

Shaolin Temple Legends, Chinese Secret Societies, and the Chinese Martial Arts

Although members of Chinese secret societies and heterodox religious sects practiced martial arts, the martial arts were not necessarily directly related to the belief systems of these secret societies and religious sects (Henning, 1999). Instead, the Chinese martial arts were simply fighting arts, stage arts, athletic events, physical conditioning, and so on, dependent upon the context in which they were done. Obviously, the range of contexts was enormous, and could (and did) include religious sectarians, organized crime syndicates, mutual aid societies, political groups, sworn brotherhoods (some of which were actually sororities), and popular media. But, put more simply: before the Chinese Freemasons was a mutual aid society and the Kuomintang was a political party, there were the Hongmen (Vast Family) and the Chee Kung Tong (Fine Public Court). Before the Hongmen and the Chee Kung Tong was the Tiandihui (Heaven and Earth Society). Before all these was a legend.

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In 1644, Qing armies captured Beijing. Assorted sworn brotherhoods (*jiebai xiongdi*) continued armed resistance for a generation. Although sworn brotherhoods existed both before and after the 1640s, these early groups were mostly small and always independent. Being Chinese, their members were undoubtedly inspired by *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo Yanyi), and *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Shuihuzhuan), e.g., romantic tales involving sworn brotherhoods, blood oaths, and martial arts. But, as far as we know, their groups were without formal names, ceremonies, or traditions. And, as for their fighting arts, they were presumably whatever the army was currently teaching, for many of their members were discharged soldiers turned bandit.

Some years later, during the Yongzheng era (1723-1735), unrelated mutual aid societies known as *hui* began to appear in Qing China. Some of these mutual aid societies had formal names. An example is the Father-Mother Society established in Fujian Province in 1728. Called a *fumuhui*, its purpose was to allow working men to pool money for burials. Other *hui* existed to allow people to borrow the money to buy land, livestock, or a business. Hui still exist in Chinese communities throughout the world. Some hui are essentially cooperative credit unions and insurance companies, some are professional guilds, and some are simply pyramid schemes. However, only a dozen or so such societies appear in archival records before 1755. Ming restoration was not mentioned in connection with any of these mutual aid societies.

The society known today as Tiandihui was founded at Guanyinting (Goddess of Mercy pavilion), Gaoxi township, Fujian Province, sometime in 1761. The founder was Zheng Kai (d. 1779, aged 68), also known as Ti Xi. The name literally means the society (*hui*) of heaven (*tian*) and earth (*di*). The practice of Tiandihui members was to address heaven as their father and earth as their mother, and one another as Brother or Sister. This form of address carries specific social connotations (Jordan, 1985), but to provide a simplification, the Tiandihui represented a form of poor man's *huiguan*, or native place association, for déclassé migrants far from home. The huiguan provided meeting grounds and regulation of trade for financially stable members, and lodging and financial assistance for less financially stable members. In the case of the original Tiandihui, both the founders and members came from the lowest and most marginal ranks of Chinese society. Since they did not own real property, they were preoccupied with the issue of survival, and their motives were not political gain but personal profit. Thus, individual members often resorted to robbery, swindling, smuggling, and extortion.

By the 1780s, the Tiandihui was no longer exclusively a product of a mobile alien migrant population. Instead, it was becoming assimilated into indigenous communities. As such, members began extending interests into local feuding, collective violence, and even open rebellion. An example is the Lin Shuang-wen affair in Taiwan (1787-1788). Sometimes called the first brotherhood rebellion in modern Chinese history, this began with a family feud but ended with Imperial military intervention (Ownby and Heidhues, 1993). From Qing records, we read of Tiandihui initiates sacrificing a cock before an incense altar, swearing their brotherhood in blood, and crawling under crossed swords. Later reports included mixing chicken or cockerel blood with wine or ash, and sometimes blood from the initiate's middle finger, and swallowing it. Anti-Manchu rhetoric, slogans, and confessions are noticeably absent from Qing records of the 1780s and 1790s, as are any mention of Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga, 1624-1662), or evidence of the Xi Lu (Southern Shaolin) legend. Instead, according to Dian Murray (1994, 82): "At the end of the eighteenth century the Tiandihui, at least as far as we now know from the documents at hand, was quite unlike the White Lotus or other religious sects whose customs and beliefs were grounded in sutras or scriptures. Its branches tended to spring up spontaneously, formed by leaders who were themselves often confused about the nature of their undertaking."

During the early 1800s, many separate (but similar) Chinese societies began adopting names that had the number three in them. There was numerological significance, of course, but the name also alluded to the first Ming Emperor, whose reign name was Hongwu (Vast Military), and the family name Hong, which was shared by people who had taken part in blood covenant rituals (Ten Haar, 2002). For example, Sanhehui (San Hop Hwai, Three Harmonies Society, founded on January 4, 1812 as a mutual aid society in Guangdong Province) and the Sandianhui (Three Dots Society; originally, the Increase Brothers Society) are early nineteenth century societies whose names echoed the number three. Groups with three in the name shared common blood oaths, passwords, and phrases. One example is, "When passing objects, never forget 'three'" (*kaikou buli ben; chushou buli san*) (Cai, 1984, 493). It was the commonality of threes that led the nineteenth century British missionaries and administrators to label these societies *Triads*. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind David Jordan's caution (1985): "Sworn brotherhood, like so many other cultural institutions, is an empty vessel, into which a very wide variety of different contents may potentially be poured."

Around the same time, stories began to associate the Tiandihui with anti-Manchu sentiment. Forty years earlier, Tiandihui had not been visibly anti-Manchu. The slogan in those days was "Obey Heaven and follow the Way," a time-honored expression unrelated to rebellion. Two existing documents, an oath and a register dating from 1787, make no reference to the Ming but do refer to fictional heroes from *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. The first written evidence of Ming restoration only dates from 1800, when the phrase "Restore the Ming House" was part of an oath taken by members of Qiu Daqin's Tiandihui society in Guangdong. This was noted in reports of a rebellion in Guangdong Province that took place in September and October 1802. Leaders of this uprising included an Increase Societies brother named Chen Lanjisi (1776-1802). The Guangdong uprising was promptly smashed, but over the years, there were additional uprisings whose slogans called for the restoration of the Ming. But, in fact, the rebels were not seeking to restore the Ming. Instead, as Liangguang Governor-general Ruan Yuan wrote in 1811: "Their intention is only to obtain wealth to use; they are not plotters of illegalities [rebellion], but their intention to incite good people to rob is a local evil" (Murray, 1994, 76).

During the Taiping wars (1851-1864), the slogan *fan Qing fu Ming* ("Oppose the Qing, support the Ming") was used. During the same period, the term traveled to North America, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Australia with immigrant Chinese. Nonetheless, intellectual efforts to depict the Tiandihui as anti-Manchu only date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For

instance, in 1903, Tao Chengzhang (T'ao Ch'eng-chang, 1878-1912) wrote an article called "*Jiohui Yuanliu Kao*" (The Evolution of China's Secret Societies) that directly linked the name *Hongmen* to the dynastic founder of the Ming Dynasty. Tao also associated the Tiandihui with the anti-Ming general Zheng Chenggong, claimed Chen Jinnan as an earlier founder of the Tiandihui (this name appears nowhere in the Qing records), and associated various religious sects with the Tiandihui. Sun Yat-sen's *Three Principles of the People* (1924) further elaborated on these themes, but Sun was neither a scholar nor historian, and he relied on the anecdotal evidence of society members who were fellow revolutionaries. Thus, the 1915 book called *Secrets of Shaolin Boxing* (Shaolin Quanfa Mijue) should be viewed as part of this twentieth century Republican tradition rather than part of the documented history of Shaolin boxing.

If the anti-Manchu history of the Tiandihui is unsupported by evidence, what of the history linking the Tiandihui to the Shaolin Temple? The traditional history is that the monks of Shaolin Temple aided the Emperor in repelling the depredations of some ill-defined Xi Lu (Western Barbarians). The monks refused the offered reward. The monks were subsequently accused of plotting rebellion; their temple was destroyed by the Emperor's forces, and only five monks survived. The destroyed temple is variously described as being in Gansu Province, Julian Mountain in Jiangxi Province, or Fuzhou Province, with the events taking place somewhere between 1728 and 1732.

So far, no one has found an actual historical site for this temple destruction, and it has not been through a lack of trying. Instead, from what is currently known, the Xi Lu legend appears to represent the merging of at least seven separate stories. If there is a historical basis to the story, then it probably involves a conflation of an historical event involving monks of the real Shaolin Temple at Mount Song in Henan Province with messianic "Luminous King" (*mingwang*) traditions dating to the sixth century (Glick and Hong, 1947; Ter Haar, 2002). Alternatively, it may simply represent a version of romantic tales told during the Boxer and Republican eras, and put to paper about 1915 by the "Master of the Studio of Self-Respect" in his book *Secrets of Shaolin Boxing*.

In a separate conflation of Tiandihui legends, one of the five surviving monks is said to have gone to Canada to establish what is now known as the Chinese Freemasons of Canada. A second reportedly went to New York, where he established the Chee Kong Tong Supreme Lodge Chinese Freemasons of the World. A third reportedly went to San Francisco, where he established the Hung Moon Chee Kung Tong. Although the historical veracity of these particular legends is no longer promoted, there does not seem to have been much attention paid to correcting them, either.

Several other remarks are required in conclusion. First, Triad is an English word meaning "Union of Three." In recognition of the prevalence of the number three in the various societies' names, the Scottish missionary William Milne (1785-1822) was the first to apply the term "Triad" to Chinese secret societies, in a posthumously published work called "Some Account of a Secret Association in China, entitled the Triad Society" (1825). There being no Chinese word for secret societies, Chinese writers instead referred to sects (*jiaomen*) or political associations (*huidang*). Second, the word *tong*, meaning "meeting hall" and describing any organization that meets in a hall, is common in Chinese. This is mentioned because the terms Triad and Tong, while often used to describe Chinese criminal gangs (Paciotti, 2005), have alternative meanings and usage that extend to legitimate benevolent societies. Third, the metaphorical and symbolic use of the square, compasses, level, and plumb rule in early Chinese writings does not demonstrate any early form of Freemasonry or link between Freemasonry and the Tiandihui or Hongmen societies. Again, it was Milne who started scholars on the search for a masonic connection. The number of subsequent freemasons who have taken an interest in the Tiandihui is noteworthy. Carl Glick, J.S.M. Ward, and W.G. Stirling are among the more notable researchers who were freemasons, and it is to these early researchers that we can assign responsibility

for the once widely-held belief that there was a common heritage between European Freemasonry and the Tiandihui. The common origin theory has since been disavowed, the few surface similarities being more than offset by the equally obvious differences, notably the ideological gulf that separated regular, recognized European Freemasonry from the Tiandihui.

-- Trevor W. McKeown

See also Belief Systems: China; Chinese Martial Arts; Chinese Boxing Styles; Chinese Martial Art Theory; Folklore; Invented Traditions; Kuntao; Written Texts: China.

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