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The 1782 Taiwan Zhangzhou-Quanzhou Feud: A Case Study on Qing Dynasty Communal Violence

Haoze Zhou



Abstract: With the aid of Chinese primary sources and supplementary secondary sources, this essay seeks to analyze the 1782 Taiwan “subethnic feud” between the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities of Zhanghua County, which began with a personal dispute but soon escalated into a lethal rural conflict. The term “subethnic feud (分类械斗),” widely referring to early modern conflicts between different Chinese communities, emphasizes the dominant role of local identity conflicts. However, I argue that such outbursts of violence were complicated phenomena. Instead of the maturation of supposed “ethnic rivalries,” the escalation of the conflict from a personal dispute to a full-scale “rural war” is more likely the joint consequence of three contributing factors: the strong patterns of Taiwanese social organization along subethnic lines, mercenary and thug activities, and the inactivity of the local government.

Key Words: Qing China, rural China, 18th-century Taiwan, ethnic conflict, rural violence

1. Introduction: Sketch of the Feud and General Arguments

It was August 23, 1782, in Zhanghua County, Taiwan, Qing Dynasty China. A local opera performance drew crowds from neighboring villages to the village of Citongjiao. A group of men set up a gambling pit, attracting attention. Suddenly, two men engaged in a hot quarrel as one of them refused to concede losses. The debate heated up and a third man intervened, mockingly taking away the capital of the man who claimed victory. Insulted at the mockery, the man hurled forward with a knife and stabbed the stunned derider dead. The surrounding crowd burst into chaos and uproar. Some spectators rushed to seize the assailant and took him away. Little did they know that this murder case over a petty quarrel would result in deadly waves of violence that swept across the entire county, resulting in immense losses of life and property, eventually known to posterity as the 1782 Taiwan Ethnic Feud (*Taian Huilu Jiji* 1959, vol.6, doc.74). But how did this small quarrel trigger lethal violence? Both Chinese imperial bureaucrats and modern scholars characterize this feud as an example of *fenlei xiedou* (分类械斗), or subethnic feud, between the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou subethnicities of the “Han Chinese” (Ownby 1990; Lamley 1977; Yan 1998; Zhou 1836). However, was subethnic tension the sole contributing factor to subethnic violence, or were there more forces contributing to the spread and escalation of violence?

This essay proposes that three possible major factors facilitated the outbreak of the 1782 Taiwan *fenlei xiedou*: the strong patterns of Taiwanese social organization along subethnic lines, the activities of mercenaries and thugs who sought after social disruption for personal or group gains, and the inactivity of the local government. I will present the primary sources, followed by a reverse outline of secondary literature. To validate the overarching argument, I develop the following contentions. Despite strong ethnic vestiges of the conflict, there is inadequate evidence to validate a preexisting hostile relationship between communities. Instead, social organization along subethnic lines was more likely to have contributed to the high level of ethnic violence, as it created segmentation within the society and necessitated alliance networks based on subethnic

lines. In addition, as historian David Ownby (1990, 93) has proposed, local mercenaries and thugs contributed to much of the destruction and facilitated a personal vendetta into a large-scale subethnic conflict. I also take the position that governmental inaction exacerbated the intensity of the violence. However, this was not simply a result of local authorities' incompetence or corruption but also stemmed from a lack of resources to quash the unrest. I ultimately contend that the escalation of the 1782 Quan-Zhang feud from a petty gambling dispute to a deadly countryside war was not merely a continuation of old grievances — a popular view that lacks adequate evidence. Therefore, despite the wide circulation of the term “subethnic feud” to describe conflicts of this genre throughout China, this branding might be potentially misleading by hinting at a conflict that strictly adheres to ethnic and identity lines while neglecting the roles of more socioeconomic and cultural factors at work.

2. What does “Subethnic Feud” Mean in Taiwanese Context?

As both contemporary sources and modern scholars, such as David Ownby and Harry J. Lamley, characterize this conflict as *fenlei xiedou*, or “subethnic feud” (with these authors applying the term “Zhangzhou-Quanzhou Feud”), it is first necessary to clarify what “subethnicity” means within the context of this essay. The two “rival” groups engaged in the feud, the “Quanzhouers” and “Zhangzhouers,” refer to people of respectively Quanzhou or Zhangzhou ancestry, which were both Qing prefectures in China's southeastern province of Fujian. While both belong to the larger group of Han Chinese, the two communities are linguistically, historically, and culturally distinct from each other. The two peoples had different places of origin, spoke different dialects, and even worshiped separate local deities. For example, Kaizhang Shengwang (开漳圣王) was the patron god of the Zhangzhou communities, while the Quanzhouers worshiped Fude Shengshen (福德圣神). Both geographic and cultural characteristics differentiate one group from another (Yan 1998, 48-50).

Despite the widespread use of the phrase “subethnic conflicts” re-

garding identity-based feuds in Taiwan, this essay uses the term merely out of academic conventions and does not seek to provide a precise definition. Terms like “subethnicity” or “ethnicity” lack standard meanings. For instance, Ownby describes both the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities as “ethnicities”(Ownby 1990, 75-6); this treatment renders the Han Chinese people, to which both communities affiliate themselves, as a “super ethnicity,” hence eschewing the word “subethnicity.” However, in “Neighborhood Influence on the Formation of National Identity in Taiwan: Spatial Regression with Disjoint Neighborhoods” by Tse-Min Lin, Chin-En Wu, and Feng-Yu Lee (2006, 35), the authors favor treating different subcategories of Han Chinese as “subethnicities,” in the meantime categorizing the Han Chinese as an “ethnicity.” Perhaps, as Charlotte Seymour-Smith (1986, 95-6) has argued, the term “ethnicity” is fluid and dynamic; the boundaries could fluctuate as long as there are degrees of differentiation. To avoid jargon, I intend to shift away from these terminological questions.

But what kind of role did subethnic rivalry play in this conflict? Ethnic differences do not necessarily lead to conflicts. Jin’s testimony suggests that the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities were not initially openly hostile. They participated in local entertainments together, hinting at a certain level of exchanges and perhaps cooperation (albeit likely at low levels). Zhanghua Tongzhi, the official record of Zhanghua county, mentioned that the 1782 *fenlei xiedou* was the first of its kind in the county, providing further evidence against the presupposition of tensions (Zhou 1836, 1066). Instead of looking for traits of preexisting “subethnic conflicts,” it might be more helpful to comprehend why the conflict manifested itself as *fenlei xiedou*.

3. Course of Conflict

We shall first account for the course of events according to Jin Changui, *Zongbin* (总兵, roughly equivalent to military prefect) of Taiwan. During a local opera performance at the village of Citongtiao on August 23, 1782, a Quanzhouer lost a gambling game to a Zhangzhouer

named Huang Jiao but refused to admit defeat. Another Quanzhouer, Liao Lao, tried to “help” by taking away Huang Jiao’s capital, who pursued Liao and killed him. When the Quanzhouers pleaded to the local government for justice, the county magistrate, Jiao Changfa, did not persecute the guilty party, resulting in Quanzhou attacks on the offenders’ dwellings. Up to this point, the conflict was limited in scale and remained personal. The situation soon escalated when the Zhangzhouers Huang Tian and Chen Bi recruited Zhangzhou mercenaries and attacked Quanzhou villages; in response, Quanzhouers organized and armed themselves (*Taian Huilu Jiji* 1959, vol.6, doc.74). After this point, the conflict grew out of control as mobs killed and looted throughout the countryside (Xie 1807, 901). It took months for the imperial court to put down the unrest.

4. Primary Sources

To better evaluate the situation and unravel the complexities, it is imperative to utilize various primary sources to digest local customs, historical developments, governmental reactions, and imperial anxieties. The chief primary source from the viewpoint of the imperial court is the *Qingshilu* (清实录), a compilation of imperial reports and edicts, which provides perspicuity into the reactions of the Qing court toward the feud. *Taian Huilu* (台案汇录), a compendium of criminal activities in Qing Taiwan, provides the details of the case, particularly government reports. Local histories, such as *Zhanghua Xianzhi* (彰化县志) and *Dongying Jishi* (东瀛纪事), provide local information such as the constitution of the local bureaucracy, the strength of the local army, and local events left out in imperial chronicles.

5. Secondary Sources, Their Arguments, and Implications

The first crucial secondary source for this study is David Ownby’s “The Ethnic Feud in Qing Taiwan: What is this Violence Business, Anyway? An Interpretation of the 1782 Zhang-Quan *Xiedou*.” This study

raises some gripping points worth paying attention to, arguing that *fenlei xiedou* is an umbrella term that might mislead researchers to overstate ethnic rivalries, thereby overlooking other dangerous currents beneath society (Ownby 1990, 94). Ownby also states that subethnic feuds were not, as some scholars believe, mere manifestations of economic struggle (Ownby 1990, 93). This essay agrees with Ownby's opinion that researchers should not overstate the importance of ethnic rivalries and draws from his work the crucial role that mercenaries and thugs played in spreading the violence. However, Ownby claims that "the 1782 *xiedou* occurred because violent elements within Taiwan society wanted it to and those who opposed violence were not strong enough to stop them," portraying the local mercenaries as the chief culprits while depicting the local elites as disciplined men who followed a "code of honor" (Ownby 1990, 93). More precisely, however, local potentates were also responsible for the spread of violence, but to a lesser degree. For illustration, one merchant and organizer of early Quanzhou defenses, Xie Xiao, was not the "pure and simple" defender of his neighborhood but an active aggressor who commanded mobs to pillage seven neutral Zhangzhou villages (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.76). Ownby takes a step too far and downplays the role of traditional social organizations and potential ethnic rivalries.

Another important secondary source is Harry J. Lamley's "Hsieh-Tou: the Pathology of Violence in Southeastern China." Lamley highlights the importance of Chinese clan-ancestry alliances. This argument forms the basis of one primary contention in this essay. He also provides crucial information on the historical background of *xiedou* in southeastern China, and he, like Ownby, argues for the importance of local strongmen and crime bosses' roles in *xiedou* (Lamley 1977, 19-22). However, while Lamley is highly critical of the failure of the local authorities to put an end to violence, criticizing corruption and indecisiveness (Lamley 1977, 22-5), the local authorities, even if they had taken decisive action, would have been unable to stop the spread of violence. I also utilize other secondary sources for supplementary purposes.

6. Potential Reasons behind the Conflict

As Lamley and Ownby have argued, it is prudent not to presuppose the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities to harbor mutual antagonisms. Still, official accounts strongly suggest that conflict was waged along ethnic lines; both the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities quickly organized themselves with the specific aim to defend against the other subethnicity. Toward the end of the conflict, its ethnic character became intense. Jin Changui wrote that “even those who had no quarrels with the other group before now treated them as their nemeses” (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.74). Zhangzhou mobs hunted down Quanzhou refugees who fled into the mountains (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.74). Since there is no extant evidence to prove that the two communities were hostile toward each other before this conflict, we could only conjecture why the two communities quickly turned to arms by evaluating the social characteristics of Taiwan at the time. However, extant studies and primary sources suggest that the segmented patterns of social organization likely allowed the conflict to brew into *fenlei xiedou*.

The first noticeable trait of Taiwanese society was the largely separated living spaces of the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities, the two largest groups on the island. Zhangzhou and Quanzhou immigrations to Taiwan took place during separate waves of continental immigration. Quanzhouers began to arrive in Taiwan during Zheng Chenggong’s conquest of the island (1661), while Zhangzhouers chiefly embarked after the Qing conquest many decades later, leading to different settlement areas (Chen 2011, 5). *Dongying Jishi* claimed that in Taiwan, Quanzhouers claimed the more fertile coastal plains, while the Zhangzhouers, as the latecomers, mostly lived in the mountains (Lin 1880). Zhangyi, as David Ownby argues, was no different; society was segmented by localized lineages living together in single-surname villages,” and the villagers spoke a single lingo (Ownby 1977, 77-8).

This highly clustered distribution of the two groups created a favorable condition for the outburst of subethnic feuds. This pattern resulted in want of mutual interaction and the continued existence of

cultural barriers between the two groups, “each with customs and temperaments of their own” (Lin 1880). Social constructions of southern Chinese communities further exacerbated this distinctiveness. Diasporas emphasized ties with their kindred groups, while communities organized local leagues by the names of *huixiang* (assembled districts) or *huizu* (collective family) based on joint places of origin for mutual protection (Lamley 1977, 10). Therefore, even when trifle personal squabbles broke out, such feuds would attract more and more participants, who, as part of their obligation as members of an extended family or as allies of common ancestry, engaged in feuds outside of their localities: “the Zhangzhouers ally themselves with the Zhangzhouers, and the Quanzhouers ally themselves with the Quanzhouers” (Yao 2009, 157). This cohesion along ethnic lines could explain why Zhangzhou and Quanzhou villages were quick to form mutual defensive alliances against the other subethnicity. It also explains why both communities saw looting and raids, even though intended by their perpetrators only as acts of personal vengeance, as a declaration of war against an entire group. One family’s diaspora and clan members coming under attack could trigger reactions from complex networks of social alliances. This might be why Zhangzhouers threatened to kill all Quanzhouers despite that the Quanzhou community only assailed the murderer and his family, for family-identity politics demand such displays of violence as a form of “mutual aid” (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.81). Therefore, while admittedly somewhat speculative, the organization of Taiwanese society along subethnic lines was highly likely a major contributing factor behind the escalation of violence in this incident.

However, to say that the traits of social organization were the *sole* cause of the escalation of the conflict is a hyperbole. Instead, two other factors also played decisive roles in spreading violence. To begin with, mercenaries and thugs were non-negligible agents in the perpetuation and escalation of the conflict. Earlier in the struggles, local Zhangzhou leaders Huang Tian and Chen Bi paid Lin Shiqian from the Zhangzhou village of Daliyi to help protect their villages and properties from Quanzhou raids. Lin, however, went on the offensive, gathered his kindreds and other mobsters to loot and kill in ninety-one Quanzhou settlements

(*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.82). It was this attack that brought the conflict to a new level. The Daliyi Lin clan saw mercenary work as a family business. When Lin received promises of payments, he gathered more than 100 mobs, mostly Daliyi Lins, to pillage neighboring villages; the state would arrest ninety-five Daliyi Lins at the end of the violence (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.82). Local thugs were also responsible for much of the violence. Jin Dangui noted that:

In Zhangzhou villages, they would cry that the Quanzhouers were coming to kill them. In Quanzhou villages, they would cry that the Zhangzhouers were coming to surround and kill them. The result was that everyone became troubled, and small villages fled to seek the protection of large villages. Thug violence left the houses in the small villages empty which the luohanjiao (罗汉脚, a local term for gangsters, thugs, or hangers-on) burned and looted" (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.74).

Jin's report provided a piece of intriguing information: while the mercenaries conducted attacks along ethnic lines (namely, they served only employers of their subethnicity), these "hangers-on" had no subethnic affiliations; instead, their sole task was to spread disarray with banditry, and they targeted villages of both communities. The extent of their damages is unclear, but both Lamley and Ownby, via their studies of rural violence across China, concluded that they were non-negligible spreaders of country violence (Lamley 1977, 19; Ownby 1990, 92). In the particular case of the 1782 Taiwan ethnic feud, these "dangerous social elements," by seeking advancements, laid the first stone for greater violence.

Another important contributing factor to the ethnic feud was the weak government response. *Qing Shilu* and local sources indicate that many eminent local officials who could have played a role in putting the conflict to an early end failed to intervene effectively. Jiao Changfa, the local magistrate of Zhanghua County, merely organized a show trial and did not pursue apprehending the assailants, intending to appease both

parties (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc.75). Jiao was not the only official who failed to forestall the further escalation of the conflict. From October 1777 to January 1778, an irate Qianlong Emperor repeatedly ordered to bring many top administrators in Taiwan to justice for their negligence, including Jin Changui and Yade, who, despite their knowledge of the gravity of the riots, did not personally lead the missions to restore local orders themselves, but only ordered their lieutenants to capture the culprits. The principal magistrate of the island, Su Tai, even wanted to let go of the criminals as a sign of appeasement (*Qingshilu*, vol.1172). Furthermore, it took a long time for the government officials to quell the feuds and bring those responsible to justice. The feud erupted in August 1782, but until early 1783, the Qianlong Emperor estimated that the affair was only 70-80% concluded, and until May of that year, there were still rioters who evaded the grasp of law enforcement (*Qingshilu*, vol.1173-5). When reflecting on the course of the feud, the Qianlong Emperor furiously commented that “the feud in Taiwan was all but the result of indolent local officials who deserted their duties to seek personal pleasures” (*Qingshilu*, vol.1174).

Government inaction did contribute much to the escalation of the chaos. But unlike Lamley or the Emperor, who blamed it all on the prejudiced and corrupt local officials (Lamley 1977, 27-30), I am inclined to contend that while many, such as Jiao Changfa, failed to take any effective measures, even if the government had acted concretely, they might still not have taken control of the situation. *Zhanghua Xianzhi* recorded that the local government in Zhanghua hosted only a small number of officials and employees, rendering it ill-prepared to counter large-scale unrests. Despite numerous alterations made to the administrative system, the total number of bureaucrats, even with the addition of schoolmasters, never exceeded 10 (Zhou 1834, 301-3). The local military force was also inadequate to cope with mass violence. In total, 605 soldiers were in charge of defending the countryside. However, they were facing thousands of armed mobs, who, as Lamley noted, were equipped with not only traditional melee weapons but also arquebuses and other more lethal arms (Lamley 1977, 5-6). For instance, government reports reveal

that the Zhangzhou community was making cannons (*Taian Huilu Jiji*, vol.6, doc. 78), rendering them a significant force. The countryside rapidly became restive and lawless, and some of the locals were even daring enough to capture small bands of the Qing Army and burn them to death (*Qingshilu*, vol.1167). Arguably, the local government's inaction exacerbated the intensity of the feud, yet its incompetence, corruption, or insouciance were not the sole causes for inaction. It was also due to their incapability to quell the crisis, given the lack of resources.

7. Conclusion and Thoughts

To conclude, the 1782 Taiwan Quan-Zhang ethnic feud was neither the result of outright ethnic hostility, as the term “subethnic feud” might suggest, due to lack of clear evidence, nor was it, as Ownby suggests, the failure of “those who opposed violence” and the triumph of “dangerous elements.” Behind the mask of relatively peaceful coexistence, the Quanzhou and Zhangzhou communities, lacking in mutual connections and tied to ancestry-based alliance networks, sat on a powder keg, ready to explode when a conflict took place. When the conflict between the two erupted, dangerous elements of society would bolster it with their ambitions. The local government, incompetent and suffering from the want of adequate resources, stood idly by, watching the crisis grow out of control. By applying the term “ethnic feud,” we could place too much emphasis on inter-communal hatred and ignore the complexities of how numerous historical forces, some of which have little relevance to identity dynamics, interposed and interacted with one another to trigger such incidents.

Implications for *fenlei xiedou* on Taiwanese society are various. They compelled the Qing government to centralize power in Taiwan, furthering legal and administrative control over the populace. Widespread social violence also led to socio-economic disruptions and exacerbated inter-communal hatred. These conflicts even emerged as a source of chaos within the overseas Chinese diaspora. Arguably, the violence-plagued Taiwan of the 18th to 19th centuries bears little resemblance to 21st-cen-

ture Taiwanese civic society, and subethnic tensions, such as the Zhanzhou-Quanzhou feuds, have long ceased to play a role in the island's power dynamics. In the present day, such feuds still survive as part of folk memory, manifested through vestiges of communal fortifications or old "battle sites" as well as folklores on violence and xiedou-themed literature (Gu 2003). But as Luo Qingsi notes, the breakup of old clan systems and the transformation of Taiwan out of a settler society marked the subsidy and end of such conflicts (2000, 106-8). Nonetheless, the intricacies of the 1782 Taiwan subethnic feud and many similar early modern Chinese intercommunal conflicts beg us to ponder upon modern racial and ethnic conflicts and question whether "racism" and "prejudice" are the only elements conducive to such confrontations, or whether there might be structural, cultural, political or economic issues encapsulated within mutually antagonistic communities or embedded within the broader milieu.

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