

The Social Ecology of Violence

MACHENG LIES ON the southern slope of the Dabie Shan, the Great Divide mountain range separating the North China Plain from the Middle Yangzi Valley. The Five Passes (*wuguan*) cutting through this range, particularly the Pine Nut Pass (Songzi guan) and the Long Ridge Pass (Changling guan), in the county's northeast corner, played pivotal roles in imperial as well as local history.¹ Macheng is a place of great natural beauty, looking, in the words of one nineteenth-century magistrate, "like a painting of purple clouds over soaring peaks."² It is also a provincial frontier, sharing a long and porous northern border with Henan and a shorter but intensely trafficked one with Anhui, in the northeast. Along with adjacent areas of these provinces, and the prefectures of Huangzhou and Qizhou, in eastern Hubei, Macheng forms part of a natural highland subregion, whose "ten thousand mountains," wrote the local historian Wang Baoxin in 1908, "reach to the Milky Way."³

Population

This hoof-shaped chunk of central highland was one of the longest-settled areas of the Chinese empire. Despite periodic waves of immigration and emigration, it was home to a fairly stable and deeply rooted population—one capable of generating a rich local dialect sharply distinguished from that of even contiguous counties.⁴ Except for the occasional sojourner merchant, it was quite ethnically homogeneous. Official reports of Macheng's population are compiled in this book's Appendix. With all the skepticism such official figures invite, the general trend is not surprising. That is, Macheng saw a steady ten-fold growth of population, from about 100,000 in the early Ming to nearly 1 million in the 1980s. If one assumes a percentage of undercounting that would

decrease over time, cumulative growth would be somewhat more modest but still very impressive.

It was not, of course, even over time. There was an unusual spurt of growth—a better than doubling—in the early and mid-Qing, which suggests how population in this moderately prosperous county might increase during a prolonged period of imperially imposed peace.⁵ Conversely, two striking periods of population decline suggest the impact of massive violence, in death and flight of local people. The late-Ming decline (a drop of more than 25 percent between 1556 and the conquest year of 1644) likely reflects trends in the empire more generally,⁶ but the sudden demographic collapse of the late 1920s and 1930s (a loss of nearly 20 percent over the period 1923–41) testifies more singularly to the horrific violence that this particular locality witnessed during those years.⁷ These two catastrophic eras are those of the “exterminations” that conclude the two halves of this book.

According to government figures, Macheng County in 1923 had a male-to-female ratio of 129:100, which, I suspect, was roughly characteristic of the preceding centuries as well. Since Macheng was by no means a pioneer- or male sojourner-dominated society, this severely unbalanced sex ratio suggests a high incidence of female infanticide. (This supposition appears to be borne out by the more balanced ratio of 102:100 in 1964, following decades of both Guomindang and Communist anti-infanticide campaigns.)⁸ It even more unambiguously reveals a high incidence of male bachelorhood. The controls on lower-class male nuptiality imposed by the agrarian bondservant system—which, as we shall see, marked Macheng society over the centuries—played a key role in perpetuating the bachelor population. This large reservoir of males without family ties participated in what has been termed late-imperial and Republican China’s bachelor subculture, with its special proclivity for violent behavior.⁹

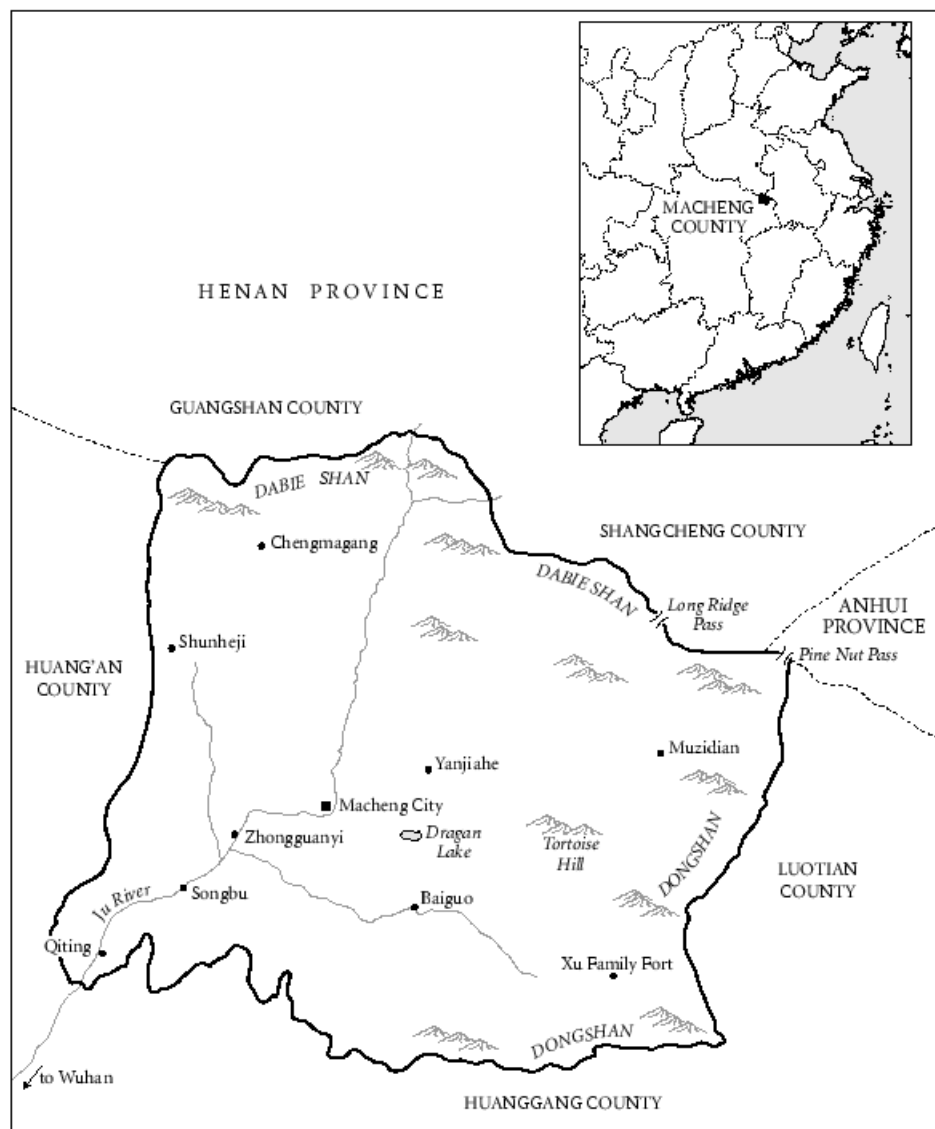
Macheng was and still is an agrarian society, part of what the American agronomist John Lossing Buck termed China’s “Yangzi rice-wheat area.” In the early twentieth century, an estimated 80 percent of its economic product still came from agriculture, very largely of grain. Much of Macheng’s terrain is uncultivable. Local sources conventionally describe the county as “40 percent mountains, 30 percent foothills, 30 percent plain” or “70 percent hills, 10 percent water, and 20 percent arable land.” Buck himself, in the 1930s, found only 790 of the county’s total 4,531 square kilometers under cultivation, a 17 percent rate not out of line with Huangzhou prefecture as a whole but far lower than the 38 percent for the Yangzi area more generally.¹⁰ Yet what arable there is has always been very good land, fertile and well watered both by sufficient rainfall and by runoff from mountain streams. For example, of the some 1 million *mou* of Macheng farmland the Qing administration listed as taxable in its seventeenth-century baseline survey, nearly three-quarters was first-quality

rice paddy.¹¹ The local climate normally cooperates. It is temperate, with four distinct seasons and often very heavy snows, but a growing season long enough to allow double cropping on the county's best land. County gazetteers report no shortage of droughts, floods, blizzards, and so on, often with failed harvests, starvation, and epidemic disease in their wake, but their incidence or severity was not beyond the norm for central China; over its history, in fact, Macheng far more regularly *received* than *produced* refugees from agrarian dearth, usually from across the mountains in southern Henan.¹² Local writers—elite writers, to be sure—consistently represented their county as one of wealth and abundance, a normally happy land (*lerang* or *leguo*), if only violence and disorder could be kept at bay.¹³

A Prize of War

But of course war could often not be avoided, due to the county's strategic centrality in the geopolitics of empire. Huangzhou prefecture as a whole is a critical juncture in the east-west traffic of the Yangzi Valley, so dominant a factor in China's modern history. But millennia before the Yangzi assumed its modern significance as a transport artery, Macheng County, with its mountain passes, was a critical juncture between north and south. This was a strategic centrality it never relinquished, even as technological and demographic change allowed waterborne east-west trade to eclipse overland communication between north and south. In times of disorder (*luan*)—any breakdown at all in central control—Macheng instantly became a prize of war. In late-imperial parlance it was a *bingchong* (military keypoint) or a *yanyi* (strategic county), and in modern vernacular a *bingjia bizheng zhi di*, a site where militarists necessarily clash.¹⁴ From antiquity, each era of dynastic decline brought with it invasion from outside and, as Wang Baoxin was quick to add, most often an internally generated rebellion to accompany it.¹⁵ With ruins of battlements dating back to the Western Zhou ever before their eyes, their bloody local history could hardly escape the consciousness of Macheng people. Indeed, recitations of the county's martial past have opened nearly all of Macheng's local gazetteers, beginning with the very first, by Xiong Ji in 1535:

With its lofty peaks and mighty rivers, its strategic passes and lairs for ambush, this Heaven-ordained boundary between north and south has been an inevitable battleground since the Three Kingdoms, the Six Dynasties, and the Tang and Song. It was here [in the Three Kingdoms era] that Man Chong made his crossing and Lu Sun erected his defense. It was here [in the Jin] that Mao Bao and Fan Jun battled to their death. Here [in the Tang] Wu Shaoyang plundered and Li Daogu seized the commanding ground. Ahai and Zhang Rou [in the Mongol conquest] sought it bitterly, while Li Zhi and Xia Gui defended it with valor. . . . In this war-wasted stretch of mountains and marsh, the greatest heroes of their times have always fought and died.¹⁶



Macheng County

In local consciousness, none of these tales of martial valor had a greater imprint than that which gave the county its modern name, “Ma’s Wall” (Macheng). During the Eastern Jin (317–419), an Inner Asian general named Ma Qiu served under the dynastic aspirant Shi Hu and occupied the site of present-day Macheng. To hold this favorable ground, he charged the local population with constructing a daunting set of battlements. Eager to complete this project as quickly as possible, he had the men work throughout the night, allowing them to go home to their families each morning only when the cock crowed and the chickens began to squawk. Legend tells that Ma Qiu’s daughter, Ma Gu, felt sympathy for the people and learned the language of the birds. One night, well before dawn, she imitated the crowing cock, the roosters and chickens of the county all followed suit, and the workers went home early to sleep. When her father discovered the ruse he was furious, and Ma Gu was forced to flee to a mountain grotto, where she practiced Daoist alchemy and ultimately passed over into the realm of the immortals.¹⁷ The site of her ascension, Ma Gu’s Grotto (Ma Gu Xiandong), remains to this day a cherished Macheng landmark. Local poets who have visited the site over the centuries, and successive gazetteer compilers who recount its significance, each celebrate one or another of the various narratives of resistance that the Ma Gu legend may embody: the narrative of patriotic resistance to non-Han invasion, of pacifist resistance to militarist conscription, of localist resistance to central state commandism, or of popular resistance to elite expropriation.¹⁸

But Macheng was not merely a prize for militarists of dynastic scale, who most often swept in via the passes in the northeast or the rivers in the southwest; it also witnessed chronic combat of a more localized nature. Its long northern border, in the heart of the Dabie Shan, posed an obstacle to larger armies but was hardly impermeable to local traffic. We have already noted the county’s receptivity to famine refugees from the southern portions of the North China Plain; reports of these, numbering into the tens of thousands, and plans for keeping them as tranquil as possible, form a recurring refrain in local sources through the centuries.¹⁹ Far from shielding Macheng, the Dabie Shan served as an avenue to plunder and as an inviting haven for predators. As the 1920 *Hubei Provincial Gazetteer* observed, “The mentality of the prefectures of Runing, Guangzhou, and Nanyang in southern Henan is fierce and unruly (*kuanghan*). Local ruffians there habitually form themselves into bands for pillage and extortion.”²⁰ As we shall see, these Henanese reivers were a routine irritant—often a devastating one—to the peace of Macheng. Though they came most often of their own accord in quest of spoils, their border crossing was also at times actively *solicited* by one or another party to the county’s own indigenous violence. Nor was it necessarily a one-way affair. The early Communist organizer



Grotto of the Immortal Ma Gu (Ma Gu xiandong). Photograph by the author.

Wang Shusheng candidly admitted that his Macheng compatriots perhaps as often crossed the mountains into Guangshan and Shangcheng counties and despoiled the place: “The peasants of [Hubei] treated [Henan] as a foreign country and did what they liked as soon as they were [there].”²¹ Mutual fear, hatred, and contempt characterized the populations on either side of the Dabie Shan.

Core and Peripheries

One can usefully imagine Macheng County as a leaf, lying at a 45-degree angle, with its stem in the southwest (pointing toward Wuhan) and its tip (the Pine Nut Pass) in the northeast. The center of the leaf is flatland, and its edges, mountains, with the Dabie Shan along the north and northwest, and the Dongshan (Eastern Hills) along the east and southeast. The veins of the leaf are waterways, tributaries feeding dendritically into the main artery, the Ju River (Jushui). The chief point of extraction, Songbu City, lies close to the stem, and the county seat lies near the confluence of many tributaries, at the leaf’s center. Macheng thus broke down, in terms of both natural and human ecology, into

three clearly defined zones—the stem and core of the “leaf,” as it were, and its two flanking peripheries. At the start of the Ming, central authorities sought to divide the county into four townships (*xiang*) based on an artificial quadrant system—northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest—but by 1475 they had come to acknowledge the need to retaylor this administrative structure to fit the ecology, folding one of the four *xiang* into the remaining three. These three were central and southwestern Macheng (Xianju Township), the mountainous north and northwest (Taiping Township), and the eastern and southeastern hills (Tingchuan Township).²²

Central and southwestern Macheng, or Xianju Township, was by all measures the county’s core. It hosted the county’s greatest population density (some 44 percent of the total population in 1795, on much less than one-third of its land), and its greatest administrative density (not only the county magistrate, a subprefect, and a township-level submagistrate but also some 44 percent of Macheng’s 124 Qing-era subtownships [*qu*]).²³ This area included by far the richest farmland, in the central plain popularly known as *guanxiang* (the house over the city gate) and in the fertile river valley draining the county to the southwest. This lush, intensely green terrain was largely double cropped, and planted overwhelmingly in wet-field rice until the cotton revolution of the mid-Ming pushed much of this paddy up to the hills that studded the plain. Silk, wheat, and vegetables were also produced in abundance. As we shall see, this lowland core was home to Macheng’s wealthiest landlords, most successful



Prosperous mountain village, Yanjiahe Ward, central Macheng County. Photograph by the author.

scholar-officials, and most powerful lineages, but it was known as well for the comfortable life of its commoner population, including tenants.²⁴

This core area also hosted the vast majority of the county's wholesale commerce, and all of its largest towns and cities.²⁵ Founded only in the Yuan dynasty, Macheng City had become, by the start of the period considered in this book, very much the political and cultural hub of Macheng, home to a substantial portion of the gentry elite, focal point of the county's elaborately interwoven lineage networks, and, as the point of linkage between the fertile central plain and the southwest river corridor, an important economic center as well. Its waterfront was ever active with river traffic, and by the close of our period it could boast nearly 600 shops and a population around 30,000. At the eastern perimeter of the central plain stood Yanjiahe, a substantial market town of well over 100 shops in the mid-nineteenth century, serving as intermediary in the exchange of lowland products for those of the mountains to the east. A similar role was played in southern Macheng by Baiguo, popularly known as the gateway to the Dongshan. More substantial still than Yanjiahe, Baiguo handled goods from all of eastern Hubei, hosted merchants from various Hubei counties as well as from Henan and Anhui, and, by the mid-Qing, had developed a significant handicraft sector in cotton textiles and metalworking.²⁶

The greatest urban concentration in Macheng, though, lay along the banks of the Ju River, which linked the county seat easily and directly to the Wuhan cities—the great mid-Yangzi entrepot Hankou and the macroregion's administrative and cultural center, Wuchang. Tributaries of the Ju River integrated much of western and central Macheng County and carried the lion's share of interregional trade between the Middle Yangzi and the North China Plain. As the magistrate Guo Qinghua observed in 1882, the profits to be made along this waterway ranked “first in all Hubei.”²⁷ The towns proudly known to locals as the three great markets (*sandaji*) were strung out in close proximity along the Ju River between the county seat and the river's exit from Macheng, in the county's southwest corner. All were sufficiently prosperous that by the nineteenth century they had been walled, at the local merchants' expense. Coming into the county from Wuhan, one first encountered Qiting. Both the political and commercial center of the county in the mid-imperial era, Qiting lost its administrative rank under the Yuan but recovered a bit in 1526, when it was designated the seat of a Huangzhou subprefect. Though the town remained a hub of intercounty trade through the nineteenth century, its long-term economic eclipse was accelerated when it was bypassed by the motor road built through the Ju River valley by the Nationalist regime in 1934. Farther upstream, en route to Macheng City, lay Zhongguanyi. As implied by its name, this town had started out as a postal station for imperial couriers, but its commercial

importance grew rapidly, and by the close of the era examined here, it hosted over 300 shops.

Both Qiting and Zhongguanyi were dwarfed, however, by the market that lay between them: Macheng County's largest city, Songbu. Throughout the late-imperial and Republican eras, Songbu was easily the most cosmopolitan place in Macheng, hosting a variety of sojourner merchant guilds. Just as Macheng City was dominated by well-to-do county gentry, Songbu was controlled by sojourners and the county's own merchant diaspora. Popularly known as Little Hankou and as the gateway to Wuhan, Songbu in the Ming and Qing transhipped goods of forty-five major trades to destinations throughout central and northern China. In 1909 the British-owned Heji Egg Factory set up an office in Songbu for buying eggs to be shipped to Hankou, processed into powder, and exported to confectioners in Europe and America. German and Japanese firms followed shortly thereafter. By the late 1930s, Songbu claimed nearly 800 business enterprises, some of quite impressive scale.

The euphemistically named Taiping (Great Peace) Township, comprising roughly the northern half of Macheng County, could not have been more different—it was the periphery to Xianju's core. This was the true Dabie Shan, less densely populated than other parts of Macheng, and lair and chief victim of the bandits and border reivers to whom we have already referred. Though the larger-scale militarists who periodically swept through the county plagued all parts—more often than not heading to besiege the county seat—they, too, usually hit Taiping Township first and hardest. The area was roughly equally divided between high mountains and foothills, with nearly no level plain, and much of its territory was uncultivable. Livelihoods were overwhelmingly agricultural (as late as 1984 in Chengmagang subdistrict, only 1.5 percent of the population were nonfarmers), with some herding, fishing, and forestry, but with handicrafts very nearly nonexistent. Even to the present day, agriculture in this marginal scrubland has been basically subsistence-oriented. Adequate rainfall allowed some terraced cultivation of dry-field rice, along with millet, sesame, and—following the introduction of New World crops, in the sixteenth century—peanuts. There was little profit to be made from owning farmland, so landlordism, not surprisingly, was of much smaller scale than in the south; the ever-present specter of downward mobility, however, made the existing landlords unusually predatory.²⁸

Given its persistently low level of commercialization, Macheng's northern township was not very urbanized. What towns there were remained small and devoted almost entirely to local retail marketing and a bit of short-distance petty trade across the provincial border; even today, in the wake of repeated "rural industrialization" campaigns, these towns hardly exceed 1,000 persons.

From west to east, the chief among them included Shunheji, Chengmagang (Horseback Ridge), Huangtugang, Futianhe, and Sanhekou. Communal identity was strong at the level of these local marketing systems but rarely transcended them. Futianhe, for instance, developed a distinctive genre of folk opera that, locals claimed, dated from the Tang dynasty; the performances, inspired by interprovincial portage traffic through the area's Two Temple Pass (Shuangmiao guan), featured a female impersonator (*huadan*) carrying baskets of flowers on a shoulder pole along a mountain road and pausing to exchange suggestive verses with two clownish bumpkins (*chou*).²⁹ In the 1920s and 1930s, the districts around Chengmagang and Shunheji produced extraordinary numbers of Communist activists (Chengmagang alone spawned no fewer than twenty-six PLA generals); it is clear that local marketing ties played a critical role in recruitment into the movement.

Macheng's eastern and southeastern hills (Tingchuan Township) were significantly divided from the rest of the county by an intervening ridge of mountains known as the "roofbeam (*wuji*) of Macheng." The highest of these was Guifeng shan (Tortoise Peak), some sixty *li* east of the town of Baiguo. Site of a famous battle between the Qu and Wu kingdoms in the Warring States era, Guifeng was also where the Southern Song magistrate sought refuge when the Mongols first threatened in 1234. Well over 1,000 meters above sea level, the Guifeng range constituted a natural watershed, and the streams that drained this eastern township and linked its principal market towns—Muzidian, Zhangjiafan, and Yantianhe—fed not westward into the Ju River, like the rest of Macheng County, but instead southeasterly into Luotian and Huanggang.³⁰ This three-county borderland was the heart of the so-called Dongshan, the Eastern Hills.

The Dongshan was highland (only 15 to 20 percent plains), and it was wild.³¹ Even today, panthers, wolves, badgers, and wild boar roam its hills, and hunting has always been a central feature of local life. Dongshan has also long been a favored wandering place for Buddhist and Daoist recluses. But, despite its wilderness atmosphere, the region is not especially impoverished. Pine, bamboo, and other forest products supply a comfortable source of livelihood, along with hides, tung oil, and a wide variety of medicinal herbs. Rice, millet, and chestnuts are the major staples, and both sericulture and tea cultivation add considerably to local prosperity. Timber and oil-pressing mills from early times offered local farmers supplementary employment. The town of Muzidian (Timber Market) was small—as late as the 1990s, it hosted no more than fifty businesses—but it was an important stage en route to Anhui and southeast Henan as well as to Luotian and eastern Hubei. More than once it was held for ransom by bandit gangs, rebel forces, or renegade soldiers sweeping in through the Pine Nut or Long Ridge Pass.³² The town's principal Buddhist temple, the

Dinghui si, was something of a nerve center for local politics and society in the volatile northern Dongshan and, to a lesser extent, in the region as a whole.

Dongshan was a periphery of a very different sort from the Dabie Shan in the north. Though tied in administratively to Macheng County—and, as our story will relate, of growing importance over time in political and military control of the county as a whole—Dongshan was never really a dependency of the lowland core. It was instead—more, indeed, than any other part of the county—a locus of personal identity and communal solidarity unto itself. This autonomous urge was most typically expressed in violence: the Wuhan University historian Wang Baoxin, a Dongshan native, proudly noted in 1908 that, local customs in his homeland being brave and martial (*qiangyong*), men of the Dongshan took armed resistance as habitual local practice (*yi wukang wei xiangsu*).³³ Outsiders, including successive national political regimes, noticed this as well, and terms such as “Dongshan rebels” or “Dongshan bandits” (*Dongshan zei*) became, over the centuries, staple idioms in official discourse.³⁴

By the late Ming, a popular quatrain gave poetic form to the stereotypes that Macheng people attached to inhabitants of the various sectors of their native county. Residents of the county seat and its surrounding plain were refined and educated (*xiu*) and accomplished (*da*) in attaining official service. Those of the commercial southwest were clever (*qiao*) and broadly traveled (*you*). By contrast, inhabitants of the Dongshan were rustic and unpretentious (*pu*) though capably self-sufficient (*zu*). The unfortunate denizens of the western Dabie Shan (Chengmagang and Shunheji) were impoverished (*pin*), surviving on a dog-eat-dog animal cunning (*jiao*).³⁵ A folk ballad of the early twentieth century was, if anything, more direct, reducing each sector to an emblematic image: in the central core it was the examination essay (*wenzhang*), in the commercial southwest the commission agent (*jingshang*), in the Dongshan the rustic farmhouse (*tianzhuang*), and in the Dabie Shan, alas, the distillery (*jiujiang*).³⁶

There was a clear intersectoral rivalry, even mutual contempt, underlying such stereotypes. To cite but one example, the Ming-revivalist agitation of certain Dongshan strongmen in the 1670s was dismissed by more refined (and Qing collaborationist) civil literati of the central core as a typical hotheaded act of that region’s impetuous small fry (*xiaochun*).³⁷ Attitudes such as this—heartily reciprocated, I might add—provided a lingering, tense undercurrent to Macheng’s political life.

Town and Country

This dynamic overlay and interacted with another persistent tension in the county: that between rural and urban. Animosity between the countryside and

the major urban centers of the county's core—most obviously Macheng City, but also to varying degrees Songbu, Zhongguanyi, Qiting, and Baiguo—was endemic. In this equation, the “countryside” might well include the rural elite (the township-level gentry, or *xiangshen*) equally with their poorer neighbors. There was much to intimidate and inspire rural resentment about even such modest cities as these. They were home to indisputably the county's wealthiest landlords and merchants, referred to locally as the county-seat gentry (*chengnei shishen*). The cities of the core were also storehouses of most of the county's food reserves and thus were regular targets in times of dearth. In times of economic distress, it was axiomatic that urbanites suffered less seriously and immediately than did the farmers.³⁸ And each of these towns, by the nineteenth century, had been walled and moated—Macheng and Qiting at the initiative of the state, and the others at that of the resident commercial elite. This highly visible distinction was probably, in practical terms, a mixed blessing for rural dwellers; labor and materials for construction of these battlements were often simply impressed from the countryside, as in the massive rebuilding of the Macheng City wall in 1573, but such labor could also be a means for the state to provide work relief for starving farmers in times of failed harvests.³⁹

Equally significant, these cities (especially Macheng, but periodically, to a lesser extent, the others as well) were home to the local representatives of national political regimes. They housed government treasuries and courts of law. They were where the county's taxes were assessed and collected, with (as we shall see) the varieties of resentment that could invite. And they were the home of government troops, not merely the magistrate's, the subprefect's, and the submagistrates' modest detachments, charged with policing their rural neighbors in times of peace, but, more important, in times of unrest as bases for far larger military forces. Macheng's history gave ample testimony, as we shall see, to the principle that a governing regime defended its walled cities and ceded the countryside to its foes or, indeed, took the precaution of actively despoiling that countryside (*qingye*) before retreating to the town. This meant systematic favoring of urbanites' subsistence needs. For example, when the Macheng magistrate wrote to Hubei governor Hu Linyi in 1858, asking for advice on how to manage the county's food supply in the face of Taiping attacks, Hu was brutally candid in his reply: “In the defense of the walled cities, nothing is more critical than grain supply. The grain collected as rent by wealthy urban households must be allowed to come unimpeded to them in the city”⁴⁰ (rather than be retained or diverted for rural relief). Moreover, regimes from the Mongols to the Guomindang routinely used the cities of the core and the southwest as bases from which to “exterminate” uppity malcontents in the county's peripheries.

All of these factors also made the cities prime targets for rural assault, and this, too, was a constant refrain in Macheng history. When threat arose from

within or without, elites from the central plain and the Ju River Valley flocked into the cities for refuge. There they fretted about the trustworthiness of the rural commoners. Would their tenants abscond and leave their lands lying fallow? Would they form into mobs (*chengqun*) and march on the towns? Or would they turn to the rebel side? Would the country folk prove, in fact, to be the elites' reliable compatriots in the face of outside forces, or would they instead be an "enemy within" (*neiyang*)? Imperial officials charged with Macheng's defense repeatedly reported on the panicked mentality of these besieged urban and suburban elites.⁴¹ No one, perhaps, voiced this mind-set better than Meng Guangpeng, a locally born, nationally renowned social scientist recruited by Guomindang County authorities to write a preface for the 1935 gazetteer. Reviewing the lessons of history as he saw them, Meng identified a recurring pattern of times of cataclysm (*shibian*), when mobs of uneducated kids (*shixue nianshao*) and propertyless traitors (*wuye jianmin*) streamed down from the county's mountainous fringes (*yanjie*) to inflict unspeakable calamities on the upright and productive citizens of the plain.⁴²

But, as it happened, the rural-urban or core-periphery dynamic in Macheng County was considerably more complicated. One of the distinguishing features of Macheng's human ecology was the presence, growing rapidly over the late-imperial era, of alternative walled safe havens in times of unrest, replete with elite wealth and food supplies. These were the fortresses (*zhai* or *bao*) about which we will have much to say as our story progresses. The presence of these fortified *rural* settlements might even, at times, reverse the conventional practice of officials and literati elites hunkering down exclusively in *urban* centers in times of social unrest. This does not mean that Macheng's major cities and towns were not subject to siege—they were indeed, and with great regularity. But when that occurred, the urban notables might, in extremis, actually abandon a city and hide out in a mountainside fort, as did the Southern Song magistrate when the county was overrun by the Mongols in 1234. It might mean that rural rebels could find themselves holding cities they had captured, and under siege by a combination of dynastic officials and fortress-based elites. It might also mean that rural strongmen from one of Macheng's peripheral areas (most typically the Dongshan highlands), rather than being excluded from the defense efforts of the administration centered on the county seat, could find themselves, by invitation or at their own initiative, actually in charge of such efforts. We will explore this complex dynamic in the chapters to follow.

Routine Violence

The historical narrative of this book inevitably tends to highlight episodic outbreaks of massive violence in Macheng County. And, indeed, the historian

cannot help but be struck by the singular frenzy, ferocity, and scale with which, in moments of broader social disorder in empire or region, the population of this otherwise nondescript locality threw itself bloodily into the fray. For the moment, however, we need to look more to the commonplace, to stress how these larger “eruptions” were embedded in a human ecology in Macheng within which violence was endemic, chronic, and routine. As the late-Ming visitor Wang Shizhen wrote of the region, “Local customs there are fierce and bellicose, and there is little regard for law.”⁴³

Macheng County, as we have already seen, was at all times a dangerous place. The persistent plague was that most commonly referred to as *tufei*, or local bandits. Bandits were never really absent from Macheng’s highlands, but the numerous reports in local sources suggest eras of greater and lesser scale and intensity of activity. These trends are hardly surprising in light of larger patterns of unrest in China’s history as a whole.⁴⁴ We first hear Macheng *tufei* referred to with regularity in the mid-Ming (the 1470s), and they remain a growing theme through the Qing consolidation two centuries later, in the 1670s. Local sources routinely complain that government functionaries and rural gentry alike are complicit in the activities of *tufei*, confirming David Robinson’s findings on the general importance of elite patronage, at least by the fifteenth century, in underpinning the empire’s “economy of violence.”⁴⁵

The early-Qing “model official” Yu Chenglong, serving as Qiting subprefect in 1673, devised a typically resolute way of identifying and dismantling these patronage networks. He simply sent out his forces to seize nine individuals widely suspected of banditry, then convened a conference of local literati to ask if anyone would vouch, in Yu’s presence, for any of the suspects. Only two were vouched for. Equally characteristically, Yu then freed the other seven on parole, deputing them as his personal agents in suppressing the activities of other *tufei* in the county.⁴⁶

By comparison to the Ming, there is a remarkable silence on bandits in the era of the “high Qing”—eloquent testimony to the policing power of the dynasty in its heyday, and especially, as we shall see, to the implementation of that power locally. We begin to hear of *tufei* routinely again in the wake of the mid-nineteenth-century rebellions, and the problem escalates rapidly and disastrously through the Republican era. As late as the 1950s, the fledgling Communist government felt obliged to launch a determined and protracted “bandit extermination struggle” from a command post on the Macheng-Huang’an border.⁴⁷

Tufei ravaged the county, at times causing calamitous damage to agriculture. They disrupted transport, depressing the county’s commerce. They engaged in salt smuggling (though in this peripheral area there is surprisingly little evidence of their involvement in prostitution, opium, or other rackets). They kid-

napped local elites for ransom. They torched local temples. Reivers routinely swept in from across the Dabie Shan, as we have seen, sometimes by the tens of thousands, and ransacked north-township markets like Chengmagang. But bandits also plundered and periodically occupied the more developed towns of the south—Songbu, Qiting, Baiguo. In 1512 they took the county seat itself, and in the spring of 1927, with Macheng and Huang'an occupied by United Front revolutionaries, they besieged both county seats again. In one of their boldest moves, in 1926 two local bandits accepted commissions as "militia division commanders" from the renegade militarist Yuan Ying, set up headquarters in the county orphanage (appropriating its endowment), and for months systematically extorted tribute from the county administration, local businessmen, and township "self-government" organizations; when Jiang Hualong, a gentry hero of the late-Qing reforms and of the 1911 Revolution, who headed the county's "self-government bureau," resisted, he and his son were abducted and killed.⁴⁸

Just who were these *tufei*? As Mei Guozhen, the Ming general and eminent bandit-suppressor, observed around 1590, farmers of his native Macheng were well practiced at turning to banditry in extremis to survive times of dearth.⁴⁹ But the more serious *tufei* threat came from professionals. Full-time bandit gangs numbering in the hundreds and thousands have been endemic throughout the past millennium in the Dabie Shan, on both the Henan and the Hubei side, and, to a lesser extent, in the Dongshan. In troubled times their ranks swelled—as, for example, with the addition of defeated antidynastic rebel remnants in the 1370s, 1640s, and 1860s and, in the early Republic, the addition of splintered detachments of warlord armies (*huibing*). The relations of these forces with local militia and fraternal societies (*hui*)—such as the Red Spears—was a complex question, to which we shall return.⁵⁰

The social analysis of banditry is much complicated by the readiness of aspirant and actual state regimes to refer to their armed political opponents as "bandits," in internal documents as well as public proclamations. Conquerors and consolidators in service of the Qing did this routinely in Macheng. Qing sources use the term *tufei*, or its variant *tuzei* (local bandits), most often to refer to professional outlaws but at times also to refer to Ming-loyalist holdouts or rebels. The word *tao* (thieves) was used in reference not only to robber bands but also to rebellious bondservants and, at times, even Ming remnants.⁵¹

The subsequent Guomindang regime learned from this, of course, becoming masters at defaming their ideological opponents as mere criminals: *gongfei*, or Communist bandits. (Macheng Communists may well have returned the favor by including Guomindang loyalists among the "bandits" to be "exterminated" in the 1950s campaigns.) There were indeed genuine bandits within Communist forces in the Dabie Shan, and others in loose alliance with them, but, as

we shall see, the relationship was more often a tense than a comfortable one.⁵² And Guomindang authorities in Macheng did spend a great deal of energy combating “bandits” who were not Communists at all. Government discourse sometimes reveals this distinction and sometimes elides it.⁵³ For example, local Guomindang sources in the 1930s, describing recent history, speak of a bandit calamity (*feihuan*) gradually giving way to a Red calamity (*chihuo*), and of a crisis of *tufei* (local bandits) eclipsed by one of *chifei* (Red bandits)—but never completely in either case.⁵⁴ In reading such documents and imagining oneself in the position of conservative local elites—struggling, as they always had, to preserve their society against forces of disorder—it becomes possible to see the origins of later Guomindang *gongfei* rhetoric as something more than cynical spin-doctoring. From the local perspective, at least, there was clear logic in viewing Communist guerrillas as simply one more gang in a long series of predatory bandits afflicting the county.

This persistent threat of banditry was the most basic factor in the progressive, long-term militarization of Macheng society that will be a major theme of this book. But local cultural responses went far beyond the institutional ones. Local heroes such as Mei Guozhen and his nephew Mei Zhihuan, and local officials such as Mu Wei and Yu Chenglong, were celebrated over the centuries for their bloody campaigns of bandit extermination. Such violence was legitimized by the popular view—reinforced by the posturing of many outlaws themselves—that saw bandits as incarnations of the ever-present demonic threat. For this reason as well, demon-extinguishing gods such as the Martial and Majestic King Yue (Wumu Yuewang), enshrined in the Yuewang Temple at the county seat, and the Lord of the Eastern Peak (Dongyue shen), in the Huiyun Shrine at the Mei ancestral home of Seven Mile Ridge, were continuously invoked to protect the county from demon-bandits.⁵⁵

Bandits also, unsurprisingly, figured very largely in local folklore. One popular story concerned Li Zhongsu, scion of a very wealthy early-Qing gentry family. Kidnapped by bandits for ransom as a child, he instead joined the band himself, becoming an expert horseman and archer. He also wrote poetry about the joys of the brigand’s life. Grand Secretary Gong Zhili was so impressed by this verse, and by the martial prowess it betrayed, that he commissioned Li an officer in the pacification army against the Zheng Chenggong regime in Taiwan.⁵⁶ Another local legend is more revealing of the black humor that Macheng people turned to in the face of the unremitting threat from bandits. The tale lampoons the mid-fifteenth-century literatus Liu Zhongpu, awakened one night by bandits who had broken into his family compound and demanded his valuables. He claimed that the only things he had of real worth were his wife’s jewels, and he gave these to the intruders. They accepted the jewelry and left, warning Liu not to tell anyone (that is, the authorities) of their visit. Some days later, Liu’s wife discovered the jewelry to be missing and asked Liu if he knew

anything about the loss. "I'm sorry, dear," he replied, "but I've promised not to tell."⁵⁷

Endemic violence in Macheng went well beyond the threat from bandits. Firearms appeared early, and in great numbers. By at least the seventeenth century, hunters of the Dongshan and Dabie Shan highlands were routinely armed with European-style muskets (*niaoqiang*), and vigilantes encouraged their use against human targets as well.⁵⁸ Heavier arms, including the cannon brought in by Mei Zhihuan from Gansu and southern Jiangxi in the late Ming, were imported by local defense forces each time the county faced an outside threat.⁵⁹ With the mid-nineteenth-century rebellions came a qualitative increase in the number of firearms in the county. In the reconstruction era, arsenals were established in the county seat and in more than half a dozen market towns, with the goal of trying to assert some control over leftover weapons, but the effort had little success. Bandits of the late Qing carried rifles by the hundreds. By the early Republic, in the proud words of the 1935 county gazetteer, the progress of civilization (*wenming jinbu*) had introduced new kinds of high-tech arms, and combatants of all persuasions now toted automatic weapons. The gazetteer recorded some 1,388 automatic weapons registered in the hands of government-friendly militia but conceded this to be a mere fraction of the actual total in the county.⁶⁰ Once imported, most of these vast numbers of arms remained in Macheng—on the street, as it were—to be used by any party into whose hands they fell.

But if guns were an accepted staple of local life, even more ingrained into the fabric of Macheng society were the martial arts (*wushu*), and most especially boxing (*quan*shu). As subprefect Yu Chenglong wrote in the 1670s, comparing Macheng to its neighboring Dongshan county, Luotian, "In the two counties the civil (*wen*) and the martial (*wu*) are not in equal balance. Whereas in Luotian the *wen* is the more highly developed, in Macheng it is indisputably the *wu*."⁶¹ Schools and fraternal associations (*hui*) specializing in Shaolin, Wudang, and nearly a dozen other local varieties of boxing were ubiquitous in the county. Members of these associations (*huiyou*) themselves fanned out into surrounding counties of the Dabie Shan region and participated in the several wider diasporas of Macheng natives during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing eras, setting up schools of their own and giving their home county something of an empirewide reputation as a center of martial arts learning. So, too, did the county's prodigious contingent of military degree holders: nearly all of the sixty-one Ming-era and seventy-six Qing-era military *juren* that Macheng produced came originally out of one or another of the county's scores of boxing academies. In the troubled times of the late Qing and early Republic, even as firearms flooded the countryside, local devotion to the arts of hand-to-hand combat only deepened.⁶²

In the Ming and Qing eras, Macheng developed a colorful empirewide re-

noun for the contentiousness of its population. One vehicle for this contention—normally nonviolent, but nevertheless highly vindictive—was the civil litigation process. As one early sixteenth-century observer put it:

The people of Hubei are customarily deceitful and conniving and addicted to litigation. At the slightest provocation they file false charges against each other, engage in mutual vendettas, and implicate their neighbors in imagined crimes. Such lawsuits can drag on for more than a century! And the very worst county of all in this regard is Macheng.⁶³

One particular Macheng incident involving an accusation of murder became sufficiently celebrated, in the form of a virtuous-widow tale, to make it into the Ming dynastic history (*Ming shi*). A certain Ms. Li was married as the second wife to the Macheng-born prefect Wang Longlin. At Wang's death, his body was brought home, and his faithful wife refused to eat for forty days, weakening herself to the point of death. Local people thought she had indeed died, and they placed her in a coffin to await burial. A kinsman, a cashiered local official, coveted the household property, which rightly would be inherited by Wang's son by his first wife. To eliminate this son from the succession, the kinsman spread rumors that he had killed his stepmother. As Ms. Li's coffin was being lowered into the earth, a crowd assembled and, at the kinsman's direction, chanted "Matricide!" But Ms. Li called out from within her coffin: "I know of your evil plan. Go away from here!" The crowd dispersed in shame, the son got his rightful inheritance, and Ms. Li expired in peace.⁶⁴

Another Macheng tale, this one involving an actual murder, gained notoriety in the genre of a Judge Dee-type detective story. Teng Zhao was a local official famous for his sleuthing technique. While serving as Huangzhou prefect in 1416, he was confronted with the suspected murder of a local soldier in Macheng. Teng thought he knew the identity of the murderer, but since no body had been found, he could not bring the culprit to justice. He decided to spend the night in the temple of the Macheng City God (Chenghuang miao) and ask that deity for inspiration. Awakened suddenly in the middle of the night, he saw a rat run into the temple, circle several times around his cot, then run out the door and dive into a nearby pond. In the morning, the prefect ordered the pond dredged at the point where the rat had jumped in, and, sure enough, the soldier's body was discovered.⁶⁵

The Case of the Runaway Bride

In such a lineage-dominated local society as Macheng, conflicts among kin groups were a fact of life; the Mei, for instance, one of the county's preeminent families of civil/military officials in the late Ming, engaged in protracted conflicts with several of their neighbors, most famously, but not exclusively, with

the Geng clan of philosophers and officials.⁶⁶ And in a population deeply acclimated to the use of force, recourse to violence among competing kin groups was hardly uncommon. In 1628, for instance, the neighboring township-level gentry (*xiangshen*) lineages of Hu and Tian became embroiled in a web of murder and litigation that ultimately attracted the attention of the Ming court.⁶⁷

But the most celebrated of Macheng's local feuds, one between the Tu and Yang that lasted over a decade in the 1720s and 1730s, became the stuff of local folklore.⁶⁸ Moreover, through its recasting as a piece of "reality fiction" by the eighteenth-century poet Yuan Mei⁶⁹ (and again, in 1996, through its serialized retelling in a mass-market "law and order" magazine⁷⁰), this affair came to reinforce prevailing images of Macheng's uncouth local lineages for an empire-wide audience, much as Faulkner's satirical portraits of rural Mississippians in his Snopes trilogy did for later audiences of urban literati.

Yuan Mei's version goes as follows: Tu Rusong, a substantial farmer from Macheng, took a girl from the neighboring Yang lineage as his wife. The two proved incompatible, and Ms. Yang ran back to her parents.⁷¹ Persuaded to attempt reconciliation, the young woman returned to Tu, but he beat her constantly, and when his mother became ill she took the occasion to abscond. No one knew where she had gone, and suits and countersuits followed between the two families. The bride's brother, Yang Wurong, announced that Tu had killed her. He asked a local villain (*wulai*) named Zhao Dang'er to corroborate his case, and Zhao craftily lied: "I have heard that it is true." Yang thus dragged Zhao along to the county *yamen* as a witness, but Magistrate Tang Yingqiu found insufficient evidence to convict Tu of murder. When Zhao's father stepped forward to confess that his son was an inveterate troublemaker, the latter's testimony was thrown out, and so the case dragged on, unsolved.

Magistrate Tang's ongoing investigations revealed that Ms. Yang had previously been sent as a child bride (*yangxi*) to the household of Wang Zu'er, but when the prospective groom died before the wedding could be consummated, she had been reclaimed by her family. The magistrate further detected a broader pattern of "tigerlike" marital chicanery orchestrated by the head of the bride's lineage, lower-gentry member Yang Tongfan, and initiated proceedings with the Board of Rites to have Yang stripped of his rank. No longer believing that Ms. Yang was actually dead, he launched a police dragnet to find and arrest her.

In actuality, when she fled the Tu, the young woman had once again returned home. Her mother feared for her safety and, after hiding her from everyone for a month, decided to notify the officials. But the person she chose to perform this notification—her son, Yang Wurong—proved unwise: instead of going to the authorities, Wurong had gone directly to the lineage head, Yang Tongfan. Sniffing a chance for profit, Tongfan said, "Let's hide the girl away.

Since I am a degree-holding gentryman, who will dare come and snatch her away from me?" So together Tongfan and Wurong sealed up the unfortunate Ms. Yang, very much alive, in a secret double-partition wall in their compound. It was then that they filed the accusation of murder against Tu Rusong.

Before the year was out, a neighbor by the name of Huang buried his dead child in a shallow grave near the river. The river then flooded, partially exposing the child's corpse, which was dug up and partially eaten by dogs. The local constable asked Magistrate Tang to come and investigate, but because of stormy weather Tang was forced to turn back. Here was another opportunity for Yang Tongfan: with Yang Wurong, he plotted to falsely identify the corpse as that of Ms. Yang. He paid the local coroner, Li Rong, to verify that the corpse was that of an adolescent girl, but Li forthrightly acknowledged that he could not be sure. Two days later Magistrate Tang was finally able to come to the site, but by then the corpse was so decomposed that no identification at all was possible; all Tang could do was have the body dressed for burial and properly interred.

Foiled again, Yang at this point mobilized a force of several dozen armed kinsmen to lead a raid against the Tu, and a violent feud ensued. News of this affray reached as far as the Huguang viceroy Maizhu, at Wuchang, who ordered the magistrate of nearby Guangji County, Gao Renjie, to reinvestigate the entire case. Gao, who secretly coveted the post of Macheng magistrate for himself, sought to use this opportunity to discredit Magistrate Tang. He enlisted some corrupt *yamen* underlings to find the corpse of a young woman, conspired with Yang Tongfan to falsely identify the corpse as that of Ms. Yang, and reported to Maizhu that Magistrate Tang had been taking bribes from the Tu to hush up the murder. Maizhu accepted this account, cashiered the honest Magistrate Tang, and the duplicitous Magistrate Gao took Tang's post. Not surprisingly, Gao proved a tyrant. He extorted money ruthlessly from the falsely accused murderer Tu Rusong, driving him and his family to attempt suicide; and, to hush up the honest coroner, secretly had Li Rong murdered.

An elaborate series of efforts followed, on the part of both the Tu and the Yang, to prove that the corpse in question was or was not that of Ms. Yang (these efforts are described with macabre delight by Yuan Mei). Gao, declaring the body to be that of the murdered Ms. Yang, submitted his case report to his superior, Huangzhou prefect Jiang Jianian, but the prefect was not convinced. Jiang ordered a coroner from a neighboring county to disinter the corpse for reinvestigation, and on this basis he determined that it was, after all, that of a male. Gao was not yet finished, however. He claimed that there had been a switch of corpses, and he submitted this report directly to Viceroy Maizhu, who forwarded it approvingly to the throne.

The people of Macheng all knew very well, of course, that justice had not

been served in this case, but they could not prove it without a living Ms. Yang to produce as evidence. Their chance came when, early one morning, an old neighbor woman discovered traces of blood spattered about the Yang compound. (It was the blood of the coroner, Li Rong, who had been beaten to death there.) The neighbor respectfully asked Yang Tongfan about it, and he dismissed her, saying, "None of your business, old woman!" Now very suspicious, the neighbor poked around the compound one day when Tongfan was away, and she heard moaning from within the wall. It was Ms. Yang, of course, and the imprisoned bride responded to the old woman's questions by describing her sorry fate. Yang Tongfan suddenly returned and leaped at the woman in rage, but she managed to escape. She told her son what she had found and sent him to report the news to the county magistrate.

At that time the new Macheng magistrate was one Chen Ding, an extremely upright man from Haining, Zhejiang.⁷² Having heard about this case upon his arrival, Chen immediately suspected fraud, but he had needed evidence of the sort that the neighbors now provided before he could bring the true culprits to justice. Chen reported the new development to Hubei Governor Wu Yingfen, who in turn reported it to the Huguang viceroy, still the same Maizhu. The enraged Maizhu, finally realizing that he had been duped, demanded that Ms. Yang be immediately brought before him. Magistrate Chen feared that if he did so too openly, there was the risk that Ms. Yang would actually be murdered or would commit suicide, and that the key to resolving the case once and for all would thus be removed. So he instead trumped up a charge of his own: that the Yang were operating a whorehouse. On the strength of this charge he personally led a raid on the Yang compound, tore down the wall's secret interior partition, and seized Ms. Yang. He then proceeded to the county law court, with Ms. Yang and the other parties in tow along with "several tens of thousands" of the good people of Macheng, whom he invited to witness the proceedings. In front of this audience, Magistrate Chen had Tu Rusong confront Ms. Yang, publicly acknowledge her as his wife, and profusely apologize for all the grief he had caused her. The assembled crowd, we are told, wept loud and long. Yang Tongfan and Yang Wurong knelt quietly and accepted their guilt.

In the late summer of 1735, Governor Wu memorialized the throne on the final resolution of the case. There was one final act to be played, however, and it was a dilly. In the time between the submission of Wu's memorial and receipt of an imperial rescript signaling closure of the case, Viceroy Maizhu had second thoughts about how bad this whole affair had made him look. He therefore concocted an alternative narrative, one more favorable to himself, by proclaiming as truth the false whorehouse charge devised by Magistrate Chen. In Maizhu's revised account, the young woman who had been discovered in the wall was not, in fact, Ms. Yang but rather a prostitute in Yang Tongfan's em-

ploy. The viceroy coerced Ms. Yang, by now exhausted, into going along, and he convinced Yang Tongfu to spare himself the death penalty by falsely confessing to keeping a brothel. Maizhu then memorialized his own version of the case's resolution.

Presented thus with two conflicting memorials, the emperor—probably the neophyte twenty-five-year-old Qianlong, who had acceded to the throne in October 1735—dispatched Shi Yizhi, president of the Board of Revenue, to Wuhan, to confront Viceroy Maizhu and Governor Wu directly and get to the bottom of things. Eventually the account of Magistrate Chen Ding (and Governor Wu) was determined to be the truth. Tang Yingqiu, the cashiered Macheng magistrate, was exonerated and restored to his rank. Yang Tongfan and Yang Wurong were convicted and executed. Justice is not always speedy, Yuan Mei concludes; but, with patience and perseverance, the truth will always be revealed.

While Yuan Mei's fascinating tale emphasizes deceit, civil litigation, careerist bureaucratic scheming, and imperial justice, the slightly varying version of this story that survives in local Macheng legend significantly places more emphasis on the militaristic elements of the feud. In this account, the raid that rescued Ms. Yang from the secret partition of the compound wall was not undertaken by the crusading Magistrate Chen and his trusty retainers but rather by a gang of local thugs in service of the Tu lineage. When the desired legal result was not achieved by the reappearance of the supposedly deceased, the Tu responded by mobilizing a still larger force of "several hundred men" that leveled the entire Yang compound to the ground. Still not satisfied, the men excavated a hole three feet deep where the buildings had stood; today it remains a marshy pit: the Yang-compound pond (Yangji tang). In local folk reckoning, it is not clever official detective work that brings resolution to this sort of nagging conflict; rather, it is armed might. *Wu*, in Macheng, prevails over *wen*.

Protest

Lucien Bianco has shown, on the basis of quantitative analysis of thousands of incidents, that the "big" entrepreneurially organized rebellions in modern Chinese history were embedded in a context of, and numerically overwhelmed by, much more routinized and smaller-scale mobilizations of popular collective force: food riots, tax resistance, and rent resistance. The experience of Macheng, so regularly the site of these "big" eruptions over the centuries, nevertheless bears out Bianco's point.⁷³ This was a county, as we shall see, where class-based tensions at all times ran perilously high. Wang Shizhen, the famous literary critic who served as Hubei provincial judge in 1573–74, wrote of Macheng: "There is no place in the empire of which it is more often said that its population is irreconcilably divided by class [*geyi buyijun*]."⁷⁴

I have found documentation of food riots in the county in 1472, 1590, 1831, 1855, 1898, and 1929; but, quite clearly, there were many more submerged below the written record.⁷⁵ When harvests failed and grain prices escalated, hungry villagers were well schooled in orchestrating demands that the government prohibit further price hikes, compel private sales at “fair” or “stable” prices (*pingjia*), and open the granaries. When these demands were not met, state and private granaries were forcibly looted, often by armed popular associations (*hui*) formed for just such purposes. So familiar were these actions, and so understandable were they to local authorities, that they were almost officially tolerated. Macheng magistrates like Li Zhaoyuan, in 1831, would dutifully arrest and convict the major rioters, then sentence them merely to remain at home and reform their conduct; or, like Liu Qi in 1855, they would bow to popular pressure to release the ringleaders from jail.⁷⁶

Tax resistance movements were an even more familiar form of collective protest in Macheng, stemming in part from the persistent patterns of center-locality and state-society tensions that we will observe repeatedly throughout this study. Unsurprisingly, such incidents became epidemic during the era of state breakdown under the Republic, but protests of significant scale against the imposition of taxes—in cash, in kind, and in *corvée* labor—were regular occurrences throughout Ming and Qing times as well. A Macheng native named Li Tianbao, for example, led a local tax rebellion, and when it failed he fled to the hills of western Hunan; there he allied with local “Miao” peoples, claiming to be a descendant of the Tang ruling house, and led a short-lived uprising of several thousand men.⁷⁷

Tax protests might unite elites and commoners against the administration, divide the two (especially when local magnates were engaged in *baolan*, proxy remittance rackets), or even fragment a social class based on geographic or other factors. Two examples will offer some of the flavor of these protests.

The first involves the county’s grain-tribute assessment. After the fifteenth century, Macheng, falling as it did under the “southern” portion of the tribute, owed a total of 4,200 catties of tribute rice per year, with the assessment divided among local property holders. Because of Macheng’s mountainous terrain, however, this assessment constituted an unusually burdensome imposition on the county’s taxpayers, who were, like others elsewhere, responsible for bearing, in surtax form, the transport costs of tribute rice to the government’s collection stations. This was an especially onerous burden when scheduled payments happened to coincide with periods of low water on the county’s tributary arteries, a situation necessitating a tremendously costly shift to overland collection. *Yamen* clerks as well as transport laborers used this situation to exploit taxpayers even further. Commutation of grain-tribute payments to payment in cash seemed to be the answer. In the later sixteenth century, local officials and

elites sat down repeatedly to seek out ways of effectively implementing this solution, but intrataxpayer squabbles were the usual result. Commutation to cash at a blanket rate, with average transport costs built in, actually disadvantaged those wealthy lowland rice planters who were within relatively easy shipping distance to the collection stations, and these planters, who preferred that payment in kind be continued, more than once resisted payment. Only in the 1590s, after several decades of bickering and a personal inspection tour on the part of the Hubei governor, was some reconciliation achieved.⁷⁸

The second example of tax protest involves the assessment of seasonal payments of firewood on highland populations. These assessments, made by Qing county officials and clerks, were for those officials' own use of firewood—a clear irritant to the ever-latent tensions in Macheng between state and society, and between urban and rural areas. Over the early eighteenth century, property holders of the Dongshan, in growing numbers, had forcibly resisted this imposition. Finally, in 1753, the newly arrived magistrate Dan Yanyang, a crusader against bureaucratic high-handedness in general, abolished the firewood assessment altogether. Dan engraved in stone the proclamation “Hereafter all wild vegetation in uncultivated areas belongs entirely to the people, who may harvest it for their own fuel needs.” The Macheng literati lauded Dan’s action as a major factor in maintaining subsistence on the county’s agrarian margins.⁷⁹

Class-based rent resistance in Macheng was less persistent than were crowd-based actions over food or taxes, but it was hardly absent. In the turbulent late 1920s and early 1930s, violent antirent movements were an everyday occurrence in the county, and, as an investigator sent down from Party Central in Shanghai reported in 1929, the majority of these actions seemed to spring from entirely local roots, with little or no direct Communist orchestration.⁸⁰ But if the frequency and ferocity of these movements was greatest in the early twentieth century, they were nevertheless far from new to that period. In the early eighteenth century, for example, in the Tiantang zhai area of Dongshan, on the Macheng-Luotian border, several men of the wealthy Jiang lineage purchased large tracts of hillside land and brought in members of the Ma surname to clear and till it as their tenants. The arrangement worked well until the yields of the land began to decline, after several years of continuous farming. In 1750, when Ma demands for corresponding rent reductions were rebuffed by the Jiang, Ma Chaozhu and two kinsmen known as “the three young Ma” (Ma san shaonian) rose in rebellion. Only the combined forces of Huguang viceroy Yongchang and Liang-Jiang viceroy Yinjishan were eventually able to subdue them.⁸¹

Much of this popular collective violence over the centuries was essentially of a reactive character, in defense of accustomed livelihoods and ways of doing things in the face of perceived threat. In the late nineteenth century, this logic extended to the cultural innovations introduced by the West, notably Christian

missions. Macheng was relatively late to experience a missionary presence. It came in the form of the nonconformist Swedish Missionary Society (Svenska Missionsförbundet), or SMS, which set up operation in Wuhan in 1890 and determined to fan out into portions of the Hubei hinterland not yet touched by personnel of other denominations. Two years later, two SMS members, O. S. Wikholm and A. D. Johansson, arrived in Songbu and rented a merchant's shop to serve as their mission. They were not made welcome. Members of the town's martial arts academies, led by the sixteen-year-old boxing prodigy Li Peixiang, mobilized popular hostility against the foreigners, and, under the heady nationalist enthusiasm of the Duanwu festival and the Dragon Boat races that fall, the boxers accused the missionaries of molesting a young girl of the Huo family and beat them to death in the open street at midday.⁸² Over subsequent decades, repeated attempts to proselytize in Songbu (by far the most cosmopolitan place in Macheng) and elsewhere in the county were met with more muted but nonetheless determined resistance.

On occasion, these sorts of popular disturbance could promote themselves into *luan* (disorders) or *bian* (rebellions) of greater than local, even regime-changing, pretension. Such, of course, were those major violent upheavals of the 1350s–60s, 1620s–40s, 1670s, 1850s–60s, and 1920s–30s, which form the basis of this study. But there were also many other, more routine *bian* that never got so far and yet were sufficiently threatening to panic local society. For instance, Dong Guanpan, in the 1490s, and Hu Tingfeng, in the 1520s, were both Macheng bandits who proclaimed themselves *wang* (kings) and for a time waged antidynastic campaigns; in 1524, a Macheng purveyor of sorcerous literature (*woshu*) named Wan Minfu managed to stir up such alarm that Ming troops were brought in from the Han River Valley to quash him; and in 1905, a self-styled White Lotus movement, under the local activists Li Shiyong, Deng Dapeng, and Hu Qucheng, systematically gathered rebel supporters to uphold the Qing and snuff out the foreigners (*fu Qing mie Yang*).⁸³ By no means was deep-seated apprehension of disorder (*pa luan*) a monopoly of the authorities and the upper classes. In 1513, for example, great fear of the approach of an army of spectral demon-rebels (*guibing*) gripped the rural population, prompting demands that the county officials and elites move to a heightened stage of defensive alert.⁸⁴ But fears of *bian* and *luan* were especially deep-seated elements of consciousness among the property-holding Macheng elite.

State Violence

At times, the prospect of popular *luan* could influence the authorities to take a more timid path in policy implementation: in the Macheng City wall-building project of 1573, for instance, this prospect prompted the authorities

to shift in part from conscripted to hired labor. More routinely, such fears underlay elite campaigns over the centuries to propagandize “civilized”—properly docile and deferential—behavior (*jiaohua*) among the lower classes, and to inculcate the four social bonds and the eight virtues (*sivei bade*) among the population at large.⁸⁵ More customary still in Macheng, however, were efforts of the state and the elite to confront popular disorder, incipient or actual, with a patterned terrorist violence of their own—a practice epitomized in the single ominous word *jiao* (extermination).

Much of the narrative in the remaining chapters focuses on just such sanctioned inhumanity. Aggressive, even preemptive violence against demonized enemies of the state was chillingly defended in the 1630s by Mei Zhihuan as the repression of evil apparitions (*tanya yaofen*), and its grisly arts were perfected three centuries later by the Guomindang ward leader Lin Renfu, the self-styled King of Hell.⁸⁶ It was no less than a divine mission: a blood-drenched defense of the cosmic moral order versus the perceived forces of chaos. In this particular local setting, such battles were joined with great frequency and ferocity.