

## A Study on the Forted Village System and Rural Social Order Rebuilding of Qinling-Dabashan Area in the Middle of Qing Dynasty

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### Abstract

Located in the border of Sichuan, Shanxi, and Hubei administrative regions, Qinling-Dabashan area (area between Mountain Qin and Mountain Daba) is generally considered hard to govern. As large numbers of immigrants flooded into this area in Kangxi and Qianlong period, social contradictions became increasingly irreconcilable, leading to the outbreak of the white lotus rebellion in early Jiaqing period, which not only posed a heavy blow to the ruling of the Qing government, but also collapsed the rural social order once in this area. Since Emperor Jiaqing took office, ways of dealing with the white lotus society had changed from simply suppress to nurturing local troops and building fortified villages. Through the discussion on the building process, spatial construction, internal order, role and influence of the fortified village, we can conclude that it had not only prevent the wars, but also strengthened the government's ruling on this area, which thus became an important means for the Qing Government to preserve local ruling in turmoil periods.

**Key words:** The middle of Qing dynasty; Qinling-Dabashan area; Forted village system; Social order rebuilding

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### INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the reigning period from Emperor Kangxi to Emperor Yongzheng and Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty was usually referred as “The Golden Age of Three Emperors” which witnessed China’s rapid economical and social progress. However, profound social contradictions were increasing under cover the prosperity, and the outbreak of these social contradictions were marked by the outburst of the white lotus rebellion in early Jiaqing period, which spread to Sichuan, Shaanxi, Hubei, Gansu and Henan provinces and resulted in social disorder among the border area of these five provinces. The outbreak of the white lotus rebellion was traditionally considered by scholars as a turning point of the fading of Qing dynasty. Ways of dealing with the white lotus society had changed from simply suppress to nurturing local troops and building fortified villages. According to recent researches, social reforms made by Emperor Jiaqing in his early reign led to a short time of renaissance (William, 2011, p.74). One important social reform was rebuilding the social order of the Qinling-Dabashan area. According to this issue, lots of researches focused on the history of wars in this region. However, the importance of the fortified village system which had a significant influence on the political situation of the late Qing Dynasty was often neglected. Thus, it is necessary to discuss the building process, spatial construction, internal order, role and influence of the fortified village.

### 1. SOCIAL DISORDER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE QING DYNASTY

Located in the border of Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Hubei administrative regions, Qinling-Dabashan area was mainly covered by mountains and forests. Wars in these areas during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties left

behind a barren farmland and resulted in a sharp decrease in local population. Thus, since the middle of the Qing dynasty, this area had become an attraction to a large number of refugees. At the end of the reign of Qianlong, regional population witnessed rapidly expanding, millions of refugees migrated into the Qinling-Dabashan area from Jiangxi, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hubei, Sichuan and Shaanxi (Lan, 2013, p.371). However, as the poor land was hard to make a good harvest, many people found it was difficult to feed them. Therefore, most people moved around within this area (Lan, 2013, p.403). The much too big administrative region of a county in this area as well as the traffic inconvenience led to inefficient governance on remote villages where local officers could recklessly squeeze the villagers who had no chance to sue for justice and became despair on life. Poor management of refugees led to increasingly conflicts. For instance, prefecture Xing'an, the hinterland of the Qinling-Dabashan area of mixed habitation topped the province for its murder, theft and other cases in court. To strengthen the control of mountain areas, the Qing government once tried to establish some additional states and counties, such as additional Zhuxi county in mountain areas of Hubei province. But the intensity of management was still not enough.

The heaven is high and the emperor is far away—there is no help for people in this area. The popular discontent could never be heard by the upper class. As part of the disadvantaged groups, refugees were subjected to the bullies and oppresses from local tyrants, bandits and corrupt officials. In order to protect themselves, refugees strengthened their contact by embracing fellow-townsmen, establishing new friendship and recognizing nominal kinship. They lived in groups in the forest and practice martial art for self-defense. As to these refugees, dilemmas in living materials resulted in strong request for spiritual beliefs, which lay a foundation for the spread of the white lotus society. White lotus society believed that converted people could reach the bliss and argued that people in real life should help and support each other. The doctrines demanded the followers “to help each other and rescue those in danger even by sacrificing themselves; to treat each other like brothers and sisters so one could travel around with the support of friends instead of money” (Jiang, 1980, p.20) Such doctrines had great appeal for refugees who were hungry and spread rapidly. Living in a hard and miserable life, these people formed a kind of tough character, which would become a great force once they met with a certain relief and organization.

During the reign of Qianlong emperor, wars towards rebellion of Tibetan nationality in big and small Jinchuan area, Sichuan province, as well as rebellion of Miao nationality in southeast China had further exacerbated people's misery and burden in Qinling-Dabashan area. In the sixtieth year of Qianlong emperor's ruling, rebellion

of Miao nationality occurred again. Preparing for the war, the government again recruited soldiers and gathered grain. At the same time, local officials extorted money by any means in the name of investigating the white lotus society. Officers cared only about whether you would like to hand over your money instead of you had engaged in white lotus society or not (Cao, 2012, p.427). Anyone refused to hand over their money would be stigmatized as guilty man and part of the white lotus society (He, 1978, p.2471). For instance, Chang Dankui, a magistrate of Wuchang prefecture, declared over thousands people guilty, which led to the rich bankrupted and countless poor people came to an end of their lives. People were extorted and could not find a way to live, and some of them started the idea of rising in rebellion. The rising finally came and spreads quickly in Hubei, Henan, Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. The forces of white lotus society took the guerrilla tactics, “they do not line up, do not start aggressive attacks, do not to walk in the plain, they only show in different groups with a loose form and an erratic direction.” (Wei, 1984, p.379) Although the government mobilized large troops to fight against the rebels, it was hard to make a success since the border of Hubei, Sichuan and Shaanxi were full of mountains with numerous and complicated paths. “When the governmental forces were ready to make a sudden attack on the mountain pass, the rebels had already been turned to other places without any governmental force. And the rebels left before the soldiers came. Therefore, places full of rebels had no official soldier; places full of soldiers had no rebels.” (Cao, 2012, p.244) And it eventually led to more and more rebels. Local control in the Qing dynasty was weak, which made it easier for the white lotus society army to obtain food and soldiers. Simple military deployment could not reach the purpose of eradicating wars. The real reason was that the surrender was not arranged so they made second rebel, and the landless had no chance to live a normal life would also become a member of the rebel. Thus, only by organizing the refugee properly and offering government supporting for them to make a living could eliminate conflicts from roots. And the most effectively way was to establish the fortified village system.

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## 2. SOCIAL ORDER REBUILDING THROUGH ESTABLISHING THE SYSTEM OF FORTED VILLAGE

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People living in the mountainous Qinling-Dabashan area would like to build allied fortified village during the turbulent times for self-defense, but the village often was abandoned after the war ended. In Jiaqing's reign after the outbreak of the white lotus society uprising, some far-sighted local officials and personages voluntarily mobilized forces to built fortified village to safeguard the village. After the uprising of the white lotus society

started in the sixtieth year of Qianlong' ruling, Wang Yisun, the local officer in Lvyan Post of Xiangyang, made eight articles on defense, including moving the weak and seniors to bigger village temporarily, practicing local militia at frequent times, hoarding army provisions, voting a leader in charge of the villagers, etc. It could be seen from the above that allied fortified village was in shape (Institute of History, 1981, p.244). Unfortunately, Wang Yisun died in a battle, so these defense articles were not well implemented. The area of Zhushan, Zhuxi, Yunii and Baihe was strategically located and difficult to access which dwelled fewer people. Counties there mostly had no city walls and it was difficult to hold their positions. Therefore, villagers built fortified mountain villages and practiced local militia, especially in Yunxi: "They practiced local militia and defended their homes, one leader of the local rebel was captured, so Yunxi's local militia was most famous in the northern part of Hubei." (Lan, 2013, p.369) At the beginning of the second year during Jiaqing' reign, Fangji, the magistrate of Liangshan county, followed the example of mountain city defense in the Southern Song Dynasty and built village forts in strategic places. Eventually the rebels didn't dare to attack the village and moved north to Xinning and Dazhou, and people then started to realize the importance of building fortified village. Preliminary results of fortified village were achieved. People in city Sha of Hubei began to build earth-made fortress. Located beside Jingzhou, city Sha was rich in land and water resources and densely populated. At the first year of Jiaqing, city Sha was sacked by the white lotus society and completely destroyed. During the rebuilt in the following year, city dwellers raised funds to relocate the city on the north side of the river and build forts on the eastern, western and northern sides, leave no ways for the rebels to tread on. Given their success, the government ordered that the "strategically important towns should build forts" (Wei, 1984, p383), which made a model of village forts on the plains. Other cities, such as Fancheng on the south of Xiangyang, Zaijiayi of Baofeng city, also built earth-made fortress. And in Zaijiayi, there were earth-made walls for about seven to eight Li (a Chinese unit of length; approximately 1/2 kilometer). After the invasion of bandits and rebels in Chu during the first two years of Jiaqing Emperor, residents renovated the walls with masonry. The city achieved prefect defense effect.

Fighting for the forces of the white lotus society, generals as Mingliang and Delengtai realized that simply block or cut off the rebel had no efficient and only by building forts can achieve effective defense. Therefore, they reported to the emperor in the second October of Jiaqing' reign and asked for the right to build village forts. At the meantime, they started to announce to the public to build village fort, dig deep trenches, and selected local country gentleman to set good examples. However, the government thought that general Mingliang ignored the

real urgent things but was distracted to conduct minor military affairs" (Cao,2012,p.231), making the village forts building stuck.

Gong Jinghan, the magistrate of Hechuan, started to build allied fortified villages from the third March of Jiangqing emperor's reign, he spent a large amount of money on training the militia, made strict disciplines, collected military supplies, set fortresses on strategic places and established prompt communication system for mutual support in case of emergency. He reported to the royal court about the success made in Hechuan, and named this defense as "strengthen the defenses by clearing the fields", which became popular in this area. After Lebao became the governor of Sichuan, he adopted the policy of Hechuan in eastern and northern Sichuan, people strengthen the defenses by clearing the fields, moved to the camps, trained the militia so as to defense themselves. The establishment of fortified village system in this area brought great trouble to the white lotus society. It was said that the rebels in eastern and northern Sichuan started to move to other places (Wei, 1984, p.419). After the fourth year of Jiaqing, imperial edict came that provinces in Qinling-Dabashan area should promote the system of fortified village. Lebao, SongJun, Wu Xionggang and some other officers were asked to spread this idea to local people to build fortified villages and train local militia for self-defense. Building the system of fortified village even became one indicator of governmental assessment.

Officers who achieved effective defense would be guaranteed to be reported to the royal court, and those hadn't building the system would be condemned in the royal court. Governors took the lead in building the system of fortified village would be awarded as those who had done a great job. (Wei, 1984, p.420)

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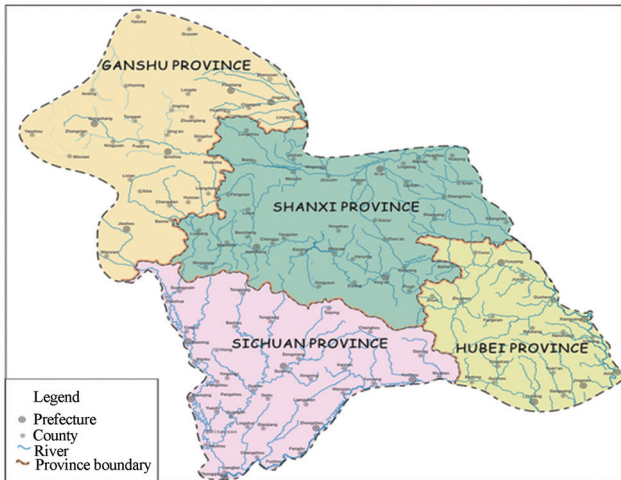
### 3. THE CONTENTS OF FORTED VILLAGE SYSTEM

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#### 3.1 Spatial Construction and Characteristics of Forted Village

The purpose of building allied village fort system in the early Jiaqing years was to fight against the white lotus society and rebuild the local social order. Therefore, the main area of building fortified village focused on the activity range of the white lotus society. After the large-scale implementation of fortified village system from the fourth year of Jiaqing, the activity range of the white lotus society mainly focused on the east side area of the Jialing River and north side of the Yangtze river in Sichuan, the north side of the Yangtze river and the west side of the Han River in Hubei province, the south side of Huain-Xi'an-Qishan mountain line in Shaanxi, the south side of the Yanchating-Guyuan line and the east side of Yaozhouting-Anding county line in Gansu, these areas were grossly consistent with the areas reported to the royal

court by the Lebao, Changlin and Wobu, who respectively were the governor of Sichuan, Shaanxi- Gansu, and Hubei (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
**Reported Area of Forted Village Building in the Early Years of Jiaqing's Reign**

Affected by the war, the area of building fortified village was enlarging. In the fifth year of Jiaqing's reign, Ran tianyuan, one of the rebel leaders, went across the Jialing River from east to west with tens of thousands of followers. Chengdu and Chongqing fell into great turmoil. Areas to the west side of Jialing River built a lot of fortified villages, such as fortified village Weicheng, Renhe, Fenggu and Yongxi in Mianzhou, fortified village Yunping and Tiansheng in Bishan county.

Local people were the main force to build the fortified village with the governmental support as a supplementary. Take province Shaanxi as an example, there were 541 fortified villages built in the first year of Jiaqing, among which 93 were funded by the government, 448 were funded by folk donation. Country gentlemen were the main strength of the folk donation. For instance, gentleman Pan Dakang was awarded by the royal court for his sole devotion of building ten fortified villages and other gentries were also rewarded respectively (Institute of History, 1981, p.293). The construction of fortified villages in Sichuan province was also mainly relied on the gentry. Take Bazhou as an example, after being invaded by the rebels of Luoqiqing and Xu Tiande in the second year of Jiaqing Emperor, it started to build fortified village, among which most were initiated and subsidized by the gentry. For example, Longchi village was built by gentry Xun Jingxian, Longxiao village by gentry Wang Ruheng, Dingshan village by gentry He Linling, Taiping village by gentry Zhangyuwen and Yingwu village by gentry Wang Sanlue.

There were three ways for the site selection of fortified village: First, places strategically located and were difficult to access. The activity range of the white lotus

society centered on mountainous area, so choose strategic places was the main way. For instance, the Jincheng fortified village in county Kai was surrounded from the east, west and north by steep precipice mountain and the only path in the south allows only one person to go through. Second, places on the plains. Cities on the relatively flat region in the Qinling-Dabashan area were vulnerable to be attacked by the rebel. It was inconvenient for these market towns to move around, so building earth-made or stone walls and digging trenches to make forts became a common way. City Sha, Fancheng and Zhajiaji mentioned above were forts as such. Thirdly, utilize the holes as forts. Qinba area was rich in karst cave, the large ones were usually chosen as forts to save money and for easier defense. To illustrate, there were dozens of hole-made fortified villages in county Kai, such as Qidong fort, Wanjia fort, etc..

The scales of the village forts had a sharp difference even for the same area. Take Kai county for an example, the Dachi village fort covered an area of dozens of square kilometers with a capacity to nearly tens of thousands of people. However, other village forts like Tiancheng and Zhongyi covered only several hundred square meters. The scale difference also could be seen in a region level, fort villages near the interior of Qinba mountain area often had small size due to the sparse population in this area. For instance, some fortified villages in Zhushan area held only dozens of households. Large scales of village forts were built in hilly lands around the northern and eastern Sichuan provinces and the both sides of the Han River in the boarder of Shaanxi and Hubei provinces due to their dense population. The construction of fort villages also should take prompt communication as a consideration. Most allied fort villages were built as mutual corner to strengthen the defense. For instance, Huayan village fort in Kai County was allied with Fuxing, Huafeng, Huaye and other fortified villages to make stronger defense. At the same time, some village forts could be divided into several layers so that even the outer forts were destroyed, they could retreat to the inner forts when the enemy breached in. The Pearl fortified villages in Kai County had two layers of forts. And the Jinyong village forts contained even eight layers which could contain nearly three thousands of people there.

Fort village always located in strategic places, so it was easy to defend and hard to attack. When the enemy forces came, the ready-made village forts could be used as defense which would save a lot of time and energy to pitch new camps. The Yingan fortified village in Kai county was famous and it was named from the third year of Jiaqing's reign for the anti-rebel army was usually fortified here. Roads in the mountains are risky and hard to access, so grain transportation became extremely difficult, sometimes might hinder military operations. Once the building of fortified villages was completed, the magistrate started to store grains in the

fort, and appropriated some fiscal budget for some reliable gentleman or elderly people to be the deliver of the grain. This brought more convenience to grain transportation once the governmental forces arrived. Take Hubei for an example, in the first six years of Jiaqing Emperor, it had spent a lot of money on military supplies, but it would still be lack of grain when the enemy invaded. Later, they delivered and stored the grain to the built village forts which resulted in a big reduction in the cost of transportation and soldiers would never be in shortage of food (Lan, 2013, p.321).

### 3.2 The Internal Order of Forted Village

The internal solidity of fortified village was very important since the fort system was an important method of pacifying the riots. The area of building the fort village was defined by the state and county magistrate, and then the work would be dispatched by committee members to implement. All the spending was supported by the government lest local officer blackmailed the village. Committee members elected the leader of the fortified village and carried on the supervision. The leader was the head of the village, and took full charge of the village affairs. The candidate should be a gentleman or an elder with a strong economic foundation and good character who was thoughtful and trustworthy. Besides, there were several vice leaders who took care of cadastral, engineering, militia, military equipments, auditing, fielding respectively. The deputy should deliberate their plans to the leader of the village and under no circumstance should they make decisions all by themselves.

The dwellers should be identified by the leader of the village and went through a long registration. After getting permission into the village, temporary inhabitants would receive a temporary access license. The permanent dweller could build a house in designated area issued by the head of the village, utilizing a doorplate as a living proof. Neighboring families took the responsibility to recognize each other as an assurance. None could step into the village without the permission of the head of the village; the civil-military member was no exception. Within the village, there were sword, spear, shotgun, signal light, gong and drum. In addition, villagers could get plumb and gunpowder at local government. Villagers who had a must to stay outside the fortified village for farming should take three days' rations, and all the other stuff should move into the village. Head of the village organized personnel to take twenty-four-hour patrolling in turn, the patroller should be disciplined and calm. Besides, some smart people were selected as scouts and messengers.

The duty of the militia was to defend the village. They could rescue each other in the neighborhood, but didn't have to follow up the enemy in a long pursuit. The government provided rations for the militia since they

fought for the village. Those behaved well in the war would be given reward, if some got injured or died in the battle, they would get corresponding pension. Those who provided food for the army of white lotus society or detained the enemy would be taken as traitors and severely punished. Besides, those who didn't inform against the traitor would also be punished. At the beginning of establishing the fortified village, the government made public that "all the villagers should try their best to safeguard their home and should not be afraid of the enemy and never give their grain or rice to the rebel." (Institute of History, 1981, Vol.5, p.289) Take Sichuan for example, governor Le Bao informed each village that "none should throw food to the rebel being afraid of them breaking into the village. If someone was found privately helped the rebel, they would be punished according to the law." (Institute of History, 1981, Vol.5, p.50) In Shaanxi, Gansu, similar official notice would be found. For those collaborationists, no matter they were ordinary people or heads of the village, would be severely punished without leniency. To illustrate, after a villager named Yu Gui in Zhongnan Mountain area was found having sold food and shoes to the soldiers of white lotus society and kept the wound soldier in his house, he was sentenced to death by the government. And two of his neighbors who were aware of this behavior but did not reported to the government were also punished severely. This case was made public to local people and everyone was afraid to make a mistake (Institute of History, 1981, Vol.5, p.155). The leader of Sanyuan fortified village was put to death by dismembering the body after being discovered that he had kept Yuan Feng, a wounded commander of the white lotus society in their village to recover. (Institute of History, 1981, Vol.5, p.156) All in all, the leader of the fortified village took full charge of the village affairs being appointed by the upper class of the government and was supervised by them.

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## 4. THE ROLE OF FORTED VILLAGE SYSTEM AND ITS INFLUENCE

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The uprising of the white lotus society in the early Jiaqing lasted for over ten years with a coverage of more than 140 counties in six provinces, namely Sichuan, Hubei, Hunan, Henan, Shaanxi, Gansu. Mobilizing over 120,000 governmental forces (excluding the militia), this uprising affected over millions of people directly, cost nearly two hundred million Liang of silver, which brought immeasurable cost to the Qing government and further its crisis in the ruling. The system of establishing fortified village had played a vital role for the Qing Court in reshaping its management framework in the border region of Sichuan, Hubei and Shaanxi during the huge turmoil.

Since the fortified village system gradually completed, residents had followed the policy of strengthening the

defenses and clearing the fields to build fortified village in the neighboring hoods and hide their grain there. Villagers conducted farming when the rebel went away and defended their home when the rebel came back. Being familiar with the rebel, villagers could always take some advantage of the rebel. Thus, the rebel reduced their activity and the area became much more peaceful. The Qing army gradually took advantage in the battlefield, “forted villages could be seen everywhere in this place, the governmental forces cooperated well with the militia in the fortified village to fight against the rebel army.” (Wei, 1984, p.408) The policy of establishing fortified village system had made great achievements. Since villagers in Sichuan built allied fortified villages, the number of rebels had been decreasing with no more than one thousand in one team and none added (Wei, 1984, p.419). By the end of June in the sixth year of Jiaqing’s ruling, ELeDengBao reported to the royal court that the number of the white lotus society army totaled no more than twenty-four thousand. The Qing forces as well as the militia were much braver than the rebel army so the number of the rebel could only reduce in stead of increasing. It could be concluded that the establishment of fortified village system greatly limited activities of the white lotus society and helped the gradually recover of local social order under control. By the end of December in the seventh year of Jiaqing’s ruling, most of the white lotus society had been eliminated. Although some remains of the white lotus society continued to fight against the Qing army, it no longer posed a threat to the ruling foundation of the Qing dynasty.

Forted village had played an important role in the war against the white lotus society and it also brought some hidden trouble for the on local control of the central government. Therefore, whether to keep the fortified village after the war became a debate focus. Changlin and Wu Xionghuang, governor of Shaanxi and Hunan-Guangzhou area respectively explicitly proposed to abolish the fortified village system. Wu Xionghuang argued that the purpose of building fortified village was to prevent villagers from disturbance of the riot which could not kill the enemy in the war. And the fortified village was easy to be surrounded by the enemy. If the village was lack of water, the inner people would surrender to the enemy. In addition, some people with bad intentions would hold the village fort to confront with the government (Institute of History, 1981, p.321). However, Le Bao, Gong Jinghan and Yan Ruyu believed that building fortified villages was not only a provisional measures in wartime to restrict the activities of the white lotus society, but also a means of maintaining local order in peacetime. In the tenth year of Jiaqing’s ruling, the emperor rewarded Le Bao in the imperial edict for the achievement he had made in establishing the fortified village system in Sichuan, Hubei and Shaanxi to fight

against the rebel army. This indicated that the court held a positive attitude towards fortified villages. Chronicles of the related states and counties of above three provinces in the late Qing dynasty all took “forted village” as an important part of the military, which also represented the wide reorganization of the system.

Due to the successful experience of dealing with the white lotus society, training militia and building fortified system became important means of the Qing court to safeguard the governance of the rural grassroots in turmoil times. In 1851, the Taiping rebelling started in Guangxi province and then spread to north like a thunderbolt with hundreds of thousands followers on the way. And then gentries in Hubei and Hunan provinces started building fortified villages and training militia which made Hubei and Hunan provinces became a bastion to counter the Taiping rebels (Yang, 2012, p.328). Later, the Qing government once again safeguarded its ruling in fighting with the Taiping army and the Nian army by building fortified villages and training militia. The fortified village system also played a vital role in Qing’s suppressing the Li-Lan uprising in Sichuan and wiping out the remains of Shi Dakai (one of the top leaders of the Taiping Heavenly).

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## CONCLUSION

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From the above analysis, we could make a conclusion: (a) the establishing of the fortified village system initiated under the circumstance of the outburst of the uprising of the white lotus society and the local social disorder. Qinba area covered a vast land but was poor in resource, numerous refugees eventually led to the outbreak of the uprising of the white lotus society. The Qing court had mobilized large number of troops and materials, but gained less achievements in fighting with the mobile fighting forces of the white lotus society. The vast rural area was a place where the white lotus society could easily get soldiers and supplies. Therefore, it was a must for the government to establish fortified villages to renew its control on the rural area; (b) the construction and management of fortified village system was conducted by the joint efforts of governmental and folk cooperation, which could not only inspire local people’s enthusiasm to protect their homes, but also greatly save the official expenses on the control of the fortified village; (c) the completion of building the fortified village system had greatly limited the activities of the white lotus society forces. The Qing army gradually had the initiative in the battle and fortified villages became the most fundamental means for the Qing army to win; (d) after the war against the white lotus society ended, fortified village system was not abolished. On the contrary, it had become an important means of maintaining local order from then on, especially in the late Qing dynasties.

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