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International Graduate Student Conference Series

No. 26, 2006

Ending an Era: The Huang Chao Rebellion of the Late Tang, 874–884

Adam Fong

Adam Fong is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History, University of Hawaii at Manoa. He can be reached at adamfong@hawaii.edu.

This paper was presented at the 5th East-West Center International Graduate Student Conference, February 16-18, 2006 in Honolulu, Hawaii USA.

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Ending an Era: The Huang Chao Rebellion of the Late Tang, 874–884

Adam Fong

University of Hawaii at Manoa

adamfong@hawaii.edu

Abstract

This paper historically and analytically examines the official records of the Huang Chao rebellion in order to better understand both what avenues of resistance were open to common people during the Tang dynasty and how common people were represented in the historical record. Huang Chao was a rebel leader during the late Tang dynasty; he and his followers successfully marauded through China from 875 until his death in 884 C.E. During that time, he conquered and sacked many important cities of the empire, such as Guangzhou and the capital city, Chang'an. This decade-long rebellion has been labeled the chief reason for the fall of the Tang dynasty. The central question that will be examined is what factors of late Tang society caused the rebellion to occur and to be so successful, and how was the rebellion later reconstructed by official historians. This paper proposes that the rebellion of Huang Chao had its roots in the extreme social instability and heavy financial burdens placed on the peasants; however, the recording of the event in official histories moralized the events as the conjunction of corrupt or inept officials and persuasive but evil-minded bandits. By critically analyzing the official dynastic histories of the Tang, using a post-structuralist methodology, it is possible to uncover the official historians' biases, and come to a greater understanding of the society and events of the period. Particular attention will be paid to the methods official historians used to direct the reader's sympathy and attention. Non-Chinese sources, primarily Arabic descriptions, will also be used, both to highlight features that all accounts noted, and to fill in details that the Chinese accounts leave out. Discussion will also be made of the significance of the events verified and the events omitted from the Chinese official histories. This paper contributes to the discussion of subaltern agency, peasant resistance and historical memory, as well as to the structure of the early relationship between Chinese society and foreigners.

Huang Chao was a rebel leader during the late Tang dynasty; he and his followers successfully marauded through China from 875 until his death in 884 C.E. During that time, he conquered and sacked many important cities of the empire, such as Guangzhou and the capital city, Chang'an. This decade-long rebellion has been labeled the chief reason for the fall of the Tang dynasty. By examining the official records of the Huang Chao rebellion, it is possible to better understand both what avenues of resistance were open to common people during the Tang dynasty and how common people were represented in the historical record. These records, critically analyzed, can reveal what factors of late Tang society caused the rebellion to occur and to be so successful, as well as how the rebellion was later reconstructed by official historians. The rebellion of Huang Chao had its roots in the extreme social instability and heavy financial burdens placed on the peasants; however, the recording of the event in official histories moralized the events as the conjunction of corrupt or inept officials and persuasive but evil-minded bandits.

As one of the great peasant rebellions in China's past, the Huang Chao rebellion has attracted a lot of scholarly attention over the years. By the middle of the twentieth century, "Chinese Communists praise the ninth-century rebel leader Huang Chao as an early champion of the rights of the masses," which contrasts with the opinion of "President Chiang Kai-shek of the Republic of China, who has vigorously denounced Huang Chao and the late Ming rebel Zhang Xianzhong as 'the two most notorious brigands in Chinese history'."¹ The link between peasant rebellions and class-consciousness made by the People's Republic of China generated many theories about such movements, although this focus has changed since the market-reform period of the 1980's.² James C. Davies has developed another theoretical model for collective violence, called the J-curve. This model posits that a sharp decline in living standards after a period of rising prosperity incites people to acts of collective violence.³ This model has not remained

¹ Howard Levy, "Review of *The Righteous Uprising of Huang Ch'ao* and *The Righteous Uprising of Huang Ch'ao*" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 16.4 (Aug 1957), 612.

² See for example Frederick Wakeman, Jr., "Rebellion and Revolution: The Study of Popular Movements in Chinese History," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 36.2 (Feb 1977), 201-237, and Kwang-Ching Liu, "World View and Peasant Rebellion: Reflections on Post-Mao Historiography," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 40.2 (Feb 1981), 295-326.

³ James Chowning Davies, "The J-Curve and Power Struggle Theories of Collective Violence," *American Sociological Review* 39.4 (Aug 1974), 607-610.

uncontested,⁴ with a particularly interesting test case being an application of the J-curve to the African American urban riots of the late 1960's.⁵ The conclusion of this test case found that “fluctuation, change and ambiguity create situations highly conducive to violence” rather than a sudden reversal of sustained economic improvement;⁶ this conclusion forms the basis for revisiting the events leading up to the Huang Chao rebellion.

According to one of the earliest sources for the entire Tang dynasty, the *Jiu Tang Shu*, Huang Chao “a native of Yuan Chu in Cao Prefecture, originally was a salt merchant by profession.”⁷ This information is corroborated in the other standard history of the Tang dynasty, the *Xin Tang Shu*, which adds the details that he was “expert at striking with a sword and at mounted archery,” and “he delighted in supporting fugitives.”⁸ The difference between the two accounts can be attributed to the dates and the manner of their compilation. The *Jiu Tang Shu* was written from 940 to 945, under the supervision of Liu Xu, during the Latter Jin dynasty. The *Xin Tang Shu*, on the other hand, was compiled under Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi between 1043 and 1060 during the Northern Song period. The intricacies and politics behind the creation of official histories at this time have already been well detailed.⁹ In the estimation of another scholar, “the *Jiu Tang Shu* is more reliable than the *Xin Tang Shu*. The *Xin Tang Shu* has tables and better monographs, but much of the rest of the work was rewritten and contains many errors.”¹⁰ From observing the time it took to compile the histories, and the distance of the writers from the period being researched, the need for critical analysis when using these sources becomes readily apparent.

The salt business that supported Huang Chao's pre-rebellion life came into existence because of the disruptions of the mid-eighth century. The breakdown of the equal-field system and the existence of powerful military governors insinuated between the imperial court and the populace

⁴ See David Snyder and Charles Tilly, “On Debating and Falsifying Theories of Collective Violence,” *American Sociological Review* 39.4 (Aug 1974), 610-613.

⁵ Abraham H. Miller, Louis H. Bolce and Mark Halligan, “The J-Curve Theory and the Black Urban Riots: An Empirical Test of Progressive Relative Deprivation Theory,” *The American Political Science Review* 71.3 (Sep 1977), 964-982.

⁶ Miller et al., 980.

⁷ 曹州冤句人，本以販鹽為事。 *Jiu Tang Shu*, 200b. 5a. The translations into English from the *Jiu Tang Shu* (hereafter *JTS*) are by the author.

⁸ See Howard Levy, trans., *Biography of Huang Ch'ao* (University of California Press, 1955), 8.

⁹ See Dennis Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History Under the T'ang* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual, Revised and Enlarged* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 820.

necessitated new ways to raise revenue. Thus “the salt monopoly soon became the center’s single most important source of revenue, accounting for more than 50 percent of income by 780.”¹¹ The salt business, while good for the government, may not have been very comfortable for the salt merchants, who had to buy salt from the government “at an inflated price that was many times the cost of production.”¹² Thus, to make money, the merchants would need to increase the price of salt even higher than the government’s already inflated prices.

The key cause of the rebellion, however, appears to be bad harvests. The *Jiu Tang Shu* draws a very clear connection between the lack of food and rebellion: “In the middle of the *qian fu* period (874-880 C.E.), there were years of fierce famine; famished people became robbers, especially so in Henan.”¹³ However, this evidence of local banditry needs to be put in the larger pattern of localized rebellions in the ninth century. From the 830’s until 869, bandit groups in areas as diverse as the Sichuan-Yunnan frontier to coastal Zhejiang, including the Henan plains, roamed the countryside.¹⁴ Seen in from this perspective, the rebellion that would eventually spell the end of the dynasty is merely a continuation of the widespread social unrest in late Tang China.

Further clues to ordinary people’s lives lie in within the rhetoric of the rebels themselves. According to the *Xin Tang Shu*, even before Huang Chao became the leader of the rebellion, the rebels “distributed leaflets among the various circuits, saying that officials were avaricious and covetous, the tax levies heavy, and the rewards and punishments inequitable.”¹⁵ The *Jiu Tang Shu* describes the society of the time in unflattering terms: “the southern government offices and the northern government ministers repeatedly contradicted each other...worthy and outstanding talents abstained from anger, retreating to their fields and pools.”¹⁶ Huang Chao also “propagated the call to arms everywhere, sending out memorials arguing for rebellion, pointing all eyes to the corruption of the imperial government.”¹⁷ Within the Imperial Bodyguard,

¹¹ David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900* (Routledge, 2002), 241.

¹² Graff, 241.

¹³ 乾符中，仍歲凶荒，人饑為盜，河南尤甚。 *JTS*, 200b. 5a.

¹⁴ Graff, 242.

¹⁵ Levy, *Biography*, 8.

¹⁶ 南衙北司，迭相矛盾...賢豪忌憤，退之草澤。 *JTS*, 200b. 5b.

¹⁷ 馳檄四方，章奏論列，皆指目朝政之弊 *JTS*, 200b. 5b.

soldiers “did not know battle formation,” so, when they were called to defend the capital “fathers and sons gathered together crying, dreading to go out on the journey.”¹⁸ And when the rebels entered the capital, they told people ““King Huang will make life good, not like the Li family that had no sympathy for your lives.””¹⁹ All of these instances reveal people with very little faith or trust in their government, and a government unable to adequately meet the needs of its citizens.

The revelation of these social ruptures centers around the attitudes and opinions expressed by the people and the officials. Successive famines, in addition to being a cosmological sign of bad government, indicate the inadequacies of government administration to move goods across the country and an inability to prepare for disasters. Officials being perceived as so greedy that men who do not serve are considered “worth and outstanding talents” indicates a long local history of conflict and extraction between the local government and the people. Likewise, the latter comments of Huang Chao and his followers reveal an established and accepted narrative that distinguished the rebels from the imperial government: the government was corrupt, inept and uncaring. The use of the Imperial Bodyguard as a sinecure for the elites, however, reflects a deeper divide in late Tang society, which moves beyond the almost clichéd state/society conflict. This fact demonstrates that certain classes could evade government oppression and exploit the corruption of the government to their own benefit. Thus, when actually called up to fight, a mad scramble ensued among the elites to find replacements, since none of the wealthy citizens of the capital, who had only paid for the job for its status and lack of responsibility, knew how to fight.

This weakness of the central government—its inability to control inefficiency and subversion within its ranks—strengthened the rebels in their challenges to the central government. In this way, the rebellion that started in 875 C.E., according to the *Xin Tang Shu*,²⁰ grew to threaten all sides of the empire, conquer Chang’an, and “set the stage for the city’s final decline.”²¹ In one scholar’s opinion, the “dilatatory and treasonous behavior” of the imperial military commanders allowed the rebellion to succeed and flourish.²² This behavior can be seen in several instances.

¹⁸ 不知戰陣...父子聚哭，憚於出征。 *JTS*, 200b. 6a.

¹⁹ “黃王為生靈，不似李家不恤汝輩。” *JTS*, 200b. 6a.

²⁰ Levy, *Biography*, 8.

²¹ Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang’an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 2000), 278.

²² Levy, *Biography*, 3.

Early in the rebellion “Wang Duo, although entitled to the Punitive Officer’s power, delayed in taking the attack.”²³ Other officials were similarly reticent. One of the first officials charged with stopping the rebels, Song Wei, purportedly said “it is better for us to spare the bandits. If [Wang Xianzhi—the leader of the rebellion before Huang Chao] unfortunately becomes Son of Heaven, we will not err in our actions,” and therefore “he did not shoulder his military [responsibilities].”²⁴ Another official is quoted as saying “the nation abounds in ingrates. In times of crisis and difficulty, [the emperor] is not niggardly in his rewards. When matters become peaceful, people are incriminated. It is better to spare the bandits and hope for consequent good fortune.”²⁵ At the fall of Luoyang to Huang Chao, “the Deputy Defender of the Capital Liu Yunzhang commanded all of the officials to welcome the rebels.”²⁶ When the rebels approached Chang’an, it is implied that fleeing members of the imperial army “burned and plundered the West Market.”²⁷

This rather depressing litany of pragmatism and self-preservation squarely puts the blame on the individual officials for the success of the rebellion. This conveniently makes the success of the enemies not due to their own merits or to the rapacity of the government bodies that fostered an attitude of rebellion. Instead, it becomes a clear moral choice, of the kind that pre-modern Chinese philosophers have become famous for. However, there are certain passages that belie this ready assumption. The historians duly noted the inability of the Imperial Bodyguard to actually fight, and the withdrawal of men of talent from government positions, but they also recorded “at this time, the world had been at peace for a long time; people did not know how to soldier.”²⁸ Both Wang Xianzhi and Huang Chao asked the imperial court for official titles before they went on raids of destruction; in both cases, the court refused to acknowledge and validate their military successes.²⁹ These examples, when put together with the self-serving officials, indicate that, protestations of lasting peace aside, very few positions at that time were stable, and that given a choice, people preferred any kind of stability—which explains the fact that they

²³ 王鐸雖銜招討之權，緩于攻取。 *JTS*, 200b. 5b.

²⁴ Levy, *Biography*, 11.

²⁵ Levy, *Biography*, 20-21.

²⁶ 留守劉允章率分司官迎之。 *JTS*, 200b. 6a.

²⁷ 博野都徑還京師，燔掠西市。 *JTS*, 200b. 6a.

²⁸ 時天下承平日久，人不知兵。 *JTS*, 200b. 5b.

²⁹ 時仙芝表請符節，不允。 / 又自[黃巢]表乞安南都護，廣州節度，亦不允。 *JTS* 200b. 5a, 5b.

were “not used to soldiering”—to warfare and banditry, which they regarded with “dread.”³⁰ However, the composers of the standard histories strove to obscure the need for self-preservation in the face of a powerless government and unstable conditions with easily understandable stories of praise- and blameworthy officials.

The opinions of the composers of the standard histories clearly stand out in the text. This also illustrates the difference between the *Jiu Tang Shu* and the *Xin Tang Shu*. In the *Jiu Tang Shu* treasonous and heroic officials do appear; however, they have none of the incendiary dialogue that they receive in the *Xin Tang Shu*. Several stories of heroic resistance to the rebels also only show up in the *Xin Tang Shu*. For example, Huang Chao solicited the aid of a retired scholar Zhou Bu, who haughtily replied “‘I will not even serve the Son of Heaven; how could I serve a bandit?’ Chao was enraged at this, and so he decapitated Bu.”³¹ In a similar vein, the official Li Tiao refused to aid the rebels, saying “‘My knee can be cut off, but a memorial I cannot draft.’ Chao became enraged and killed him.”³² Whether or not these accounts were embellished, they make the moral position of the writers of the history very clear. Also, the *Xin Tang Shu* records a lengthy memorial drafted by Huang Chao when he was in Guangzhou, which enumerated the various failures of the government. These included “the control of the court by petty officials (i.e. eunuchs) and the defiling and corrupting of the imperial statutes. He also pointed out the conditions whereby ministers and eunuchs were both implicated in the exchange of bribes. In civil service examination results and the selection of officials, men of talent were frustrated.”³³ All of these concerns reflect the problems, and the understanding of those problems, facing the elites in Tang (and particularly Song dynasty) China, rather than the concerns of a salt merchant-turned-conqueror.

Even more revealing of the biases of the literati authors of the standard histories is the information that is excluded entirely. A particular case comes to light by comparing surviving Chinese and Arabic texts. At this time, trade between these two cultures flourished on land and

³⁰ See above quotations: *JTS* 200b. 5a.

³¹ Levy, *Biography*, 17.

³² Levy, *Biography*, 20.

³³ Levy, *Biography*, 18.

by sea, particularly by sea due to the fact that in this way Arab sailors came directly to China.³⁴ During Huang Chao's peregrinations across China, he sacked the administrative center of Guangzhou. In his biography in the *Jiu Tang Shu*, this event is recorded very plainly: "He looked to the south to despoil Hu and Xiang, proceeding to seize Jiao and Guang."³⁵ The *Xin Tang Shu* has a slightly lengthier account, recording "Chao ensnared Gui-guan and then advanced and plundered Guang prefecture....Swiftly, he attacked the Guang prefectural [capital] and seized Li Tiao," who is the same brave official discussed earlier.³⁶ Arabic accounts of this event, however, are much more revealing. According to one of the earliest, dated 886, "the inhabitants opposed him and he besieged them for a long while...until he triumphed over it. Then he put its inhabitants to the sword. And men experienced in their affairs have mentioned that he killed 120,000 Moslems, Jews, Christians and Magians who lived in this city and became merchants in it."³⁷ Another text, written in 943, relates "His armies increased and he conquered this city of Khanqu [Guangzhou] forcibly and killed an incalculable number of its inhabitants. And it was estimated that some 200,000 of the Moslems, Jews, Christians, and Magians [in it] were killed or drowned [through their] fear of the sword."³⁸ Aside from the inflation in the number of victims over time, the two Arabic accounts reveal the existence of a sizeable community of foreigners living in China at that time, as well as their untimely end during the Huang Chao rebellion.

Thus, the omissions in the standard dynastic histories prove to be as revealing as what was included. In this case, the total omission of the effects of Huang Chao's sack of Guangzhou, the *Khanqu* of the Arabs, symbolizes a number of things. First, it reflects the position of commerce and trade in the eyes of the literati writers. As merchants were not all that important to society, their mass slaughter in a remote city was not deemed to be important enough to be added to the dynastic histories. Second, it reveals the shift between early Tang and post-Tang view of

³⁴ Graham E. Johnson and Glen D. Peterson, *Historical Dictionary of Guangzhou (Canton) and Guangdong* (Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999), 3.

³⁵ 尋南陷湖，湘，遂據交，廣。 *JTS*, 200b.5b.

³⁶ Levy, *Biography*, 19, 20.

³⁷ Levy, *Biography*, 117. See also Gerard Ferrand, *Relations de voyages et textes géographiques arabes, persans et turks relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient du VIIIe au XVIIIe siècles*, 2 vol. (Paris, 1913-14), and Hasan ibn Yazid, Abu Zaid; al-Sirafi and Sulayman al-Tajir, *Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde; Rédigée en 851*, ed., Jean Sauvaget (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1948). "Magians" refers to people of Iranian descent that were Zoroastrian.

³⁸ Levy, *Biography*, 121.

foreigners. Many scholars have rightly pointed out the cosmopolitan and foreign-influenced nature of the Tang dynasty in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. However, in the aftermath of the An Lushan rebellion and the subsequent exactions by the Uighurs,³⁹ this open-minded attitude shifted. Therefore, while the slaughter of mere merchants itself was unremarkable, the death of foreign merchants was completely inconsequential. Third, it demonstrates the tenor of life at the local, non-elite and non-metropole levels.

The rebellion also had wide consequences for the overall demography of China. Wealthy cities and prosperous farmlands, situated in easily accessible areas, became targets for the rebels, leading people to seek safety in poor and remote places. One such place was Huizhou, since

“Hui-chou’s mountainous terrain with its caves and gullies provided shelter for those seeking relief from political disturbance in the North. Thus the main reason for initial settlement in this area was that those fleeing the North from upheavals and rebellions thought that they would be safe from these threats in Hui-chou.”⁴⁰

This left a lasting mark on the local history of the prefecture, as “a majority of the existing Hui-chou genealogies attribute the first ancestors’ settlement in the Hsin-an area to the period of the Huang Ch’ao rebellion.”⁴¹ Interesting local legends have preserved the memory of the Huang Chao rebellion as well. For example, “it has been suggested that the reason for this was that the town of Huang-tun in present day She hsien was renamed after the rebel leader in the hope that the area would no longer be liable for attack.”⁴² Nevertheless, it is clear that

the Huang Ch’ao rebellion was a great turning point in the history of Hui-chou. While the chaos continued for more than ten years, with North and Central China captured by armies “uprising like wasps” and South China devastated, Hsin-an remained relatively unscathed.⁴³

³⁹ Graff, 228.

⁴⁰ Harriet T. Zurndorfer, *Change and Continuity in Chinese Local History: The Development of Hui-chou Prefecture, 800 to 1800* (E.J. Brill, 1989), 22.

⁴¹ Zurndorfer, 23.

⁴² Zurndorfer, 22.

⁴³ Zurndorfer, 22.

A similar windfall affected the southern port of Quanzhou in Fujian province. Although the rebellion promoted the rise of a local warlord,⁴⁴ “the rebellion of Huang Chao and the subsequent chaos of the North that accompanied the collapse of Tang legitimacy prompted a massive relocation toward the more stable South.”⁴⁵ And of the places receiving these refugees, “few grew as rapidly as Quannan.”⁴⁶

In ways such as these, the importance of the Huang Chao rebellion can be gauged. Besides helping to end the Tang dynasty, destroying Chang’an and rendering it unsuitable as a capital for future dynasties, revealing and devastating the foreign communities in Tang China, and causing massive shifts in the population that would push the southern regions to economic prosperity, the records of the Huang Chao rebellion reveal a lot about the people who compiled those records. These records display the progressively expanded role for brave loyalists and despicable opportunists in literature, the heavily exploitative and administratively disorganized nature of late Tang governance, the unsettled nature of society, and the biases and prejudices of the literati class. In trying to uncover the experiences of the past, even well known and often referenced materials such as the standard dynastic histories continue to demonstrate their usefulness.

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⁴⁴ Hugh Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 38.

⁴⁵ Clark, 52.

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