Broken Passage to the Summit: 
Nayancheng’s Botched Mission in the White 
Lotus War

Yingcong Dai

In ruling an extensive empire in pre-modern times, a monarch often delegated his authority to his representatives. In China, this practice reached its apogee during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) when the Manchu rulers developed a sophisticated system of appointing both provincial governors and governors-general for its regular provinces and designated administrative commissioners for its protectorates. In addition to territorial administrators, the political centre of an empire also detailed special commissioners, from time to time, to inspect its territories and to accomplish special tasks, civil or military, which served as another means to cement the bonds between the centre and the provinces. During the Qing dynasty, special commissioners sent by the imperial court were often granted the *ad hoc* title, ‘Qinchai Dachen’ or ‘Special Imperial Commissioner.’ For some commissioners who were political upstarts, a successful mission could serve as a steppingstone to more prominent positions because the achievement, as well as the experience, enhanced their credentials. But a failed mission could well lead to disgrace, punishment, or worse.

This chapter sheds light on the story of an imperial commissioner in Qing China. In 1799, a Manchu aristocrat, Nayancheng (1764–1833), was appointed as a Special Imperial Commissioner to supervise the suppression campaign against a sectarian rebellion, the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1805). Not only was he expected to inject new energy into the enervated campaign and promote the reform at the warfront, but it was also anticipated that he would prove his own worthiness so that he could be named to lead the Grand Council, the Qing monarch's key advisory body. Nevertheless, Nayancheng’s mission ended in failure, with severe consequences for him as well as for the central government. Humiliated and stripped of almost all his numerous titles, Nayancheng fell so precipitously that he had to strive the rest of his life to re-prove himself but received only more denunciation and disgrace. At the same time, Nayancheng’s downfall doomed the practice of the monarch relying on a single leading aide, which was a contributing factor to the reforms of the Qing central authorities during the transition from the Qianlong period (1736–1795) to the Jiaqing period (1796–1820).
I Nayancheng’s Meteoric Rise

Nayancheng’s failed mission occurred at a critical moment for the Qing. At the beginning of 1796, the Qianlong emperor abdicated the throne in favour of his son, the Jiaqing emperor, but continued ruling for three more years until he died at the beginning of 1799. While Qianlong’s sixty-year reign was one of the golden ages in Chinese history, the successional transition was sullied by two sizeable rebellions. In 1795, the last year of Qianlong’s reign, the Miao ethnic people in the southwest revolted, protesting Chinese immigrants’ encroachment in their home areas. The intense fighting did not end until 1797. Several months after the start of the Miao Rebellion and several days after the new Jiaqing emperor’s enthronement, the White Lotus Rebellion erupted.\(^1\) Within the year of 1796, more than a dozen uprisings occurred in western Hubei, southern Shaanxi, and north-eastern Sichuan. Taking advantage of the rebels’ vague political agenda, loose organisation, and poor military strategy and tactics, the Qing forces destroyed most of their strongholds by early 1797, and forced the rebels of Xiangyang in northern Hubei, one of the bastions of the sectarian movement, to leave Hubei for Sichuan. However, when they reached northern Sichuan in the summer of 1797, the insurgents of the two provinces failed to merge. Subsequently, about a dozen rebel groups, each numbering hundreds or thousands people, wandered and conducted guerrilla warfare in the border regions between Shaanxi and Sichuan, occasionally infiltrating into north-western Hubei and south-eastern Gansu.\(^2\)

Although the rebellion itself did not pose a grave challenge to the Qing state, the suppression campaign had been lethargic and ineffective, failing to finish off the already disarrayed insurgents year after year. By the beginning of 1799 when Qianlong died, the campaign had hit an impasse. The bungled campaign revealed a number of serious problems in the empire’s political and military

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\(^1\) First appearing in the twelfth century, the White Lotus teaching evolved into an amalgam of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Manichaeism, and other teachings with distinctive millenarian characteristics. Although numerous sects had sprung from it, both the state and some sectarian members used ‘White Lotus’ as an umbrella name to refer to various sects. In the 1790s, the Qing state’s pre-emptive actions against some of these sects prompted their leaders to plan an uprising. Meanwhile, social stresses caused by overpopulation and Qing crackdowns on salt-smuggling and coin-counterfeiting radicalised many in central China.

\(^2\) I try to provide a comprehensive picture of the rebellion, the suppression campaign, and the high politics intertwined with the war in a book-length manuscript, “The White Lotus War: Late Imperial China in Crisis.” Some of my findings have appeared in ‘Civilians Go into Battle: Hired Militias in the White Lotus War, 1796–1805,’ *Asia Major*, Third series, Volume XXII, no. 2 (2009), 145–178.