oath to help out other members of the sect [jiao] whenever they encounter any trouble." He then went on to describe the rituals and passwords of the society/sect. His confession continues:

I presented an earlier version of this paper first at the Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, in March 2002, and am grateful for the comments of Paul Katz, Meir Shahar, Ch'en Ch'iu-k'un, and other participants at the presentation. Another version was presented at the History Faculty Colloquium in October 2003, at Western Kentucky University, and I wish to thank the participants for their comments and suggestions. I also wish to thank the two anonymous readers for East Asian History for their critical comments. Research was supported by a Fulbright Fellowship that was funded by the National Endowment for Culture and Arts, Republic of China.
Originally people willingly entered the society to get financial help from other members for weddings and funerals and support if they got into fights. Also if bandits accosted them, as soon as they indicated the secret signs of the sect they would not be bothered. What is more, by transmitting the teachings to others they could receive some gratuities.

According to his testimony, the society/sect had been created “in the distant past” in Sichuan 四川 province by two people whose surnames were Li 李 and Zhu 朱. Afterwards a certain Ma Jiulong 马九龍 gathered forty-eight monks to spread their religious teachings, which also included magical techniques (fashu 法術) for dispatching spirit soldiers. Later, of the original forty-eight Shaolin 少林 monks, only thirteen had survived to spread the teachings everywhere. Yan Yan said that it was Monk Hong Er 洪二, who was also called Tixi 提喜 (or Tuxi 涂喜), who actually introduced the Heaven and Earth Society to Guangdong in the 1760s. As Yan Yan explained to his inquisitors, Li, Zhu, and Hong were not only the surnames of key founders of the society, for the names also served as secret codes (anbao 暗號) themselves.²

Interpreting the Early Heaven and Earth Society

One of the most heated debates among historians of China concerns the origins and nature of the Heaven and Earth Society, debates which unfortunately sidetrack research from other important questions about the role of secret societies in Chinese society and culture more generally.³ Following the archival trail left by Yan Yan and others, today a number of scholars, particularly Zhuang Jifa 莊吉發 and Qin Baoqi 秦寶琦, have concluded that Tixi founded the Tiandihui 天地会 in 1761 or 1762 in Huizhou or Zhangzhou. While Qin Baoqi has explained that the Triads arose as a result of the social and economic hardships of the laboring poor, Zhuang Jifa has suggested that it originated in the ethnic and lineage feuds (xiedou 社仇) common throughout southeast China at that time. For both scholars the Heaven and Earth Society was fundamentally a mutual-aid and self-protection organization.⁴

Other scholars, most notably He Zhiqing 赫治清, while recognizing Tixi as a Triad leader, have insisted that the society was founded much earlier in the Kangxi 康熙 reign as a rebellious pro-Ming 明, anti-Manchu 滿 organization.⁵ And although most current research has debunked such theories, still some scholars maintain that the Tiandihui 天地会 started in the Ming dynasty or that its founders were followers of Zheng Chenggong 鄭成功 (Koxinga) on Taiwan. They also interpret the secret society in

² Tiandihui [The heaven and earth society], compiled by the Qing History Institute of People’s University (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1981-9) 1: 97-111.


⁴ See, for example, Zhuang Jifa, Qingdai tiandibui yuanliu kao [On the origins of the Tiandihui in the Qing period] (Taipei: Guoli Gugong Bowuyuan, 1981), passim, and Qingdai mimi hUidang shi yanjiu [A study of secret societies in the Qing period] (Taipei: Wenshizhi Chubanshe, 1994), passim; and Qin Baoqi, Qing qianqi tiandihui yanjiu [A study of the Tiandihui in the early Qing period] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1998). passim.

⁵ See He Zhiqing, Tiandibui qiyuan yanjiu [A study of the origins of the Tiandibui] (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), passim; see also He Zhiqing ROBERT J. ANTONY
narrow political terms as an anti-Qing organization. Despite their differences in interpretation, one thing that most of the above-mentioned writers have in common is their attempts at literal interpretations of Tiandihui myths and legends. They each base their arguments or attempt to trace the names of places and peoples in Triad lore to actual historical locations and figures.

Conventional wisdom has also informed us that the secret societies in Chinese history were somewhat rigidly divided into two distinct groups: one, the secret religious sects in northern China, namely, the so-called “White Lotus” (Bailianjiao 白蓮教) tradition, and two, the secret societies in the south, namely, the “Triad” tradition. In this interpretation the Tiandihui was viewed as being basically secular, even irreligious, in nature.

Recent research by David Ownby and especially Barend ter Haar, however, has radically altered previous interpretations. While ter Haar offers no explicit explanation for the origins of the Triads, Ownby suggests that secret societies, including the Triads, had evolved out of two separate and distinct phenomena: the community-based mutual-aid associations (bui 會) and blood-oath brotherhoods. Secret societies only emerged sometime in the 1740s to 1760s when these two types of popular organizations merged for the first time in history. This merger, Ownby tells us, was marked by the appearance of specific names for the various societies, the Tiandihui being one such name. Both Ownby and ter Haar have also rejected the literal interpretation of Triad legends as the basis for historical facts and instead treat them on their own terms as mythology. In doing so they have opened the door to look seriously at Triad rituals and legends as being important to members in creating a community and identity of their own. Significantly, too, their findings suggest ways to view the Heaven and Earth Society in terms of popular religion, an approach rejected or ignored by most earlier scholars.

In this paper I follow the leads of Ownby and ter Haar to investigate further the connections between Chinese secret societies and popular religion, and in particular ter Haar’s interpretation of what he calls the “demonological messianic paradigm.” In brief, ter Haar has traced the roots of early Triad rituals and lore back to traditional Daoist exorcist techniques and to folk demonology, clearly showing links between several non-Buddhist-inspired messianic movements and early Triad development. While building on the studies of previous scholars, this article attempts to go beyond them to explore secret societies (in the broadest sense) in relation to both popular religion and organized crime. I link the early Triads and secret societies in general to a line of development that emerged out of popular demonological messianic movements and “gangsterism,” phenomena that were frequently bound by blood-covenants (shaxue jiemeng 銮血結盟).
What I do not intend to do in this article is present any new hypothesis for an exact date and place of the founding of the Heaven and Earth Society. Nor do I offer any new information on who founded the Tiandihui. These are not relevant questions for this article and I have nothing new to add here to the ongoing scholastic debate. Instead, I am interested in elucidating the context in which the Tiandihui and other secret societies emerged and developed in south China in the eighteenth century. Borrowing from history, anthropology, and folklore, my approach is what scholars have called “history from the bottom up.”¹⁰ My purpose is to investigate as best as we can the early secret societies based on a study of the perspectives and motives of the people who formed and joined them. Of course, these events and movements can be interpreted in different ways depending on the perspective taken. Thus, we can look at them from the official perspective, which invariably emphasized the seditious nature of the movements; or we can take the popular perspectives of the participants or leaders, which emphasized folk beliefs about the supernatural and/or survival strategies sometimes involving banditry and racketeering. It is dangerous to rely solely on the perspectives and interpretations of officials, because by doing so we run the risk of attributing perceptions and motives to the participants that they did not have. Nevertheless, none of these perspectives is mutually exclusive.

Geographical and Temporal Distribution of Illegal Associations in South China, 1641–1788

My findings are summarized in the Table in the Appendix. That table outlines data on over forty “illegal associations” in Taiwan, Fujian, and Guangdong between 1641 and 1788. (This table, which is derived from a broad range of primary and secondary materials, does not claim to be complete but only suggestive of major trends.) I selected these particular areas because of their direct relevance to the early development of the Tiandihui and other secret societies. I begin with the Ming-Qing transition in the 1640s and end with the year 1788, which marked the appearance of the Tiandihui in Taiwan during the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion mentioned earlier. Roughly half of the cases in the table were demonic messianic movements or at least demonstrated certain messianic influences. Just over half of the cases involved associations that used blood oaths or covenants. While in almost half of the cases groups took specific names, a slightly larger number of groups had no appellations. The majority of the associations were involved in such activities as banditry, swindling, and/or sedition. (In the table I have used quotation marks around the words “swindling” and “sedition” to indicate that these were labels imposed by Qing officials.) This article focuses mainly on the cases labeled “messianic” in the table.

¹⁰ See, for example, the essays in Frederick Krantz, ed., History from below: studies in popular protest and popular ideology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), passim.
The geographical distribution of illegal associations in south China during the years 1641–1788 is illustrated in the map. As the map indicates, these associations were spread throughout much of Guangdong, Fujian, and Taiwan. I have not, however, uncovered evidence of illegal associations for this period in southwestern Guangdong (e.g., the Leizhou Peninsula or Hainan Island) or in eastern Taiwan (although there was such activity in those areas by the early nineteenth century). While several illegal associations were located in the peripheral areas of Guangdong and Fujian, the majority of them were located in core areas, particularly the densely-populated and highly-commercialized prefectures of Chaozhou and Zhangzhou, with somewhat fewer in Quanzhou and the Canton delta. These findings are significant because they modify the conventional interpretations of G. William Skinner and others, which claim that most social disorders appeared not in core but in peripheral regions of the Qing empire.11

Although Taiwan was a frontier region during this period, nonetheless, it is important to point out that all of the associations on the island were located in the most populated and commercialized areas, namely Zhanghua 彰化, Zhuluo 諸羅, and Fengshan 凤山. Not incidentally, these were areas settled by large numbers of people who came from Zhangzhou and Chaozhou who brought with them their local customs and folk beliefs. When viewed as a whole, the area with the largest number of messianic incidents, namely Chaozhou, Zhangzhou, and southwestern Taiwan, was one of shared culture, including not only language and religion but also endemic feuds and local violence.12

Table 1 below gives a temporal view of the illegal associations in south China between 1641 and 1788. Most activities occurred in the years between 1731 and 1788. Not only did many of these associations take specific names—e.g., the Father and Mother Society (Fumubui 父母會) or Small Dagger Society (Xiaodaohui 小刀會)—but there was also an increase in both demonological messianic and blood-oath activities beginning in the 1730s. Why was there this apparent sudden upsurge? As Rolf Stein pointed out for an earlier age, demonic cults (guidao 鬼道) tended to appear in China during times of decadence and crisis.13 The eighteenth century was such a time of increasing decadence and extravagance; it was also an age of great anxiety, fierce competition, and violent confrontations. Perhaps even more important, beginning in the late 1720s both the Yongzheng 雍正 and Qianlong 乾隆 emperors took a personal interest in the investigation and suppression of heterodox sects and therefore called upon officials to crackdown on their activities, undoubtedly causing a marked increase in their numbers.14 Also, although there were earlier prohibitions, after 1729 the imperial court promulgated several new laws against what it saw as an increase in heretical sects, especially in the southern provinces. In 1747, for instance, the Qianlong emperor issued an imperial edict that condemned the evil customs among the people in Fujian who placed their trust in shamans and magicians who claimed that they could control the forces of nature by summoning spirits and demons.15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Demonic Messianic</th>
<th>Sectarian Messianic</th>
<th>Named Associations</th>
<th>Covenants/ Blood Oaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1641–1670</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1671–1700</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1701–1730</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1731–1760</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1761–1788</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
Temporal Distribution of Illegal Associations in Southeast China, 1641–1788
Interpreting Demons and Saviors

Demonological messianism was an important type of folk millenarianism but was distinct from the better known messianic movements associated with the so-called White Lotus (Buddhist) tradition. In the latter tradition, believers responded to the threat of apocalypse by changes in their lifestyle and moral behavior, for example, by keeping a vegetarian fast, meditation, sutra reading, and so forth. Only those who adopted the proper lifestyle would be saved; everyone else was doomed. In the demonological messianic tradition, according to Barend ter Haar, there was no need for a change in one's lifestyle or even moral behavior. To fight off the impending apocalyptic disaster one simply used Daoist (or popular) exorcist techniques, which called on the aid of various saviors or messiahs, divine armies, and protective amulets. In a word, anyone could buy protection from the apocalypse. Furthermore, unlike most Buddhist-inspired millenarian movements, the demonic messianic movements frequently invoked blood covenants similar to ones used in Daoist exorcistic rituals. The beliefs in demons and apocalyptic disasters, of course, were deeply ingrained in Chinese folk culture.

Although the information in the table in the Appendix is incomplete, nevertheless we can make some general statements based on what we do know about those messianic movements. Indeed, there are certain key elements that are common to nearly every case labeled messianic in the table. What is more, besides the messianic attributes, most of these same movements also exhibited various nefarious activities or forms of gangsterism—swindling, extortion, gambling, theft, banditry, murder, and so forth (discussed in the following section).

Demons and the Apocalypse. Messianic movements began with rumors or prophecies of impending eschatological disasters—demons invading this world, plagues and epidemics, wars, barbarian invasions, bandits, floods, fires, locusts, and so forth. Demons were themselves the harbingers and the cause of apocalyptic calamities. J. J. M. de Groot explained that in Chinese folk beliefs demons acted not only alone in causing havoc, but also they frequently banded together “in gangs and hordes, armed, equipped and led by chieftains quite like terrestrial troops and armies.” Indeed, he continued, “spectral warriors” (guibing 鬼兵) and their exploits were key features of China’s demonology.

Spirits and demons, who resembled humans and were ruled over by spectral kings (guiwang 鬼王), resided in a nebulous realm, often said to be located in remote barbarian areas beyond the pale of Chinese civilization. The ancient Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhai jing 山海經), for instance, described a “ghost kingdom” (guiguo 鬼國) that was inhabited by one-eyed beings with human features and situated among the distant northern countries. There also were headless monsters, like...
the one depicted in Figure 1. Here was a region of yin 陰, of cold and darkness inhabited by demons. A sixth-century Daoist work likewise associated barbarians with the forces of darkness (yin) as well as with heterodoxy or licentiousness. The world of ghosts and demons was separated from the world of humans by specter gates (guimen 鬼門). During the Tang dynasty and earlier eras, according to the Old History of the Tang (Jiu Tangshu 唐書), one such gate was located in the south, at the far extremity of the Chinese empire. Some thirty li 里 to the south of Beiliu 北流 there was a “Specter Gate Pass” (guimenguan 鬼門關) marked by two rocks that opened into the malarial regions of Vietnam. It was, therefore, quite natural for Chinese to associate foreign invaders and conquerors—such as the Mongols, Manchus, and later Westerners—with demons and the associated disasters they brought with them as nothing less than apocalyptic.

Divine Armies and Messianic Saviors. In each of the messianic cases discussed here, charismatic leaders appeared who either prophesied about an impending apocalyptic disaster or who took advantage of such rumors already in circulation. They preached that they possessed methods to combat apocalyptic demons and plagues. In some cases they asserted that they themselves were saviors. In 1719, in Fujian, for instance, Xue Youlian 薛有連 said that he could invoke a Bodhisattva (Pusa 菩薩) to descend into his body (jiangshen 降身) supposedly to save his followers from the apocalypse. In other cases leaders claimed that they could summon divine armies and saviors to fight against evil demons. Violent demonic beings could only be warded off by violent measures. In Daoist and folk beliefs evil-spreading demons had to be battled against and violently destroyed with spirit soldiers (shenbing 神兵 or yinbing 陰兵) by using exorcistic rituals. It was common for Daoist priests and shamans, wielding swords and flags in ritual exorcist dances, to expel demons by summoning spirit soldiers. In the nineteenth century, as a local gazetteer from Guangdong explained, in the countryside wizards or male shamans (nanwu 男巫), who, dressed in female clothing, would ascend altars to dispatch divine armies.

Figure 1

Figure 2
Exorcistic sword dance (source: Shalun village, Taiwan, February 2002 [photo by the author])
to drive away the evil specters lurking in the area.\textsuperscript{22} Exorcistic rituals, like the one in Figure 2, are still performed in Taiwan.

The five divine armies, called the Five Encampments (\textit{wuying 五營}) in southeastern China, were denoted by five colored flags representing the five directions (north, south, east, west, and center). Each army was commanded by its own divine general whose name and title were often written on his flag. In 1748, Li Awan 李阿萬, a local Daoist priest from Chaozhou, possessed five colored flags representing spirit armies which he said he could call upon to fight back the apocalypse.\textsuperscript{23} It is reasonable, too, that the “Five Houses” (\textit{wufang 五房}) in \textit{Tiandibui} accounts, which were represented by five colored flags, stood for the Five Encampments of the divine armies.\textsuperscript{24} Such flags could (and still can) be found in rice bushels (\textit{dou 斗}) on temple altars and placed around villages for protection against demonic forces.\textsuperscript{25}

Saviors, who always came from some idyllic outside place (often in the west), led and dispatched divine armies to fight demons. Once the demons were defeated a perfect age of Great Peace (\textit{taiping 太平}) would ensue under the rule of a savior. It was common, in fact, for messianic leaders to issue proclamations declaring the advent of a new era of “great peace.” The message was both messianic and political for it assumed a change of dynasty. According to \textit{Tiandibui} lore, once the Manchus were destroyed, an era of Great Peace would begin. In mythological terms, during initiations new Triad members would cross a river in a boat to reach the destined Great Peace Market 太平墟 (Figure 3). In fact, the term “great peace” frequently appeared in Triad myths and legends. Not coincidentally, in the earliest foundation account (dated 1806), the Shaolin Monastery 少林寺 was supposedly located in the Great Peace Fortress 太平堡 in Great Peace prefecture 太平州 in Gansu 甘肅 province in far western China.\textsuperscript{26}

In the eighteenth century, most of the saviors were represented by individuals having the surnames Li or Zhu. Although in early imperial China the surname Li was more commonly used for apocalyptic saviors, in the Qing period the surname Zhu also became quite common. Because there was a popular belief that disasters could be averted by the aid of imperial descendants saviors were often said to be royal figures, thus the names Li of the Tang 唐 dynastic house and Zhu of the Ming dynasty were popular. The use of the surnames of imperial families also gave legitimacy to messianic movements and bolstered claims to emperorship.\textsuperscript{27}
As the table in the Appendix indicates, one of the most frequently mentioned saviors was named Li Kaihua (or variations such as Li Jiukui, Li Chaoyi, Li Tianbao, Li Tianbo, and Li Taohong). Other common saviors included Third Prince Zhu (Zhu Santaitzi 朱三太子) or such similar names using the surname Zhu. In Zhuluo county, Taiwan, in 1734, for example, one messianic group invoked the Fourth Prince Zhu (Zhu Sitaitzi 朱四太子) as their messiah. In 1742–43, in Fujian, another messianic group inscribed the names Li Kaihua and Zhu Son of Heaven (Zhu Tianzi 朱天子) on a white silk flag. A decade later in one of several incidents in Fengshan county, Taiwan, Zhang Fengjie 張鳴喈 also wrote on flags that Li Kaihua would aid him and his followers in attacking Xiamen 厦門. Taking advantage of a local drought, leaders of the Small Dagger Society in southern Fujian in 1742 spread rumors of impending disaster. They produced banners proclaiming that Li Kaihua would lead five (divine) armies to drive away demons. The Heaven and Earth Society, from its very beginnings, espoused various saviors of the Li and Zhu surnames, as well as others. There was a Li Taohong and the familiar Li Kaihua, as well as a Prince Zhu, a Zhu Hongde 朱洪德, a Zhu Jiutao 朱九桃, and a Zhu Hongzhu 朱洪竹 (Figure 4). According to Sasaki Masaya, the name Li Kaihua appeared as early as the Ming dynasty and was deeply embedded in popular thought. The name Third Prince Zhu, ter Haar suggests, was derived from the popular exorcist deity Santaizi 三太子 or Nezha 哪吒, who had the surname Li. Such widespread appearances of these specific, well-known saviors over a long period of time and over a large and diverse area of southern China was not usually the result of simple coincidence but rather of a shared cultural and religious heritage.

Besides their reputed royal heritage, saviors also shared a number of other distinct characteristics. For one, they were usually young. Because of their virility, according to Chinese folk belief, young men were considered to be especially animated with positive yang forces. For that reason male shamans were preferably youths, and in late nineteenth-century Fujian young boys between the ages of eleven and fifteen were employed in religious processions to chant exorcising spells. As noted above, saviors also all had unusually remarkable personal names, often employing flower or fruit symbolism (such as “peach”), auspicious numbers and other distinctive characteristics.

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28 Shiliu xunkan, tian series, pp.324a–5b.
31 Zhupi zouzhe (677) QL 7.6.22; (947) QL 7.8.2; and (947) QL 7.8.25 [Unpublished palace memorials, First Historical Archives, Beijing]. In the notes QL stands for the Qianlong reign and JQ for the Jiaqing reign; the numbers following QL and JQ stand for the reign year, lunar month, and day.

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34 What is more, as Barend ter Haar (Ritual and mythology, passim) and Suzuki Chûsei [Studies on millenarian popular movements] (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 1982), pp.151–350.
The color red, in particular, has very positive connotations and is efficacious in counteracting evil and averting calamities. It is the color of fire and light, and therefore possesses positive yang; it is also the color of blood, the vital force of life. For these reasons emperors and Daoist priests used red ink in writing documents and rebels wore red turbans around their heads; it is also why parents in south China tied red thread in the hair of their children.36

The Li Mei case is instructive. Uncovered by officials in Enping county in Guangdong in 1729, a charismatic preacher named Li Zantao or Li Shixin, but who called himself Li Mei (“Plum Plum”), showed up early in that year in the Canton delta, along the West River, and in neighboring Guangxi province, predicting an impending apocalypse of demons and plagues. He had at his command, he asserted, an arsenal of saviors leading (divine) armies. They included the familiar names of Li Kaihua or Li Jiukui, Zhu Santaizi, and Luo Ping, who was a savior associated with another savior known as the Luminous King (Mingwang among other titles).37 In one incident from Guangxi officials reported that someone named Li Mei declared that Li Kaihua was none other than his son, and elsewhere it was said that Li Kaihua was but a youth of eight sui. Li Mei also mentioned other less familiar saviors such as Duke Chu Thunder (Chuzhen gong) and Prince Jade Dragon (Yulong taizi). The names Luo Ping and Duke Chu Thunder were written on command flags (lingqi) similar to the ones used in exorcist rituals for commanding spirit armies. Li Mei said that Li Jiukui and Zhu Santaizi, who were assembling several hundreds of thousands of (divine) soldiers, resided in the Little Western Heaven (xiaoxitian) located to the far south in Vietnam, that nebulous region of ghosts and spirits. Zhu Santaizi’s army would come from Wizard Mountain (Wushan), a name that referred not only to an actual place in Sichuan province but also carried significant magical connotations. At one time or another, Li Mei had told followers that there were divine armies (represented by colored silk or paper flags or placards) in Guangxi, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Fujian. People who claimed to be Li Mei (or who used similar names) continued to appear from time to time over a wide area as far away as Yunnan, Guizhou, and Hubei until at least 1743. Interestingly, although over those years several hundreds of people were arrested, the authorities never apprehended anyone by the name of Li Mei.38

Protective Charms and Magical Techniques. Throughout Chinese history, but especially in times of social and moral anxiety, itinerant healers and priests appeared in towns and countryside selling charms (fu) and chanting spells (zhou) to cure diseases and ward off calamities. In 1709 such practices became so rampant and disturbing that the Qing government had to enact a new law prohibiting anyone from writing charms and agitating the populace.39 For most Chinese, however, demonological healing was traditionally the most important type of relief from illnesses and epidemics.40 Charms were, and still are, ubiquitous to Chinese
folk culture and could (and still can) be found in temples and almanacs.\footnote{See, for example, Xu Zhenghong, \textit{Fuzhou mixin jengyun} [On popular charms and incantations] (Tainan: Daxing Chubanshe, 1993), \textit{passim}.} Charms and spells were one of the chief means used by Daoist priests and other religious practitioners to expel and kill demons, and therefore were indispensable in exorcist rituals. Charms were essential to vernacular and classical Daoist rituals, considered being “the most fundamental of cosmic revelations.”\footnote{Schipper, “Vernacular and classical ritual,” p.46.}

Charms were cosmic signs or heavenly revelations believed to have been handed down from mythical rulers and deities, who, like the ritual specialists, had used them to summon, control, and even punish spirits and demons. Charms were potent because they were contracts between the religious adept and the deities who conferred them. They were written orders sent to the nether world of spirits, and, as in the case of the imperial bureaucracy, they bore the impress of official seals. Such seals were necessary for the efficacy of the charm, for, as one magician explained, “a charm without a seal is like an army without a general.”\footnote{Cited in Willoughby-Mead, \textit{Chinese ghouls and goblins}, p.119.} Charms were usually stamped or written in some esoteric or archaic script such as \textit{zhuanwen} 鍾文 on yellow (sometimes red or white) silk or paper (some-
times on wooden or jade tablets). Spells were recited over charms to give them potency. Protective amulets were normally worn on the person or hung somewhere in the home or burned and the ashes consumed (often mixed with liquor) or carried in small satchels.\textsuperscript{44} Figure 5 depicts an “all-purpose” exorcising charm for expelling from houses all demons that molest and injure people. “The name of the person for whose benefit the ceremony has been performed, as well as the date at which it has taken place, are written on the space left blank for that purpose.”\textsuperscript{45}

In the demonological messianic cases discussed in this article charms were the chief means of protection for individuals from demons and eschatological calamities.\textsuperscript{46} After warning people of impending catastrophe, preachers like Li Mei, Li Awan, and others, promised that no harm would come to anyone who bought their charms. According to several depositions, Li Mei and his associates produced charms and certificates (zhà on yellow silk stamped with a wooden seal in archaic characters with the names of generals and saviors. As with most charms, spaces were left blank for filling in names and dates. The seal was kept in a special pewter box. The certificate that Li Qisheng 李其聖 had purchased cost three taels of silver. Li Mei had told him to display the certificate at the entrance to his village to protect himself and his family from (demon) soldiers. Li Mei told Liang Zibin 梁子賓 that he needed no weapons but only an amulet for protection.\textsuperscript{47} Although official documents do not mention any predictions of impending apocalypse, the Iron Ruler Society (Tiechihui 鐘尺會) case in Fujian from 1736 to 1756 was very similar to the Li Mei case cited above. Leaders of the Tiechihui used an “old text” or Heavenly Book (tianshu 天書) containing charms and incantations written in the archaic script, which they copied to make seals and certificates that they sold to villagers. These charms were printed on yellow silk and paper with the name Li Kaihua as well as several military titles.\textsuperscript{48} When Zhu Ajiang 朱阿姜 was arrested in 1770, officials found a seal and a booklet containing charms and spells.\textsuperscript{49} The classics, old books with archaic writing, and old seals were also in themselves considered to be effective protective charms.\textsuperscript{50}

During Triad initiations new members were given “certificates” (yao­ping 魏憑), often on yellow or red paper or silk, to be carried at all times as a form of identity. These certificates also served members as protective charms. Figure 6 depicts a Tiandihui certificate or charm dated from the early nineteenth century.


\textsuperscript{47} Shiliao xunkan, tian series, pp.20b–3a.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., di series, pp.441a–51b.

\textsuperscript{49} Kang Yong Qian shiqi chengxiang jiankang douzheng ziliao, vol.2, pp.686–8.

\textsuperscript{50} Willoughby-Meade, \textit{Chinese ghouls and goblins}, pp.28, 45.
century. Triads also produced amulets for guarding physical health and for “cultivating and regulating the person.” During the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion there was the case of Woman Jin 金娘 who used charms and incantations to cure sickness among Lin’s troops. She also reportedly performed exorcist rituals with a sword while beating a drum and chanting spells in order to protect the rebels from the weapons of Qing soldiers. \(^52\)

\(\text{Tiantibui}\) members also used a variety of hand signals amazingly similar to the ones used in exorcistic magic. Triad rituals, certificates, hand signals, and charms, as David Ownby has explained, “added a layer of supernatural protection to the more secular protection sought by joining a brotherhood association.” \(^53\)

Sometimes door plaques and flags were used as amulets to expel demons and plagues. \(^54\) In 1733 and 1734, Wang Atong 王阿童 in Haiyang 海阳 county, Guangdong, for instance, claimed to have paper charms that could protect people and cloth flags that could ward off ghosts. On some of the charms were printed the words “Heaven Round National Treasures” (\(\text{Tianyuan taibao 天圆宝藏}\)). \(^55\) The “national treasures” (\(\text{taibao}\)) in ancient China were considered to be charms of power and long life that had been miraculously bestowed by Heaven. \(^56\) In the mountainous border area between Fujian and Jiangxi 江西 in 1767 and 1768, Monk Jueyuan 覺圓 and his band, after foretelling the imminent arrival of brigands, produced flags that they sold to villagers for protection against those bandits. \(^57\)

Saviors were often armed with iron or peach wood swords, as were Daoist priests and shamans. These weapons were usually said to have been bestowed on them by Heaven, a past emperor, or a famous warrior. In 1770, in Chaozhou prefecture, for example, the geomancer Zhu Ajiang declared that he had received a magic iron sword from Heaven. \(^58\) Iron symbolized strength, determination, and justice, as well as positive yang forces. The magnetic properties of iron also infused the weapon with magical properties quite useful in quelling demons. \(^59\) The wood of peach trees, of course, had important supernatural qualities useful in exorcist rituals. Because it symbolized vitality, demons feared the peach tree. For the same reason, people in Xiamen wore miniature swords of peach wood as amulets or hung them over the doors of their houses to ward off demons and epidemics. \(^60\)

Besides charms and spells, many of the leaders of the various messianic movements also professed that they or someone close to them had special magical techniques (\(\text{fashu 法術}\)). Li Mei claimed that he possessed magical powers which he could use to summon and command the five divine armies, as well as to excavate hidden treasures of silver buried in the ground in a place called Great Peace (\(\text{Taiping 太平}\)) in Yangjiang 陽江 county in Guangdong. He was assisted by an illusive monk named Zhikai 智開, who was his military advisor and who could also use magical arts to stupefy people and exorcise demons. For his part,
Li Tianbao claimed to be able to perform magic with a jade charm that the gods had given to him. When he was arrested, officials uncovered a jade tablet, five charms, and miscellaneous pieces of “seditious” writings. jade, which symbolized Heaven and the emperor and had magical qualities, had traditionally been used in China for good luck, immortality, wisdom, and power, as well as for protection against evil spirits and illnesses. In Fujian in 1752, a Daoist priest named Feng Heng said he could use magical arts to tell the past and predict the future, as well as conjure up the five spirit armies. People who bought charms from Wang Atong said he was a wizard (wushi 巫師) who was good at sorcery (xieshu 邪術).

*Tiandihui* initiation rituals normally included a rice bushel containing the usual exorcistic objects—colored flags, sword, scissors, mirror, ruler, and scales. These items were explicitly mentioned in a Triad initiation in 1802 in Xinhui 新會 county, Guangdong. The Triad altar in Figure 7 clearly shows these objects, as well as charms (fu 符) and command flags (lingqi) common in exorcist rituals. In the context of Chinese folk religion, each object had specific functions of expelling demons and providing protection against illnesses and other evils. The rice in the

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**Figure 7**

Triad altar showing common exorcist objects (source: Li Zifeng, Haidi [Bottom of the seal], 1940)
bushel, which represented positive rejuvenating powers, was commonly used in divination and exorcism; it also sometimes represented spirit soldiers. Triad lore spoke of a peach wood sword engraved with dragons, and in at least one early society manual the sword was used ritually to “behead demons.” Scissors, like swords, cut and destroyed demons; and rulers and scales, as instruments of measurement, controlled things. Mirrors, which ever since ancient times were used to produce “fire from the sun,” were instilled with magical powers that could deflect evil spirits. Even today one can still find mirrors attached to the walls or roofs of houses as “all-efficacious household charms” providing protection against malevolent forces.

Interpreting Sedition and Gangsterism

Imperial Pretensions. The demonological messianic incidents were not politically innocent. In some cases a dynastic change was implied and in other cases it was explicit in their slogans and banners. The seditious propaganda, too, can be viewed in eschatological rather than simply in purely political terms. In many instances, as Barend ter Haar has explained, “Their driving motivation [to rebel] was the threat of apocalyptic disasters, rather than some fundamental dissatisfaction with Qing rule.”

Tiandihui rhetoric, which was explicitly anti-Manchu, can be viewed, on the one hand, as being politically and ethnically motivated, and on the other hand, as being a conflict with demons. In demonological messianic terms the Manchus, as “barbarian” conquerors, were seen as devastating demons (likely to bring military disasters). This is implicit in several cases where villagers fled their homes in panic with the approach of imperial troops who had been sent to quell “rebels.” Manchus were to be fought not only with conventional armies but also with armies of divine soldiers. Significantly, officials noted that in a number of cases cited here, “rebel” groups had neither actual armaments nor real armies. Li Mei, as noted above, told followers that they did not need weapons. Seldom, in fact, did these cases ever escalate into actual rebellion against the Qing dynasty. In some instances it is difficult to pinpoint any rebellious intentions even though officials labeled these groups as “seditious.”

Although not all of the messianic incidents purported Ming restoration, several in fact did. The popularity of saviors having the surname Zhu after the collapse of the Ming dynasty was a clear reference to the fallen dynasty. In Fujian in 1742–43, Huang Tianrui 黄天瑞 and Monk Shanjue 善覺 produced a white silk banner with the names Orchid Dragon, Zhu Son of Heaven and Li Kaihua (lanlong Zhu tianzi Li Kaihua 蘭龍朱天子李開花) written on it. Li Amin told his followers that someone with the surname Zhu, who was a Ming heir, was planning to lead a revolt in 1770 in southern Fujian. The Third Prince Zhu (Zhu Santaizi) or Fourth Prince Zhu obviously referred to saviors who were the supposed
scions of the Ming royal family.\textsuperscript{71} In 1734 in Zhuluo, for example, on Wuchifu's 無處府 flags were the words “Great Ming Revival Fourth Prince Zhu” (\textit{da Ming fuxing Zhu Sitaizi} 大明復興朱四太子).\textsuperscript{72} Earlier in Taiwan in 1721, the Zhu Yigui 朱一貴 uprising, which also demonstrated certain demonological messianic attributes, called for the “restoration of the Ming.”\textsuperscript{73}

Messianic leaders also bolstered their political claims by surrounding themselves with imperial symbols. Saviors with the word “Dragon” in their names, the use of yellow silk and paper with writing in red, and precious objects bestowed by Heaven all had clear imperial references and helped to create a sense of legitimacy. Displaying his imperial pretensions, Li Mei reportedly wore a yellow robe and rode in a sedan-chair.\textsuperscript{74} Du Qi 杜奇, a leader of the Iron Ruler Society, had a bronze seal and an “old book” with imperial enfeoffments and dragon motifs, which he copied to produce documents on yellow silk.\textsuperscript{75} Messianic preachers, as we have seen, claimed to possess various dynastic treasures, including jade tablets, bronze seals, Heavenly books, stashes of silver, and Heavenly swords. Royal treasures were important for guaranteeing the ruling family’s possession of the Mandate of Heaven. The appearance of jade charms, such as the one allegedly produced by Li Tianbao, had traditionally been regarded as portents heralding the rise of a new dynasty.\textsuperscript{76} Leaders also produced seals claiming the Mandate of Heaven and new reign titles. Li Mei had banners with the words “Receive the Mandate of Heaven and Carry out the Way” (\textit{tianyu daoxing} 天育道行) and certificates stamped with the future \textit{guihua} 歸化 reign year.\textsuperscript{77} The Small Dagger Society in Fujian and Guangdong in 1742 had banners that proclaimed “On Behalf of Heaven Carry out the Way” (\textit{titiang xingdao} 替天行道).\textsuperscript{78} In Taiwan in 1753 another group included the words “Follow Heaven” (\textit{shuantian} 順天) on its flags.\textsuperscript{79} The Triads, of course, had similar slogans. Leaders also distributed ranks and titles, always an imperial privilege, to their closest followers.

\textit{Blood Oaths and Covenants.} A large number of the illegal associations, both messianic and non-messianic, listed in the table in the Appendix, bonded members with blood oaths and covenants. Such oaths normally consisted of three components: the swearing of an oath or covenant (either written or oral) before a deity, the drinking of a concoction of blood (either of some sacrificial animal or from the participants themselves) mixed with liquor, and a malediction listing specific punishments imposed on transgressors of the oath. Originally derived from ideas of human sacrifice, blood oaths were as old as Chinese history; they were used at one time or another by rulers, statesmen, religious practitioners, and commoners, as well as by bandits, pirates, and rebels.\textsuperscript{80} During the Warring States 戰國 period, according to Mark Lewis, blood oaths provided a means for elite political and social cohesion following the disintegration of the Shang 商 and early Zhou 周 aristocratic order. At that time, bloody rituals involving the killing of a sacrificial animal (usually a
sheep) and the drinking of its blood sealed military and diplomatic alliances. Participants performed a solemn ritual calling on the gods and ancestors as witnesses. “Blood was ... sprinkled on the altar to summon the spirits, and the text of the covenant was read. This text included a list of the participants, the terms of the oath, and sometimes a curse upon those who violated the covenant.” The covenant was presided over by a covenant master (mengzhu 盟主), 81 Although blood oaths became less important in China’s ruling class after the Han 漢 dynasty, the practice continued in the lower orders, especially to “sanctify undertakings of great danger.” 82 From the Tang dynasty onwards there was an upsurge in the use of blood oaths, particularly among the socially marginalized elements of Chinese society who engaged in violent, criminal, messianic, and rebellious activities. 83

Also, ever since at least the eleventh century in south China, Daoist priests and shamans used blood oaths in exorcist rituals. Indeed, the blood oath between adept and deity was an essential element in exorcism, without which it would have been futile. In an exorcism the religious specialist (sometimes several of them) performed a ritual dance while holding a sword and flags in his hands (see Figure 2 above). Through ritual he summoned the divine generals. The flags of five colors represented the five divine generals of the five directions whose armies helped to exorcise evil demons. With the sword he fought the demons. Normally, too, the ritual included a blood covenant between the specialist and the divine generals. The priest drank blood mixed with liquor and offered the same concoction to the divine generals. It was usually the blood of a cock that was sacrificed and used in the covenant. Not coincidentally, cock's blood was traditionally used to cure illnesses caused by demons. The cock and its blood were believed to have “solar propensities, and moreover confer on man the vitality bestowed by the universal source of life, of which it is the symbol.” According to one source, the blood from a cock's comb “will cure sorcery, drive away evil, and arrest epidemics.” Sometimes the blood of the ritual specialist himself was used, human blood being considered even more potent. 84

Tiandihui initiation rituals always included blood oaths, but they were not the only illegal association to have them. The first messianic secret society clearly to have a blood oath was the Iron Ruler Society in southern Fujian. Although antecedents to the society dated back to 1736 with the God of War Society (Guanshenghui 關聖會), the first mention of a blood oath ritual was not until 1752. Late one night in the fourth lunar month of that year twelve members had retired to the tiny cloister (an 隘) of Monk Daosan 道三 to drink and feast and to initiate several neophytes with prayers, sacrifices, and the swearing of an oath with the blood of a cock. The covenant also included a death curse on anyone breaking the oath. At an earlier initiation, which took place on the day of the God of War festival, leaders produced a covenant text and recorded in it the names of over fifty sworn brothers. As we have noted earlier,
they also produced charms or certificates with the name Li Kaihua and the titles of military officials on them. One is immediately struck by the similarity here with the earlier Warring States and later exorcist blood oath rituals. The Triads and other secret societies also had similar blood oaths and covenants.

**Messianic Leaders.** Several features immediately stand out when we examine the social backgrounds of leaders of the messianic groups discussed in this article. Significantly, the largest number of leaders were itinerant religious practitioners who drifted around from place to place making a living by selling their services and expertise on various religious and medical matters. They were a highly mobile group, who, like itinerant merchants, peddlers, and laborers, traveled from market to market often over long distances. Since ancient times China has known of such men, distinct from Confucian scholars, who were called “masters” (fangshi 師士). They lived close to the common people, spreading their ideas and supporting themselves as diviners, alchemists, astrologers, and healers. After the Han dynasty, because of their association with various apocryphal texts and rebellions, they were forced underground.

Such folk diviners, sorcerers, magicians, spirit mediums, and healers, who were often literate or semi-literate, nonetheless endured into the Ming, Qing, and contemporary eras. The mid-nineteenth-century illustration in Figure 8 of the “snake charmer” and his assistant is an example of such a folk healer. Li Mei, too, was described as a roving medicine seller and geomancer, who traveled back and forth between Guangdong and Guangxi using several aliases. At one time earlier in his life he had been a common soldier in Dongan 廣安 county, and he was also described as a shaman or magician. One of his compatriots, Li Tianbao, was likewise a traveling magician or spirit medium. Wang Atong was a sorcerer who moved about the Chaozhou area between Haiyang, Puning 普寧, and Jieyang 揭陽 counties. Li Boju 李伯舉 had received his book of amulets from a man named Cao Risheng 曹日昇, who traveled about practicing geomancy and sorcery. Wang Liangchen 王亮臣 was an itinerant fortuneteller in Guangdong in the 1750s. In a number of cases mendicant Buddhist monks and Daoist priests were deeply involved in these cases of demonic messianism. The supposed founder of the Heaven and Earth

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**Figure 8**
Snake charmer and folk healer (source: William Gillespie, The Land of Sinim, or China and Chinese missions [Edinburgh: Myles Macphail, 1854])
Society, Tixi, was a monk who reportedly traveled about between Fujian, Guangdong, and Sichuan. In 1767 and 1768, Monk Jueyuan led a messianic group, which included a covenant, in the border area between Fujian and Jiangxi. Li Mei said that a certain fictitious Monk Zhikai assisted him; Monk Shanjue helped Huang Tianrui, an itinerant tobacco peddler; and the Daoist priest Feng Heng aided Cai Rongzu in organizing a messianic group in Fujian in 1752. Li Awan was born into a family of practicing Daoist masters who possessed a secret book of sorcery. Because they practiced magic and could summon and control spirits and demons, villagers held such religious practitioners in awe. They were an ubiquitous and indispensable part of village life and customs.

While many leaders were outsiders, others lived on the margins of village life, and still others were men with some status and property in their local communities. Frequently leaders were local bullies and riffraff. Several depositions described Lin Shuangwen as a local bully, petty thief, and an abusive husband. Du Qi, a leader of the Iron Ruler Society, was described as a “good-for-nothing fighter” and his cousin, Du Guoxiang, was a dismissed soldier and boxing master. Both men traveled around local markets teaching martial arts and recruiting followers. A Buddhist monk named Daosan assisted them. Another leader, Luo Jiaqiu, who came from a lower gentry family, was also a boxing master. So was Li Amin. There always had been a close association between boxing masters and religious adepts in China. As Kristofer Schipper reminds us, the so-called “barefoot masters” in Taiwan normally studied martial arts as part of their religious training. The Small Dagger Society case on the Fujian and Guangdong border in 1742 involved local bullies Chen Zuo and He Zhi, as well as two members of the local gentry and a merchant. Cai Rongzu, who helped to form a sworn brotherhood in Fujian in 1752, was a xiucai degree holder. In a Taiwan case in 1734, officials arrested an old cripple known only as the “toothless fellow,” who was undoubtedly a wandering beggar who spread rumors of impending apocalypse. In the Chinese popular imagination beggars have typically been viewed as dangerous outsiders often associated with sorcery.

One is also struck by a number of cases in which women took leading, or at least important, roles in instigating or organizing messianic groups. In Fujian in 1747–8, one of the leaders of the Venerable Elders Vegetarian Society, Pu Shao who predicted the future and claimed that Maitreya had called for a revolt against the government. Sect members honored her by parading her in a sedan chair, in the same way that deities and spirit mediums were transported in processions (Figure 9). On their flags were the words “On Behalf of Heaven Carry out the Revolt” (daitian...
In other incidents, officials named Li Awan’s mother as his co-conspirator, and Wang Atong was aided by his paternal aunt. In yet another case in Jieyang county, Guangdong, between 1770 and 1773, certain members of Lin Ayu’s brotherhood were followers of a woman named Wang, who used amulets and incantations to cure illnesses. Lin’s charm was inscribed with the words “beseech fortune, avoid calamity.” Mrs. Wang’s remedies were so efficacious that the local people called her “Divine Matron” (xianpo), a title commonly given to prominent sorceresses in Guangdong.

Charlatans and Gangsters. In the official documents derogatory terms such as “rascal” (jianmin) were invariably used to describe leaders and their followers. To officials messianic preachers were all charlatans and swindlers who duped ignorant villagers out of their money. Were such depictions simply an expression of bias on the part of officials? In some cases, yes, but in other cases, no. When we examine the activities of these groups (which, of course, were also recorded by officials) we get a better insight into their nature. As the table in the Appendix clearly shows these illegal associations were commonly involved in various nefarious activities. I have used the term “gangsterism” as a shorthand to describe activities that included theft, banditry, feuds, gambling, extortion, and murder.

Once again the Li Mei case is instructive. In late 1729, officials in Nanhai county near Canton arrested Ou Zaitai, a man claiming to be the brother-in-law of Li Mei and a co-conspirator. In his confession, extracted under torture, he told officials that it was he and Li Mei who had cooked up the whole scheme to make and sell certificates (charms) to swindle people. In Enping county, Li Mei sold about thirty protective charms and flags within a couple of weeks, collecting anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 cash (wen) apiece. According to Ou, on that one trip alone Li Mei earned over 20,000 cash, plus three or four taels of silver. Li Mei shared the money with Ou and another two accomplices. At a time when hired workers and sailors earned only 200 to 400 cash per month this was quite a handsome sum. Ou also told officials that they had contrived everything to cheat the villagers out of their money. There were no soldiers assembled in Guangxi or elsewhere, and as for the names Li Jiukui, Zhu Santaizi, Chu Zhengong and Monk Zhikai, they too were all unfounded fabrications. To what extent Li Mei was a charlatan is anyone’s guess. We must remember that it was not (and still is not) unusual for religious specialists to collect payments for their services, even such large sums. Another important point to remember is that for the people who bought his charms and flags, they did believe in his warnings of an impending apocalypse. To most Chinese, demons and plagues were real.

Many individuals explained in their depositions that because of poverty and hardships in making an honest living they had been forced to form or join gangs to engage in theft, robbery, extortion, and swindling. We have already noted that there was a ready market for spreading rumors of impending disasters and peddling protective charms. But some messianic groups went beyond simple swindling to plan to become bandits and
pirates, in some cases using such rallying cries as “rob the rich to aid the poor” (*jiefu jipin* 劫富濟貧). Although they espoused such high-sounding slogans few individuals or groups put their words into action.106 In the early nineteenth century, the pirate Wang Zheng 王曾 reportedly recruited followers by claiming invincibility against the Qing navy by summoning “spirit soldiers” (*yinbing*) to assist him in battle.107

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106 For examples, see the Xue Yanwen, Wang Atong, Huang Tianrui, Chen Guangyao, Li Awan, Lu Mao, and Li Amin cases listed in the table in the Appendix.

107 *Taiwan tongzhi* [Gazetteer of Taiwan province] (Taipei: Taiwan Yinhang, 1980), 140: 553.
formed a sworn brotherhood in Guishan county in Guangdong in 1768, comprised of petty thieves, night watchmen, and local constables, specifically to engage in extorting villagers and operating a gambling racket. Members wearing red headbands and sashes, members of the Small Dagger Society (on the Fujian-Guangdong border) organized to plunder the Zhao’an county seat in 1742. Earlier that year members hired an assassin to
murder the Zhangpu 漳浦 county magistrate, who had uncovered their brotherhood. At the time of the arrest of Chen Zuo and other leaders, officials discovered two bags of foreign silver, without doubt money they had collected from extortion and selling amulets.\textsuperscript{109} Zhang Polian gou 張破臉狗 (Scar-face Dog Zhang), who had joined the Tiandihui in 1781 in Zhao’an county, had opened a gambling parlor in his home because he was out of work. His abode quickly became a regular meeting place for gamblers, drifters, yamen underlings, and soldiers, as well as petty thieves, robbers, and other secret society members.\textsuperscript{110}

When some messianic groups formed blood-oath brotherhoods ostensibly for self-protection there was little to prevent them from becoming predatory. Perhaps because they made little money “swindling” villagers by selling their charms, Du Qi proposed that he and his followers become bandits (jielianfeilei 對聯匪類). Everyone agreed and they swore an oath before a deity promising to help and defend one another and to rob people and split the loot among themselves. Du Qi’s Iron Ruler Society was composed chiefly of local rogues, yamen runners, and soldiers, all marginal elements of village communities.\textsuperscript{111} The Small Dagger Society in Taiwan in the 1770s and early 1780s, was composed of local thugs (referred to in the sources as guntu 條徒 and luobanjiao 羅漢腳) who engaged openly in local feuds and gangsterism. In Zhanghua local people referred to them as the “Wangye Small Dagger Society” (王爺小刀會). The Wangye or “Royal Lords” referred to a whole group of demons and deities in Taiwan, who either brought or relieved epidemics. They were therefore both respected and feared. Because of their demonic characteristics and appearance, the term wangye was also used colloquially to refer to bandits and ruffians. As Paul Katz has pointed out: “Calling a bandit chief wangye proves especially significant, as it implies that in most people’s minds holders of that title were not necessarily benevolent.”\textsuperscript{112} The evidence suggests, too, that this Zhanghua group may have been involved in demonology and exorcist rituals. Not only was Wangye a popular deity used in exorcism, but this particular group hung out outside the southwestern gate of the city where a Wangye temple was located, and members swore blood oaths and carried a “double edge sword” (jian 剣), like the ones used in exorcist rituals, instead of the more common single edge sword or dagger (dao 刀).\textsuperscript{113} According to de Groot, the double-edge sword, usually made of iron or peach wood, had been used since the first century to exorcise demons and was considered to be the most potent demon-destroying weapon.\textsuperscript{114}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Heaven and Earth Society was but one of many illegal associations that existed in south China in the early modern period. In this article, following the leads of David Ownby and Barend ter Haar, I have examined the connections between secret societies and folk religion, and in particular the connections with Chinese demonology and messianism. Embedded in China’s rich popular culture, secret society rituals
embraced traditional Daoist exorcist techniques and folk demonology. What is more, I have also demonstrated that these secret societies had closer ties with organized crime than they had with rebellious activities. In fact, I argue that the secret societies developed out of a popular tradition that combined demonological messianic movements and gangsterism, phenomena that frequently employed blood-covenants to bond members in a sort of brotherhood of crime.

Most of the people who formed and joined these clandestine organizations lived on the fringes of respectable society. They were chiefly individuals who fell outside normal community social and religious groups—lineages, guilds, temple cults, and the like. These were the sorts of people—poor, mobile, unattached, and discriminated against—who often turned to gangsterism and predation to survive. Triad members, as we noted at the start of this article, swore solemn blood oaths before the gods to help out one another in debt and in fights. Yan Yan explained that people joined the Heaven and Earth Society for many reasons, including earning money by transmitting the secret codes, argot, and hand signals to new members (what officials routinely labeled as “swindling”). The fortune-teller named Chen, who was active in spreading the Triads in Guangdong at the turn of the nineteenth century, always tried to attract new followers by telling them that as members they could benefit not only by receiving help in times of trouble but also by taking advantage of their numbers to rob villages and to share in the loot. Like other Triad members Chen and his men carried “certificates” that doubled as identification tags and talismans. Their initiation rituals also included the same sorts of myths and legends about messianic saviors and magical techniques. People undoubtedly joined these illegal associations for support and for protection against both men and demons.

Let us end with one final anecdote concerning a messianic leader named Yang Daohua from Linhong in Guangdong, who claimed to possess a magical sword that could slay everyone within a radius of twenty miles. After gathering a group of villagers from his home community he led an armed uprising, whose forces attacked the granary, markets, and government posts in the area. Yang and his band killed seven people and absconded with a sizable amount of official funds before being apprehended by the authorities. Although similar to the other cases mentioned above, what is striking about this incident is the fact that it did not occur in the eighteenth century but rather in the summer of 1957. Despite the repeated attacks on popular “superstitions” by the Communist government since 1949, numerous similar cases have been reported throughout China in recent years. As one Chinese newspaper editorial in 1982 explained:

In the past few years, there have been indications of a revival of reactionary superstitious sects and secret societies in some places. In some areas, scoundrels and counterrevolutionaries have appeared, claiming to be “emperors” or the “Jade Emperor” descended to earth.

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115 On Chen and the early Triads in Guangdong, see Antony, “Pirates, bandits, brotherhoods,” pp.280–92, and on the predatory activities of secret societies, see ibid., pp.353–65.
117 Ibid., p.298.
### APPENDIX: ILLEGAL ASSOCIATIONS IN SOUTH CHINA, 1641–1788

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>PLACE</th>
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<th>LEADERS</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>ATTRIBUTES</th>
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As in the past, shamans and charlatans continue to appear from time to time in China’s vast countryside, gathering bands of followers by offering protection from dangers in both the seen and unseen worlds of men and spirits. Charismatic leaders offered protection as well as opportunities for predation. In gathering his band, Yang Daohua relied on traditional, time-honored methods of recruitment. Indeed, he could never have gathered a following if what he had been preaching had not been deeply embedded in Chinese popular culture. Clearly folk beliefs in demons and apocalyptic calamities are still alive and perhaps flourishing in contemporary rural China.