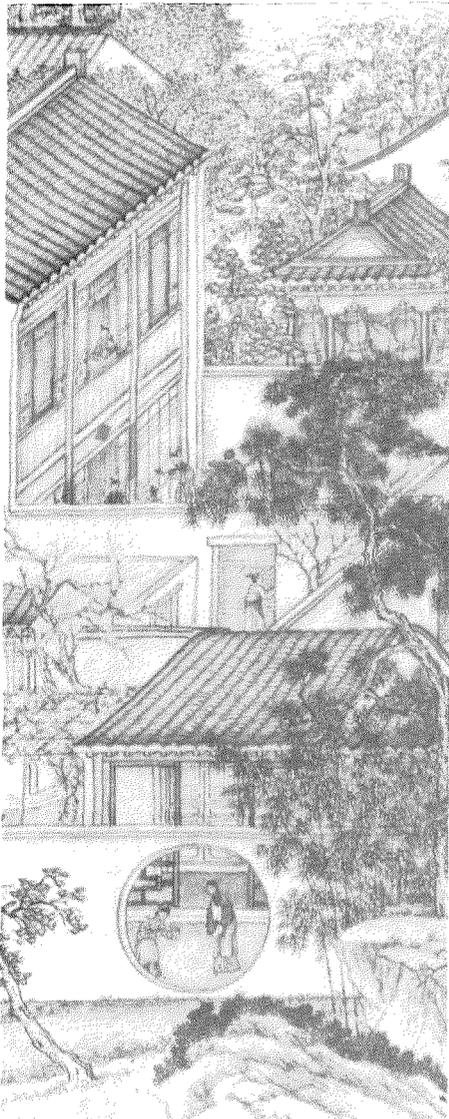


*"This is the first time anyone has looked at patterns of criminality in China."*

**Like charity, murder begins at home. 25% of the manslaughters and 37% of the premeditated murders were committed in houses, more than in any other location.**

## *Murder by the Numbers*



In China's Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), all capital crimes went through an elaborate review system whose final step was the emperor himself. Like all good bureaucracies, the system kept copious records. The information included not only particulars on the criminal and victim, but a summary of the crime and the events leading up to it. At least 300,000 such case histories survive today in the Palace Archives at Taipei and Beijing.

Associate Professor of History James Lee realized that a statistical analysis of these records to find out who was killing whom and why would reveal much about Qing society. "A similar technique has been applied to police blotters in Western countries, especially England and France," Lee says. "But this is the first time anyone has looked at patterns of criminality in China."

Then-sophomore physics major Xiaojian Yan began the work this past summer on a SURF grant, along with Research Assistants Shaoai Chi and Mei-chih Chang. They obtained microfilm copies of the Beijing records via the Genealogical Society of Utah. It took them eight weeks, translating from the Chinese as they went, to computerize the data from a single year—1738. The cases had to be input in a standardized format, but as the trio plowed through the records they found that the

reporting methods kept changing. And each time they revised the format, all the previously entered cases had to be redone, a cycle that ultimately consumed nearly half of the available time. Once the data had finally been entered, it took Yan several more weeks to complete the preliminary analysis.

The statistics show men killing and being killed far more often than women. Of 1,500 homicides studied, about 95 percent of the criminals were male, as were 80 percent of the victims. More than 60 percent of these killings were manslaughter cases, often escalating from a domestic dispute or a quarrel with neighbors. By contrast, women were three times more likely to commit premeditated murder than men. Of the 77 female criminals, 52 killed their husbands, with their lover as an accomplice. According to Yan, "Women had no social position, and couldn't own property. They had no contact with the world, so the only people they could come into conflict with were relatives. In the coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Fujian, and Guangdong, however, we found a higher percentage of female criminals and victims than inland. This may be due to greater commercialization encouraging women to have more contacts outside the family, giving them more opportunities for conflict. We can also see commercialization's influence in

*The illustrations for this article come from a Qing Dynasty scroll depicting Suzhou, a bustling commercial center near Shanghai. Painted by the court artist in 1749, the scroll is over 40 feet long, 15 inches wide, and includes some 4600 people.*

**Fields were the second most popular site for dirty deeds. 26% of all manslaughters and 22% of all premeditated murders occurred there.**



another way. These three provinces had more property-related crimes.”

Indeed, 51 percent of all murders were property crimes, often beginning as a dispute between neighbors over land, between acquaintances over unpaid loans, or between brothers over an inheritance. (The oldest son did not automatically inherit everything, and many quarrels arose when one brother felt slighted in the will, or decided to lessen the competition by removing a sibling while the father still lived.) Some of the fights about land escalated into clan wars, with hundreds of members of both extended families mixing it up throughout town and countryside. When this happened, the local militia (who acted as civil police) lay low until the dust settled, then emerged to arrest any survivors they could round up.

A few murders can be blamed on salt smugglers. Like drug trafficking today, smuggling salt was a lucrative profession, and it attracted ruthless, violent men. Several militiamen were killed trying to arrest salt runners who, like their modern counterparts, were better armed and organized. The smugglers had guns, but the militia usually had only spears.

Yan measured the strength of societal bonds and conflicts by finding how often two people in a given relationship were accomplices versus how often they killed each other. “No one has ever tried to quantify this before, as far as I know,” says Lee. The larger the accomplice/victim ratio, the stronger the bond. A ratio near 1 is ambivalent, while a ratio less than 1 shows sources of conflict. Although the data are limited because only about 30 percent of the killers had accomplices, a pattern

emerged. Not surprisingly, the father/son bond proved very strong, with a ratio greater than 10, namely 21 cases to 2. The brother/brother ratio was slightly less than 2, with 65 to 39 cases, as brothers fought together against outsiders but among themselves within the family. The uncle/nephew bond rated 0.5 (12 to 25), and more distant relatives behaved as total strangers. “We were a little surprised by this,” Yan says. “We thought that the extended-family relationships would make the bond decline gradually, but it’s more like an exponential decay.” There was little love lost between husband and wife: while the lover/lover bond rated 8.4 (67 to 8), the husband/wife bond was less than 0.001 (1 to 124).

Some cases offer cultural insights even when taken in isolation. In a case from Henan Province, Hanying Liu’s daughter was betrothed to Mao Yang. Then Liu’s wife began an affair with Hei Tian. Yang’s father found out, and demanded that Liu immediately surrender his daughter into Yang senior’s keeping to protect her from further disgrace. Liu complied, and Mao married her as soon as the arrangements could be made, even though the wedding was supposed to be several months away. The Lius were not invited. Liu, furious, plotted with his wife and her lover, Tian, promising him that if they killed the Yangs, he could marry Liu’s daughter. Tian agreed to an ambush. Liu’s wife lured Mao and his father into a convenient field, where Liu and Tian set upon them with knife and spear, finishing them off with an axe they had brought for that very job.

In a case from Jiangsu Province, Liu Gao was traveling around the country

on business. He carried a lot of cash, perhaps as much as 1,000 taels (roughly equivalent to ounces) of silver. Gao stayed in Shicheng Wang’s house for several months while conducting business in town, and had an affair with Wang’s wife at the same time. Wang discovered her infidelity, but allowed it to continue until Gao, who was a lavish gift-giver, had spent his last tael on Wang’s wife. (Wang, needless to say, took his share.) Once Gao had been bled dry, Wang threw him out into the street. Gao returned that night and broke into Wang’s house, killing the larcenous couple as they slept. “There were many cases where a husband allowed his wife to have an affair if he stood to profit from it,” Yan said. “Or a woman would be raped by a rich or powerful man, and a cash settlement would follow. Sometimes the husband would almost act as a pimp. But we see no cases of a husband allowing his mistress to do this. Usually, if a man knew his wife was having an affair, he would kill her. But if his mistress had an affair, he would kill the other man.”

Although Yan’s analysis has barely scratched the surface of the available data, Lee says his results offer a tantalizing glimpse of several facets of Qing society unexamined previously. Lee plans to continue the research with the assistance of future SURFers. “As we examine the records from other years, we hope to see trends as Qing society evolved,” Lee says. “We are also looking for regional variations. And I’d like to look for correlations between the criminal-victim relationship and the criminal’s eventual fate. Records are available for other kinds of crime, and I’d like to look at them, too.” □—DS