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LEAVING HOME:

Chinese Migrations in the Mid-Late 19th Century

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INTRODUCTION

In China, there is an old saying that “a thousand days at home are good; a day away from home is hard.”¹ The saying was attributed to Confucius, whose philosophy emphasized the importance of family and respecting one’s elders. That meant staying close to home. For centuries, people in China tried to heed that advice. But starting in the mid-19th century, millions of Chinese pulled up stakes and left for unfamiliar and faraway places, both within and beyond China’s borders. Why and how did this happen?

This introduction to Chinese migration looks at some of the factors that caused so many people to move—economic, demographic, technological, social, political, and other factors. Some factors played a direct role; others played an indirect, but still very important, role. It also looks at different types of migration and the consequences for those who migrated, those who were left behind, and the places that became their new homes away from home.

Confucius was correct that being away from home is hard. Yet migration was a path that millions of Chinese people took in the mid-19th century. By examining the causes and consequences of this migration, we can better understand the major events and changes happening during this period, both in China and in the wider world. It also helps us think about similarities and differences with migration in other countries and at other periods of time, including today.

THE CONTEXT FOR MIGRATION: CHINA’S TUMULTUOUS 19TH CENTURY

The wave of Chinese migration starting in the 19th century happened in the final century of the Qing Dynasty. The Qing, who were in power from 1644 to 1911, began their reign as effective rulers. They brought about a long period of peace, expanded the size of the empire, and raised the standard of living for millions of people. But by the mid-1800s, they were struggling to respond to mounting challenges from within China and from international actors and forces. Some of the biggest factors that shaped the 19th century—and the context for migration—are described below.

FACTORS WITHIN CHINA

Expanding the empire: The Qing more than doubled the territory under their control (see Map 1). Many of the newly incorporated areas in the north and west were sparsely populated, but they added ethnic and religious diversity to the country. This included Mongolians, Tibetans, Muslim populations, and others. Even the Qing were not from the Han ethnic majority. Rather, they were Manchus from Manchuria, north of the Great Wall.

MAP 1: CHINESE TERRITORY DURING THE MING AND QING DYNASTIES

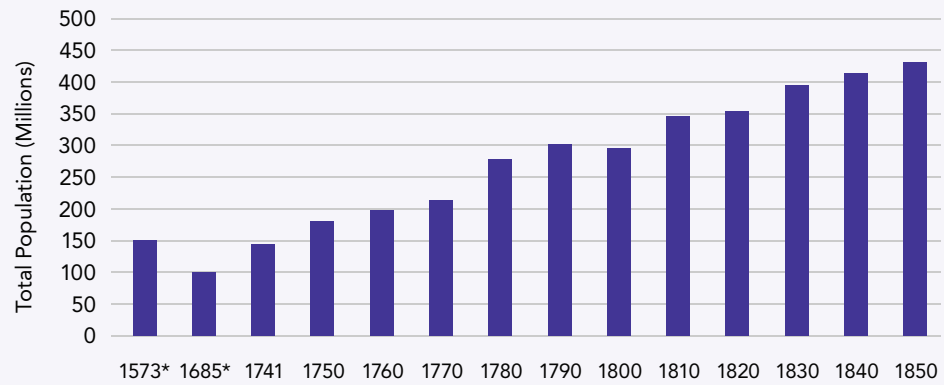


Population growth: Qing government officials introduced new irrigation and water management techniques. These techniques helped to limit the damage from floods and droughts and increased China's food supply. So too did the introduction of new strains of rice in the south, and crops from the Americas, such as peanuts, corn, and sweet potatoes. These imported crops could be grown in areas of China where it was otherwise difficult to grow food, and that allowed new lands to be opened up and settled in the southwest and northeast.

As nutrition improved, China's population grew rapidly. In the early 1600s, the population had decreased because of the violence and chaos that accompanied the previous dynasty's collapse. But by the 1740s, it rebounded to about 140 million. By the end of the 18th century, the population doubled to nearly 300 million. By 1850, it had climbed to 430 million (see Figure 1).

Population growth can benefit a society, especially if it leads to increased economic activity. In late imperial China, it also created social and economic strains. China had not yet adopted industrial manufacturing on a large scale, and most people supported themselves through farming. Farmers who owned their land followed a tradition of dividing up the land equally among the family's sons. But the amount of farmland did not expand enough to absorb the growing population, even with the opening of new lands. Therefore, in some parts of the country, people struggled to support themselves on smaller and smaller plots of land. Many other farmers rented their land from landowners, through a system called tenant farming. These farmers were squeezed from two sides: they had to pay rent to their landlords, usually as a portion of what they produced, and they also had to pay taxes to the government.

FIGURE 1: POPULATION GROWTH IN CHINA, 1573–1850



*Number based on estimates only

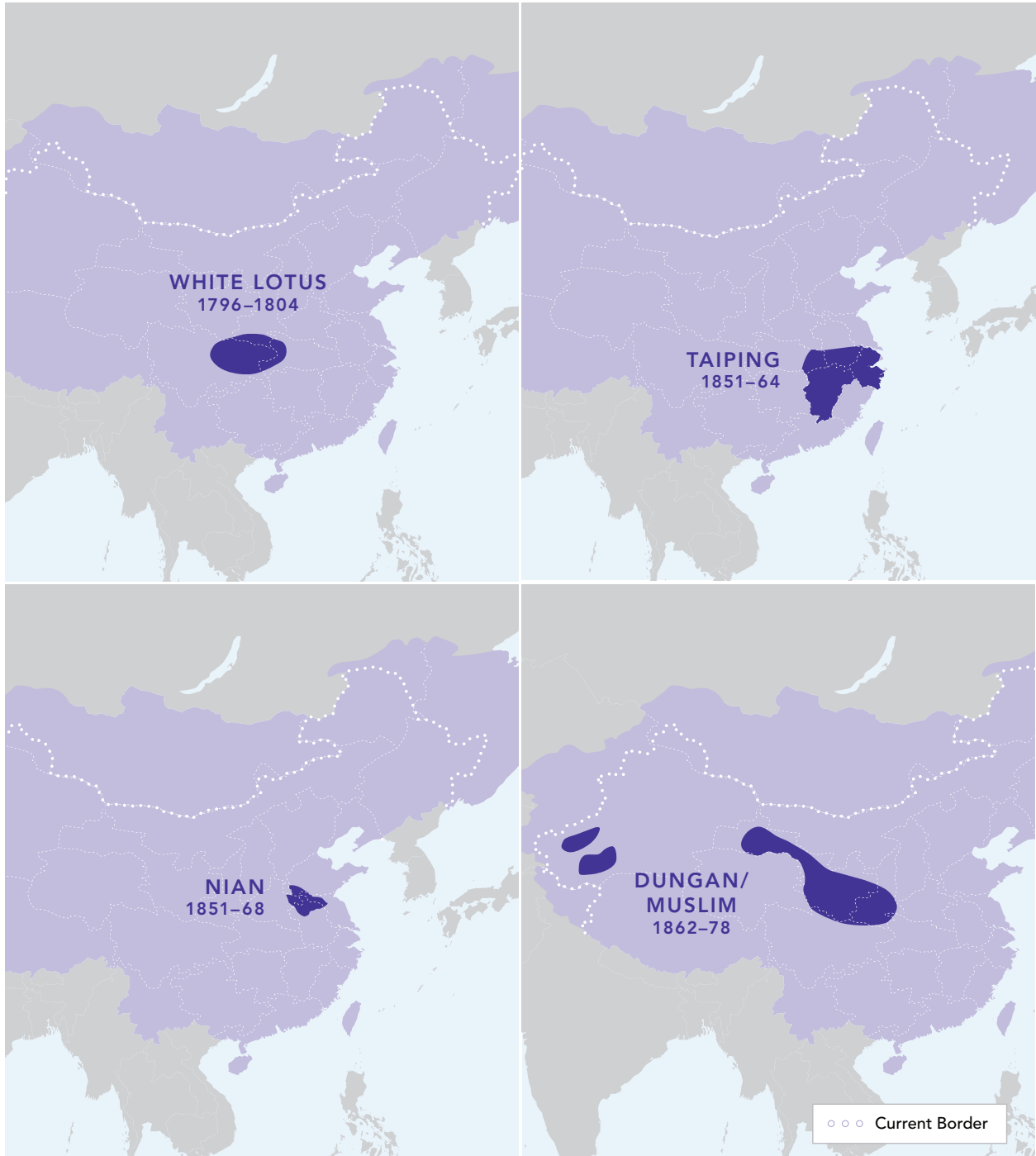
Sources: Ping-ti Ho, *Studies on the Population of China, 1368-1953*; Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*.

Declining governance: The size of the bureaucracy in the late Qing period did not expand at the same rate as population growth. With more people to govern, Qing officials were stretched thin and could not do their jobs effectively. In fact, many of them neglected their responsibilities and focused instead on enriching themselves by engaging in corruption—for example, collecting taxes from farmers, but not providing the services that improved the farmers’ lives. Even members of the military and those who were responsible for water management were becoming less effective or ineffective, and often more corrupt.

Lack of employment opportunities: Although the bureaucracy’s reputation had gotten worse, many educated young men still aimed to get a government job. The reason was that few other types of employment provided the same social and economic benefits and status. These young men were under tremendous pressure because their families sacrificed a lot to pay for the education that prepared them for the imperial exam. If he passed the exam and got a government position, it would raise the whole family’s status. But as the population grew, more young men were competing for—but failing to get—these government positions.

Internal upheaval: Throughout the 19th century, there were several large-scale rebellions and peasant uprisings throughout China. These were based on a variety of grievances, including poverty, famine, anger at official corruption, and a strong dislike of the Qing. Some were also inspired by new religious ideas or ethnic identities. All of the rebellions were eventually defeated, but they took a heavy toll on the Qing, and an even heavier toll on the people and areas that were directly affected (see Map 2).

MAP 2: MAJOR REBELLIONS IN CHINA, 19TH CENTURY



Note: Locations are approximations only

White Lotus (1796–1804)

The White Lotus Rebellion broke out in response to famine, overcrowding of land, and harassment from government officials. It was led by a Buddhist cult that promised its followers that the Buddha would return to end their suffering. They also believed that the Qing were a foreign occupier, and they wanted to restore the previous Ming Dynasty. The rebels were effective at blending in with the local population, which made it difficult for the government to identify and suppress them.

Taiping (1851–64)

The Taiping Rebellion was one of the largest and most destructive civil wars in history, killing an estimated 20 million people. It began under the leadership of Hong Xiuquan, an ethnic Hakka who tried—and failed—several times to pass the exam to become a government official. Hong's encounter with a Christian missionary in southern China led him to have visions that he was the son of God and the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and that he was sent by God to reform China. Hong led a group of impoverished peasants, some of them fellow Hakka. The Taiping promoted Christianity and egalitarianism, two values that contradicted the Qing Dynasty's values of Confucianism and hierarchy. The Qing ultimately needed the help of Western powers to defeat the Taiping.

Nian (1851–68)

The Nian rebels shared their origins with the White Lotus, and were mostly peasants, army deserters, and salt smugglers. Flooding in the area in the 1850s led to famine. In response, several bands joined to raid and plunder neighbouring regions. The Qing executed the Nian's leader in 1863, but corruption and abuse by local government officials created resentments that allowed the Nian to recruit even more supporters. Only after the government defeated the Taiping (see above), could they turn their attention to defeating the Nian.

Dungan/Muslim (1862–78)

The Dungan/Muslim Revolt was mostly an ethnic conflict between the Han and Hui Muslim groups. Local Han in northwestern China formed militias to defend the region against the Taiping Rebellion. The Muslims became worried about the Han being armed, and in response, formed their own militias. In 1862, a local business dispute escalated into a wider conflict because both sides were armed. An estimated 10-12 million people died, and many Hui Muslims fled to Russia.

FACTORS FROM OUTSIDE CHINA

Foreign intrusion: In the 1800s, foreign powers were becoming more aggressive in their efforts to access China's resources and large market. The first major confrontation was the Opium War against Great Britain (1839–1842). The British were demanding the right to sell opium to Chinese consumers. The Qing state, fearing the social consequences of opium addiction, tried to defend itself against Britain's demands. But once the two sides went to war, the Chinese were no match for the technological superiority of the British navy.

As a result of their defeat, the Qing had to allow the sale of opium. It had exactly the kind of impact they feared. They also had to pay a huge indemnity to the British for damage and losses during the war. In addition, China was forced to open several treaty ports to foreign presence—not only foreign governments, but also foreign business interests. The new treaty arrangements also forced the Qing to end their ban on Christianity. It had been banned because Christianity was seen as a challenge to China's Confucian belief system. Once the ban was lifted, the number of Christian missionaries from Europe and the United States grew, and they expanded their efforts to convert Chinese souls.



IMAGE 1

Opium War

Rundle Burges
Watson/

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Foreign intrusion in China did not end there. In 1860, China lost a second Opium War against Britain and France, while at the same time it worried about Imperial Russia's expansion into the Far East, just north of China. Toward the end of the century, China suffered perhaps its most shocking and humiliating defeat of this period: a loss to Japan, a country it always considered inferior, in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Japan's victory gave it control over the island of Taiwan, off China's southeast coast, and a foothold in the resource-rich Qing heartland of Manchuria.

New transportation technologies: New forms of transportation that arose out of the Industrial Revolution in Europe were making their way to China and other parts of the world. This included steamships, which made sea crossings safer and faster. It also included railroads. Like steamships, railroads were an efficient way to move raw materials, finished goods, and people across land. But they also had another important effect on China. The construction of railroads required a lot of workers to do the difficult and often dangerous work of clearing land and laying tracks. Railroad construction projects in China and other countries began looking for people to fill these jobs (see “Growing demand for labour,” below).

Growing demand for labour: Current and former European colonies in the Americas, Southeast Asia, Australia, and other far-flung places needed workers for agriculture, construction projects, and extracting natural resources. This included plantations—rice, rubber, fruit, sugar, and tea plantations, for example—and the dreadful work of mining guano—dried and baked bird droppings used in fertilizer and gun powder. Foreign companies went in search of a new pool of cheap—and exploitable—workers. They set their sights on China because of its large labour force and the opportunity created by the opening of treaty ports.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONNECTIONS TO MIGRATION

Many factors made the 19th century a time of great change and upheaval in China. Thinking about how these factors related to migration raises several questions:

- What forms did migration take?
- Which factors mattered the most? Did these factors work alone, or in combination with others?
- Did the factors play a direct role or indirect role?
- What was the role of the Qing government, and did it change across cases or over time?

The next sections introduce two main types of 19th-century Chinese migration: flight migration and economic migration (internal and international). They also provide case studies for exploring these types of migration in more detail.

TYPES OF MIGRATION

In the mid-to-late 19th century, there were two main types of Chinese migration:

- **Flight migration**, driven by the need to escape unsafe conditions, such as war, disease, natural disasters, poor governance, or persecution because of one's race, religion, or political beliefs; and
- **Economic migration**, driven by the need or desire to improve one's economic situation by moving elsewhere for a business or job opportunity.

Both types of migration can be temporary or permanent, and both can be internal (within a country) or international.

Economic migration during this period had three important features.

1. It followed a pattern of **chain migration**, in which the earliest migrants to a location returned to their villages or nearby areas (often sent by their bosses) to recruit more workers.
2. **Most economic migrants were men**, especially young men. The view at the time was that women were not suitable for the types of jobs that migrants did—agriculture, construction, and mining. However, limiting migration mostly to men made many overseas Chinese communities unsustainable. Often, migrants left behind wives and families, or wanted to return to their hometowns as soon as possible to get married and have children, thus fulfilling their Confucian duty to carry on the family line.
3. Migration was often a **family decision** made based on how it could help the migrant's family, which remained in China. For example, if a new economic migrant received a recruitment bonus, the money was often given to or shared with his wife or parents. Once the migrant began receiving payment for his work, he was expected to save as much as possible to send home. These payments were called **remittances**. If a migrant's family was heavily dependent on the remittances, he carried a heavy burden of having to work hard, live cheaply, and sometimes endure terrible circumstances.

The case studies that follow explore in more depth three examples of 19th century Chinese migration: flight migration, internal economic migration, and international economic migration.

CASE STUDY 1: FLIGHT MIGRATION AND THE TAIPING REBELLION

The Taiping Rebellion was by far the largest of China's 19th-century rebellions. It lasted 14 years (1850–1864) and killed 20 to 30 million people, making it perhaps the deadliest civil war in history. It nearly brought down the Qing government.

The rebellion began under the leadership of Hong Xiuquan, an ethnic Hakka from southern China. Hong tried and failed four times to pass the exam to become a government official. After his final attempt, he encountered a Christian missionary, and he later claimed to be the second son of God and that he was sent by God to reform China. Hong attracted millions of converts. Many of them were impoverished peasants and fellow Hakka. The Taiping embraced strict egalitarianism and Christianity, both of which conflicted with core Qing values of Confucianism and social hierarchy. They also sharply criticized Chinese cultural traditions and the ethnic Manchus who ruled the Qing government.²

The scale of violence during the Taiping Rebellion was extraordinary and was committed by many sides—the Taiping, Qing soldiers, the foreign militaries enlisted to help the Qing, and militias taking advantage of the disorder and chaos. Upper-class people in Taiping-controlled areas feared that the Taiping would confiscate their wealth, given the emphasis on egalitarianism. Some feared their wealth could even get them killed. Therefore, they fled to one of the newly opened treaty ports, especially Shanghai, which benefited from foreign protection. Many of these wealthy flight migrants prospered as merchants and manufacturers, hiding their money and possessions from government taxation. They and the foreign businesspeople operating in the treaty ports discovered a mutual interest in making money. Together, they helped to transform Shanghai and Hong Kong into prosperous and sophisticated cities.

The fate of other flight migrants was dramatically different. Most tried to escape the final, massive battles between the Taiping and government forces. But historian Tobie Meyer-Fong says that flight provided no guarantee of safety. The Qing and Taiping were on alert for people from the other side disguising themselves among the refugees so they could sabotage the enemy. Thus, "mobile populations were the object of everyone's suspicions." These suspicions often led to torturing or even massacring civilians "out of fear that they might not be who they seemed."³ Those who survived ended up in provinces in the southwest and southeast. Others made it to Shanghai, but fared far worse than the wealthy flight migrants because they did not have money, and there was not enough shelter or food for all of them.



IMAGE 2

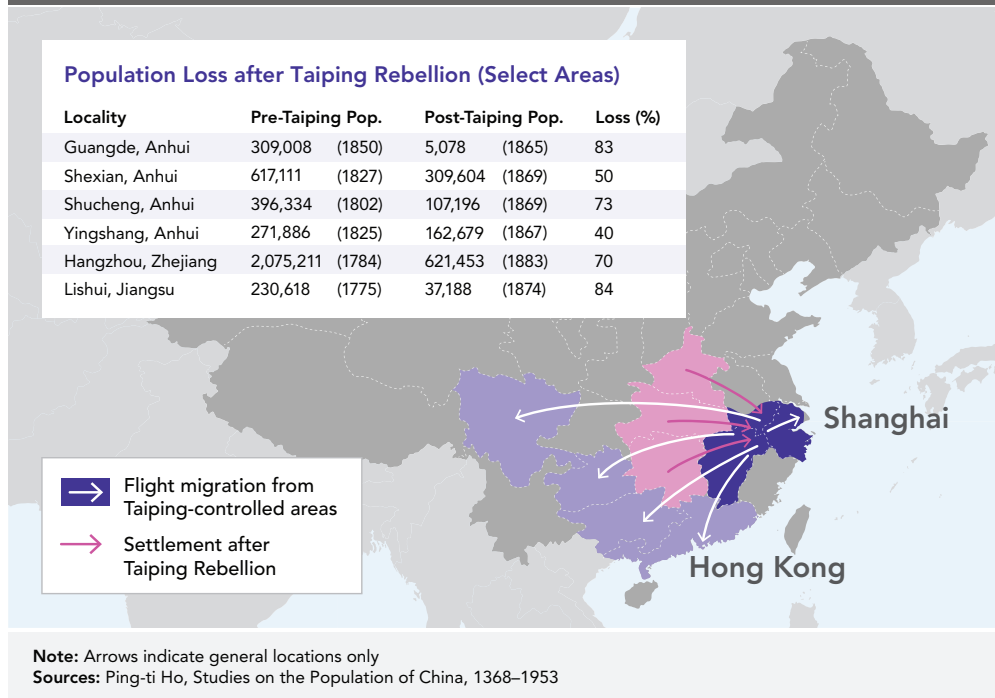
Taiping Rebellion

*Felice Beato/
Getty Images*

After the war ended, land that was once a major food and tax-producing area was left scarred and de-populated. Jiangsu province lost about 70 percent of its population (about 24 million people), and Anhui and Zhejiang lost about half their populations (15 million people each). These numbers do not distinguish between those who died and those who fled, but they do give a sense of the war's impact. Witnesses at the time described vast stretches of land where barely a living person could be found. Whole neighbourhoods and towns were crushed and burned, and many cherished cultural spaces and literary works were destroyed. Professor Meyer-Fong says that in the county of Wuxi, just west of Shanghai, there were "almost no human survivors," and that "returnees straggling back ... had found no homes" and thus "determined it [was] better to move elsewhere."⁴

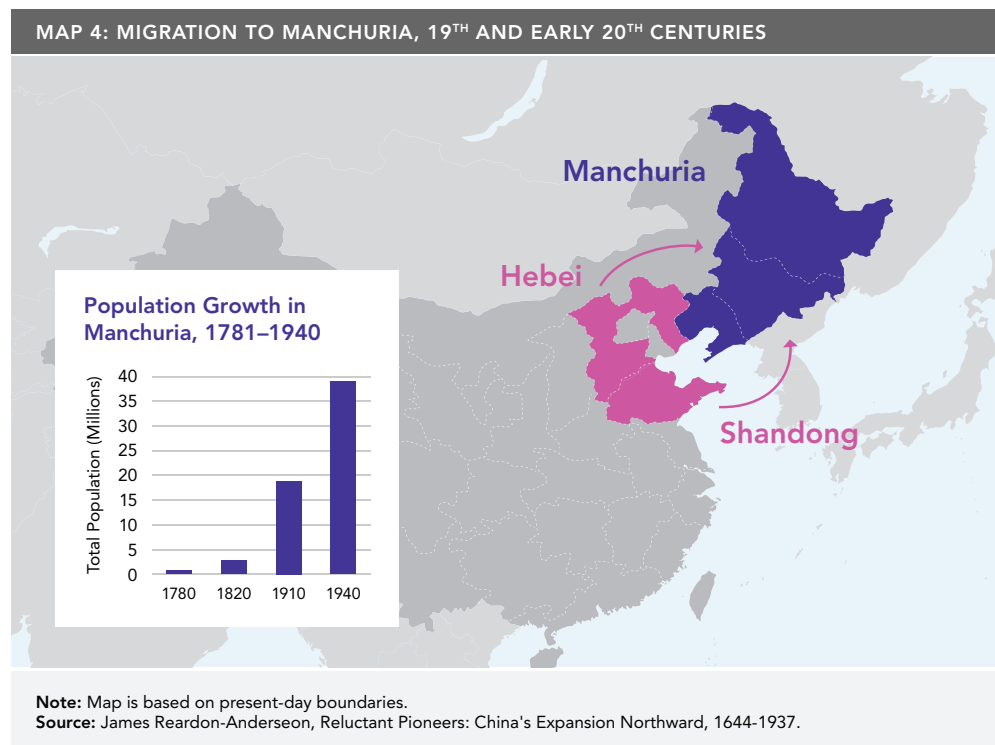
The Qing finally defeated the Taiping Rebellion in 1864, with help from the British and American militaries. But flight migrants did not return. Instead, many years later people from the central provinces of Hubei, Hunan, and Henan migrated to east-central China and began to cultivate farmland that had been abandoned (see Map 3).⁵

MAP 3: FLIGHT MIGRATION AND POPULATION LOSS, TAIPING REBELLION



CASE STUDY 2: INTERNAL ECONOMIC MIGRATION TO MANCHURIA

One of the largest waves of internal economic migration during this period was to the northeast region of Manchuria. Before that, Manchuria was sparsely populated, even though it was rich in agricultural land and natural resources such as minerals and timber. For years, the Qing tried to limit migration to Manchuria to protect it as a Manchu homeland. But beginning in the 1860s, a steady stream of migrants began arriving from Shandong and Hebei provinces and continued to arrive in larger numbers well into the 20th century (see Map 4). What explains this change?



According to historian James Reardon-Anderson, the Qing changed their minds for two reasons:

Costly conflicts: The government had a system of taking revenue from prosperous areas of the country and using it to support less prosperous areas, like Manchuria. By the 1860s, the Taiping Rebellion had devastated and de-populated east-central China, a prosperous agricultural region. That left a gap in the government's budget. So too did the indemnity payments China had to make to Britain after it lost the Opium War in 1842. To raise revenue, the Qing decided to sell land in Manchuria and then tax it once it became more productive.⁶

Foreign expansion: Imperial Russia continued to push around the areas to China's north, including Manchuria. The Qing worried that the region's sparse

population made it vulnerable to Russian encroachment. They believed that populating Manchuria with Chinese settlers was one way to defend it.⁷

Even after the Qing relaxed migration restrictions, why would people in Shandong and Hebei move to a region that was not economically developed and very cold in the winter? In fact, many of them did not want to, but they were facing serious economic challenges. Economist Dwight Perkins observed that the population of these two provinces, along with two other neighbouring provinces, grew 56 percent from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century. But there was no growth in the amount of land under cultivation in these provinces. Perkins estimates “that the area of farmland [per person] declined by around 35%” by the late 1800s.⁸ Farming and other work in Manchuria offered a way for them to get some economic relief.

At first, most migrants to Manchuria were young men. Some were only in their mid-to-late teens. Generally, they were not from the very poorest families; rather, they were from families who were under economic stress, but could afford to send away a second or third son to earn money. They were recruited through chain migration, usually by a man from their village or a nearby village “who had gone to Manchuria, found a job, and [was] sent back by his employer to recruit more workers.”⁹ The system was organized and efficient, but also exploitative. New workers received a recruitment bonus, called a “comfort-the-family fee,”¹⁰ but most of the profits from their work went to their bosses, recruiters, and employers, not to the workers themselves. The bosses also handled the remittances that workers sent back to their families.

Most migrants did not want to stay in Manchuria long term. Their goal was to work as long as it took to earn enough money to return to their hometowns and families. Travel by steamship made these trips easier. Some migrants in northern Manchuria returned home every year because the bitterly cold Siberian winters meant there was not much work during those months. A common name for these migrants was “swallows”—they went north in the spring and south in the fall to warmer weather. Gradually, migration became year-round, especially for work in agriculture and timber harvesting. This led to long-term settlement, and women and families eventually joined the chain of migration.

Two features of this migration are notable.

First, migration to Manchuria grew significantly over time. This increase was not just because of changes in Qing policy. Manchuria was becoming a place of international interest. After Japan defeated China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), it demanded control of the Liaodong Peninsula in southeast Manchuria. Russia challenged this control, and with France and Germany’s support, received a 25-year lease on the peninsula in 1898. Soon after that, it began developing the region’s agriculture and building mines and railways. But Russia was soon forced to end the lease, after it was defeated by an increasingly strong Japan in a war in 1904–1905. Japan renewed its activities

in Manchuria, which also included agriculture, railways, and harbours. All of this work drew even more Chinese migrant workers to the region.

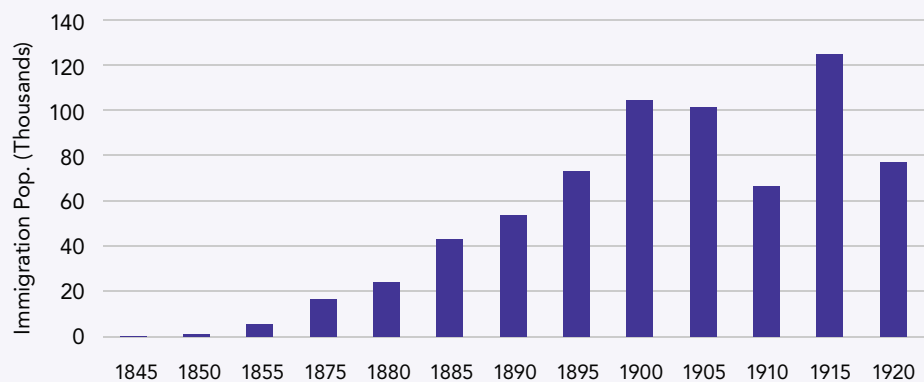
Second, this wave of migration changed the region's culture. In many other cases of migration, including internal migration, people who settle in a culturally different place often keep some of their own traditions, but also adapt to the culture of their new surroundings. In the case of Chinese migration to Manchuria, migrants did not adopt Manchu culture, but rather replaced it, making the region more "Chinese" over time.

CASE STUDY 3: INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC MIGRATION TO THE AMERICAS AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Millions of Chinese people in the mid-19th century responded to the international demand for labour, which took them to Southeast Asia, the Americas, and other corners of the globe. Their travel to such faraway places was possible because of new forms of sea transportation, and their knowledge of work opportunities was possible because of new networks that linked communities in China to economies in other parts of the world.

Many of the early migrants were wealthy merchants who moved with their families and opened businesses such as stores, laundries, and medicine shops. They also helped to organize the migration of more Chinese, usually from their home villages and counties. This later wave of migrants was mostly men from two southern provinces: Fujian and Guangdong (see Figure 2). At the time, southern China was experiencing social unrest because of the effects of the opium trade and the Qing government's weakness and poor governance after fighting wars against foreign powers and internal rebels. Thus, southern China was fertile ground for Western companies to recruit workers, which they did with the help of local Chinese partners.

FIGURE 2: EMIGRATION FROM XIAMEN, FUJIAN, 1845–1920



Note: In 1845, 180 people emigrated from Xiamen, but the number is too small to be visible on the graph.
Source: Hong Liu, *The Chinese Overseas*, p. 157

*1845–1855 data are based on *International Migration*, Vol. 1, p.927

*1975–1885 data are based on the table attached to the *Philippine Chinese Labour Questions* by Mezalini.

*1890–1920 data are based on the *Register of Chinese Maritime Customs*.

The majority of these migrants went to Southeast Asia, such as Malaya and Singapore, which were British colonies, and Sumatra (Indonesia), which was a Dutch colony. There, they worked in the sweltering heat on fruit, rubber, rice, and tea plantations. Most of the Chinese migrants to North America were from Guangdong, and went to work on huge construction projects like the U.S. Transcontinental Railway (1869) and the Canadian Pacific Railway (1886), as well as large dam projects in the Rocky Mountains. These and other workers in the

Americas helped fill the demand for cheap labour after the abolition of the slave trade by the British in 1834 and the end of slavery by the United States in 1865. Some Chinese migrants, however, hoped to strike it rich in the North American gold rushes in California in the 1850s and the Cariboo (in BC) in the 1860s. In the Caribbean and Central and South America, the work sites included sugar plantations in Cuba, the Panama Canal, and guano mines in Peru.

Chinese migrants entered into work contracts under a variety of conditions. Some paid for their own overseas passage, probably borrowing from family funds. They were expected to repay their families in the form of remittances, but they were not indebted to their employers or another outside creditor. Others took out a loan from an employer or creditor to cover the cost of their overseas passage. They paid it back out of their meagre wages or through several years of labour. These contracts were often exploitative and unfair to the worker.

The most vulnerable were those who were deceived by a recruiter or kidnapped and forced into a situation that was not much better than slavery. This was the case for many Chinese who went to Cuba and Peru. The conditions of the four-month sea voyage to the Americas and after they arrived were cruel and abusive. Also, their contracts were written in a way that made it almost impossible for them to ever repay the cost of their passage, housing, and food. Their employers had so much control over them that these migrants had almost no chance to escape or improve their situations.¹¹



IMAGE 3

Chinese in Cuba

*The Print Collector/
Print Collector/
Getty Images*

In addition to economic pressures, Chinese migrants in Canada and the United States also faced racism and discrimination. This was not only tolerated, it was even encouraged by politicians and labour unions who feared competition from cheap Chinese workers and so-called Asian “threats.” Racism led to policies that restricted immigration from China in the 1870s and ended it altogether in the 1920s. Yet, amid this very negative treatment, these migrants made important contributions to the development and modernization of their host countries. In almost all cases, these contributions were not recognized until at least a century later.

Also, despite their harsh treatment, Chinese migrant communities found ways to flourish. In the Americas, their host societies and fellow compatriots expected them to settle together in self-contained communities. They created Chinatowns, where they had little contact with the outside world, but formed strong social networks with each other based on common surnames or home villages. They also relied on a go-between, usually a Chinese merchant, who helped with relations with the host society and made sure letters and remittances made their way back to family members in China.

Although the Qing government was focused on dealing with its internal challenges, they did not completely forget these migrants. They set up an office in 1861, called the Zongli Yamen, to handle foreign affairs. Through this office, the Qing tried to keep track of overseas Chinese communities. In the 1870s, the Zongli Yamen was part of two fact-finding missions to Cuba and Peru to investigate reports of the extremely poor conditions of Chinese workers. They did so with the assistance of diplomats from Europe and the United States, and the result was an end to the most abusive practices.

A characteristic of all of these Chinese international migrant communities, especially in the Americas, was their stoicism in enduring hardship and living in poverty and isolation in foreign places where they had little or no language or cultural connections.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Education.

ENDNOTES

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