

Secrecy, Society, and Revolution: Shaanxi Gelaohui in the Late Qing (1840–1911)

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the critical role played by the Gelaohui, a prominent secret society in Shaanxi Province, in the events leading up to and including the 1911 Revolution. Drawing extensively from Qing dynasty archival records, local gazetteers, and contemporary memoirs, this study traces the emergence of society, its regional adaptation, and eventual political mobilization. It argues that the Gelaohui's effectiveness in the revolutionary context was rooted not in explicit revolutionary ideology but in its adaptive organizational practices, strategic use of local ecological conditions, and deeply embedded social networks. Initially formed through interactions between displaced soldiers and marginalized local populations, the Gelaohui thrived within Shaanxi's mountainous terrains, exploiting the imperial absence and administrative weaknesses of the Qing state. Over the decades, it evolved from mutual aid networks into an effective organizational structure capable of both criminal and political action. In the revolutionary moment of 1911, the Gelaohui's decentralized yet highly coordinated networks proved

pivotal, particularly in the capture of Xi'an. Ultimately, the thesis reframes the Gelaohui's historical role from that of marginal rebel groups to key adaptive social actors who mediated the broader dynastic transition by operating at the intersection of ecological, military, and social forces.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon on the second day of the revolution in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi. By then, most of the city had already fallen to the revolutionary forces on the first day—except for the Manchu city, which remained defiantly untouched. Despite their initial plan to seize it before dawn, the revolutionaries found themselves unable to breach any of its gates, their assault stalled in the face of unexpected resistance. Beyond this unforeseen delay, the revolutionaries faced two pressing concerns. Though they had secured most of the city, their control over the troops remained shaky. Instead of coordinating under the general headquarters, the soldiers operated independently, often failing to report back. Meanwhile, another challenge loomed—handling the local patrols set up by the Qing government. If not carefully managed, they risked battling both the Manchu bannermen and these patrol forces simultaneously, further complicating their mission.¹

Despite these obstacles, Manchu City was successfully taken by the end of the day, and the credit belonged not to the Tongmenghui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance, 同盟會), the revolutionary party which initiated the nationwide revolution, but primarily to the Gelaohui (Society of Brothers and Elders, 哥老會), a local secret society largely without primary belief in revolutionary ideology.² Throughout the chaotic two days, while the revolutionaries spearheaded the uprising, it was the members of this local secret society who played a crucial role in linking the independently operating troops and reinforcing the local military power.³ Additionally, it was Hui ethnic members of the Gelaohui who first made an unexpected and

¹ Zhu Xuwu 朱叙五 and Dang Zixin 黨自新, “Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyi 陝西辛亥革命回憶” [Recollections of the 1911 Revolution in Shaanxi], in *Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyilu* 陝西辛亥革命回憶錄 [Memoirs of the 1911 Revolution in Shaanxi], ed. by Literature and History Research Committee of the Shaanxi Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中國人民政治協商會議陝西省委員會文史資料研究委員會) (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 1982), 38–40.

² Here follows the translation of Gelaohui by Joseph Esherick in *Reform and Revolution in China: The 1911 Revolution in Hunan and Hubei* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

³ Zhu and Dang, “Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyi,” in *Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyilu*, 38–40.

secret connection with someone inside Manchu City, ultimately enabling a coordinated effort from both within and outside to seize control of the city.⁴ Why and how did and could this secret society in this region play such decisive role in mobilizing armies, delivering message, and collecting local forces in the revolution symbolizing the collapse of the dynasty in which it originated and developed?

Secret societies, such as the Gelaohui, were deeply integrated into the administrative structure of the Qing dynasty and played a vital role in its functioning. Secret societies played complex roles as both social support networks and political rebels, often filling the gaps left by weakened state structures through providing alternative structures of authority, using rituals, hierarchical systems, and ideological doctrines to mobilize and regulate their members.⁵ These societies, including influential groups like the Tiandihui (Heaven and Earth Society, 天地會), emerged partly as responses to social and economic instability, providing marginalized populations with protection, mutual aid, and a sense of belonging.⁶ As Barend Ter Haar explains, these societies offered “an alternative society” for those excluded from official structures, with rituals and collective practices fostering solidarity and loyalty among members.⁷ Developing hierarchical structures, coded language, and shared oaths, such societies could maintain group secrecy and cohesion in the face of repression. The Qing

⁴ Ma Shinian 馬士年, “Shaanxi Huizu renmin canjia Xinhai geming de jingguo 陝西回族人民參加辛亥革命的經過” [The Participation of Shaanxi’s Hui People in the 1911 Revolution], in *Xi’an wenshi ziliao di yi ji* 西安文史資料第一輯 [Xi’an Historical Materials, First Collection], ed. Committee for the Study of Historical and Cultural Materials, Xi’an Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Shaanxi Province (中國人民政治協商會議陝西省西安市委員會文史資料研究委員會) (Xi’an: Wenshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1981), 62–3.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, ed. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 258–9.

⁶ The Heaven and Earth Society was one of late imperial China’s most prominent secret societies, often associated with anti-Qing activities and mutual aid among marginalized groups. Founded in the 18th century, its organizational structure and rituals emphasized loyalty and brotherhood, making it a model for other secret societies like the Gelaohui. Despite its revolutionary reputation, scholars have debated whether its activities were primarily political or focused on social and economic survival. See Dian H. Murray, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China: The Formation of a Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁷ Barend J. Ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 37.

government, therefore, perceived these groups as threats to social order, frequently labeling them as “criminal” or “rebellious” organizations and enacting policies to suppress and marginalize them.⁸

Addressing the question of the function of secret societies in the 1911 Revolution within a specific regional context holds significant scholarly implications. Existing research has primarily focused on Gelaohui activities in provinces such as Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, and Anhui—especially in connection with late Qing revolutionary movements, the Taiping Rebellion, or the 1911 Revolution. In contrast, systematic investigations into Gelaohui organizations in inland and arid northwestern regions, such as Shaanxi, remain comparatively underdeveloped. Moreover, current studies on late Qing Gelaohui, including those in Shaanxi, have largely been confined to an “anti-Qing” political narrative or have reductively framed them as opportunistic military manpower mobilized for the 1911 Revolution. Such approaches have failed to adequately capture their complexity as localized social agents, particularly in terms of their organizational mechanisms, socio-ecological embeddedness, adaptive strategies to environmental constraints, and nuanced political maneuvering.

By examining the Gelaohui in Shaanxi Province, a key borderland region, this study seeks to move beyond simplistic binaries of suppression and resistance, instead emphasizing local continuities that link the late Qing and early Republican periods. In doing so, it seeks to re-examine the multifunctional roles of the Gelaohui in shaping local governance structures and socio-political order during the dynastic transition. This thesis contends that the key to the Gelaohui’s decisive revolutionary role lies in its successful adaptation to Shaanxi’s unique ecological conditions during the Qing dynasty and its evolving social environment from the 1860s to 1911. By strategically embedding itself within local communities, developing responsive organizational practices, and maintaining efficient, flexible

⁸ Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies*, 84.

communication networks, the Gelaohui provided the organizational backbone necessary to unify scattered grievances into coordinated revolutionary action. It was precisely this local adaptability, rather than revolutionary ideology, that enabled the Gelaohui to operate as a key vehicle for mobilization during the revolutionary movements that ultimately led to the collapse of the Qing dynasty.

Gelaohui as the Distorted and Silenced

Tracing the origins of secret societies like the Gelaohui is essential for understanding their later roles as alternative structures of authority. These origins often reflect underlying social tensions, conflicts between state and society, and experiences of marginalization at the time of their emergence, making them a central concern in historical research. At the regional level, such as Shaanxi, key questions are: How did the Gelaohui, which originated elsewhere, come to establish itself and flourish specifically in Shaanxi? Textual evidence has helped establish a general framework for its emergence. One proposed origin is the Guolu (囫嚅) transported from Sichuan. They were groups of jobless, unattached men who organized themselves into sworn brotherhoods and received attention due to their frequent appearances in reports on local unrest submitted by Sichuan officials to Beijing during the Qianlong period (1736–1796).⁹ The primary source is the Xiang Army (Xiangjun, 湘軍), led by Zuo Zongtang, in its campaign against the Muslim Rebellion (1862–1873).¹⁰ The previous part,

⁹ Kristin Stapleton, “Urban Politics in an Age of ‘Secret Societies’: The Cases of Shanghai and Chengdu,” *Republican China* 22, no. 1 (1996): 31, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/788911>.

¹⁰ Carl Jacobson, *Brotherhood and Society: The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993), 28. The Xiang Army, also known as the Hunan Army, was a prominent regional militia established by Zeng Guofan in 1853 during the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864). This force was unique for its reliance on localized recruitment and funding, marking a departure from the traditional reliance on the Green Standard Army and the Eight Banners. Its decentralized structure and ties to regional elites exemplified the militarization of Chinese society in the mid-19th century, with far-reaching implications for Qing governance and military organization. For detailed analyses, see Stephen R. Platt’s *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War* (2012), which explores the Xiang Army’s pivotal role in defeating the Taiping forces and its influence on Qing policy. Additionally, Philip A. Kuhn’s *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796–1864* (1970) provides a foundational exploration of the Xiang Army’s origins, organizational structure, and socio-political consequences. More recently, Tobie Meyer-Fong’s *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th-*

as a hypothesis linking the Guolu to the Gelaohui, is based on the geographical proximity of the two provinces and structural similarities between the groups.¹¹ The second half of the argument draws from Zuo's memorials and letters discussing the Gelaohui.¹² More recently, Chinese scholars have reinforced the Guolu-Gelaohui connection by incorporating the Rebellion of Lan Dashun (1859–1865) as a catalyst for the society's spread from Sichuan to Shaanxi.¹³

Historical inquiry into the origin carries risks of reiterating a state-centered framework of intelligibility. What emerges is not a disinterested analysis but a continuation of the classificatory and punitive logic through which the Qing state itself managed instability. The search for origin becomes a technique of disciplinary containment, a means of silencing alternative genealogies and legitimizing existing hierarchies. Historical narratives, therefore, are not neutral recountings of what happened, but reflect “the power in the story”—the mechanisms through which certain voices are authorized while others are excluded, distorted, or erased.¹⁴ This dynamic of silence is especially visible in the case of the Gelaohui, whose members left behind little or no self-authored testimony. Their silence in the historical record is not simply a result of the passage of time or archival scarcity but a form of structural silencing, produced at multiple stages in the making of history.¹⁵ First, these individuals were literally silenced by death, often executed following rebellion or suppression, leaving no opportunity to tell their stories. Second, they were epistemologically silenced by the Qing state's monopolization of legitimacy and its documentary apparatus.¹⁶ Court records,

Century China (2013) offers a nuanced perspective on the aftermath of the rebellion and the Xiang Army's legacy in shaping the late Qing period.

¹¹ Jacobson, “*Brotherhood and society: The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912*”, 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97–107.

¹³ Sun Fang 孫昉, *Xibei Gelaohui yu Xinhai geming* 西北哥老會與辛亥革命 [The Northwest Gelaohui and The Xinhai Revolution] (Zhongguo Zhi Gong Chubanshe), 26–9.

¹⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

¹⁶ Chesneau, “Secret Societies in China's Historical Evolution,” 4.

confessions under duress, and administrative reports framed Gelaohui members as criminals or threats, not as agents with their own political imaginaries or social grievances.

This thesis aims to provide a crucial alternative to state-centered historical narratives by shifting the focus from the central to the local and emphasizing the structure and function of secrecy itself. Rather than tracing linear paths of diffusion or institutional genesis, the following chapters investigate the transmission of texts, the performance of rituals, and the embodied practices that reproduce secrecy across space and time. In this framework, secrecy is not merely a psychological state or absence of information but a form of social organization—one that includes both invisible elements, such as symbolic codes and origin myths, and material practices like initiation, spatial control, and selective membership.¹⁷ This perspective offers a powerful corrective to the historiography of groups like the Gelaohui, whose history has been shaped by significant archival silences. While the Heaven and Earth Society often emphasized mythic origins and ritual genealogy in its spread, Gelaohui's secrecy emerged less from ceremonial continuity and more from flexible responses to local political and economic pressures. Its formation cannot be fully understood through origin myths alone; rather, it illustrates how secrecy became a material and strategic mode of organization—what might be called an infrastructure of concealment, enacted through spatial practices, codes of conduct, and informal hierarchies.

Secrecy, Ecology, and Local Society

Previous studies on Gelaohui's origins depict a Shaanxi shaped by the society's early emergence, yet still decades away from revolutionary prominence. Situated between two key areas of state concern—the suppression of local uprisings and the rise of organized revolution—Gelaohui in Shaanxi appears to have entered a phase of notable dormancy.

¹⁷ He Xi 贺喜 and David Faure, *Mimi shehui de mimi* 秘密社會的秘密 [Secrecy of the Secret Society] (Beijing Normal University Press, 2021), 19.

Documentary evidence from this period is limited, and the society's activities were confined mainly to peripheral mountainous zones along intersecting provincial borders.¹⁸ During these intervening decades, it is precisely in the quiet intersections of secrecy and local society that the subtle yet influential operations of the Gelaohui demand scholarly attention.

The Gelaohui operated within the fabric of everyday life rather than on its margins. Studies have shown that persistent illicit trade within local communities served to rationalize Gelaohui's unofficial yet enduring presence. Following an urban-rural, center-periphery framework, the society's historical association with this interprovincial border mountainous region has often been interpreted as indicative of connections between peripheral spaces and socially marginalized groups.¹⁹ This analytical approach integrates social history with regional geography in examining the history of the Gelaohui. Furthermore, this perspective can be developed further by recognizing the ecological environment as an active participant, rather than merely as a passive backdrop, in the unfolding of social-historical processes.

Ecological conditions play a significant role in rationalizing the actions and events occurring within local hierarchies, allowing behaviors deemed illegal from a central state perspective to be viewed as rational or necessary by local populations. In other regions of northern China, scholars such as Elizabeth Perry have noted that ecological scarcity gave rise to extractive or predatory practices.²⁰ While the environment itself remains silent, it nonetheless offers a compelling lens through which to interpret local motivations. Extending this line of analysis, the concept of the "friction of terrain" can offer valuable insights into interpreting Gelaohui's activities in the mountainous areas of Shaanxi.²¹ Considering this

¹⁸ Jacobson, "Brotherhood and society: The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 112–3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 130–1.

²⁰ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845–1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 3.

²¹ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xi.

friction encourages reflection on how geographical challenges and ecological realities may have shaped the strategies, resilience, and social embedding of the society.

The thesis seeks to interpret the operations of secret societies through the lens of regional ecological conditions. Rather than overturning state-centered narratives about such societies, the aim is to reframe understanding from the ground up, starting with local societies marked by distinct ecological features. This perspective helps to illuminate one possible source of the state's long-standing view of secret societies as forces of resistance. At the same time, it allows for a more complete recognition of these organizations, or collectives, as groups that, while often oppositional, coexisted with the state in a long-standing, uneasy symbiosis.

Anti-Qing and the 1911 Revolution

Gelaohui's involvement in the 1911 Revolution highlights its opposition to the Qing dynasty. However, Guolu, which serves as the origin of Gelaohui, is considered by scholars as anti-society and does not reach the extent of anti-Qing, which aims at overthrowing the reign of the Qing government.²² The two armies—the Xiang Army and the New Army (Xinjun, 新軍), serving as the two prominent sources of Gelaohui members in the Shaanxi region, are formal military institutions set by the Qing government to maintain its governance.²³

Therefore, questions arise as to when the Gelaohui became anti-Qing. What triggered the shift? One group of scholars considers the disbanding of the Xiang Army after the

²² Cai Shaoqing 蔡少卿, *Zhongguo jindai huidang shi yanjiu* 中國近代會黨史研究 [Studies in the History of the Party in Modern China] (Zhonghua Book Company, 1987), 209; Sun, *Xibei Gelaohui*, 19.

²³ The New Army (Xinjun, 新軍), established in the late Qing Dynasty, was pivotal in China's military modernization efforts. Formed in 1895 following the First Sino-Japanese War, it marked a significant shift from traditional military structures to a more modern, Western-style army. This transformation was crucial in the Qing government's attempts to strengthen national defense and assert sovereignty during a period of internal turmoil and external threats. For an in-depth analysis of the New Army's formation, development, and pivotal role in the 1911 Revolution, see Edmund S. K. Fung's *The Military Dimension of the Chinese Revolution: The New Army and Its Role in the Revolution of 1911* (1980).

suppression of the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) as the trigger for the essential change in society. Multiple social contradictions after the Taiping Rebellion, including the international situation in which China was invaded by foreign countries, and the domestic economic situation, left many disbanded Xiang Army soldiers without proper placement.²⁴ From the Shaanxi local perspective, the instability following the army's disbandment, combined with increasing local economic pressures and the gentry's influence, fostered a shift toward an anti-Qing stance. This development was further accelerated by the involvement of the Gelaohui members in protests and uprisings that eventually included anti-Qing sentiments, such as Anti-Christian Incidents (1891), likely fueled by local elites who used the organization to mobilize against the Qing as political conditions shifted.²⁵

Another group of historians points out that the Qing government's harsh suppression of the Gelaohui interacted with the society's anti-Qing consciousness. The harsh suppression tactics, including executions and military campaigns, served as a catalyst for discontent within the ranks of the Gelaohui. This discontent, while initially focused on survival and mutual support, was redirected against the Qing authorities as gentry figures began to encourage and leverage anti-Qing sentiments for their own agendas.²⁶ This approach to analyzing the formation of anti-Qing sentiments is also evident in other societies that share the mutual aid ideology through brotherhoods, such as the Heaven and Earth Society. It became entangled in confrontations with the Qing state due to their use of rituals and symbols derived from popular religious traditions and faced increasing hostility from the Qing government, particularly after events like the political rebellion.²⁷

The history and the production of the history of the Gelaohui never formed on one side among the multiple doers and narrators. Rather than presenting a linear narrative of

²⁴ Cai, *Zhongguo jindai huidang*, 218–9.

²⁵ Jacobson, “*Brotherhood and society: The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912*”, 283–4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108–9.

²⁷ Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies*, 93–5.

Gelaohui's anti-Qing evolution, this thesis highlights how its interactions with the Qing government and revolutionaries illustrate a dynamic exercise of power that is not fixed but continuously enacted.²⁸ The Gelaohui could operate both within and in opposition to state control, embodying both collaboration with the Qing government and resistance against it. From a governance perspective, the late Qing court, facing weakening central control, local governance challenges, and foreign intrusions, implemented changing measures to manage local unrest and regulate secret societies, such as the Gelaohui. Meanwhile, on the Gelaohui's side, its role transitioned from involvement in the military to localized mutual aid, then to anti-Qing uprisings, and ultimately to organized revolutionary military action. Rather than being purely a revolutionary force and even being revolutionary, Gelaohui's extensive influence within military networks and its pivotal role in the revolution reflect decades of strategic adaptation to evolving state control, culminating in a structure capable of both military and political mobilization.²⁹

²⁸ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 16.

²⁹ Xiaowei Zheng, *The Politics of Rights and the 1911 Revolution in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 39.

Chapter 2: The Ecology of Crisis—Shaanxi’s Terrain, Society, and Governance

Shaanxi’s unique ecological conditions played a critical role in the rise and development of the Gelaohui. The province’s distinct topographical zones—the Loess Plateau, the Wei River Valley, and the rugged Qinling Mountains—created natural barriers and areas of isolation, particularly in the mountainous Nanshan region. These geographically secluded and ecologically dense terrains facilitated “imperial absence,” a governance gap which the Gelaohui effectively exploited. Building on this ecological advantage, this chapter argues that the Gelaohui strategically developed secrecy, mobility, and operational footholds, enabling it to grow across provincial borders and setting the stage for its subsequent social adaptation.

Geography, Ecological Landscape, and Imperial Absence

Shaanxi, as a province, has experienced changes in scale and boundary since its establishment in the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). Before Gansu Province was separated from it in the reign of Kangxi, Shaanxi Province, which combined the central and southern parts of nowadays’ Gansu Province in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), enjoyed a more intimate relationship with borderland provinces such as Xinjiang and Tibet.³⁰ This change reduces the extent of Shaanxi’s attachment to the northwestern inner land, but it does not essentially influence the position of Shaanxi as a stronghold lying on the path from the central government in Beijing to inner Asia in late imperial China.

Although under change, Shaanxi has a relatively settled political and geographical position and a settled core area. Shaanxi has historically been an inland province located in

³⁰ According to *Qing shi gao* 清史稿 [Draft History of the Qing], compiled by Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1998), vol. 63, 2091, in the second year of the Kangxi reign (1663), Gansu Province was established by separating four prefectures—Lintao, Gongchang, Pingliang, and Qingyang—from Shaanxi, and the office of the Right Provincial Administration Commissioner was relocated there. The original Chinese reads: 「康熙二年，析臨洮、鞏昌、平涼、慶陽四府置甘肅省，移右布政使治之。」 The English translation provided here is my own.

central China, bordered by other provinces on all four sides. Besides the relationship of Shaanxi with its western provinces, such as Gansu, it has a relatively settled positional relationship with the other three sides. In the north, Shaanxi borders on Mongolia; in the east, it borders on the present-day Shanxi and Henan Provinces; in the south, it borders on the present-day Sichuan and Hubei Provinces. Under this complex outer relationship with other provinces, Shaanxi has a less-changed core region. This region features three distinct topographic zones arranged in a general north–south orientation: the Loess Plateau in the north, the Wei River Valley at the center, and the Qinling Mountains in the south, which is also known as the Nanshan or “South Mountain” area (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Shaanxi Topographic Map³¹

³¹ Blue Green Atlas, *Topographical Map of Shaanxi*, digital map, Mercator projection, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.bluegreenatlas.com>.

The Nanshan area's extreme elevation, dense forests, and rugged terrain rendered it one of the most geographically and socially isolated areas of the province, setting it apart from the more agriculturally developed northern and central zones prior to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The Nanshan area remained largely untouched by earlier regimes due to its rugged topography and dense forest cover, which made cultivation particularly challenging. The area, with elevations exceeding 3,700 meters, stands in stark contrast to the provincial average of 1,127 meters.³² In addition to its mountainous landscape, the region is characterized by dense old-growth forests. These forests, long unexploited and in a state of natural growth, were often described by Qing officials in reverential terms as products of Heaven and Earth.³³ A defining feature of these forests is the extraordinary density of vegetation. Coupled with deep mountain valleys, the combination of thick forests and rugged terrain created an enclosed, inaccessible space where outsiders found entry difficult, and insiders remained geographically and socially secluded.³⁴

Imperial absence stemming from geographic concealment significantly challenged Shaanxi's local society and was further aggravated by the Qing government's prior administrative practices before the Gelaohui arrived in the region. Starting from the Kangxi era, the Qing government was aware of the reclamation of uncultivated lands in the mountainous areas by immigrants from other provinces. In the following Qianlong-Jiaqing reigns (1736–1820), the Qing government and the local officials commented as observers and passively allowed migrants to settle in these areas without taking effective action.³⁵ The

³² China Map Publishing House, *Shaanxi: Atlas of Chinese Provinces* (Beijing: China Map Publishing House, 2023), 8.

³³ Yan Ruyi 嚴如燧, *Yan Ruyi ji* 嚴如燧集 [The Collections of Yan Ruyi] (Yuelu Publishing House, 2013), 1709.

³⁴ *Ibid.*.

³⁵ Zhang Jianmin 張建民, *Ming Qing Changjiang liuyu shanqu ziyuan kaifa yu huanjing yanbian: Yi Qinling-Daba shanqu wei zhongxin* 明清長江流域山區資源開發與環境演變：以秦嶺—大巴山區為中心 [Resource Exploitation and Environmental Change in the Yangtze River Basin Mountain Areas during the Ming and Qing Dynasties: Focusing on the Qinling-Daba Mountains] (Wuhan: Wuhan University Publishing House, 2007), 260–1.

government's role here was thus reactive, dictated by demographic pressures and resource scarcity, rather than proactive governance driven by deliberate planning. Consequently, the development of these mountainous zones was entirely initiated and managed by spontaneous grassroots movements among itinerant populations. Following the outbreak of the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1804) in Sichuan and Shaanxi, the Qing government implemented a policy of forest burning and road clearing under the guise of suppressing rebellion, transforming previously untouched forests into targets of wartime exploitation.³⁶ Ecological imbalances caused by this action further accelerated the influx of migrants. While this intervention might superficially appear proactive, it represented disorderly reconstruction following the destruction of the original ecological order, resulting in unsustainable governance practices. Ultimately, such measures exacerbated imperial absence, deepening rather than alleviating the state's governance gap in mountainous frontier regions.

Gelaohui's Strategic Use of Geography

Gelaohui views this rugged terrain with imperial absence as a perfect place to settle and create secrecy. For secret societies such as the Gelaohui, ceremonies like the establishment of a new mountain hall (shantang, 山堂) and the initiation of new members serve as ritual gateways that mediate the transition from ordinary life into a world of secrecy.³⁷ In secret societies with prominent religious features, such as the Heaven and Earth Society, their rituals and ceremonies can be regarded as an interpretation of the origin story of the society.

³⁶ The Longxing Temple in Ankang County, a strategically significant location in southern Shaanxi frequently affected by rebellions during the Qing dynasty, provides an illustrative example. A stone inscription dated to 1858 (Xianfeng 8) states: 「嘉慶二年（1797年），白蓮作亂，山寨前後樹木叢雜，著地界相連砍伐，有可耕者耕之，則樹木不日淨盡，一邊滾木播石，而龍山亦固焉。」（“In the second year of Jiaqing [1797], during the White Lotus rebellion, densely growing trees around mountain forts were continuously cut down, particularly in cultivable areas, and soon cleared entirely. Consequently, rolling logs and stones were deployed, strengthening Longshan's defensive position.”) See “Boundary Marker of Longxing Temple,” in *Ankang beishi* 安康碑石 [Stone Inscriptions of Ankang], ed. by Zhang Pei 張沛 (Xi'an: Sanqin Chubanshe, 1991), 210. English translation provided here is my own.

³⁷ The term shantang (山堂) is translated into English as “mountain hall,” though “lodge” might also be an appropriate term. Since both “mountain” and “hall” are essential to capturing the core meaning of this foundational social unit, this article will retain the direct translation, “mountain hall,” from the original Chinese.

During the rituals, participants, including both old and new members, gathered in a specific location at a designated time to complete the ceremony procedure. Beyond the visible ceremonial scene, holding ceremonies in front of the ancestral temple creates a virtual spiritual link between the new members and the ancestors when they pay their respects.³⁸ Gelaohui emphasized the origin story less, but the rituals and ceremonies it undertook also represented how the transition from reality to fiction happened in a secret society.

One of the fundamental rites of Gelaohui is the ceremony for opening a new mountain hall. The place for conducting the ceremony must be in an ancient temple in remote mountains. The props required for the ritual include a ceremonial space with statues of the Five Patriarchs and Guan Yu and red paper.³⁹ Two types of oaths are written on the red paper. The first, called Entering the Mountain Oath (jin shan jian, 進山柬), is used to announce to heaven and earth the establishment of this mountain hall and includes the ranks and regulations of its members. The second, called Exiting the Mountain Oath (chu shan jian, 出山柬), informs other mountain leaders across the land of the hall's establishment.⁴⁰ Realistic parts, such as the props, texts, and places needed for the rituals, are shown in the opening ceremony of the Gelaohui. However, what the ritual of the opening of the mountain seeks is the establishment of a virtual organization, the new lodge, and hierarchical human relationships in this virtual institution.

³⁸ He and Faure, *Mimishehui de mimi*, 11–2.

³⁹ Pingshanzhou 平山周, *Zhongguo mimishehuishi* 中國秘密社會史 [The Chinese Revolutionary Party and the Secret Societies] (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1912), 84. The author does not provide a specific explanation of the Five Patriarchs. Scholars such as Qin Baoqi, who argue that both the Tiandihui and the Gelaohui were referred to as the Hongmen (洪門) in the late Qing period, often apply the Tiandihui's interpretation of the Five Patriarchs to the Gelaohui. According to this framework, the Five Patriarchs are divided into three groups: the Early Five Patriarchs (Qian Wu Zu 前五祖), the Mid Five Patriarchs (Zhong Wu Zu 中五祖), and the Late Five Patriarchs (Hou Wu Zu 後五祖). These groups each consist of five figures from the early Qing era who shared anti-Qing beliefs and supported one another in acts of resistance and escape. See Qin Baoqi 秦寶琦, *Zhongguo mimi shehui tongshi juan si* 中國秘密社會通史 卷四 [A General History of Chinese Secret Societies, vol. 4] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2024), 399.

⁴⁰ Pingshanzhou, *Zhongguo mimishehuishi*, 84–5.

Mountains which belong to the physical environment, start to represent symbolic meaning within the interaction with the secret society. In the context of the Gelaohui, mountains can refer to the organization's physical and fictional basic unit and are used as sacred sites to conduct ceremonies to establish new branches. The members of the Gelaohui chose the mountains for their isolation and natural serenity. Mountains, as the traditional symbols of permanence and resilience, embody qualities that secret societies sought to emulate in their organizational structures and rituals.⁴¹

From a provincial perspective, Gelaohui adjusted itself to the geographically interconnected characteristics of Shaanxi in all four directions. In the 7th reign of Tongzhi (1868), the newly assigned Viceroy of Shaanxi and Gansu, Zuo Zongtang, wrote a memorial to the throne explaining the situation of Gelaohui in the Shaanxi region. "The Gelaohui was in Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan provinces,"⁴², which implies the Gelaohui's state of itinerant mobility across the provincial borders of southern Shaanxi. Zuo gave an example of Ma Fuxi, who was a member of the Gelaohui in Sichuan. To avoid being caught in Sichuan, Ma fled to Shaanxi. He was discovered by the official of the camp and caught eventually. This case shows Gelaohui achieved cross-regional dissemination between Sichuan and Shaanxi.⁴³

Absconding across provinces, including Shaanxi, appears repeatedly in the accounts of local magistrates in neighboring places. A year later than Zuo Zongtang's memorial mentioned above, the contemporary Viceroy of Huguang Li Hongzhang again started the report by commenting that due to the geographical position of the northwestern cities in Hubei at the junction of Hubei, Shaanxi, and Henan provinces, and further acting as the gateway for Shaanxi and Gansu to interact with the central government, the Gelaohui roamed

⁴¹ Jacobson, "The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 78.

⁴² The First Historical Archives of China, "Tongzhi nianjian Gelaohui shiliao 同治年間哥老會史料 [Historical Archives of Gelaohui in Tongzhi Period]," *Historical Archives*, no. 4 (1998): 35.

⁴³ Ibid..

and formed alliances here.⁴⁴ In addition to the cognition between the geographical borderlands and the spread of Gelaohui, Li also concluded that due to its bordering with Shaanxi and Henan, the people of Hubei, who live in this transitional region, have a strong and resilient spirit, which makes banditry more common among them.⁴⁵

Beneath the unclear and fragmented accounts provided by local officials lies a mutually reinforcing relationship between the highly mobile, profit-oriented illegal activities of the Gelaohui and the geographic setting of the interprovincial border region. In 1872, the Provincial Commander-in-Chief of Gansu reported a case in which Gelaohui members exploited the geographical situation to collect tolls and expand the organization.

Qianzhou, situated at a strategic crossroads, frequently witnessed the deployment, withdrawal, and reorganization of military camps, with soldiers coming and going in large numbers. The local bandits often exploited this situation, disguising themselves as military personnel and falsely claiming official duties. They seized travel permits and official documents, using them as protective credentials. At times, they entrenched themselves in nearby towns and counties, maintaining secret communication with each other. Through covert signals and coded agreements, they lured soldiers into their ranks, enabling one group to be apprehended while another escaped. Their movements were highly elusive and shrouded in secrecy.⁴⁶

Local officials in Shaanxi during the Daoguang era (1821–1850) recorded that Qianzhou was considered relatively easy to govern due to its lack of rugged mountains, large lakes, external migrants, and Hui Muslim communities.⁴⁷ However, two decades later, the Gelaohui exploited its strategic position as a transportation hub connecting Shaanxi to Gansu and Xinjiang. This location became crucial for the Gelaohui to secure material resources and expand its organizational influence.

Mountain passes and the intersection of interprovincial transportation routes served as hidden pathways for communication and transport. These routes, well-known by locals and

⁴⁴ The First Historical Archives of China, “Tongzhi nianjian,” 38.

⁴⁵ Ibid..

⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁷ Lu Kun 盧坤, *Qin jiang zhi lue* 秦疆治略 [Strategies for Governing Shaanxi] (Taipei: Chengwen Publishing Company, 1970), 71.

members, ensured the secrecy of the society's movements.⁴⁸ This geomorphological feature, which provides both secrecy and mobility, is reflected in Qing government archives, where the Gelaohui is consistently described as moving across different provinces, making it nearly impossible for local officials to track the activities of its members in real time.

⁴⁸ Ella S. Laffey, "The Making of a Rebel: Liu Yung-fu and the Formation of the Black Flag Army," in *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China 1840–1950*, ed. Jean Chesneaux (Stanford Press, 1972), 89.

Chapter 3: Taking Root—The Emergence and Localization of the Gelaohui (1867–1875)

This chapter examines the development of the Gelaohui in Shaanxi following the suppression of the Muslim Rebellion, highlighting the complex interplay between its internal organization and the region's evolving social dynamics, in addition to its ecological context. It shows how the Gelaohui fostered cohesion and loyalty through its practices of ritual secrecy and hierarchical brotherhood, embedding itself within a society shaped by militarization and upheaval, particularly under the influence of the Xiang Army. By analyzing the organization's adaptability, secretive operations, and engagement with a war-torn regional context, this chapter uncovers the foundational elements that sustained the Gelaohui's identity and effectiveness.

Secrecy and Brotherhood

Secrecy created an atmosphere of belonging among the members through the operation of rituals. The initiation rites, the other ritual besides opening a new mountain hall in expanding the scale of the Gelaohui, further reflected how human relationships were transferred into internal relationships circulating in the secret society. The person who introduced the new members is called Cheng Brother (Cheng Xiong, 成兄).⁴⁹ Cheng Brother is the human agency that knows the background of the new members in the secular world and leads the new members into the hierarchical brotherhood of the Gelaohui. The whole procedure of the initiation rite repeatedly strengthens and clarifies the relationship of the brotherhood. The loyalty towards brothers serves as the essential principle for becoming a member of the society. After the individual oath section, the leader at present will represent the Eldest Brother (da ge, 大哥) and issue the membership certificate to the new members by

⁴⁹ "Brother" is how members in Gelaohui address each other. Cheng, written in 承 or 成, refers to this member's duty: to introduce new recruits to the organization and vouch for their reliability and loyalty.

reciting, “The Eldest Brother is asking me to give you the membership certificate.”⁵⁰ Added to the relationship in the real world, the society’s rituals incorporate symbols and oaths to establish a brotherhood relationship and loyalty among members.

Even outside of the field of rituals, secret jargon and gestures will assist the members in recognizing reality and further prove the existence of society and its relationship network.⁵¹ Li Zifeng, who has been one of the members of secret societies since the early twentieth century, praised jargon and gesture as the soul of the secret society. The jargon and gesture, on the surface, expand the influence of the society in a secret way and immerse the members in an atmosphere where loyalty and brotherhood serve as a discipline. He speaks highly of the amazement of their immediacy and effectiveness in connecting members. Once the members recognize each other through the jargon and gestures, even though they may not know each other, they will offer help and protection as much as possible. He also mentions that a person’s proficiency in using the jargon and gestures can reflect one’s qualifications in this secret society.⁵² The jargon and gestures and their potential function in real life further confirm the existence of the Gelaohui as a secret society with nationwide members and a systematic organization.

Brotherhood is the central element that emphasizes “total loyalty and a flowing sympathy between brothers” and brings in new members.⁵³ It is revealed in the blood oaths. Blood oaths are the usual and core means by which the Gelaohui recruits new members and integrates them into the hierarchical structure of secrecy within the organization. When confronted with other local secret societies in Shaanxi, Gelaohui achieved integration between the two secret societies by taking a blood oath. The Red and Black Seal Society (Hong Hei Qian Hui, 紅黑簽會) was one of the local secret societies that interacted with the

⁵⁰ Pingshanzhou, *Zhongguo mimishehuishi*, 87–9.

⁵¹ He and Faure, *Mimishehui de mimi*, 13.

⁵² Li Zifeng 李子峰, *Haidi 海底* [Seabed] (Nanchang: Jiangxi Education Press, 2010), 4.

⁵³ Jacobson, “*The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912*”, 44.

Gelaohui. By engaging in blood oath rituals, Gelaohui successfully absorbed this local society.⁵⁴ The cooperation between Gelaohui and Tongmenghui was also based on the foundation of a blood oath. In the second year of the Xuantong era (1910), leaders from both sides took a blood oath at the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda (Dayan Ta, 大雁塔), becoming thirty-six sworn brothers, marking the preliminary establishment of cooperation facing the revolution between the two forces.⁵⁵

The blood oaths do not establish an equal relationship; in fact, a hierarchical relationship is based on the brotherhood. In the initiation rite for new members of Gelaohui, taking a blood oath is not the first step of the entire rite. Before taking the blood oath, prospective members will undergo a vow-making session known as the Douhai Ceremony (douhai shi, 抖海式), accompanied by a question-and-answer session requiring the new members to kneel in front of the god's statue.⁵⁶

At this point, the ceremony director asks the prospective member, "What is your purpose here?" The respondent says, "To join the Hongmen."⁵⁷ The official then asks, "Who introduced you to join the Hongmen?" The respondent names the sponsor. The official then asks the sponsor, "Do you bring in this person?" The sponsor affirms. The official further inquires of the prospective member, "Do you know the rituals of joining the Hongmen?" The respondent relies on the senior members for guidance. The official asks again, "What is your reason for joining?" The respondent answers, "For loyalty and righteousness." The official then says, "After joining our society, if dazi discover you, they will kill you."⁵⁸ If you violate

⁵⁴ *Guangxu chao donghua lu* 光緒朝東華錄 ed. Zhu Shoupeng 朱壽朋 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), 2342.

⁵⁵ *Xinhai geming huiyilu di wu ji* 辛亥革命回憶錄第五集 [Memoirs of the Revolution of 1911, vol. 5], ed. Literature and History Research Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中國人民政治協商會議全國委員會文史資料研究委員會) (Beijing: Wenshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1981), 2.

⁵⁶ Pingshanzhou, *Zhongguo mimishehuishi*, 88.

⁵⁷ In Pingshanzhou's context, the orthodox branch within the Gelaohui was called the Hongmen, see page 76.

⁵⁸ Dazi (韃子) is a derogatory term historically used to refer to the Manchus, often with ethnic and political hostility. While the source in question uses this term to frame the Gelaohui as anti-Manchu or anti-Qing, I do

the rules of our society, you will also be killed. Are you willing?” The respondent says, “If the secrecy is compromised and dazi discovers it, I will take full responsibility and will not implicate my brothers. If I violate our rules, or secretly communicate with mazi, or act against our teachings, I am willing to accept the punishment of three cuts and five axes.”⁵⁹

The blood oath takes place after these two stages are completed. The director of the ceremony will kill a white cock as the sacrifice or use five-color silk tied thread incense if a cock is unavailable.

The whole process represents how the blood oath served as a gatekeeping ritual, marking the entrance of individuals into a secretive, hierarchically organized brotherhood. In this context, the blood oath functioned as a stratified layer of secrecy, enforcing loyalty while introducing initiates to an inner hierarchy that distinguished between new and senior members. Combining the secrecy and rituals in the previous part, the principle of Gelaohui’s internal operation as a secret society can be revealed: systematic secrecy and brotherhood.

Contemporary comparisons further reveal the efficiency of the Gelaohui’s systematic secrecy and brotherhood. At that time, the Swordsmen (Dao Ke, 刀客) was another Shaanxi local secret society. Like the Gelaohui, its members were mainly unemployed peasants and urban small craftsmen. Its philosophy was also about righteousness. Thus, the Swordsmen became the target of the revolutionaries’ fight to organize the revolution. However, the swordsmen group did not form a nationwide secret social organization like the Gelaohui, nor did they participate as widely as the Gelaohui in the 1911 Revolution in Shaanxi, for instance, occupying a leading position in the revolution. This is mainly because their organization has no fixed form or discipline. No matter how many people are there, there is only one leader-like figure, known as “Brother X”. The rest constitute brothers without

not adopt the author’s interpretation of the Gelaohui as primarily driven by anti-Qing ideology. Therefore, this material is cited not as evidence of the Gelaohui’s anti-Qing sentiment, but rather to illustrate contemporary representations or rhetoric surrounding the group.

⁵⁹ Mazi (馬子 or 媽子) refers to the outsiders of the Gelaohui.

differences.⁶⁰ In contrast to the Gelaohui, the Swordsmen's lack of systematic organization has led to their limited organizational size and their inability to achieve cross-regional influence.

Parasitic Relationship: Xiang Army and Gelaohui

The relationship between the Gelaohui and Xiang Army during the late Qing period represents a parasitic dynamic that operated fundamentally outside the formal governmental system while supporting the restoration of Qing governance in Northwestern China. This unofficial status amplified negative perceptions of Gelaohui, casting it as an inherently destabilizing presence. At that time, the Qing state's survival in the face of imperial aggression and internal rebellion increasingly relied on decentralized, hybrid forms of statecraft that blurred the boundaries between formal authority and informal actors.⁶¹ In this light, the Gelaohui's collaboration with the Xiang Army—despite its secretive and extralegal nature—mirrored the broader logic of a military-fiscal state that drew strength from local networks, personal loyalties, and parastatal arrangements. Far from being an anomaly, Gelaohui's involvement reflects the improvisational and fragmented mechanisms through which the Qing regime adapted to preserve sovereignty and sustain political order in a hostile global context.

The close relationship between the Xiang Army and Gelaohui is intuitively shown in the written account. The records of the Gelaohui appeared simultaneously with those of the Xiang Army. For the Shaanxi province, the scholars found no records of the Gelaohui before 1867, when Zuo Zongtang led his army to suppress the Hui Rebellion.⁶² The term Gelaohui

⁶⁰ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi* 辛亥革命在陝西 [The 1911 Revolution in Shaanxi], ed. by CPC Shaanxi Provincial Party History Data Collection Research Committee (中共陝西省委黨史資料徵集研究委員會) (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 1986), 246.

⁶¹ Stephen R. Halsey, *Quest for Power: European Imperialism and the Making of Chinese Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 114, 121.

⁶² Jacobson, "The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 95.

first appeared in records with this army in the province. Records of the society and its activities in Shaanxi gradually vanished with the suppression of the Muslim Rebellion around 1875.⁶³ It is fair to regard Gelaohui as a means for soldiers and local societies in long-term warfare to express discontent with unstable economic incomes and pursue illegal ways of getting money.⁶⁴

Going back to the Xiang Army as a whole, the appearance of Gelaohui in the text records is also closely related to the reports related to this army. Gelaohui came into the memorial of Zeng Guofan, the contemporary leader of the Xiang Army, as the one to blame for the incidents of soldiers in the Xiang Army causing trouble because of military pay.⁶⁵ Initially, this turmoil was not attributed to Gelaohui. However, Gelaohui finally turned into the cause of this turmoil and became a general concept used in local officials' reports towards the central government that the restlessness, difficult to solve in the military, can be attributed to this.⁶⁶

The origin of the term Gelaohui in northwestern China also seemed to follow the same narrating pattern. Zuo Zongtang noted in an 1868 memorial that the Gelaohui had already extended its influence across multiple provinces, stating, "The Gelaohui was in Hubei, Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan province" and hinting that "wherever government troops are stationed, there are hidden instigators of Gelaohui."⁶⁷ Such statements highlight the strategic use of military movements by Gelaohui to expand its reach. The example of Ma Fuxi, a Gelaohui member who sought refuge in the Xiang Army and was eventually executed along with his followers, illustrates the group's trans-regional spread through military channels.

⁶³ Jacobson, "The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 110.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁵ He and Faure, *Mimi shehui de mimi*, 203.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁶⁷ The First Historical Archives of China, "Tongzhi nianjian," 35.

How did the Gelaohui come to infiltrate the Xiang Army? To answer this, one must closely examine not only how the Xiang Army was organized but also why its structure left it vulnerable to such penetration. At the heart of the Xiang Army's operations was the yongying (Brave Camps, 勇營) system—a military framework that existed prior to the Xiang Army but flourished under its command.⁶⁸ The term yong (勇), meaning “brave,” referred to the rank-and-file soldiers recruited into these units. As Zeng Guofan observed, the defining feature of the yongying system was its reliance on short-term, ad hoc mobilization: men were recruited to form temporary military units in response to specific threats, engaged in battle, and swiftly disbanded once the fighting ended. This flexible but loosely bound structure created the conditions under which groups like the Gelaohui could embed themselves with relative ease.⁶⁹

These features suggest that, from the Qing state's perspective, the yongying camps were an effective means of mobilizing manpower to address local conflicts, offering both administrative efficiency and a mechanism for maintaining social order while restraining the autonomy of individual military leaders. At the same time, however, the system also revealed several potentially negative consequences. The need to assemble temporary forces quickly often bypassed more rigorous selection processes, thereby lowering recruitment standards. One way to improve combat effectiveness was to raise the quality of recruits. Zeng Guofan emphasized this method by selecting men from rural villages, whom he viewed as more reliable than those from mountainous areas, who were considered rough and difficult to discipline, from water-rich regions, who were thought to be sly, or from urban centers, who

⁶⁸ Li Zhiming 李志茗, “Yong Ying System: The Intermediate State of Military System in Qing Dynasty 勇營制度：清代軍制的中間形態,” *Shilin*, no. 4 (2006): 29.

⁶⁹ Zeng Guofan 曾國藩, *Zeng Guofan quanji (xiudingban): Zougao yi* 曾國藩全集（修訂版）奏稿一 [Complete Works of Zeng Guofan (Revised Edition): Memorial Drafts, vol. 1] (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 2018), 461.

were seen as idle.⁷⁰ An alternative strategy prioritized quantity over quality, aiming to enhance strength through mass recruitment. Yet, as Zuo Zongtang later observed in a memorial, this approach had its costs. He remarked that “the recruited yong are all riffraff from the streets,” a critique that underscores the dangers of prioritizing numbers at the expense of quality and highlights the resulting susceptibility of these units to infiltration by groups like the Gelaohui.⁷¹

Beyond regulations, institutional structure, and long-term training typical of formal armies, what most directly shaped the functioning of the Xiang Army was the role of human relationships. At the center of this dynamic was loyalty—an organizing principle that Zeng Guofan, the architect of the Xiang Army, placed at the core of military cohesion. The yongying system was built upon personalized and hierarchical bonds of allegiance rather than on formal bureaucratic procedures or standardized institutional chains of command. Military units were structured from the top down: a general appointed a commander, who in turn selected his own officers, each of whom chose their own subordinates. Each rank bore personal responsibility for the loyalty and behavior of those they appointed. In this system, loyalty was not an abstract duty to the state, but a deeply personal and affective bond. Soldiers were expected to obey their superiors with the same devotion they would show to a father or elder brother.⁷² This familial model of authority reveals that allegiance was directed primarily toward individual leaders rather than to the Qing state itself. The practice of disbanding an entire unit when a commander was replaced further illustrates the non-transferable nature of this loyalty. Soldiers’ commitment rested not on office or institutional allegiance, but on enduring personal ties marked by reciprocal obligation and protection.

⁷⁰ Zeng, *Zeng Guofan quanji*, vol. 1, 461.

⁷¹ Zuo Zongtang, *Zuo Zongtang quanji: Zougao er* 左宗棠全集：奏稿二 [Complete Works of Zuo Zongtang: Memorials to the Throne, vol. 2] (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 2014), 342.

⁷² Wang Ding’an 王定安, *Xiangjun ji* 湘軍記 [Record of the Xiang Army] (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 1983), 337–8.

Regarding relationships among soldiers, the Xiang Army promoted strong bonds and a sense of brotherhood, which the Gelaohui could take advantage of. *Shen Newspaper* described the close-knit relationships: “When they were serving as yong in the camp, they looked after each other like brothers, sharing both hardships and comforts,” and after military service, these bonds provided a supportive network for former soldiers who were “unable to return to farming” or re-assimilate into rural life.⁷³ This mutual support system helped ensure that former soldiers who had become disillusioned with the government were drawn to the Gelaohui as an alternative means of security.

In addition to organizing the army’s operations during active service, Zeng Guofan initially conceived a dual structure aimed at maintaining oversight of soldiers both during and after their service. His preference for recruiting men from rural villages reflected his broader intention to facilitate their return to agricultural life under the supervision of local officials once discharged. In practice, however, many soldiers did not return home, instead relying on the Gelaohui for support. *Shen Newspaper*’s critique of discharged soldiers noted that they could not adapt to the “simple and meager diets” of civilian life and increasingly turned to Gelaohui’s network for sustenance.⁷⁴ Others developed “habits of indulgence and gambling and could no longer endure hardships,” leading some to engage in banditry and creating an environment where the Gelaohui’s influence continued to grow.⁷⁵

The reliance of discharged soldiers on Gelaohui solidified the perception of Gelaohui as a destabilizing element within the Qing system. This narrative was exacerbated by the behaviors of some Gelaohui-affiliated soldiers who engaged in criminal activities while wearing Xiang Army uniforms, blurring the line between military personnel and bandits. Li Rong, who fought alongside Zeng Guofan, observed that “many of those dressed in military

⁷³ “Discussing about Gelaohui,” *Shen bao*, August 22, 1876; “Discussing about Dismissing yongding,” *Shen bao*, July 6, 1872.

⁷⁴ “Discussing about Dismissing yongding,” *Shen bao*, July 6, 1872.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*.

attire and bearing weapons engage in robbery outside the camp,” which led civilians to view them as both soldiers and bandits.⁷⁶ Such accounts contributed to the image of Gelaohui as a malign force that infiltrated government institutions and posed a threat to public safety.

In handling the spread of Gelaohui, Zeng Guofan and other Qing officials faced a difficult dilemma. On one hand, Zeng feared that allowing Gelaohui to flourish within the Xiang Army could undermine his soldiers’ loyalty and lead to rebellion. To counter this, Zeng implemented strict prohibitions, equating Gelaohui membership with “heresy,” a crime punishable by death. On the other hand, Zeng recognized that suppressing Gelaohui risked inciting mutiny, which could threaten his own standing and accomplishments.⁷⁷ Consequently, he tolerated Gelaohui’s activities under certain conditions, allowing the group to continue its parasitic relationship with the army.

Zuo Zongtang, who led the Xiang Army in later campaigns, adopted a similarly pragmatic stance. He issued directives to prohibit Gelaohui practices but acknowledged the limitations of his efforts. Zuo’s approach combined strict regulation with implicit tolerance, reflecting his understanding that social stability depended as much on the government’s control as on Gelaohui’s presence. In letters, he suggested that rather than being fully eradicated, Gelaohui’s influence might only be mitigated through a balance of force and leniency.⁷⁸

The parasitic relationship between the Gelaohui and Xiang Army thus evolved into a complex, mutually dependent system, with each side leveraging the other’s presence for

⁷⁶ Li Rong 李榕, “Bing Zeng zhongtang Li zhijun Peng guanbao Liu zhongcheng 稟曾中堂李制軍彭官保劉中丞,” *Shisan feng shuwu quanji pidu* 十三峰書屋全集·批牘 [Complete Works of the Thirteen Peaks Study·Correspondence] (Xiuhai Studio, 1899), volume 1.

⁷⁷ Sun, *Xibei Gelaohui*, 34.

⁷⁸ Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠, “Yanyusuicheng dao dingkanglin shulidaozhan ji chouban anfu shiyi you 延榆綏成道定康稟署理道篆及籌辦安撫事宜由 [Yanyu-Sui Circuit Commander Cheng Dingkang Reports and Requests Authorization to Temporarily Oversee Circuit Duties and Handle Pacification Matters],” *Zuo Zongtang quanji zhajian* 左宗棠全集 札件 [The Complete Works of Zuo Zongtang: Letters and Documents] (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 1986), 141.

survival and influence. For the Qing government, this reliance allowed Gelaohui to support state objectives informally. However, because it operated outside formal systems, Gelaohui's affiliation with the Xiang Army contributed to the perception of it as an insidious force that undermined Qing authority. The government's struggle to control Gelaohui while benefiting from its military presence led to a complete "negativization" of the group's image in official and popular narratives, framing Gelaohui as a corrupting force within the Qing structure.

While rooted in legitimate concerns, this depiction also obscured Gelaohui's role as a vital support network for disbanded soldiers and displaced individuals. By existing within but never fully integrating into the official structure, Gelaohui's presence highlighted the tensions between state authority and the alternative social systems that arose in response to Qing policies. This tension, coupled with the army's inability to re-assimilate its discharged soldiers, led to an enduring portrayal of Gelaohui as a destabilizing influence that infiltrated formal institutions and posed an existential threat to the stability of Qing rule.

Chapter 4: Networks of Resistance—Mobilization, Communication, and Local Influence (1875–1911)

Following the suppression of the Hui Rebellion, records of the Gelaohui's activities rapidly diminished. From 1875 to the early 20th century, accounts of Gelaohui activities were primarily concentrated in the southern Shaanxi region, particularly in the remote forests of Nanshan.⁷⁹ This area, which had served as the conduit for the Gelaohui's dissemination from Sichuan into Shaanxi, once again became the central hub of their operations. During the final 25 years of the 19th century, the Gelaohui transitioned from a mutual aid phenomenon within the military to establishing deeper connections with Shaanxi's local society.

Local Community Views on the Gelaohui

No accounts directly reflect the local communities' attitude toward the Gelaohui during these decades. Due to the activities participated by Gelaohui's members, such as robbery, killings, and rapes, the conclusion can be reached that contemporary communities held negative perspectives on Gelaohui.⁸⁰ The individuals and their families being attacked were the victims of Gelaohui's activities, and their attitude should be negative. Most of the robbery cases Gelaohui was involved in involved the robbery of property, the personal injuries caused by beating, and even the loss of life due to beating.⁸¹ Even more morally reprehensible cases have been documented. For instance, an 1890 report on a case in Pingli County, located in the southern Shaanxi region, details how, in 1888, members of Gelaohui falsely accused an

⁷⁹ Jacobson, "The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 112.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸¹ Personal injuries caused by beating case, see *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji* 宮中檔光緒朝奏摺 第五輯 [Palace Archives of the Guangxu Reign Memorials to the Throne, vol. 5], ed. by National Palace Museum Palace Archives Editorial Committee (國立故宮博物院故宮文獻編輯委員會) (Taipei: Dong ya zhi ben suo, 1973), 260. Beating to death case, see *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di shisan ji* 宮中檔光緒朝奏摺 第十三輯 [Palace Archives of the Guangxu Reign Memorials to the Throne, vol. 13], ed. by National Palace Museum Palace Archives Editorial Committee (國立故宮博物院故宮文獻編輯委員會) (Taipei: Dong ya zhi ben suo, 1974), 163.

innocent resident of being a thief who had stolen silver and subsequently seized the man's wife, forcing her to become a concubine.⁸² In the same piece of recording, one of the so-called "liangmin" (upright commoner, 良民) was forced into becoming a member of Gelaohui.⁸³ While no direct accounts from residents are available, the evidence of Gelaohui's destructive activities provides a strong basis for concluding that they were viewed negatively by the communities they affected.

Through careful examination of the records related to Gelaohui in this time period, local officials categorized Gelaohui as one of the local bandits. The catastrophic famine of 1877 to 1888, known as the Dingwu Qihuang, gave rise to widespread banditry in the Shaanxi region.⁸⁴ Gelaohui and its activities were not reported separately as a local phenomenon needing separate care. The records of it came along with the local criminal cases dominated by robbery. In October of 1888, the contemporary Shaanxi Provincial Governor and Financial Commissioner, Tao Fan, submitted a memorial to the emperor. The memorial started with the title, "Banditry in Shaanxi is growing more intense by the day."⁸⁵ The similar content appeared several times again in the memorials in 1890. This information serves as the context for local officials' following report about the bandits or Gelaohui-related robbery cases. It also reveals that the point of concern at that time of the Qing government was not limited to Gelaohui but emphasized the local stability, which the activities of bandits could destroy. Gelaohui, which was called secret-society bandit (hui fei, 會匪), followed tufei (bandit, 土

⁸² *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 499.

⁸³ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁴ Lu Weidong 路偉東, "Tongzhi Guangxu Nianjian de Shaanxi Renkou Sunshi 同治光緒年間的陝西人口損失" [Population Loss in Shaanxi During the Tongzhi and Guangxu Reigns], in *Lishi dili di shijiu ji 歷史地理第十九輯* [Historical Geography, vol. 19], ed. Historical Geography Committee of the Geographical Society of China and Editorial Committee of *Historical Geography* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2003), 352–5.

⁸⁵ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di si ji 宮中檔光緒朝奏摺 第四輯* [Palace Archives of the Guangxu Reign Memorials to the Throne, vol. 4], ed. by National Palace Museum Palace Archives Editorial Committee (國立故宮博物院故宮文獻編輯委員會) (Taipei: Dong ya zhi ben suo, 1973), 99.

匪), mazei (mounted bandits, 馬賊), youyong (disbanded soldiers, 游勇) in the memorials.⁸⁶

These four groups of people constituted the social instability defined by the Qing government.

It would be inaccurate to conclude that local communities viewed the Gelaohui simply as synonymous with local bandits like the Qing officials, given the Gelaohui's particular roles and functions in relation to criminal activities. A frequent scenario involved bandits and robbers who previously had been Gelaohui members. For instance, in the 1888 robbery case discussed earlier, one of the individuals involved had joined the Gelaohui prior to 1885. However, his membership in the society was not the direct reason for his participation in highway robbery three years later.⁸⁷ Similarly, in 1890, a criminal apprehended in Zhouzhi County at the foothills of the Qinling Mountains confessed his prior association with the Gelaohui and past service as an army recruit.⁸⁸ Yet again, there was no immediate causal link between his membership in the society and his later criminal conduct. Thus, rather than causing local crimes directly, the Gelaohui functioned primarily as an organizational background, providing networks and potential recruits who might later engage in illicit activities.

The Gelaohui did facilitate the development of criminal activities in the region. Its structured secrecy provided criminal groups with an established internal organization, allowing them to operate on a larger scale and with greater durability. Criminal cases involving members of the Gelaohui typically required more extensive investigation by local officials compared to those involving transient or spontaneous criminal collaborations. For instance, in 1890, officials from Chenggu County in the Nanshan region, assisted by officials from Chang'an County, apprehended Li Jianzi, a prominent Gelaohui leader, along with three

⁸⁶ Mounted bandits (mazei 馬賊) often referred to outlaw groups in rural or frontier regions, especially in areas where horses were a primary means of transport, such as northern China or Inner Asia.

⁸⁷ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di si ji*, 99.

⁸⁸ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 260.

additional members of the society. Before his arrest, Li had founded a mountain hall and attracted over five hundred participants. While the precise year of establishment was unclear, the official records indicating operations “over the years,” along with the substantial membership, underscore the long-term embeddedness of the organization in local society. The group conducted crimes such as robbery and sexual assault over an extended period without significant interference from authorities. This situation illustrates how the combination of Gelaohui’s secretive organizational structure and the Nanshan area’s mountainous terrain jointly contributed to illicit activities’ persistence and scale. Internally, the Gelaohui maintained a clear hierarchical order, exemplified by Li’s leadership position, with subordinate members actively following and safeguarding him. This hierarchical arrangement distinguishes these cases significantly from other temporary criminal associations, which were generally characterized by ad-hoc, non-hierarchical collaboration.⁸⁹

Another illustrative case from 1899 in Ziyang County, also located in southern Shaanxi, further demonstrates the continuity and resourcefulness of the Gelaohui. In this instance, Gelaohui membership had been transmitted through multiple generations, eventually facilitating a break-in robbery. Fifteen years prior, leadership and membership had already passed down to the individual central to the robbery, who later recruited another participant into the society. By 1897, they made a deal on a home invasion.⁹⁰ Together, these cases effectively demonstrate that the Gelaohui functioned as both a reservoir of potential criminal actors and an organizational framework enabling sustained and coordinated criminal activities in the region.

Another complex aspect in defining the relationship between local communities and the Gelaohui involves the apparent local support for illicit activities in which the society engaged, notably the trafficking and sale of women. For instance, records from Zhouzhi

⁸⁹ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 770.

⁹⁰ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di shisan ji*, 162.

County in 1890 mention a former soldier and Gelaohui member who spontaneously abducted women and trafficked them across provincial boundaries.⁹¹ Similarly, the 1890 Chenggu County case reveals that a local Gelaohui branch had been systematically involved in arranging marriages and selling women over a prolonged period.⁹² Such evidence suggests that, in this region, the Gelaohui participated actively in an existing practice of human trafficking, which already held a significant role within the local socioeconomic framework. Johanna S. Ransmeier, in her study of human trafficking in northern China during the late Qing and early Republican eras, argues that the practice functioned as an essential component of mutual aid systems within local communities.⁹³ Applying this insight to the context of late nineteenth-century Shaanxi, the Gelaohui's involvement in the local marriage market and trafficking activities underscores a broader symbiotic relationship. It highlights the extent to which local communities facilitated and supported practices that, while considered illegal by the Qing state, continued to play integral roles in their social and economic lives.

Economic Motivations Behind Gelaohui Identity

During the final three decades of the nineteenth century, perceptions of the Gelaohui shifted significantly. Initially regarded as a military issue arising from soldiers' grievances over inadequate pay, the Gelaohui increasingly came to be viewed as a social problem at the local level, frequently labeled as a form of banditry. Thus, the role of the Gelaohui in Shaanxi must now be examined within the broader social conditions of the time. What did participation in the Gelaohui signify for its members, beyond the external perceptions held by local communities? Addressing this question provides a more comprehensive understanding of how deeply embedded the society was within local contexts. Given that the Gelaohui was

⁹¹ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 260.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 771.

⁹³ Johanna S. Ransmeier, *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 5.

often classified among local bandits, specifically as “secret-society bandits,” and that membership was recognized as an effective means of carrying out prolonged illegal activities, this inquiry can be further refined to explore what becoming a bandit truly meant from the participants’ perspective.

Membership in the Gelaohui, though offering a temporary organizational framework for individual criminal endeavors, proved inadequate in securing long-term economic stability. This insufficiency often drove members toward acts of violence and criminality, thereby reinforcing the association between the Gelaohui and banditry. Membership in the Gelaohui could effectively serve as a criminal record in the eyes of Qing authorities. Archival records indicate that upon arrest for robbery, the majority of suspects confessed their membership in the society, which Qing officials subsequently classified and recorded as an additional criminal offense. Thus, prior membership in the Gelaohui was routinely considered when determining punishments.⁹⁴ From the perspective of participants, these official records indicate that membership alone was insufficient to ensure a stable, long-term livelihood. Their identities as Gelaohui members did not preclude them from engaging in violent and criminal activities. Consequently, the fraternal bonds, fundamental to the Gelaohui’s identity, were ultimately inadequate to satisfy the economic needs of its members.

Banditry served a necessary function, primarily driven by economic motivations, particularly in cases involving secret-society bandits. Targets were typically selected based on their wealth. Wealthy families without strong neighborhood protection were especially vulnerable, as were merchants and employers, such as dyehouse owners, who possessed considerable financial resources and commanded substantial labor forces.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 772.

⁹⁵ Merchant being robbed, see *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 96. Dyehouse case, see *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 492.

Economic motivations also arose from acute financial distress, resulting in robberies that were initially unplanned and spontaneous acts driven by immediate necessity. For instance, in an 1890 case from Liuba County in southern Shaanxi, an employee traveling from another prefecture within the province found himself unexpectedly without money for his journey and subsequently resorted to robbing passersby to resolve his immediate financial predicament.⁹⁶

In the case of sudden robberies, the deeper reason for banditry seems to be generalized poverty. In an 1890 case from Liuba County, the robbery participants all had jobs before being employed to work in Shaanxi. They came from several different counties in Sichuan, which is the southern neighboring province of Shaanxi, at various times. For some unrecorded reason, one became a bagger at the beginning of 1889, and the other accidentally met him one night. Two of them came into an empty temple for a night's sleep. After that, another one employed in Shaanxi came with a robber. After self-introduction, they all lamented that life is so complicated and that they are poor. The same night, they robbed a nearby wealthy family.⁹⁷ In this case, three people from Sichuan were turned into bandits because of their difficulties working in Shaanxi. Qing officials commented on their case, saying that although two of them have fathers and one has a brother, their family relationships did not prevent them from being bandits.⁹⁸ By stating that no family relationship can prevent a family member from engaging in criminal activity, the severity of the economic situation for individual survival can be addressed indirectly.

The poor economic conditions led to the dire financial situation of interprovincial employees, making them a group with the potential to turn to banditry. A very similar case happened in the same year in Lintong County, Liuba County, and Xi'an. In Lintong case, the hired workers from Henan encountered bandits. They shared their hardships and poverty, so

⁹⁶ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 169.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96–7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

they conspired together to steal from wealthy households.⁹⁹ The hardships and poverty repeatedly appear in the narration as they decide on robbery. The crisis in the socio-economic situation is further demonstrated by the fact that artisans who are professionals join the ranks of thieves. In the case records of Ziyang County in 1899, one of the participants in one of the thefts was a carpenter with the surname He.¹⁰⁰

In sum, an analysis of the economic motivations behind banditry and the experiences of Gelaohui members underscores the complex relationship between economic vulnerability, social identity, and criminal behavior in late Qing Shaanxi. Although Qing authorities consistently categorized Gelaohui members as criminals, the reality was more nuanced: membership did not inherently provide economic security, nor did it encourage or discourage participation in illicit activities. Rather, the Gelaohui offered a structured social network through which economically marginalized individuals navigated their daily struggles. By situating banditry within these broader social and economic frameworks, this examination demonstrates the centrality of economic conditions in shaping both individual decisions and collective practices among Gelaohui affiliates.

Transition from Neutrality to Rebellion

From the perspective of the Qing government, Gelaohui in Shaanxi had already shown rebellious tendencies in the 1880s. In one report from 1890, the official caught a leader of Gelaohui in Pingli County and found that he had been active as the organizer of the mountain hall for years. The oath document they used contained words and phrases implying their rebellious intention.¹⁰¹ This evidence can only be less convincing in proving society's anti-Qing intention in Shaanxi. One reason is that it is a single piece recorded by the Qing government. The other possible reason is that, according to the previous section, there are

⁹⁹ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 99.

¹⁰⁰ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di shisan ji*, 163.

¹⁰¹ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 499.

anti-Manchu comments in the general initiation ceremonies of Gelaohui. The detailed information about the rituals and materials used in the Shaanxi area is less known, so this evidence cannot support the argument that the findings made by the Qing officials in 1890 represented the start of the anti-Qing intentions of Gelaohui in Shaanxi.

Scholars, through analyzing the political movements in Shaanxi from 1900 to the 1911 Revolution, concluded that it is the local gentries that stimulated Gelaohui's participation in political activities, promoted the society from the peripheral of the province into the core area, and finally intensified the society's anti-Qing goal.¹⁰² The thesis generally agrees with the argument about the relationship between Gelaohui and the local communities made by the previous scholar. The differences lie in the use of materials. Because Gelaohui at the beginning of the ten years of the 20th century was not that tractable in the records, this thesis will not make hypotheses about Gelaohui's participation in some political activities if Gelaohui was not directly mentioned as a group. Besides, the difference between the materials related to Gelaohui of this time and those during the 19th century is that Qing officials were not the only ones taking records about this group. Local newspapers and memoirs of contemporary revolutionary participants also helped mold the image of Gelaohui.

The local community and the Qing government have stood on opposite sides in the anti-church incidents (jiao an, 教案) in Shaanxi. The "Ningqiang Catholic Incident" (1900) offers a profound lens through which to examine the relationship between the Qing government and local communities. The event, which unfolded in Ningqiang County, the southwesternmost division of Shaanxi, during the late Qing dynasty, was sparked by widespread resentment among local farmers towards Catholic missionaries and their exploitative practices. These missionaries, backed by imperialist powers, used religious influence to seize land, manipulate

¹⁰² Jacobson, "The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 134.

local disputes, and enforce high-interest loans, exacerbating the socio-economic challenges faced by rural communities.

Initially, the Qing government's response to the uprising reflected a degree of sympathy towards the grievances of the local population. Officials like Liu Dingchen, the magistrate of Ningqiang, sought to defuse tensions by mediating between the aggrieved locals and foreign missionaries, demonstrating a nuanced approach to maintaining social stability. However, the broader context of the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) and the imperialist demands following the Eight-Nation Alliance's intervention fundamentally altered this dynamic.

Faced with mounting international pressure and the obligations imposed by the 1901 Boxer Protocol, the Qing government pivoted from its initial conciliatory stance to a harsh crackdown on those involved in the Ningqiang uprising. The Qing authorities, eager to appease foreign powers and prevent further escalations, arrested and executed key leaders of the rebellion, such as Li Yundong and Yang Hai, while imposing heavy reparations on the local community. This shift underscores the Qing government's precarious position, balancing the need to assert state authority while managing both local unrest and foreign demands.¹⁰³ It was precisely within the shifting internal and external relations of the Qing government that the Gelaohui gradually became anti-Qing.

The Qing government sensed Gelaohui's anti-Qing intention in the society's participation in anti-church incidents. In 1901, a Gelaohui member was found in Xi'an's barracks. The person was not a soldier himself but a handler of tobacco products. His primary intention was to burn and destroy the churches. Its significance as a landmark anti-Qing event for the Gelaohui is primarily attributed to the timing of its occurrence. At that time, Empress

¹⁰³ Zhang Li 張力 and Liu Jiantang 刘鉴唐, *Zhongguo jiaosan shi* 中国教案史 (Chengdu: Sichuan Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe, 1987), 555.

Dowager Cixi had already fled to Xi'an, leading Qing government officials to perceive this incident as a direct threat to the Qing rulers.¹⁰⁴

How the Gelaohui utilized missionary incidents to oppose the Qing is further elaborated in the reports of local officials in Shaanxi regarding these incidents. The Gelaohui was the driving force behind the worsening relationship between the church and the people. In a report about the anti-church violence from Pingli County in 1903, Gelaohui was thought to manipulate local content. Due to the unjust taxation of tobacco fields, locals, including Zhan Chaozhu, brought accusations against Yuan Ruilin and Liu Zimo, who were members of the local defense units (tuan bao, 團保), leading to their dismissal from their duties. They later converted to Christianity.¹⁰⁵ The dissatisfaction with local governance created fertile ground for anti-church sentiments, which organizations like Gelaohui could exploit to channel these grievances into broader anti-Christian violence.

The role of organized groups is seen in the systematic escalation of violence. After converting to Christianity, Yuan Ruilin accused Zhan Chaozhu of conspiring with secret-society bandits to slander the church. Pressured by the church authorities represented by Yuan, the Qing government dispatched county officials who adopted a conciliatory approach by expelling and summoning the alleged secret-society bandit associated with Zhan. Initially, county officials merely imposed a fine of one hundred strings of copper coins on the accused bandit member. However, Yuan's son insisted that the officials imprison him. Upon learning of the member's predicament, bandit leader Wang Luan Dao Zi gathered several hundred followers, burned Yuan's family property, killed Yuan Ruilin who turned into Christianity before, and his son, along with four other Christians, and looted several church properties.

¹⁰⁴ *Xinhai geming qian shinian jian minbian dang'an shiliao* 辛亥革命前十年間民變檔案史料, ed. by First Historical Archives of China and History Department of Beijing Normal University (中國第一歷史檔案館 北京師範大學歷史系) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), 808.

¹⁰⁵ *Xinhai geming qian shinian jian minbian dang'an shiliao*, 817.

Subsequently, local Qing officials initiated a familiar pattern of pursuit against the secret-society bandits across mountainous terrain and provincial borders. Even in flight, one of the members gathered more than 1300 people.¹⁰⁶

Such actions, exemplified by the above one, indicate organized anti-Christian networks, which the Gelaohui was known to lead, uniting locals under shared grievances to resist external influences like the church violently. The material points to the use of secretive, coordinated efforts to incite and sustain conflict. Gelaohui was described as a loose coalition, and once scattered, its leaders fled without support. The description of such groups aligns with the Gelaohui's methods, which involved forming temporary alliances among dissatisfied locals and systematically using their networks to escalate conflicts. Gelaohui's position in the anti-church incidents was finally concluded: "These bandits instigated hatred against the church, incited crowds to create unrest, and required military suppression."¹⁰⁷ This highlights the Qing government's recognition of the deliberate strategy of using anti-church sentiment as a unifying force to mobilize local populations, a tactic often associated with the Gelaohui. Marked by Liu Changhai, an influential Gelaohui leader with many supporters, who was against churches and foreign missionaries, the records related to Gelaohui and anti-church incidents ended around 1905.¹⁰⁸

1905, when anti-church records related to Gelaohui ceased, witnessed the Gelaohui blatantly plotting anti-Qing activities. The Gelaohui leader, Monk Liang, strategically planned an uprising against the Qing. After becoming a Gelaohui leader, Liang engaged in extensive organizing efforts. He coordinated with local Gelaohui members in multiple

¹⁰⁶ *Xinhai geming qian shinian jian minbian dang'an shiliao*, 818.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*.

¹⁰⁸ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 44. There is no accurate number of the follower of Liu, and this is why I use the word "many" here.

regions, including Ankang and Xi'an, to plan an armed insurrection.¹⁰⁹ Liang's preparations for rebellion are evident in his stockpiling of weapons and resources. In less than six months, Liang and his associates prepared significant quantities of weapons and materials, including over twenty barrels of kerosene, two chests of copper coins, and a large stockpile of food.¹¹⁰ These resources demonstrate the level of organization and intent to conduct a direct anti-Qing action. The planned uprising culminated in a coordinated attack during a sacrificial ceremony attended by a Qing military officer, Fu Diankui. Liang's group attempted to set fire to the venue as a signal for the attack but failed due to faulty kerosene. This led to the discovery and suppression of the uprising, resulting in significant casualties among Gelaohui members and the eventual capture and execution of Liang. However, this event showcases how Gelaohui activities had shifted to direct confrontation with the Qing state.

Another event that directly reflects the anti-Qing intentions of the Gelaohui is the anti-opium incident. In case records from the last 25 years of the previous century, items stolen by Gelaohui members included opium. This highlights the personal consumption needs of Gelaohui members for opium.¹¹¹ Within six months of the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution in Mei County, located near the entrances of Mount Zhongnan and Mount Taibai, Gelaohui members caused disturbances under the pretext of local officials enforcing an opium ban. This demonstrates that the Qing government's anti-opium efforts directly affected the interests of the Gelaohui residing in the area.¹¹²

The Gelaohui's evolution from a secretive mutual aid society to a significant socio-political force illustrates its adaptability and impact on local communities in late Qing Shaanxi. Initially categorized as a bandit-like organization due to its criminal associations,

¹⁰⁹ *Jiuminzhu zhuyi geming shiqi Shaanxi dashi jishu* 舊民主主義革命時期陝西大事記述 [Chronicle of Major Events in Shaanxi during the Old Democratic Revolution Period], ed. by History Department of Northwestern University (西北大學歷史系) (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 1984), 145.

¹¹⁰ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 148.

¹¹¹ *Gong zhong dang Guangxu chao zouzhe di wu ji*, 498.

¹¹² *Xinhai geming qian shinian jian minbian dang'an shiliao*, 832.

the Gelaohui's role expanded into facilitating anti-Qing activities, particularly through anti-church incidents and organized rebellion. This transition underscores the complexity of their operations, blending local grievances with broader socio-political objectives. By 1905, the Gelaohui had ceased its documented anti-church efforts, redirecting its energy toward explicit anti-Qing actions. This period highlights their progression into an organized resistance force, contributing to the eventual collapse of the Qing Dynasty and reflecting their dual role as both a local disruptor and a catalyst for revolutionary change.

Chapter 5: Revolutionary Culmination—Gelaohui and the Shaanxi Uprising

The capture of Xi'an during the 1911 Revolution underscores the critical role of the Gelaohui in Shaanxi's revolutionary landscape, where its deep-rooted local networks and secretive organizational structure allowed it to exert significant influence. This chapter examines the Gelaohui's integration into the Qing New Army, renamed the Qin-Long Army for the Restoration of the Han (Qin Long fu Han jun, 秦隴復漢軍) during the uprising, and how it outmaneuvered other revolutionary groups like the Tongmenghui in mobilizing forces and seizing control. Beyond Xi'an, the Gelaohui's adaptability is analyzed through its varied roles in nearby counties, where it often spearheaded uprisings in coordination with or independently of other factions. The study further contextualizes the Gelaohui's activities by comparing its revolutionary strategies and interactions with the New Army in other provincial centers like Wuhan, Chengdu, and Changsha. By exploring these regional dynamics, this chapter highlights the interplay between local conditions, military development, and the Gelaohui's ability to navigate revolutionary opportunities, ultimately shaping its impact on the broader 1911 Revolution.

Capture of Xi'an

Gelaohui's secretive structure was instrumental in embedding its influence within the Qing government's New Army, which was renamed and restructured as the Qin-Long Army for the Restoration of the Han during the capture of Xi'an. This became the sole title for the forces involved in the 1911 Revolution in Xi'an. Understanding the influence of the Gelaohui during the uprising is inherently linked to this army, which evolved from the New Army.

The term "New Army" referred broadly to several provincial armies established to modernize the Qing military rather than a specific unit. The local Shaanxi New Army was

called the Shaanxi Army Mixed Brigade (Shaanxi lujun huncheng xie, 陝西陸軍混成協). Starting from 1895, six successive governors of Shaanxi oversaw the organization and training of the Shaanxi New Army.¹¹³ By 1910, the Shaanxi Army Mixed Brigade formally included two infantry battalions, a cavalry battalion, engineers, supply units, and artillery.¹¹⁴

The revolutionaries' influence within the New Army was limited compared to that of the Gelaohui because the New Army was established through local recruitment, whereas the Gelaohui had already been embedded in Shaanxi society well before the formation and recruitment of the New Army. In the recruitment process of the New Army, the main source of soldiers is unemployed people. This group of unemployed people also happens to be the main source of members of Gelaohui. During the recruitment of new soldiers, many unemployed Gelaohui members joined the New Army, including the leaders of the brotherhood group to which Wan Bingnan and Zhang Yunshan belonged. Wan became the head of the third battalion (ying, 營), first regiment (biao, 標) in the New Army.¹¹⁵ Zhang, in his soldier career in the New Army, got promoted from bugler to Assistant Chief Bugler and took the responsibility to supervise the buglers of the whole association. He also established a new mountain hall called Tongtong Shan, the lodge with more than 2,800 brothers on the list. The vast majority of the brothers were soldiers of the New Army.¹¹⁶

On the contrary, Tongmenghui, which established a branch in Shaanxi in 1908, had only four members in the New Army: junior officers Zhang Zuodong, Peng Shi'an, Zhang Guangkui, and Zhu Yiming. In the spring of 1910, five newly appointed junior officers, including Qian Ding, Dang Zhongzhao, and Zhang Baolin, returned to Shaanxi after studying

¹¹³ Zhang Ran 張然, *Qingmo Xinzheng shiqi Shaanxi Xinjun yanjiu* [A Study on the Shaanxi New Army During the Late Qing New Policies Period] (PhD diss., Central China Normal University, 2022), 39.

¹¹⁴ Zhu and Dang, "Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyi," 30.

¹¹⁵ *Xi'an Xinhai jiyi: Xi'an Xinhai geming bainian jinian wenji* 西安辛亥記憶：西安辛亥革命百年紀念文集 [Xi'an's Xinhai Memories: A Collection for the Centennial of the 1911 Revolution in Xi'an], ed. by Xi'an Municipal Archives (西安市檔案館) (Xi'an: Sanqin Chubanshe, 2011), 388.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 415.

at the Baoding Army Accelerated Training School (Baoding lujun sucheng xuetang, 保定陸軍速成學堂) and were members of Tongmenghui.¹¹⁷ Although both Tongmenghui and Gelaohui members held certain positions of rank within the New Army, the Gelaohui enjoyed a significantly larger following among the soldiers.

The problem was that although Tongmenghui occupied more leading positions in the army than Gelaohui, it did not play an effective role in leading the army during the revolution. The leadership of the Tongmenghui and that of the New Army could not effectively and quickly gather large numbers of armed forces in the chaotic revolution. As the revolutionaries themselves said in their memoirs, the army of the uprising occupied the Bureau of Military Uniforms for storing weapons. It established a general headquarters, but the location of the battalions and how many troops were in which area were utterly unknown to the command. Because the decision to revolt was made in haste, there was no time to make detailed plans for military deployment or plans of attack. After the army had completed the task of capturing the Bureau of Military Uniforms in the rough plan of attack, the progress of the battalions was utterly unknown. The rebel army was not an organized unit from the original New Army, and many officers did not participate in the uprising, so the original military force's dispatching ability of the New Army was significantly reduced in the war. The loss of the original organization and the blocking of information caused the military command, which was more favorable to the New Army and the Tongmenghui, to fall into the hands of another force in the revolution – Gelaohui.¹¹⁸

The organization of Gelaohui is characterized by secrecy, having its own language and gestures for internal communication. Together with its broad membership, it played an essential role in the intelligence work of the revolutionary process. Gelaohui established in

¹¹⁷ Zhu and Dang, "Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyi," 1.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

the army a set of management system in line with the military regulations. The leader of each military rank is called the rudder (duo ba zi 舵把子).¹¹⁹ Each level of the organization had its own designated leader or “rudder” title corresponding to its hierarchy. Although Gelaohui could not form an army-style unified dispatch, the rudders at all levels were able to rally a certain number of Gelaohui members. Coupled with the large number of Gelaohui members, the number of rudders at all levels was also significant. As the New Army and revolutionaries established a new headquarters in the Bureau of Military Uniforms, leaders of various ranks within the Gelaohui had already taken control of various city gates over a more extensive area. Although the New Army and revolutionaries appeared to have command, Gelaohui actually held broader authority over the mobilization of military forces during the siege.

A notable feature of Xi'an City during the Qing Dynasty was that the isolated Manchu Quarter was located in Xi'an City. The capture of the Manchu Quarter was an indispensable part of the capture of Xi'an. The whole city is confined because it has walls on all sides. If the insurgents wanted to breach it, they needed to know what was going on inside, and Gelaohui's intelligence system was able to do that. There were members of Gelaohui who were Hui people. Many of them were small merchants and hawkers who excelled in business. The Hui Zhang Huaibao has a small teahouse located at Xihua Gate in the Manchu Quarter, where many Hui people who conduct business in the quarter reside. Shortly before the revolution, the tea house became a stronghold. The Hui people heard about the Qing army and reported to the revolutionary party. During the capture of the west gate of Manchu Quarter mentioned in the introduction, this tea house gathered many Hui traders because of the sudden closure of the quarter by the Qing army. These Hui people and the Hui people

¹¹⁹ “Shaanxi Xinhai geming zhong de Gelaohui,” in *Shaanxi Xinhai geming huiyilu*, 262.

outside of the quarter who participated in the uprising worked together to help the rebel army clear the soil bags behind the west gate, allowing the rebel army to enter the city smoothly.¹²⁰

One of the key factors contributing to the effectiveness of the Gelaohui during the revolution in Xi'an was its ability to collaborate with the local Hui community. This collaboration was rooted in a shared socio-political experience: both Gelaohui members and Hui individuals had long been marginalized and stigmatized as rebellious or subversive elements by the Qing government. Over the decades, both were frequently subjected to harsh repression, surveillance, and violence.¹²¹ As the revolutionary movement sought broader support, the leaders of the Gelaohui recognized the strategic importance of forming alliances with disenfranchised groups like the Hui, who held deep grievances against Qing rule. The Gelaohui's grassroots network and adaptability made it well-suited to establish these connections. The Hui, particularly those involved in local commerce and community leadership, found common cause with the Gelaohui's anti-Qing stance.¹²² This shared history of resistance and mutual recognition of the need for systemic change created ground for collaboration. It not only enhanced the revolutionary reach of the Gelaohui but also provided the Hui community with a channel to participate in a broader political transformation, ultimately strengthening the revolutionary effort in Xi'an.

The extent of collaboration was limited, as reflected in the silence of the majority of the Hui community in Xi'an at the time. By the end of the Guangxu reign (1871–1908), the Hui population in Xi'an was about 10,000 out of a total population of 110,000.¹²³ Of those, only around 1,000 participated in the revolution, primarily under a few leaders affiliated with the

¹²⁰ Ma Shinian, "Shaanxi Huizu renmin canjia Xinhai geming de jingguo," 59, 63.

¹²¹ Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 123.

¹²² Ma Shinian, "Shaanxi Huizu renmin canjia Xinhai geming de jingguo," 59.

¹²³ *Shaanxi wenshi ziliao di ershier ji: Shaanxi Minguo renwu 1* 陝西文史資料第22輯：陝西民國人物1 [Shaanxi Historical Materials, vol. 22: Republican-Era Figures of Shaanxi, Part 1], ed. by Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi Shaanxi Sheng Weiyuanhui Wenshi Ziliao Weiyuanhui (中國人民政治協商會議陝西省委員會文史資料委員會) (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 1989), 80.

Gelaohui, the New Army, or those holding Hui or pro-Hui identities.¹²⁴ Most Hui residents chose not to engage in the early stages of the uprising. This limited involvement can be traced to a legacy of interethnic violence among Hui, Han, and Manchu communities, which had fostered deep-seated mistrust, negative stereotypes, and extreme handling over previous decades. However, the restrained collaboration ultimately worked in favor of the Gelaohui by allowing them to secure support from segments of the Hui community while the broader Hui population maintained a neutral stance.

Gelaohui's Involvement Across Shaanxi

Xi'an was a focal point for revolutionary activities as the provincial capital and a historical military hub. The Gelaohui in Xi'an collaborated closely with the Tongmenghui and revolutionary factions within the New Army to coordinate the uprising. Their efforts culminated in the overthrow of Qing authority and the establishment of a provisional government. Gelaohui members actively participated in armed clashes, utilizing their extensive networks to mobilize resources and manpower. The alliance with the Tongmenghui amplified their impact, as both groups shared anti-Qing objectives. However, tensions occasionally arose due to differences in organizational priorities.

Xi'an was designed as the dispatch and command center for spreading the revolution in Shaanxi province. After the Wuchang Uprising, the leaders of the revolution in Xi'an gathered the members of Tongmenghui from different counties. They met at a restaurant on a busy business street in Xi'an City. During this secret meeting, they decided that all cities and counties in the province should start the uprising on the same day, October 22, 1911. This deal did not work out in reality. Besides Xi'an, where the revolution started on that day, other places generally started the revolution after hearing about the success of the provincial city.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Ma Shinian, "Shaanxi Huizu renmin canjia Xinhai geming de jingguo," 60.

¹²⁵ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 658.

Several factors determined the process of the revolution. The distance between each place and the provincial city largely determined the revolution process across the province. Lintong County, under the Xi'an Prefecture, set off the revolution in the afternoon of the same day as Xi'an due to its close geographical location with the provincial city.¹²⁶ In Tongguan County, on the eastern edge of the province, the revolution came much later, eleven days after the revolution in Xi'an.¹²⁷ Because Xi'an did not fully function as an effective monitoring center for the revolutionary activities, how the revolution was processed in each city and county once they received the news from Xi'an heavily relied on their local political, economic, and social situation.

Previous scholarship has examined the Gelaohui's complex and variable interactions with groups such as the Tongmenghui, the Swordsmen, Qing officials, and local gentry. While the Gelaohui frequently took the lead in launching initial attacks, the extent and nature of their influence largely depended upon their alliances or conflicts with local elites and revolutionary organizations. In central and northern Shaanxi, the Gelaohui occasionally collaborated with or were brought under the influence of the local gentry or Tongmenghui. In contrast, they retained a greater degree of autonomy in peripheral regions. Nevertheless, internal factionalism combined with external pressures gradually eroded their authority, ultimately facilitating the rise and consolidation of warlord power in northern China.¹²⁸

Based on this framework, there are several questions worth exploring. Gelaohui and the local gentry's relationship was more complex than before the revolution, and the examination of Gelaohui's role in the revolution cannot avoid the nuanced roles of the gentry in shaping post-coup power struggles. Besides, external Qing loyalist military responses were an essential force in hindering the development of the revolution. Further discussion of the

¹²⁶ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 646.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 653.

¹²⁸ Jacobson, "The Shaanxi Gelaohui, 1867–1912", 235–6.

impact of external forces, especially that of the former Governor General Shengyun on the west side of Shaanxi, can offer a clearer picture of Gelaohui's ability to consolidate power or compromise under military pressure. Due to the rich materials during the revolution compared with those during the late Qing, the primary sources depict a more three-dimensional image of Gelaohui and provide the opportunity to examine the internal divisions of the society. The question based on this points to how leadership disputes or rivalries within the Gelaohui affected their alliances with the Tongmenghui or their ability to withstand gentry-led counterattacks. The inquiry about the internal division of Gelaohui further points to examining the society's ideological motivations. Whether the society's members' actions were primarily ideological, such as anti-Qing, or pragmatic, such as seizing local control.

The counties within the Xi'an Prefecture witnessed a similar pattern of uprising to that of Xi'an. Xianyang, Lintong, Yaoxian, Tongguan, Fuping are the counties under discussion based on the available primary sources.¹²⁹ They were the first group of counties to start the revolution after the revolutionaries controlled the provincial city. Besides Xianyang, Gelaohui took the dominant leadership to set off the uprising in the other four counties, just like Xi'an. In Lintong, the local Gelaohui leader, the livestock tax broker, started the revolution by leading the brothers to attack the city gate and open the local prison.¹³⁰ In Yaoxian, while the revolutionaries and Swordsmen had begun organizing a coordinated assault on the city, the Gelaohui disregarded their plan and initiated military action on their own.¹³¹ In Tongguan, Gelaohui in the city collaborated with Swordsmen outside the city and successfully overtook it.¹³² In Fuping, the strategy made by the revolutionaries was to rescue the prominent leader of Gelaohui and let him lead the revolution.¹³³ In these four cities, there

¹²⁹ Tongguan here refers to 同官 under Xi'an Prefecture. There is another county, also called Tongguan, 潼關 under the Tongzhou Prefecture in Shaanxi.

¹³⁰ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 646.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 649.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 651.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 667.

were scenes similar to those during the capture of Xi'an, where Gelaohui members played an undisputed leading role as the vanguard in the revolutionary efforts.

As Xi'an is the center of the revolution in the province, the counties under it should be better controlled by revolutionaries than other, more remote areas. However, apart from Xianyang, where revolutionaries carried out a systematically organized uprising by changing their attire, mobilizing local residents, promoting revolutionary ideas among the masses, spreading revolutionary principles, and forming an army, the Gelaohui's actions in the other four counties were less coordinated with revolutionary forces and appeared far more spontaneous.¹³⁴ In Lintong, Gelaohui completed the overtake of the city before the arrival of Tommenghui's member.¹³⁵ In Yaoxian, the Gelaohui, to some extent, positioned themselves in opposition to the revolutionaries. The leaders of the Gelaohui in this county disregarded the revolutionaries, their armies, and institutions, choosing instead to cooperate with local Qing officials. This collaboration was not motivated by revolutionary goals but rather by pursuing money and provisions.¹³⁶

The gentry in these five counties played a significant role in supporting the revolution. In Lintong, they contributed to maintaining social order under the revolutionary leadership after the county's restoration.¹³⁷ Similarly, in Yaoxian, the local gentry was tasked with preserving social stability and ensuring order among merchants and residents.¹³⁸ In Tongguan, they served as key advisors on local governance following the county's recovery.¹³⁹ During the revolution, although the gentry did not provide direct military support like the Gelaohui, they were considered an essential part of maintaining local social

¹³⁴ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 644.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 646.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 649–50.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 646.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 649.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 651.

order. This role became even more prominent in local society after the outbreak of the revolution.

The counties in the eastern part of Shaanxi Province were generally stable during the revolution. In Tongguan and Chaoyi, the revolution was initiated jointly by leaders of the Gelaohui or Swordsmen and students from modern schools. The entire process of capturing the cities was swift and encountered little resistance.¹⁴⁰ In Dali, the county magistrate himself was a member of the Gelaohui. The overlap between local officials and the Gelaohui forces made the transition during the revolution in Dali even smoother.¹⁴¹ The smooth scene in the eastern counties was also able to be attributed to the revolutionaries' emphasis on eastern Shaanxi as a strategic location. As an area bordering Henan Province, the revolutionaries sent troops into the area the day after the restoration took place to prevent the Qing government from moving westward.¹⁴² The local chaos brought by Gelaohui can be directly erased, accompanying the entry of revolutionary armies.¹⁴³ The revolutionaries' emphasis on the strategic location of eastern Shaanxi Province as a gateway to the political center brought about the local involvement of armed forces dispatched and led by the revolutionaries as well as the stabilization of the local society.

The role of Gelaohui in counties in the western part of the province is more complex. On the border between Shaanxi and Gansu, Fengxiang Prefecture and Qianzhou were the places where the Qing government directly attacked after the outbreak of the revolution.¹⁴⁴ Before that, the local situation complicates the narrative of the revolution. Fengxiang Prefecture was

¹⁴⁰ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 653–4.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 648.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 653.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 648.

¹⁴⁴ In the Qing Dynasty, Qianzhou 乾州 was a directly governed prefecture (Zhili Zhou 直隸州). A directly governed prefecture was administratively under the province and held the same rank as a prefecture (Fu 府) and a directly governed sub-prefecture (Zhili Ting 直隸廳). See Zhang Zhenglang 張政烺, *Zhongguo Gudai Zhiguan Da Cidian* 中國古代職官大辭典 (Dictionary of Ancient Chinese Official Positions) (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, October 1990), 579.

viewed as a significant place in the preparation of the revolution. There are few records of secret meetings in the Xi'an restaurant mentioned before, but one representative was from Fengxiang. The records do not tell whether Gelaohui was participating, but they say that the representative who went to Xi'an and took part in the secret meeting could not lead after the uprising. Gelaohui, in the place, took the responsibility to maintain the social order, although its local governance may suffer from a lack of order. Another scene that had not been witnessed in the provincial city surrounding counties and eastern counties was the hatred towards the church. During the uprising in Fengxiang, the Qing local officials were not the only ones to attack. Local people also attacked the foreigners, missionaries, and followers. Even the public middle school and the advanced elementary school were the targets of attack because the locals believed they were foreigner-related.¹⁴⁵ The same situation about burning down the churches and the schools also happened in Baoji.¹⁴⁶

In Longzhou, far from the provincial center and facing the border between Shaanxi and Gansu, the torturous uprising led by Gelaohui directly faced resistance from the Qing officials, local gentry, and internal divisions of the society. Before the local uprising, one of the two leaders of Gelaohui secretly collaborated with the Magistrate of a Prefecture and the gentry to resist this activity dominated by Gelaohui. This division directly led to the failure of this action. The next day, although in a hurry, the local gentry established the local militia to suppress the uprising. They appointed a person who has relationship with Gelaohui to be the leader of the militia. This action resulted in attracting the military forces of Gelaohui into the militia, and the force of Gelaohui was further weakened. The following days saw the attempted uprising by Gelaohui and the poor peasants across villages in Longzhou. However,

¹⁴⁵ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 658.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 655–6.

full success was not achieved until the arrival of the New Army from the provincial city, which was ten days after the first local uprising.¹⁴⁷

Revolutionary activities in the northern and southern parts of the province happened relatively late; Yulin Zhili Prefecture and Hanzhong Prefecture even happened one month after the Xi'an Revolution. In the northernmost prefecture of Shaanxi, the uprising in Yulin, which was a directly governed prefecture due to its political and military position, witnessed a different scene of revolution. When the potential uprising information of Gelaohui, including its name list, time for the uprising, and meeting address, was given, the three local officials were reluctant to take responsibility for dealing with the potential turmoil. They ended up taking no action regarding the uprising.¹⁴⁸

In the southern part of the province, the uprisings led by Gelaohui in Luonan County, Shangzhou Zhili Prefecture, and Ankang Zhili Prefecture went smoothly and quickly succeeded in the primary stage. In Luonan, two revolutionary students reached consent with the local Gelaohui. In addition to the weak military power in Luonan, the local Qing officials fled before the revolution.¹⁴⁹ Shangzhou had a similar pattern in which revolutionary students collaborated with the local secret societies in setting off the revolution.¹⁵⁰ In Ankang, out of consideration for securing the stability of the official army, the Qing officials provided the soldiers with guns without bullets. This action completely stripped the Qing army of its fighting strength and facilitated the uprising of Gelaohui.¹⁵¹

Although there were revolutionaries and Gelaohui members in Hanzhong, the uprising was challenging to process under the relatively strong control of Qing officials in local societies and their collaborations with local gentries. The failure in one of the counties in

¹⁴⁷ *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 664–5.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 674–5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 700.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 699.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 695.

Hanzhong, Xixiang, was caused by a gentry leak to a Qing government official and the weakness of the army's fighting capacity organized by the revolutionaries. Gelaohui's absence from the activity could further weaken the military capacity for the uprising.¹⁵² A similar absence of Gelaohui happened in Lueyang County. With the local governor's strategy of pretending to compromise and his mastery of the army, he besieged the militia groups organized by the revolutionaries.¹⁵³ The Gelaohui and revolutionaries in Nanzheng county were betrayed and harmed by their original collaborator in the New Army, who was actually collaborating with Qing officials.¹⁵⁴

A complex interplay of organizational structure, local leadership, and ideological mobilization shaped the role of the Gelaohui in Shaanxi's 1911 Revolution. Its decentralized organizational structure enabled flexibility and adaptability to local socio-political contexts, but it also led to inconsistencies in coordination and revolutionary outcomes. In areas like Xi'an, where Gelaohui leaders had strong organizational capacities, the society played a decisive role in capturing the city, collaborating with the New Army and Tongmenghui to overthrow Qing authority. This success was facilitated by the city's central position as a provincial command hub, allowing revolutionary leaders to coordinate activities across counties. However, in more remote areas like Longzhou and Hanzhong, the decentralized nature of the Gelaohui weakened its ability to enforce uniform strategies. Localized divisions within the Gelaohui, conflicting interests with local gentry, and Qing military counterattacks hindered effective coordination, often leading to failed or delayed uprisings.

Social networks and leadership capacity further determined Gelaohui's revolutionary impact. In counties like Lintong and Tongguan, charismatic local leaders spearheaded the uprisings, leveraging personal influence and mobilizing local Gelaohui members to act

¹⁵² *Xinhai geming zai Shaanxi*, 687–9.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 692–3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 691.

decisively. In contrast, areas like Yaoxian and Xixiang experienced internal disunity and gentry resistance, leading to divided efforts and compromised military capacity. Notably, local gentry and Qing officials sometimes collaborated, suppressing Gelaohui uprisings by manipulating local militias or co-opting Gelaohui leaders. In Longzhou, the betrayal of a key Gelaohui leader who sided with Qing authorities exposed the vulnerability of Gelaohui's decentralized leadership, while in Yulin, the reluctance of local officials to preemptively quell the uprising allowed revolutionary activities to escalate.

Finally, anti-Qing ideology and mass mobilization played a crucial role in the Gelaohui's success or failure. The anti-Qing sentiment of Gelaohui members found resonance among the rural poor and marginalized groups, offering ideological justification for rebellion. This ideological alignment was pivotal in Lintong, where Gelaohui independently launched the uprising without waiting for Tongmenghui's guidance. However, in regions like Yaoxian, pragmatic goals such as securing money and supplies overshadowed ideological motives, leading to cooperation with Qing officials instead of revolutionary actors. In regions like Shangzhou and Luonan, the alignment of student revolutionaries with local Gelaohui forces fostered ideological unity, enabling more coordinated and effective uprisings. The strategic location of eastern Shaanxi as a gateway to the provincial capital prompted immediate military intervention by revolutionary forces, stabilizing the region more rapidly than in other areas.

In summary, the Gelaohui's role in Shaanxi's 1911 Revolution was far from uniform. The success of revolutionary activities depended on local leadership, the adaptability of the organizational structure, and the resonance of revolutionary ideology within specific local contexts. While Xi'an's centralized leadership and coordination efforts created a model for success, peripheral areas like Longzhou and Hanzhong revealed the limitations of Gelaohui's decentralized framework. Conflicts with the local gentry, Qing military responses, and

internal divisions exposed the vulnerabilities of a loosely connected revolutionary force. Despite these challenges, the Gelaohui's ability to mobilize local populations, leverage charismatic leadership, and adapt to local conditions ensured its enduring influence in Shaanxi's revolutionary landscape.

Gelaohui in Other Provincial Cities

Shaanxi's Gelaohui played the leading role in capturing the provincial capital city and the other cities in the province. To better understand the role of Gelaohui in Shaanxi's 1911 Revolution, which can be seen as the last scene of the Qing dynasty, the comparative study can be compelling, and the possible following questions are: how did Gelaohui's participation in Xi'an compare to its activities in other provincial cities during the 1911 Revolution? What factors influenced the nature and impact of Gelaohui's revolutionary role across different cities?

To address these questions, this study employs a comparative case analysis involving Chengdu, Wuhan, and Changsha. Chengdu and Wuhan are the provincial capitals of Sichuan and Hubei, provinces neighboring Shaanxi. The formation and development of the Gelaohui in Shaanxi were notably influenced by social transformations that occurred in these regions, extending through southern Shaanxi. Changsha, the provincial capital of Hunan, shares a geographical connection with Hubei in the Yangtze River basin, and both provinces are traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the Gelaohui. Additionally, the Xiang Army—one of the key origins of Shaanxi's Gelaohui—also emerged from Hunan. Thus, the historical development of the Gelaohui closely links Shaanxi with these three provinces. Furthermore, these provinces and their respective capitals played significant roles during the 1911 Revolution. Wuhan is widely recognized as the starting point of the nationwide revolution, while Sichuan's significance was underscored by Sun Yat-sen, who identified its Railway

Protection Movement as the immediate trigger of revolutionary upheaval.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Hunan responded to the revolutionary call on the same day as Shaanxi. By comparatively examining these provinces, each deeply intertwined with the history of the Gelaohui and prominently involved in the revolutionary events of 1911, this section seeks to clarify the distinctive revolutionary contributions of the Gelaohui and highlight unique elements that enabled Shaanxi's branch to play such a prominent role in the revolution.

Wuhan's position as a transportation and industrial center, especially after becoming a treaty port after the Second Opium War (1856–1860), made it a pivotal site for revolutionary activities.¹⁵⁶ The city's thriving economy and role as a railway and river hub facilitated the Gelaohui's expansion and integration into various social strata. Wuhan's modernizing urban environment also created a space for collaboration between the Gelaohui, workers, students, and intellectuals.

Gelaohui's collaboration with Tongmenghui members and labor unions was particularly significant in Wuhan.¹⁵⁷ This partnership facilitated the Wuchang Uprising, a key event in the 1911 Revolution. The society worked alongside progressive elements in the New Army, whose support ensured the uprising's success. This partnership exemplified how the Gelaohui adapted its strategies to mobilize urban groups effectively.

The Gelaohui in Wuhan emphasized urban mobilization, leveraging its alliances with students and intellectuals to drive revolutionary momentum.¹⁵⁸ While its activities in Wuhan focused on integrating diverse social groups, its role in Xi'an was more aligned with direct military support, highlighting the regional variations in its approach.

¹⁵⁵ Feng Yuxiang 馮玉祥, *Wo suo renshi de Jiang Jieshi* 我所認識的蔣介石 [What I Know About Chiang Kai-shek] (Shanghai: Cultural Supply Agency, 1949), 611.

¹⁵⁶ Esherick, *Reform and Revolution in China*, 35.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 122–3.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

Changsha's numerous schools and intellectual circles fostered an environment of ideological innovation and anti-Qing sentiment.¹⁵⁹ Within this context, the Gelaohui engaged closely with local reformers and revolutionaries, collaborating with students, teachers, and radical thinkers to circulate political pamphlets, organize public discussions, and promote anti-dynastic rhetoric. Rather than relying primarily on armed confrontation, the Gelaohui in Changsha contributed to the revolution by amplifying revolutionary discourse and supporting propaganda networks that extended from elite institutions into the broader urban populace. This strategy stood in contrast to the more militant and confrontational tactics employed in Xi'an, where Gelaohui members were more directly involved in armed insurrection and seizing control of key urban centers.

The New Army in Changsha played a moderate but significant role in revolutionary activities. While less influential than its counterpart in Wuhan, the Changsha New Army provided logistical support and occasionally acted as a bridge between revolutionary leaders and the Gelaohui.¹⁶⁰ This partnership allowed the Gelaohui to amplify its ideological impact, though it remained less militant compared to its operations in Xi'an.

The Gelaohui in Changsha played a prominent role in supporting intellectual and student movements, emphasizing ideological influence over direct confrontation.¹⁶¹ By fostering anti-Qing propaganda and working with local elites, the Gelaohui contributed to the broader revolutionary effort, complementing the New Army's actions with a focus on public engagement and ideological groundwork.

¹⁵⁹ Esherick, *Reform and Revolution in China*, 58.

¹⁶⁰ Tao Juyin 陶菊隱, "Changsha xiangying qiyi jianwen 長沙響應起義見聞" [Changsha's Response to the Uprising: Observations], in *Xinhai geming huiyilu di er ji* 辛亥革命回憶錄第二集 [Memoirs of the 1911 Revolution, vol. 2], ed. by Literature and History Research Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中國人民政治協商會議全國委員會文史資料研究委員會) (Beijing: Wenshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1981), 197.

¹⁶¹ Zhang Pingzi 張平子, "Wo suo zhidao de Ma Fuyi 我所知道的馬福益" [What I Know About Ma Fuyi], in *Xinhai geming huiyilu di er ji*, 239–44.

Chengdu, one of the wealthiest cities in southwestern China, provided a fertile ground for developing secret societies like the Gelaohui. The city's status as a major economic center attracted a diverse population, including merchants, artisans, laborers, and intellectuals. This diversity shaped the local chapter of the Gelaohui, resulting in a membership base that reflected Chengdu's vibrant urban dynamics. Unlike the Gelaohui in rural or less prosperous areas, its presence in Chengdu was closely tied to the city's thriving economy and cultural life, making it a more integrated part of the urban fabric.

Chengdu's economic prosperity influenced the Gelaohui's structure and objectives. The society's membership in Chengdu included more middle-class and elite figures, such as merchants and scholars, compared to the predominantly laborer and peasant-based composition in regions like Xi'an.¹⁶² This shift in social composition led to a broader range of objectives, including economic advocacy, protection of local commercial interests, and occasional alignment with reformist rather than purely revolutionary agendas. These differences highlight how local economic conditions shaped the society's role and priorities.

Chengdu's New Army played a relatively subdued role compared to its counterparts in Wuhan and Changsha due to internal divisions and regional biases within its ranks.¹⁶³ Tensions between officers from Sichuan and those from other provinces created deep rifts, with Sichuanese officers feeling marginalized despite their qualifications and long-standing contributions to military institutions. These divisions were further exacerbated by critiques during military exercises, where Sichuanese officers used public forums to disparage their counterparts, heightening mistrust and animosity. This lack of cohesion directly impacted the army's revolutionary potential, as factionalism hindered unified decision-making and action.

¹⁶² Ouyang Enliang 欧阳恩良, *Xi'nan paoge yu Xinhai geming* 西南袍哥与辛亥革命 [Southwest Paoge and the 1911 Revolution] (Beijing: Zhongguo Zhigong Chubanshe, 2011), 37–8.

¹⁶³ Wei Yingtao 魏瀛涛 and Zhao Qing 赵清, eds., *Sichuan Xinhai geming shiliao* 四川辛亥革命史料 [Historical Materials on the 1911 Revolution in Sichuan] (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1981), 470–1.

During the 1911 Railway Protection Movement, these internal conflicts led to hesitation and inaction, as key leaders within the New Army felt their influence was too weak to rally support effectively. Unlike the more cohesive and coordinated New Army units in Wuhan and Changsha, Chengdu's fractured military environment undermined its capacity to play a decisive role in the revolution.

The Gelaohui in Chengdu was actively involved in revolutionary movements, but its approach and role were distinct. While the Gelaohui in Xi'an leaned towards more militant resistance and violent uprisings, the Chengdu branch often engaged in strategic alliances and political maneuvering. For example, during the Railway Protection Movement and the subsequent uprisings leading to the 1911 Revolution, the Gelaohui in Chengdu played a pivotal role in organizing protests and rallying support against Qing policies. Their methods often emphasized leveraging urban networks and economic influence rather than direct confrontation.¹⁶⁴ Xi'an's Gelaohui operated in a more militarized and oppositional context. They secured the networking during the revolution and personally participated in the military action.

Among the four provinces mentioned above, the strength of the New Army appears to determine the influence and power of the Gelaohui. Their function in the revolution shared similarities with that of the primary source of armed force for the revolution.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, the maturity of the New Army influenced the nature and impact of the Gelaohui's revolutionary role across cities. Where the New Army was advanced, the Gelaohui collaborated closely, amplifying the scale and impact of uprisings. Gelaohui stepped in to play a more militant and autonomous role where the New Army was underdeveloped. Hubei's New Army was the most advanced, serving as the revolution's catalyst. In contrast,

¹⁶⁴ Ouyang, *Xi'nan paoge yu Xinhai geming*, 166–9.

¹⁶⁵ Edmund S. K. Fung, "Military Subversion in the Chinese Revolution of 1911," *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1975): 103.

Xi'an's New Army was less developed, limiting its revolutionary impact. Chengdu and Changsha's New Armies fell between these extremes, with varying degrees of modernization and revolutionary inclination. The Gelaohui's integration with the New Army was strongest in Hubei, facilitating coordinated revolutionary actions. In Xi'an, the Gelaohui operated more independently due to the New Army's limitations. Chengdu and Changsha exhibited collaborative relationships, with the Gelaohui influencing military actions to varying extents.

From a broader perspective, each province's socio-economic context and corresponding local grievances significantly shaped the Gelaohui's membership, strategies, and revolutionary role in the 1911 Revolution. In Shaanxi, the economy was underdeveloped, with limited access to international markets and a dependence on agriculture, leaving many peasants impoverished and unemployed.¹⁶⁶ This economic hardship fueled Gelaohui's reliance on rural recruitment from peasants and soldiers, emphasizing direct military confrontation, as seen in the capture of Xi'an. In Wuhan, the Gelaohui operated in an urbanized industrial hub where dockworkers, laborers, and port workers faced harsh conditions. Here, the Gelaohui drew support from these groups, aligning with labor unions and Tongmenghui to fuel the Wuchang Uprising through strikes and mass mobilization. Chengdu's grievances were driven by the Railway Protection Movement, where the Qing government's seizure of locally funded railway control angered merchants and local elites. The Gelaohui allied with these groups, focusing on economic advocacy and protest movements rather than military action. In Hunan, the discontent was rooted in tenant-landlord conflicts and the province's role as a center for intellectual reform. Gelaohui in Hunan prioritized propaganda and student-led ideological mobilization. These regional differences highlight the adaptability of the Gelaohui, as it tailored its tactics to address local socio-

¹⁶⁶ Li Gang 李剛, *Ming Qing shiqi Shaanxi shangpin jingji yu shichang wangluo* 明清時期陝西商品經濟與市場網絡 [The Commodity Economy and Market Network of Shaanxi during the Ming and Qing Dynasties] (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, April 2006), 149–50.

economic grievances, from rural militancy in Shaanxi to urban labor mobilization in Wuhan, economic protests in Chengdu, and intellectual activism in Hunan, ultimately shaping its impact on the 1911 Revolution.

The relationship between the provincial cities and the surrounding areas also reflects the socio-economic context of each city. Xi'an's rural surroundings meant that much of the Gelaohui's membership came from unemployed peasants, rural laborers, and local militia. Since the Gelaohui was deeply embedded in local rural communities, it was able to mobilize large numbers of agricultural workers to join its armed efforts. In contrast, cities like Wuhan, Chengdu, and Changsha had more urban-centric economies, with larger populations of students, intellectuals, artisans, and industrial workers. As a result, the Gelaohui in these cities focused more on labor mobilization, merchant advocacy, and ideological propaganda.

Conclusion

The historical development of the Gelaohui calls for a rethinking of the mechanisms of change in late imperial China. Rather than treating political transformation as a process initiated and dominated by intellectual elites or formal revolutionary parties, this thesis foregrounds the role of socially embedded, semi-clandestine organizations, such as the Gelaohui. Although the 1911 Revolution is not the central focus here, it serves as a crucial historical juncture that illuminates the Gelaohui's long-standing capacity for adaptation, mobilization, and influence. The society's evolution, ritualized secrecy, and relationships with both official bureaucracies and unofficial networks reveal a layered political ecosystem, one in which formal governance was often shadowed or supplemented by alternative systems of power.

This study reframes the Gelaohui not as a binary agent, either reactionary or revolutionary, but as a flexible and adaptive mechanism whose internal cohesion and symbolic legitimacy enabled it to persist across regimes. By focusing on Shaanxi, a province shaped by environmental constraints, logistical fragmentation, and partial administrative reach, the thesis illustrates how the Gelaohui leveraged gaps in Qing state power. Its ability to assert territorial control, coordinate covert communication, and claim moral authority was not born of centralized command, but from bottom-up responses to fragile institutions and challenging terrain. In such regions, secrecy was not merely a defensive strategy; it became a constitutive practice of organization, trust-building, and governance.

Moreover, this thesis avoids framing the Gelaohui's history through the lens of romantic resistance or linear revolutionary progress. Reconstructed from incomplete and ideologically skewed sources, such as memorials, judicial records, local chronicles, and stone inscriptions, the Gelaohui's history appears instead as one of ambiguity, elasticity, and negotiation. Its endurance speaks not only to its strategic plasticity but also to the improvisational and

informal ways in which ordinary people navigated an age of bureaucratic decay and political flux. This reveals a more accurate historical reality—one in which social continuity persisted beneath apparent institutional rupture, and localized strategies of survival operated in the shadow of elite discourse and political action.

A comparative view further reveals the society's regionally differentiated character. In cities like Chengdu, Wuhan, and Changsha, the Gelaohui responded to urban-industrial environments by forming links with dockworkers, miners, and syndicalist activists. In Shaanxi, by contrast, it drew on military veteran networks and village-based brotherhoods, embedded in an older ecology of rebellion and mobility. These differences caution against attempts to define the Gelaohui through a single typology. Rather, they show that the society's capacity to adapt to local structures of opportunity, whether urban or rural, militarized or commercial, was central to its relevance during the late Qing.

Seen from this perspective, the Gelaohui's participation in the 1911 Revolution was not a sudden departure from its past, but a visible crystallization of organizational forms and social logics already well established. The revolutionary moment did not create the Gelaohui's political role; it revealed and accelerated it. What appeared to be a spontaneous uprising was, in many places, an extension of earlier practices of clandestine coordination and symbolic resistance. This insight underscores the nonlinear, sometimes hidden, pathways through which political change unfolds.

By mapping the historical evolution of the Gelaohui across multiple regions and political regimes, this study advances an alternative analytical framework for interpreting state-society relations and trajectories of political change from the late imperial period into the early Republic. When situated within their specific environmental, social, and infrastructural conditions, informal associations such as the Gelaohui provide critical insights into the ways authority is challenged, undermined, and reconstituted from below. Rather than occupying a

peripheral role in the collapse of the Qing, the Gelaohui represents a central actor in the obscured and often undocumented processes that facilitated imperial decline. Its history unfolds not through official proclamations, but through ritual practices, covert communication, mobility, and the adaptive strategies of collective life under conditions of political instability. Moreover, the organizational logics and sociopolitical functions of the Gelaohui persisted beyond 1911, continuing to shape local political ecosystems in the Republican era.

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