

Schan Chau, The Chau, and Westerly can and ought to be accessible." A bill was accordingly drafted by a sympathetic congressman. But missionary humanitarianism and even American trade interests were overridden by the backlash of the Far West against the supposed "yellow peril" of immigrant labor. Starting in the sandlots of San Francisco in 1876, anti-Chinese violence had spread like a wild-fire through the depressed towns and railroad camps of the Western states. In Congress, as a result, "the prejudice against the Chinese was too strong; Senator Hamlin reported the bill unfavorably, alleging that the starving would all be dead before the money could reach them in China."<sup>61</sup>

The other powers were as unrelenting as the United States in their collection of indemnities from starving China. Meanwhile, fragmentary reports began to reveal the famine's terrible toll in Shaanxi, Hebei and Henan, where, as we have seen, fierce anti-foreignism had discouraged missionary contact. It wasn't until early 1879, for example, that Europeans got a first-hand glimpse of conditions in Henan when W. Hillier, another British consul working on behalf of China Famine Relief, passed through the province en route to distribute 2,000 taels of silver in Shanxi. In south Henan the land had already returned to cultivation, and angry crowds, shouting insults and anti-foreign slogans, threatened Hillier in the streets; but in the north, where drought still reigned, living human beings remained an uncommon sight in a silent landscape:

Many towns and villages were almost empty.... [We heard] nothing but the echo of our own footsteps as we hurried through ... cities of the dead. We had the curiosity to enter into one of these houses, but the sight that awaited us there gave us both so terrible a shock that we went into no more.... We gave up talking much about the things we had seen. The misery was too deep to be discussed. Only in some homes were the dead in coffins or bricked in by their families - to foil the certain alternative of being exhumed and eaten by starving neighbors.<sup>62</sup>

Recognizing that if relief grain could not get through to them, they must go to it, entire villages continued throughout the winter of 1878-79 to desert their homes in desperate migrations toward provincial capitals and, especially, the great entrepot of Tianjin. Unwittingly they were trading starvation for the deadly epidemics being incubated in fetid relief camps and shanty towns. "A hundred thousand refugees [mainly from Shaanxi] had flocked into Tianjin, finding shel-

ter in hovels made of mud and millet stalks,' but typhus broke out and in the cold weather 400-600 died each night." Their plight was all the more pitiful because so many thousands of them were virtually naked, having sold their clothes long before for food.<sup>63</sup> This epidemic phase of the famine had a microbiological momentum that extended mortality far beyond the spatial or social boundaries of starvation per se. Thus the typhus brought by famine refugees killed Europeans and Qing nobles as well as tens of thousands of plebeian city-dwellers in Beijing and Tianjin.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, cholera, incubated in the flood-stricken districts of Fujian in 1876, worked its way north through China's coastal cities until it finally arrived in southern Japan.<sup>65</sup>

Although the monsoon had finally returned to Shanxi in summer 1878, the resumption of normal agriculture, as in the Deccan, was incredibly difficult. Writing to the British ambassador, Timothy Richard explained that "in hundreds, or even thousands, of villages seven-tenths of the population are already dead," and that only 30 percent of the normal amount of grain had been sown.<sup>66</sup> Some peasants were afraid of the violence that might result if they revealed seed corn that they had secretly hidden; while others were simply too sick or weak to work. Those who did manage to sow a crop then faced the challenge of guarding it against their famished neighbors. And when crops were finally harvested again in 1879, "a new horror then claimed more victims. Among those who had survived to enjoy eating again 'a pestilence of dysentery beat out typhus as soon as the harvest was gathered, and the stomachs of the people were inflamed by too great indulgence in unaccustomed foods.' Fields of millet stood unharvested, sagged and decayed." In this way famine and its allied diseases continued to decimate parts of north China until the beginning of 1880 or even later.<sup>67</sup>

## II. Brazil

Meanwhile, half a globe away, the interior of Brazil's Nordeste baked under a relentless sun and cloudless sky. The *sertão* is a high, rolling plain broken by smooth-top tablelands and rocky monadnocks of decomposing granite. Rainfall is dramatically orchestrated by El Niño and few landscapes change their aspect so radically between seasons or wet and dry years. "Nature here rejoices," wrote Euclydes da Cunha in his epic *Os Sertões*, "in a play of antitheses."<sup>68</sup> When, after an arduous ride from the coastal Ceará capital of Fortaleza, the famed Harvard

geologist Louis Agassiz and his wife first glimpsed the rainsoaked sertão in April 1868, they were flabbergasted by its lushness. Expecting a wasteland, they instead beheld a "verdant prairie ... beautifully green."<sup>69</sup> Yet when Herbert Smith, the "special famine correspondent" for *Scribner's Magazine*, looked down upon the Ceará interior a decade later, it was all antithesis: "a dry, cheerless desert, scorched with heat." As many as 500,000 sertanejos had just perished from hunger and smallpox.<sup>70</sup> (Da Cunha noted ghoulishly that under such conditions the bodies of dead men and horses were exquisitely mummified by the extreme aridity "without any unseemly decomposition.")<sup>71</sup>

The drought in the Nordeste began six months after the failure of the summer monsoon in India. (Indian droughts, as we shall see, tend to "lead" El Niño warmings of the tropical eastern Pacific by a season, while Brazilian *secas* "lag" by one, sometimes two seasons.) "Vague rumors of a drought," according to Smith, had first reached the coast in February 1877.<sup>72</sup> The unease was greatest in Ceará, where the previous year's harvest after scanty winter rains had been meager, but there was also concern about agricultural conditions in the high sertão of Paraíba, Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Norte. By March, the dreaded "drought winds" – the steady, dessicating northeasterlies – controlled the weather, and worried bishops ordered prayers *ad pretendam pluviam* in all the churches. "Most sertanejos," writes historian Roger Cunniff, "crossed the narrow line between hope for a belated winter and total despair during the first two weeks of April. Having already lost two plantings in the false winters of January and March, they fearfully refrained from casting what remained of their dwindling supplies when light rains appeared, lest they have nothing at all for the long treks which were already beginning, or to sustain themselves for the long months of drought most were now sure were upon them."<sup>73</sup>

Later, some savants would claim that the drought had been "due to the extreme deforestation which had been provoked by the increasing cultivation of cotton."<sup>74</sup> Certainly the collapse of the cotton boom had immiserated much of the backland population, and they now began to wander in search of work or subsistence of any kind. Some huddled around the handful of marginally prosperous market towns in the river valleys that drain the high sertão, while others, often in extended-family groups, migrated hundreds of kilometers. The *fazendeiros* (ranchers), for their part, ordered their *vaqueiros* to take part of the cattle

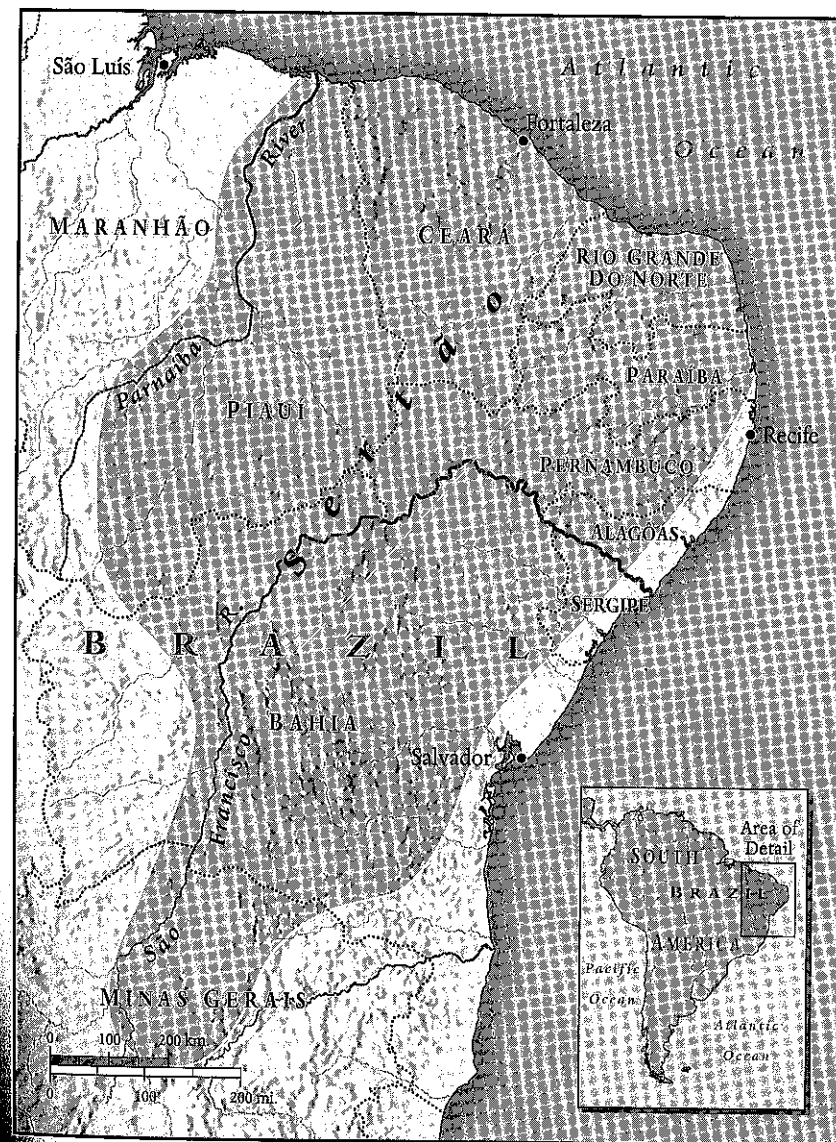


Figure 2.7 Northeast Brazil: The Grande Seca, 1876–78

to the more humid serras or across the sertão to Piauí, where the rains hadn't failed, while slaughtering the rest for hides and tallow. In some places, they shared this windfall of beef with the poor; in others, the poor simply took what they needed without permission. Sertanejos, "the most honest men in the world," began to rustle cattle, even pillage *fazendas*. In Quixeramobim, the poor briefly seized power, warning that "they do not have to die of hunger knowing that in the houses of the rich are money and food."<sup>75</sup>

#### THE SCOURGED ONES

But charity and riot only postponed starvation until mid-summer. Then, according to Smith, "good men turned away and cried in their hearts to God." Even formerly well-off fazendeiros traded their slaves for grain and deserted their dying ranches for the towns.<sup>76</sup> The poor now foraged the skeletal *caatinga* (thorn forest) for *xique-xique* cactus, the heart of the carnauba palm, even the roots of the *pao de moco*, ordinarily used by ranchers to poison anthills. ("The refugees, desperate from hunger after their long march, and not knowing the plant's toxic character, cooked and ate it. A few hours later, they were completely blind.")<sup>77</sup> In July and August, corpses began to appear by roadsides and abandoned homesteads; by September and October, dozens were dying daily and beriberi was rampant in the fetid refugee camps on the outskirts of towns like Acaracu, Ico and Telha. If the population of the sertão, especially in Ceará, were to survive in place until the winter, food had to be imported in massive quantity.<sup>78</sup>

The commercial grain trade was as hopelessly unequal to this task as in India or China. A handful of opportunist merchants gouged spectacular profits without relieving any of the hunger of the interior. "Small supplies of provision came in from other provinces and were sent to the interior towns on the backs of horses; but often the animals died on the way, or the caravans were robbed. In some places, where they had no horses, provisions were brought in on men's shoulders. The few baskets of mandioca-meal, obtained in this way, were retailed by the merchants at fabulous prices – frequently eight or ten times above the normal – so that only the rich could buy." Since most local governments, apart from the wealthy port of Recife, were already bankrupt before the onset of drought, responsibility for the emergency passed to the provincial presidents, some of whom, like the recently appointed president of Ceará, Caetano Estelita,

were utterly unfamiliar with conditions in the backlands. Although the constitution of 1824 guaranteed subsistence as a right to every Brazilian citizen, the sertanejos had few advocates. British utilitarianism and social darwinism (above all, Herbert Spencer) had made rampant inroads in Liberal thinking, while the Conservatives followed a church hierarchy that preached that the drought "was God's punishment to Brazil for accepting the materialistic ways of the nineteenth century." ("Against God," thundered a Conservative leader during a legislative debate on famine relief, "there is no virtuous insurrection.")<sup>79</sup>

Precious months, as a result, were lost in abstract philosophical debates before the Conservative Estelita – shocked by the horde of indisputably famished sertanejos suddenly descending on Fortaleza – began to send aid into the interior. By this point, there was virtually no pasturage or water left for cargo horses so it had become impractical to ship food directly from the coast. (The *Cearense* reported cases of all the animals in relief pack trains dying in futile attempts to deliver food to Taua and other interior municípios.)<sup>80</sup> The president instead sent money, much of it raised by Ceará migrants in the rest of Brazil, to the besieged sertão municipalities. It made depressingly little impact on the massive subsistence crisis.

The last hope of preventing a fatal stampede toward the coast was truly heroic action by the minister for imperial affairs, Antonio da Costa Pinto. Since the imperial government was also laboring under a heavy deficit, Costa Pinto instead chose to play the role of Sir Richard Temple, turning mere disaster into catastrophe. He authorized limited food shipments to the Nordeste but otherwise took control of relief expenditure away from the formerly autonomous provincial presidents. Meanwhile, as legislators in Rio wasted June and early July debating farfetched schemes for developing the sertão, drought refugees were spilling out of the desertified interiors of Ceará and Pernambuco towards oases like the Cariri Valley in southeastern Ceará, Triunfo in Pernambuco and Acu in Rio Grande do Norte. Far from mitigating the crisis, Cunniff points out, this simply generalized the immiseration to areas where the rains had not failed:

The masses of hungry people and cattle carried the destruction of the drought into regions that had escaped the meteorological effects. Triunfo complained that it had been converted into a "cattle ranch for the abuse of the poor by the rich." The roving cattle moved into the *agreste* regions "... smashing the cane, manioc and

other crops, and reducing to the last degree of misery and despair the class that lives exclusively from agricultural labor." Human refugees as well consumed and destroyed crops, quickly rendering the traditional agricultural hills and *brejos* nearly as desperate for food as the drought regions.<sup>81</sup>

In the Inhamuns sertão in southwestern Ceará, the leading oligarchs, the Feitosas, had temporarily quieted panic with food imports from unafflicted Piauí, while the provincial government provided some relief work for the poor. By June, however, even the well-to-do were ready to flee. "A prominent citizen of Saboeiro, Captain Salustio Ferrer, wrote on June 12 that migration was about the only course left open to most of the inhabitants of that municipio, since it was becoming increasingly difficult to find water. Many leaders of the community, he added, were forming a caravan to depart for Piauí in the following month. 'Grave must have been our sins,' Captain Ferrer wrote of the seca, 'to have deserved such horrible punishment.'" By mid-summer the region was almost deserted: only an estimated 10 percent of the population – some of them now *cangaceiros* – grimly attempted to wait out the drought on their ruined farms and fazendas. "A large number," writes Billy Jaynes Chandler, "went to Piauí, particularly those who had some resources, while others sought refuge in Ipu, the Cariri and Fortaleza."<sup>82</sup>

As the population of the sertão now drew closer to the humid *zona de mata*, the sugar planters and urban merchants were forced to weigh difficult alternatives. The frightened elites vacillated over whether to divert the *retirantes* ("more wild beasts than rational human beings") to the labor-hungry Amazon, and thereby risk losing part of their surplus workforce, or allow them into the cities where, mixing with slaves and poor artisans, they might pose an insurrectionary threat. In Fortaleza, the pharmacist Rodolfo Theofilo kept a famous diary that chronicled the growing presence of desperate backlanders. "The sad procession," he wrote, "paraded along the streets of the capital at all hours.... Real animated skeletons, with skin blackened by the dust from the roads and stuck to their bones, held out their hands begging from everyone they met." A wave of looting and theft by the refugees was countered by bourgeois vigilantism and lynching that "went unpunished because the retirante was considered a leprous dog who was going to stain the land."<sup>83</sup>

Frightened by the strange army of ghostlike sertanejos, the Liberal opposition

in Ceará reluctantly agreed to support a Conservative plan to ship the retirantes at imperial expense to the provinces of Amazonas and Para. Others were sent off to Recife, where they were loaded together with slaves on packets for transshipment to Rio and the labor-hungry southeast. Large landowners, however, expressed misgivings about such a massive exodus of workers, and Costa Pinto in Rio dragged his feet in remitting the promised subsidies. Grasping at an alternative policy to control an invasion that would eventually swell Fortaleza's population from 25,000 to 130,000, President Estelita "ordered rough shelters constructed for the hordes investing [the city] and a dole of both money and food allotted to those unable to work." Costa Pinto and his Conservative allies in Fortaleza, however, denounced this as a waste of money. Estelita, as a result, was replaced by a new, more conservative appointee, João Aguiar, who promptly discontinued the dole and public works. With Costa Pinto's support, he returned instead to the strategy of deporting the sertanejos to the rainforests. Although thousands were debarked, usually in overcrowded and squalid conditions, there was not enough coastal shipping to keep up with the influx of refugees into For-



Figure 2.8 Exodus from the Sertão

taleza and Recife. Meanwhile, on the rim of the sertão, a human dam was about to burst.<sup>84</sup>

#### THE EXODUS TO THE COAST

By New Year's Day 1878 perhaps 50,000 had died in Ceará, several tens of thousands more in other provinces of the Northeast. For a long, terrible year, the majority of the sertão's people had clung to the land, waiting for the winter rains to work magic. In January it rained for a few days, raising spirits as well as a few blades of grass. Farmers scattered some of the seeds they had carefully guarded through months of hunger. But the skies cleared and the first planting shriveled. *Scribner's* correspondent Smith, who arrived at the end of the year, interviewed scores of survivors about what happened next.

First of March, and no rains. Government aid almost withdrawn. No food left in the villages; no hope for the starving peasants. Then, as by one impulse, a wild panic caught them. Four hundred thousand, they deserted the sertão and rushed down to the coast. Oh! it was terrible, that mad flight. Over all the roads there came streams of fugitives, men and women and little children, naked, lean, famine-weak, dragging wearily across the plains, staining the rocky mountain-paths with their bleeding feet, begging, praying at every house for a morsel of food. They were famished when they started. Two, three, four days at times, they held their way; then the children lagged behind in weakness, calling vainly to their panic-wild fathers; then men and women sank and died on the stones. I have talked with men who came from the interior with the great exodus; they tell stories of suffering to wring one's heart; they tell of skeleton corpses unburied by the road-side, for a hundred thousand dead (some say a hundred and fifty thousand) were left by the way.<sup>85</sup>

The *retirada* to the coast overwhelmed provincial resources. In the drought-famine's epicenter, the state of Ceará, almost total social collapse had occurred by the spring of 1878. "The treasury was empty, commerce nonexistent, and over a hundred thousand refugees clogged the towns on and near the coast.... Outlaw bands roamed the backlands, threatening to displace completely the fragmented civil authority."<sup>86</sup> "It is horrible to see," wrote the future "saint of Joãozinho," the priest Cícero Romão Batista, "that the despair of hunger has led the indigent population to eat cows that have died of carbuncle, knowing, and saying, that they will soon die from eating them, and eating horses, dogs, cane already chewed

by others, pieces of leather, and anything else they can find. It is horror upon horror!"<sup>87</sup> A trader told Smith "that a refugee asked permission to kill rats in his store, that he might eat them." Horrifying rumors of cannibalism were relayed as far as Rio by retirantes.<sup>88</sup>

After a starving mob looted the municipal market in Fortaleza, the middle classes locked themselves in their big houses. President Aguiar, who had compounded the chaos by cutting off relief, had fled the province in early February, and power finally passed from the defeated and bitterly divided Conservatives to the Liberal Party. Equally opposed to Estelita's dole, the Liberals extolled the example of the Lytton administration in India and proposed to restore order in Ceará with strictly "scientific British methods." Their approach, as Cunniff points out, had been eloquently outlined by the famous engineer and Liberal ideologue Andre Reboucas the previous October during a three-day debate at the Polytechnic Institute in Rio:

Although he insisted that the government had a constitutional obligation to render relief to every citizen, he agreed with the rising sentiment that it should not be in the form of a dole. There was, he said, a lamentable Latin tendency to confuse relief with charity. Citing the "immortal" Richard Cobden ... he urged salaried employment on public works as the most efficient and morally appropriate remedy. He was guided by the example of the British government's handling of the severe drought in India, which had begun in 1876 and was still in progress, an account of which he had just read in the *Journal des Economistes*.<sup>89</sup>

"Motivated primarily by fears of revolution and epidemic," the new Liberal president of Ceará, José de Albuquerque, stepped up the shipments of labor-power to Amazonas and Para, in some cases allowing local elites to forcibly deport retirantes. "Consciously following the example of the British government in India, he ordered local relief committees to begin projects suitable to unskilled labor and to give relief only in exchange for labor." In Fortaleza, tens of thousands of retirantes were relocated to makeshift work camps outside the city, where they toiled in construction gangs of one hundred. Elsewhere, in Pernambuco as well as Ceará, the sertanejos provided labor armies for the railroads (most of them never completed) that the Liberals hoped to build with imperial support. Although the ration in the camps – "one-half kilogram of meat, one liter of manioc flour and one liter of a vegetable daily" – was a banquet compared to the



Temple wage, the living conditions were fully as deplorable as in the Deccan.<sup>90</sup> "The refugees," reported Smith, "were huddled together about Fortaleza and Aracaty, barely sheltered from the sun in huts of boughs or palm leaves. The camps were filthy to the last degree; no attempt was made to enforce sanitary rules."<sup>91</sup>

Before the famine, smallpox outbreaks had been confined to small scattered pockets of the sertão, and most of the population had lost the community resistance that comes from surviving regular exposure. Equally, for reasons that remain unclear, vaccination was uncommon in the rural Nordeste. As a result, the squalid work camps provided "virgin soil" for smallpox in the same way that the Indian camps had given full scope to murderous cholera outbreaks. "The greatest horror of the drought," smallpox, reached Ceará in the middle of 1878 after having ravaged the Paraíba capital of João Pessoa. Smith estimated that one-third of the population of Fortaleza died in the months of November and December 1878 alone; while Albuquerque testified that 100,000 had perished in Ceará by the end of 1879, including his own wife. "The Imperial government's only response to the emergency," says Cunniff, "was to send limited quantities of weak vaccine." Cearense refugees subsequently carried the epidemic as far afield as Belém and Rio de Janeiro.<sup>92</sup> A popular poet wrote of the despair of the retirantes trapped between starvation and disease:

Let us march on and face  
Thirty thousand epidemics  
Cold, Dropsy,  
Which no one can escape.  
Those who go to the lowlands  
Die of the epidemic,  
Those who stay in the sertão  
Go hungry every day.<sup>93</sup>

Although the government ordered a cessation of all relief in June 1879 and thousands of retirantes were forcibly expelled from Recife, the great drought did not actually end until the beginning of March 1880, when the rains turned the sertão green for the first time in more than three years. With 80 percent of the herds destroyed, even fazendeiros were temporarily forced to scratch at the



Figure 2.9 *Retirantes*: Ceará, 1877

earth for their subsistence. Much of the sertão never completely recovered. Surveys by Cearense officials over the next decade revealed the profundity of the seca's impact. In Arneiros, the *vereadores* in 1881 "estimated that 90 per cent of the inhabitants left the município during the drought and that 50 per cent of those had not returned by August 1881, two winter seasons after it ended. In regard to the recovery of the cattle industry, the provincial president reported in 1887 that in a few areas herds were beginning to near their 1876 size. Within the

Inhumans, there are many who believe that area never fully recovered from the drought of 1877-79, a result of the havoc wrought on fortunes and herds and the general feeling of demoralization which ensued. The Great Drought, it is said, cast a long shadow."<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, Gilberto Freire explains, the "apocalyptic double sevens [1877]" became the "dramatic synthesis" in Brazilian memory of the conjoined tragedies of drought and underdevelopment. Yet some sectors of the Nordeste's ruling class discovered that the "drought industry" was more profitable than the declining regional staples of sugar and cotton. This was certainly true for Singlehurst, Brocklehurst and Company, the British merchant house in Fortaleza, which supplied vast quantities of provisions to the government and transported thousands of retirantes to the Amazon on their coastal steamers. Likewise, big sugar planters profited from lucrative imperial grants for temporarily putting drought refugees to work. A precedent was thus set for allowing the *coronéis* (the landowners who dominated provincial and local politics in the Nordeste) to plunder disaster aid. "Development" became simply a euphemism for subsidizing a reactionary social order, and over the next century vast sums of "drought relief" disappeared into the sertão without leaving behind a single irrigation ditch or usable

reservoir for its long-suffering population.<sup>95</sup>

The "double sevens," however, did spell the beginning of the end to slavery in Brazil. Land, cattle and free labor in the sertão became almost valueless commodities during the drought, leaving slaves, in keen demand by Paulista coffee planters, as the major fungible asset of the fazendeiros. Selling slaves to the south, like exporting free labor to the Amazon, generated obscene prosperity amid general catastrophe. "The Baron Ibiapaba, Joaquim da Cunha Freire, for example, profited greatly, being the principal exporter of human cargo from both Fortaleza and Mossoro. From Fortaleza alone, he was reputed to have sold at least fifteen thousand slaves south." This sudden revival on a grand scale of the slave trade, with all the brutal public spectacles that accompanied it, provoked enormous public resentment, particularly in Ceará where emancipation societies formed in virtually every town. Within six years, popular agitation had not only ended slavery in Ceará, the first province to do so, but sparked similar crusades across the Northeast. Four years later, in the final twilight of the old Empire, slavery was abolished throughout Brazil.<sup>96</sup>

### Three

## Gunboats and Messiahs

Previously one laughed at the state of one's heart; now nothing at all elicits joy or laughter. It is said that people live on hope. I have no hope even of living.

—Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib

India, China and Brazil accounted for the most massive mortality, but the world drought of the 1870s had profound and deadly impacts in at least a dozen other lands. Peasant producers, as we have seen, were already reeling from the impact of the trade depression, which deepened abruptly in 1877. Drought and famine gave foreign creditors, allied with indigenous moneylenders and compradores, new opportunities to tighten control over local rural economies through debt or outright expropriation. Pauperized countrysides likewise provided rich harvests of cheap plantation labor as well as missionary converts and orphans to be raised in the faith. And where native states retained their independence, the widespread subsistence crises in Asia and Africa invited a new wave of colonial expansion that was resisted in many cases by indigenous millenarianism. El Niño was thus followed by gunboats and messiahs as well as by famine and disease.

In the Korean case, the opportunist power was Japan. In a familiar pattern, the drought in north China extended latitudinally across the Yellow Sea into Korea's breadbasket Cholla region. The ensuing famine and peasant unrest coincided with the implementation of the "open door" treaty that Meiji Japan had extorted