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Organized Violent Conflicts over Water Control in Rural China: The Jianghan Plain, 1839-1979

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江汉平原清后期以来与水利有关的有组织的暴力冲突

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Abstract

This article explores organized violent conflicts over water control in the Jianghan plain,[2] Hubei, central China, from 1839 to 1979. These include both large-scale conflicts between residents of the upper and lower reaches of the rivers of the Jianghan plain, or between residents on the opposite banks of the same rivers, and small-scale conflicts between neighboring polders or villages or clans. The organizers of these conflicts were usually men with military experience or were community leaders, such as clan leaders and village cadres. Their methods of organization

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[2] The Jianghan plain in this research includes the following counties (or cities): Jiangling, Songzi, Gong'an, Shishou, Jianli, Honghu, Qianjiang, Mianyang, Tianmen, Hanchuan, Wuchang, Hanyang, Xiaogan, Yunmeng, Yingcheng, Jingshan, Jingmen, Zhongxiang, Dangyang, Zhijiang, and Shashi.

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included issuing flyers, establishing (illegal) dike bureaus, and mobilizing members of a whole village or clan. These kinds of organized violence over water control were civil actions involving villagers struggling to protect and promote their interests, not revolutionary action aimed at overthrowing the government. In the pre-1949 era, the government usually responded to such conflicts slowly and passively; in the post-1949 era, the government has responded quickly and actively. As a result, organized conflicts over water control occurred more often and were more violent in the pre-1949 era. This demonstrates that the occurrence of organized violent conflicts caused by human nature and environmental issues are not necessarily related to a sociopolitical form and its change, but their scope and frequency are determined by state control.

Keywords
organized violent conflicts, water control, the Jianghan plain, rural China

摘要
本文探讨华中地区湖北江汉平原自 1839 年至 1979 年间与水利有关的有组织的暴力冲突，包括河流上下游、左右岸居民之间的大规模冲突与邻垸、邻村、或不同家族之间小规模的冲突。这些冲突的组织者往往是有军事经验者或地方领袖，如族长及乡村干部。其组织方法包括发放传单、私设堤局、及全村（族）动员等。这种为争水权的有组织的暴力冲突只是老百姓为保护、促进切身利益的民事行为，不是旨在推翻政府的革命行动。冲突发生后，1949 年以前政府往往应对缓慢、被动，而 1949 年以后政府则迅速、积极处理。因此此类由水利而引起的有组织的冲突在清代民国发生较多、更具暴力。这表明这种因人本性、因自然环境原因而形成的有组织的暴力冲突与社会政治形态及其改变没有必然关系，但冲突的规模与发生的频率则与政府的控制有关。

关键词
有组织的暴力冲突，水利，江汉平原，中国农村

According to conventional wisdom, China's peasants were cowardly, afraid of the government, and always tried to keep out of trouble; according to Chinese Communist orthodoxy, they were born rebels fully imbued with revolutionary ideology and intent on overthrowing the old regime to build a new one. These two perspectives, though oversimplified and rejected by almost all students of Chinese studies, indeed represent two extremes of Chinese peasants' characteristics: either docile subjects or violent mobs. Chinese peasants, of course, are not just submissive citizens or oppressed and exploited rebels. Other than engaging in many kinds of "collective violence" (Perry, 1984), in imperial times and the Republic they also used the notion of civil justice to defend their rights through legal venues (Huang, 1996), local customs to bargain for power in daily village governance (Li, 2005), and demonstrations, riots, and petitions to protest against the government (Hung, 2011). In recent decades, all over China they have engaged in various forms of resistance to the state (Perry and Selden, 2000; Friedman et al., 2005; O'Brien and Li, 2006).

Most of these studies look at the peasants from a state-peasant perspective. In rural society, however, non-state-engaged conflicts among the peasants are more common than state-peasant conflicts. For example, while it is true that there were frequent peasant uprisings in Chinese history, more commonly peasants fought among themselves over issues such as landownership, rent, water control, and the like. Disputes over water rights were probably the most common form of violent conflicts in rural Guangdong in the eighteenth century (Buoye, 2000: 82-83). However, one might say that such disputes generally occurred between villagers by accident. The conflicts over water control in the Jianghan plain in the past one and a half centuries—the subject of this article—were different: they were not only violent, they were organized.

The Jianghan plain—which lies between the Yangzi and Han Rivers—is an alluvial plain located in the middle of the Yangzi River valley in Hubei province, central China. Hubei once was called "the province of a thousand lakes." Most of these lakes are located in the Jianghan plain. Thus there is an abundance of water—and frequently an overabundance. In the Qing dynasty, water calamities were a part, albeit a devastating part, of life in the Jianghan area. Droughts also occurred, but they were far less common than water calamities (Mei, Zhang, and Yan, 1995: 190). This sets the Jianghan plain apart from other regions of rural China. In late imperial times, the North China plain, for example, frequently suffered from both droughts and floods. Droughts lasting more than ten years were not rare, and changes in the course of the Yellow River could bring disaster to half of the North China plain. Frequent natural disasters also contributed to social chaos such as peasant rebellions. In the Yangzi delta, some communities relied on the protection of sea walls, and others also built polder dikes to protect their farmland, but the area rarely suffered a huge disaster such as those following a change in the course of the Yellow River, which was certain to nearly reshape the local ecosystem. The differences in the environment also help to explain why society in the Yangzi delta was more stable than in the North China plain.

In terms of the water control systems, in the North China plain, the main system included the Yellow River dike, which was managed by the state, and numerous wells owned by the locals. In the Yangzi delta, the state was responsible for some major water control works but the locals were in charge of their own community water-control projects. The Jianghan plain was similar to the Yangzi delta in that the state was responsible for some sections of its major dikes and the locals responsible for the rest of them as well as all polder dikes. As for the importance of flood control and irrigation, both flood control

(particularly the safety of the Yellow River dikes) and irrigation were important in the North China plain, but irrigation was more important than flood control in the Yangzi delta, while flood control was far more important than irrigation in the Jianghan plain.

The local residents of the Jianghan plain have built river dikes to protect their farmland from annual high water for about two millennia, and they began to reclaim polder (or *yuan* in the local dialect) land on a large scale a millennium ago. The endless construction of river and polder dikes in the area, however, naturally reduced the flood-discharge area of the Yangzi and the Han Rivers and the water surface of lakes, which contributed to the increased incidence of water calamities, such as flooding, inundation, and waterlogging. An observer in 1840 claimed that Hubei suffered the most water calamities of any of China's provinces, and most of these water calamities occurred in the Jianghan area (Yu, 1999 [1840]: 8). In fact, reports show that from 1736 to 1911 in the Yangzi River valley, the most frequent water calamities occurred in the Jianghan plain (Zhang Jiayan, 2011: 60). Once a water calamity occurred, the result was usually a zero-sum game, as a break in one polder's dike would reduce the pressure on the dikes of its neighboring polders; a break of a river dike in its lower reaches would reduce the pressure on dikes in its upper reaches; and a break of a river dike on one side of the river would guarantee the safety of the river dike on the other side of the river along the same section. Therefore in some extreme cases, people even deliberately broke a dike on the other side of the river or the dike of their neighbors' polders. Naturally, this would inevitably cause conflicts among people at different locations and with different interests. Local residents also frequently fought over the opening/closing of an outlet of a river. In order to exercise control over waterways and minimize the damage caused by water calamities, local residents not only engaged in fights but also pursued various lawsuits to protect their interests. In sum, the Jianghan plain is characterized by an abundance of dikes and lakes, and the local residents repeatedly suffered from water calamities, which caused frequent violent conflicts.

These conflicts rarely occurred between individual peasants. Instead, since rivers run through several counties and lakes are sometimes bordered by two or more administrative jurisdictions, any single conflict could involve dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people. In view of this background, this article will not touch upon irrigation disputes among individual villagers. Instead, it will focus on group conflicts: organized violent conflicts over water control. To be sure, violent group conflicts seldom occurred spontaneously; instead, they were usually organized and planned events. These conflicts took different forms, but most common were struggles over the closure or opening

of one river outlet or dike rupture, or over drainage and/or irrigation. These were mostly horizontal conflicts among different groups; vertical conflicts between the peasantry and the state only occurred occasionally. Participants in either of the two sides of these conflicts could come from the upper and lower reaches or two banks of the same river, or neighboring polders, villages, or clans. In terms of administrative divisions, the participants could belong to different counties, prefectures, or even provinces.

People sometimes tried to settle disputes through recourse to the law. Lawsuits, however, usually could not resolve problems. Thus more often, peasants tried to find a solution themselves via fighting. Fighting usually failed to completely solve problems either; some fights—particularly when there were deaths—would cause endless lawsuits, which was common in areas such as the lower Han River valley, where water calamities occurred almost every year. In some places, the residents of neighboring polders even became bitter enemies due to violent conflicts over the control of waterways.

Frequent water calamities and the ensuing conflicts led to a reputation of people who lived in the lower reaches of the Han River as litigious and bellicose. The Zekou case, for example, lasted from 1844 to 1913; those on either side of this extraordinarily protracted conflict fought/sued thirteen times (Da zekou cheng an, 2004). According to some Qing officials, some of these people were not struggling for water rights, but were "rebels" (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 741-45). This view was shared by Morita Akira, who thought their action was "anti-feudal" (Morita, 1974: 134). As will be seen later, these conflicts in the Qing dynasty were not vertical conflicts between the peasantry and the state; they were horizontal conflicts among the peasants. The state did not use troops to settle disputes at their very beginning; it did so only reluctantly and as a last resort. Even so, peasants were struggling for the control of waterways, not aiming at overthrowing the government; they were not rebels. In other words, these conflicts were not anti-government, or "anti-feudal" as Morita argued.

Like Morita, most scholars on the subject have focused on the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), with an occasional mention of the republican era (1912-1949) (Zhang Jiayan, 2006), but none has touched on the period of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In this article, it can be seen that organized violent conflicts over water control continued to exist in the republican and the PRC eras. As we will see, the people who participated in these violent conflicts were not rebellious peasants (although some happened to be members of the White Lotus); they were average peasants who struggled for control of waterways without any intention or ambition of overthrowing the government. Indeed, in

the PRC, these kinds of conflicts were categorized as contradictions (*maodun*) among the people, not people-enemy contradictions.

In addition, past scholarship has analyzed different forms of conflicts over water control in the Jianghan area in the Qing and the Republic, and has noted that the participants could come from different administrative divisions (Peng and Zhang, 1993; Zhang Jiayan, 2006). If rural residents who actively participated in violent conflicts came from different administrative divisions, good organization would be essential to their success. Past scholarship, however, has not explored how these peasants, sometimes numbering in the hundreds or even thousands, were able to be mobilized and organized, without the involvement of the state, when most importantly, in many cases, they were not from the same administrative unit. This article will examine this key issue.[3]

In exploring organized violent conflicts over water control in the Jianghan plain during the period from 1839 to 1979, this article will examine who were the organizers, how the peasants were mobilized and organized, and when and why the state stepped in, as well as different governmental attitudes or strategies and their varying results. The results of this research should contribute to a better understanding of Chinese society and Chinese peasants, the relationship between political ideology and society, and the relationship between human beings and their living environment.[4]

The Organizers

In China's peasant rebellions, large or small, the leaders were usually clear: such as Zhu Yuanzhang at the end of the Yuan dynasty, Li Zicheng and Zhang

[3] Water control has long been an important topic in Chinese studies. Two examples of the many works in English are Chi Ch'ao-ting (1963 [1936]) and Karl Wittfogel (1957). However, few works by scholars in the West have focused on the organizers, the organizational means, and the changes in organized violent conflicts over water control from the late Qing to the present. In China, studies of the so-called "hydraulic society" have becoming increasingly popular in recent decades; conflict over water use is a natural part of such research. It seems, however, these studies focus on the formation of those conflicts, and the relationship between the conflicts and their associated sociopolitical situation, such as in Sichuan (Chen, 2011), Shanxi (Zhang Junfeng, 2008), and the Pearl River Delta (Zhong, 2009).

[4] The main source materials in this article are memorials and case records related to water control in the Qing dynasty, gazetteers of the late Qing, the Republic, and the PRC, and archives of the Republic and the PRC. The article starts with 1839, the first year of a decades-long case in Jianli, and ends in 1979, the most recent year for which archives are available (governmental archives within the past thirty years are not open to the public), also the year that the rural reform was launched.

Xianzhong at the end of the Ming dynasty, and Hong Xiuquan of the Taiping Rebellion, and so on. Some peasant rebellions actually were named after their leaders, such as the Chen Sheng and Wu Guang Rebellion in the Qin dynasty, the Huang Chao Uprising in the Tang dynasty, and the Fang La Uprising in the Song dynasty. But who the leader or leaders in a particular conflict over water control may have been is usually unclear. In fact, there are few or no well-known leaders of conflicts over water control at all. Because these conflicts entailed violence and involved hundreds or even thousands of participants, it is certain that these were organized events, and that the organizers must have been determined or influential figures. This is indeed the case in the Jianghan area.

First, many organizers had militarily experience or a military background.

Yan Shilian, for example, was a major leader in the Zekou case. It is said that he was born to a poor family and had no access to education; but he was handsome and glib, and happened to be adopted by a general in Jingzhou. Relying on the power of this general, Yan was able to mobilize people of four counties (Qianjiang, Jianli, Mianyang, and Hanyang), and "self-appointed as the commander-in-chief," to work on the closing of the Zekou (Ze outlet, an outlet of the Han River) (Mianyang chenchang qu xiangtu zhi, 1987: 296).[5] Two other less important figures in the Zekou case also had a military background: Guan Juncai was a former military degree-holder (but was stripped of his military degree, for reasons unknown), and Wang Zifang was a former military official (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 807-13, 829-31). According to Xiao Qirong (2008: 112), the involvement of these former military personnel in the violent conflicts over Zekou reflected the militarization of local society after the Taiping Rebellion and the Nian Rebellion.

For the same reason, often those who wanted to block the Zekou outlet were quasi-military personnel—"each has guns, cannons, and [other] weapons" (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 633)—who formed a de facto paramilitary organization. Their goal, of course, was to prevent others from stopping them from blocking the outlet, not to rebel against and overthrow the government. But that does not mean that they were willing to be subject to the state. On the contrary, they mostly turned a deaf ear to the government—in any case, the state definitely did not support their behavior. In one instance, after hearing that the government had decided to destroy a dam built by them, they intentionally mobilized more people and collected more money to work on their supposedly

[5] In this source, his name is Yan Shilin, it should be Yan Shilian.

illegal project (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 641), a characteristic, of course, entirely at odds with the conventional image of obedient peasants.

This tradition carried over to the PRC. In 1954, residents of two neighboring polders in Honghu fought against each other over the closing/opening of an outfall on a dike. The commander in the fight was a certain Zhu who had practiced martial arts and served in the Guomindang army (SZ 34-2-489).[6] In 1957, fisherfolk of two clans, one from Tianmen, the other from Hanchuan, fought for the control of a lake located between these two counties. Members of the Yan clan of Hanchuan, following a red signal flag, charged at members of the Xiao clan of Tianmen (SZ 113-3-197). In 1961, in a conflict between Tianmen and Yingcheng, an organizer of Yingcheng's peasants used a bugle to sound an emergency rally and quickly called together three hundred or so people (SZ 34-5-22: 45). Even in 1979, several days after a deadly clash between residents of Yingcheng and Jingshan, the Jingshan side still prepared to deal with revenge by gathering dozens of people every day, and "hired three hatchet men [or fighters]" (SZ 67-5-91a). All of these were related to militarily experience. Some leaders of the Fankou case (which involved conflicts over the building of Fankou dam in Southeastern Hubei, 1876-1883) were degree-holders and ex-soldiers as well (Rowe, 1988: 378). It has been found that the organizers of "rightful resistance" in current rural China also "are often male and demobilized soldiers" (O'Brien and Li, 2006: 135).

Thanks to the militarily background or experience of organizers and commanders, it is understandable that many of the participants wielded weapons, such as rifles and cannons, as frequently mentioned in memorials of the Qing dynasty and recorded in gazetteers and archives of the Republic. It must be noted, however, that those weapons were not regular weapons used by troops. These so-called "rifles" were actually hunting guns, "cannons" were locally made or were blunderbusses; more commonly people used non-firearms such as spears, knives, sickles, or even fishing tridents (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 743; Mianyang chenchang qu xiangtu zhi, 1987: 298; Jianli shuili zhi, 2005: 383). In the PRC, firearms were strictly controlled; "weapons" used in fights were consequently more diverse and less lethal. In 1959, for instance, to discharge floodwater, some residents of Hanchuan forcibly dug out a dike in Mianyang, enraging its residents. In the fighting that ensued, the "weapons" used included shovels, sickles, bricks, dirt clods, and even 666 powder (hexachlorocyclohexane, a pesticide) and lime (SZ 113-2-263). In 1961, residents of Tianmen

[6] SZ 34 is category [quanzong] number, 2 is subcategory [mulu] number, and 489 is file [juan] number. The same as the following archives; all come from The Hubei Provincial Archives.

and Yingcheng fought over the use of water from a small reservoir historically shared by the two sides; the "weapons" they used were homemade guns, shoulder poles, knives, poles, shovels, plus stones (SZ 34-5-22: 45). All these weapons were non-military and not inevitably fatal.

Second, some organizers had a background as gangsters or were members of a secret society.

The influence of gangs and secret societies in pre-1949 rural China is obvious: it can be seen in the activities of the Big Sword Society and the Boxers in the North China plain, the Red Spear Society in the Huai River area, and the Gelao Brotherhood Society in the Yangzi River valley, among others. According to recent research, gangs and/or members of secret societies were also very active in rural Jianghan in the Republic (Yin, 2008). Not surprisingly, some organizers of conflicts over water control in the area had some relations with gangsters. Tang Chuanxun, the leading organizer of the thirteenth, and last, fight in the long, drawn-out Zekou feud, was a gang member. At first, Tang was a merchant in his hometown. He later moved to Hankou, a major commercial town of central China, to run an inn. There he got the chance to make friends with various gang members and gradually became their leader. Later, he went back to his hometown and became a "protector" of the area—if you paid him a "protection fee" in advance, nobody would dare to steal your property, such as cattle or farm implements; in case anything was stolen, Tang would get it back for you. Tang therefore became a very influential figure in the area (Mianyang chenchang qu xiangtu zhi, 1987: 296).

Third, community leaders served as organizers.

The Zekou case and the like were large-scale conflicts, which needed figures influential across a large area to organize and mobilize many people to participate. Smaller fights were usually organized by community leaders such as the rural gentry or clan leaders in the Qing dynasty and the Republic, or rural cadres in the Republic and the PRC. In late Qing Mianyang, two groups of neighboring polders (12 upstream polders vs. 25 downstream polders) had fought for the maintenance/opening of a dike (for the purpose of drainage), and many were killed and wounded. The leaders were the rural gentry and other powerful people in the polder communities (Mianyang Chenchang qu xiangtu zhi, 1987: 297-98). In 1942, residents of two neighboring villages in Jiangling fought over the digging of a drainage ditch; one side was led by the head of the village's public security office, the other side was led by gentry. Five people were killed; and many were wounded (Jiangling xian shuili zhi, 1984: 166).

Many of these conflicts, particularly feuds, actually occurred between clans; thus clan leaders naturally became organizers and leaders. For instance, in the

Suohe area in Hanchuan, one duty of the clan leaders (who were usually the elders of powerful and influential families) was to plan and plot battles, which were over the control of reed fields and lakes (Suohe zheng zhi, 1991: 364-65). The same was true in Hanyang, where clan leaders organized battles over the control of lakes (Hanyang xian zhi, 1989: 513).

The power of clans declined in the early years of the PRC, and rural cadres became the chief leaders. In 1953, residents of Hanchuan and Yingcheng fought for the control of a lake (for lake weeds, as manure), and the leader of Yingcheng side was a township head (SZ 34-2-383). In 1959, residents of Hanchuan and Mianyang fought for the maintenance or digging out of a dike (for the purpose of drainage), and production team leaders and production brigade leaders on both sides led the fight. The result of this clash was one drowned, ten critically wounded, and six-two otherwise wounded (SZ 113-2-263). In 1960, residents of Mianyang and Hanyang fought over dike building and the reclamation of wasteland; it was found that the organizers were village and commune cadres (SZ 34-4-506). In 1963, conflict over the use of lake weeds between these two counties again broke out, and 1,300 residents of Mianyang were reportedly organized by county leaders (SZ 34-5-313). In 1964, residents of Mianyang, led by their village leaders (the party secretary, brigade head, and others), seized some paddy fields from Hanchuan (SZ 113-2-295). In 1979, residents of Jingshan and Yingcheng fought for the control of an irrigation water source; one died and many were wounded. Later, investigators found that this was an "organized" event, with the involvement of cadres of both villages and communes (SZ 67-5-91ab, 38).

In sum, the organizers of these conflicts were usually those with military experience or background, and/or leaders of gangs or secret societies, as well as community leaders such as clan leaders in the Qing dynasty and the Republic and village cadres in the Republic and the PRC eras.

Means of Organization and Mobilization

The basic reason for the Zekou case is simple: some people of Jiangling, Qianjiang, Jianli, and Mianyang who lived on the south side of the Han River wanted to close Zekou, because the floodwater from this outlet every year flooded some of their lands. Some people of Tianmen, Hanchuan, and Hanyang who lived on the north side of the Han River wanted it to remain open, because the river dike on their side then would be safe and their lands protected. At the same time, residents of about 1,600 polders along the Chailin River, 700 polders

on one side and 900 on the other, had fought each other for decades; in terms of administrative units, everyone involved belonged to one or another of four counties (Dongjinghe difang zhi, 1994: 37, 70).

It is clear in both cases people were not acting according to administrative jurisdiction in which they lived, but according to their interests. How, then, could the above-mentioned organizers, mostly not affiliated with government at any level (except for some rural cadres in the Republic and the PRC), organize or mobilize hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people who did not belong to the same administrative unit to engage in a fatal fight? Based on memorials, gazetteers, and archival materials it can be seen that the participants in large-scale conflicts were organized or mobilized by the distribution of flyers and the establishment of (illegal) dike bureaus; participants in smaller conflicts were organized or mobilized by their polders or villages, and clans, with some aftermath measures to encourage peasants to charge forward in battle.

The Distribution of Flyers

Distributing flyers was a common means of sending messages to residents who lived in different polders. In the Zekou case, for instance, several times the organizers distributed flyers to related polders to inform the residents to come to Zekou to work on the project (either to block the outlet, or to establish a sluicegate, or to build a dike or dam), and to collect fees (in kind or in cash). The flyer also informed polder residents to bring their own tools, and called for those who were rich to contribute money and those who with strength to contribute manpower. The flyer also dealt with other matters that needed attention. The flyer of 1913 is one of the most detailed.

In this year, one hundred or so people, some in military uniforms, carrying weapons and flags, under the leadership of Tang Chunxun and others, came to block Wujia Gaikou (another name of Large Zekou [Qianjiang shuili zhi, 1997: 311, 314]). The flyer dated December 28, 1912, reads:

> [We] wish to inform you that it has been decided that the dike work on Wujia Gaikou will to start on the thirteenth day of the first month of the lunar year of Kuichou.[7] [Please] register in the Peng Family Ancestral Temple. Friends of each polder, [please] provide carrying-baskets and shovels for yourself, and bring luggage and money and

[7] According to the Chinese lunar calendar, the numbering of years using the ten heavenly stems and the twelve earthly branches, Kui is the last of the ten Heavenly Stems, and Chou is the second of the twelve Earthly Branches. In this case, the lunar year of Kuichou is 1913.

provisions for ten days. Be careful not to disturb the local residents. Notice is hereby given

Notification of an order of the military governor

Wujia Gaikou has been plagued for decades,

Now [our] petition for rebuilding has been approved; please all come to work on the project with no delay.

[Please] provide carrying-baskets, shovels, money and provisions for yourself, everyone must eagerly contend for first place.

The rotation term is ten days, per laborer per yuan of copper coin.[8]

[We] will purchase land buried or used for digging earth, [please] donate according to your ability.

[We] will purchase wood, bamboo, grass, and the like.

Be cautious when asking for lodging and cooking; do not make trouble for the residents of the area.

Everything should be enjoined to [your] representative; negligence and idleness are not allowed. (Da zekou cheng an, 2004: 8b-9a)[9]

The Wuchang Uprising, which ended China's imperial system, occurred at the end of 1911. The Republic of China was established the next year, but society became even more disorderly. That some of those who came to block this outlet were in military uniforms implies that they were probably stragglers or disbanded soldiers. That they wore military uniforms does not mean they represented the state and therefore could issue orders to the commoners, nor were they supported by the government—they claimed their notification was "an order of the military governor," but this was untrue; the military governor soon sent troops to stop them (Da zekou cheng an, 2004: 15a). But, at least at that moment, they showcased their force publicly and deterred the other side of the conflict from acting imprudently.

The information this flyer carries is clear and rich: who is responsible for tools, materials, money, and food; when, where, and how long people are require to work. And, interestingly, the flyer warns those called not to make trouble for the local people. In a word, this is a detailed and thoughtful flyer. The most ironic part of it, however, is it discourages any kind of troublemaking. But the activities the flyer announces are per se troublemaking and violence-oriented from the very beginning.

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[8] It is not clear from the flyer whether this amount of cash is the payment for the labor for the term mentioned, or the amount each peasant had to pay to the organizer, or something else.

[9] Unless mentioned otherwise, all translations in this article are mine.

The Establishment of (Illegal) Dike Bureaus

The flyers the organizers distributed at most could only deliver messages to the residents of the related polders; they had no binding force. But why did hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people answer the call of these flyers and get together to work on a project that clearly was against the wishes of the government? From the case reports submitted by the other side of the conflict, that is (mostly) the residents of Tianmen on the northern bank of the Han River, it seems some residents on the southern bank of the Han River were voluntarily working together (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 603). Even if this is the case, it is also true that many peasants were law-abiding people and did not willingly engage in any kind of troublemaking. How were the organizers able to mobilize these people to participate? They used force. One method was the establishment of (illegal) dike bureaus.

There were many dikes in the Jianghan area, and most dike fees were usually apportioned among all residents whose land benefited from the dike. To avoid surcharging and overcharging of dike fees by the responsible government officials or clerks, many dike bureaus had been established since the mid-Qing to be responsible for the collection of dike fees; the local residents were asked to select some upright, honest, and experienced gentry members to handle the matter (Jiangling xian zhi, 1876, vol. 8: 45a). In other words, the dike bureau was an agency affiliated with the government. Thus, the dike bureaus established by the organizers of these conflicts were unauthorized, and considered by the government to be *si*, or illegal.

The organizers, however, ran the dike bureaus just the same way as the legal ones. They asked the residents of the related polders to pay fees and to contribute labor according to the land they owned. What if people refused to listen to them? Then the organizers would punish these people by taking away their farm cattle (oxen), and/or knocking down their houses. It was said that the organizers were so ferocious that the residents did not dare to report to the authorities (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 748). This again demonstrates the toughness of the organizers. In the countryside of the Jianghan plain, taking away someone's farm cattle and knocking down someone's house are the most severe and cruelest way to force that person to give in. A similar method (taking away someone's ox and quilt) also had been used by the head of dike building and repair committees of some polders in the Republic to force the residents to pay fees (LS 31-4-60).

That is to say, some residents might voluntarily respond to the organizers' call; others were forced to participate.

Organized and Mobilized on the Basis of Clans

The above-mentioned methods were used to organize and mobilize hundreds and sometimes thousands of people to participate in large-scale conflicts. Smaller conflicts involving fewer people were usually organized and mobilized on the basis of clans or lineages. Armed fights between clans were common in traditional rural China. Any reason could stimulate two or more clans to fight, such as disputes over land, controversies over rituals, and in the Jianghan area, struggles for the control of dikes, waterways, and lakes.

Compared to clan power in the countryside of south China, in most parts of rural Jianghan clans were relatively weak. In some places of the Jianghan plain, however, clans were apparently also very powerful, or at least influential. In Hanchuan, for example, the Huang clan and other clans had fought for centuries for control over parts of Lake Diaocha, the largest lake in this county (Zhang Xiaoye, 2005). In fact, in the Suohe area of this county, before 1949, every large clan had trained a group of hatchet men (fighters), and stored weapons (in preparation for fighting) (Suohe zheng zhi, 1991: 365).

The same was the case in Hanyang. Armed fights among clans frequently occurred at the end of the Qing and the early Republic, for the control of reed fields, lake weeds, fishing areas, and irrigation water. In 1911, for instance, the area was hit by a severe drought and the Taidu River almost dried up. In the rush to get water from the river, two clans, each with two hundred young and middle-aged men, fought a merciless battle; some were killed, many were wounded. In 1912, the Li clan and Gao clan fought another battle for the control of a lake. The ensuing lawsuit lasted for six years. For the Gao clan, the cost of a lawsuit was apportioned among all clan members (Hanyang xian zhi, 1989: 513). In 1936, the county governments of Tianmen and Mianyang co-investigated the Lake Cheng area in order to solve a long-standing feud between the Liu clan and the Guo clan (and others) over the ownership of newly silted lakeside lands (LS 19-2-2676). In 1947, an armed clash over the control of lake land broke out between the Zhang clan and the Guo clan of Tianmen, because "the Zhang clan is large, has many members, and is fond of fighting" (LS 1-4-820).

Clan-based fights continued in the early PRC. In 1957, to control a lake shared by two clans (of two counties), the Yan clan of Hanchuan mustered 43 fishing boats and 140 men in total in a battle with the Xiao clan of Tianmen (SZ 113-3-197). In 1968 in Yingcheng, several hundred fisherfork of two clans engaged in a ferocious melee over fishing; fifteen were wounded, and six were killed (Yingcheng xian zhi, 1992: 205).

Organized by Polder or Administrative Units (Commune, Brigade, Team)

With the increase of environmental deterioration in the Jianghan plain in the late Qing, conflicts over the control of waterways became more violent. The breach of the Chailin River dike at Zibeiyuan in 1839, for example, brought the residents of hundreds of polders into violent conflict. Since 1839, the residents of Jianli who lived on the upper reaches and the residents of Mianyang who lived on the lower reaches of this river continued to fight over the blockade of the breach. They hated each other so much that even relatives who lived in different counties were thought of as enemies. Small clashes gradually evolved into large-scale battles. Battles between fully armed residents of Jianli and Mianyang in 1881 alone reportedly caused thousands of deaths. In 1882, residents of seven hundred or so polders on the southern side of this river and residents of nine hundred or so polders on the northern side of this river joined in the battle (Peng and Zhang, 1993: 225; Dongjinghe difang zhi, 1994: 70).

This tradition continued in the early PRC. For instance, in Honghu, where residents of an upstream polder and a downstream polder had fought and sued for control of a drainage ditch for two centuries, conflict exploded again in 1954. The organizer of the upstream polder called a mass rally to decide to not allow the downstream polder to block the drainage ditch; the organizers also claimed that "if there is not enough gunpowder, each household has to contribute a liter of peas to buy [gunpowder]" (SZ 34-2-489). Both sides of the conflict were organized by polder.

One polder could include one or more villages. In the early years of the PRC, when the state deeply penetrated into rural society, local administrative units, such as the production team (village), the production brigade (administrative village), and even the township began to become the basis of the organization of violent conflicts over water control in the Jianghan area. For example, in 1952 there was a abortive violent conflict in Zhongxiang organized by townships (Zhongxiang shuili zhi, 1998: 241). In 1979, to get precious irrigation water, a melee erupted between the residents of a production team in Jingshan and a production team (backed by its brigade) in Yingcheng (SZ 67-5-91b). The organizing unit in this case was the production team.

In some places, such as the Suohe area, where clans had been powerful in the pre-1949 era, the sense of attachment to a clan gradually shifted to the sense of attachment to a territory in the post-1949 era. Concomitantly, the organizing unit for conflicts over water control shifted from clans to production teams and villages (Suohe zheng zhi, 1991: 365).

Some Organizing Principles and Aftermath Measures

Participants in these conflicts not only had to contribute money and labor, but also ran the risk of being wounded or even killed—a not very large-scale battle in Qianjiang in 1884, over the control of a sluicegate, resulted in thirty-seven deaths and seventy-six injuries (Qianjiang shuili zhi, 1997: 311). The following paragraphs will discuss some organization principles and aftermath measures, including force and the obligation of clan regulations, used by the organizers to push people to charge ahead in battle.

The use of force has been mentioned earlier, as in the Zekou case in which some people were forced to participate; otherwise their cattle would be taken away and their houses would be torn down. In Honghu in the early PRC, when a battle was imminent, the organizer promised that if someone was killed, the community would be responsible for the funeral expenses; if someone on the other side was killed, he would turn himself in to the authorities and pay this with his own life. "That is the decision, we must abide by it. . . . No one can sneak away before battle starts" (SZ 34-2-489). In Yingcheng in 1953 a cadre warned that those who did not want to participate in a fight would have to contribute a sum of money, and middle peasants who did not go to fight would not get one share in the future (SZ 34-2-383).[10]

In the pre-1949 era, there was a special kind of pre-battle arrangement in Honghu where armed fights frequently occurred due to conflicts over drainage. Lawsuits ensued after fatal fights. The leaders (landlords) believed that one death on their side would ensure that they would win the case. Thus, a poor peasant was chosen to be beaten to death in the battle by his own people; then his fellow villagers would use his death as the basis for a lawsuit against the opposing side. The family of the one chosen to die was promised that it would be well taken care of by the community. Eighteen such victims were killed by their own people in thirty-six clashes led by two landlords in one township in the period from 1933 to 1947 alone. Many of those families, tragically, were not taken care of as promised (Honghu xian zhi, 1992: 408).

Clan members were bound by clan regulations. For example, in the Suohe area before 1949, whenever a battle was about to begin, all males of the clan would drink at a dinner gathering. Everyone had to fight, no one was allowed to sneak away; those killed would be posthumously hailed as martyrs (with some monetary compensation to the family) (Suohe zheng zhi, 1991: 365). In

[10] The original material did not make clear one share of what. It seems it means one share of everything.

this case, the clan regulations made it very clear that every male member had to participate; there was no other option.

As mentioned earlier, for larger-scale battles over water control, the organizers would distribute flyers calling on the residents of the related polders to participate. The organizers also would set up (illegal) dike bureaus and require these residents to pay fees and contribute labor (exacted by force in some cases). For smaller-scale conflicts, the participants could be organized and mobilized on the basis of clans or polders, or in the PRC era, administrative units such as the production team, the brigade, or even the commune or township. In some clans and polders, there were some principles that compelled members to participate.

Governmental Attitudes toward and Reactions to Organized Violent Conflicts over Water Control in the Qing Dynasty and the Republic

Many conflicts over water control ended up in violence, but they did not begin that way. If the government had reacted promptly and correctly, in many instances it could have forestalled a violent outcome. The Qing provincial government, however, usually only issued an order to the prefect and asked him to take action; he then transferred the order to the county magistrate to ask the people to stop. The exchange of documents among different levels of government, of course, was of no avail in settling disputes. The Qing government usually only stepped in after things were almost out of control.

Among the Qing governmental officials, the county magistrate was the key. On the one hand, as the lowest-ranked formal official, he certainly needed to represent the interests of the local area he served. Moreover, the effectiveness of his governance, such as whether there were water calamities or not, whether social order was maintained or not, whether the tax quota was met or not, was an important criterion for his assessment and promotion. On the other hand, he also had to obey any orders issued by the upper levels of government. It would be fine if an order was favorable to him and his county; but if an order ran counter to his interests and that of his county, he had to make a choice between the upper levels of government and his county—there was no middle ground. Most times, he would obey the upper levels of government. But sometimes he did not. The magistrate of Jiangling, for example, once organized his people in 1882 to open a river outlet by force, which caused a battle between the residents who lived on either side of this river (Dongjinghe difang zhi, 1994: 70).

The situation of the prefect was no better. He had to obey the orders of the governor; he also needed to consider the requirements of the magistrates. Things would be more difficult to handle if a conflict occurred in different counties of his prefecture—if this was the case, he might try to work out a compromise by putting the blame on the two parties equally. But this kind of moderation usually did not work. It is just because of such indecisiveness of Qing governmental officials that organized violent conflicts over water control, such as in the Zekou case, occurred again and again on the lower reaches of the Han River.

As for organizers—especially those on the initiating side—of conflicts, they not only used force to collect fees and recruit participants, but also worked out regulations to monitor those participants. As a result, the discipline of the participants, the weapons they carried, and the militarily background of the leaders, combined to create quasi-military organizations. To make things worse, they frequently refused to yield to the government; at one time, they even surrounded the sub-prefecture courtyard. To the state, all of these were crystal-clear signs of rebellion. Even though they had no intention of rebelling, once they were labeled bandits and rebels, they became the enemy of the state, which gave the state a legitimate basis for military suppression.

A typical case occurred in 1874. This was the fifth of the thirteen clashes of the Zekou case, and the only time that the participants directly collided with the state. The drama reached its climax when the participants, led by Yan Shilian, bullied the government into meeting their demands. According to a report reported by the magistrate of Mianyang sub-prefecture:

> The illegal leader Yan Shilian . . . again leading two thousand people came to Mianyang. One thousand [of them], put aside their flags and weapons at the Dongyue Temple outside the city, and entered the city through five city gates. . . . [They] surrounded the yamen compound of Mianyang sub-prefecture . . . and forced me to give them 60 notifications that allow them to collect fees, and 100 strings of meal fees. They looked formidable and similar to rebels. . . . [I] therefore wrote them 60 notifications one after another and gave them 100 strings as meal fees. [Only then did] they withdraw from the city. . . . According to my investigation, this time Yan Shilian got together even more people, many of them carrying spears, sickles, and knives; their formation was clear and they marched in step; anyone who violated discipline would soon be taken to [their] court to be accused and punished. [What they did] is unpredictable. . . . The rebellious intent of their behavior is obviously clear . . . and Yan Shilian was originally a White Lotus bandit. . . . Most of them are adherents of the White Lotus. [If we] do not disband their companies and arrest their adherents as soon as possible, the disaster in the future will be beyond description. (Xiangdi cheng an, 1969: 741-45)

A typical example of a folk Buddhist sect, the White Lotus was popular from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries; in the Qing dynasty, its followers launched two uprisings, in 1796 and 1813 (Overmyer, 1976: 73, 105). Understandably, the Qing government was hostile to the White Lotus. Yan Shilian and some of his men might have happened to be members of the White Lotus. Even so, this can only add one more explanation of why Yan was able to gather them together; it is clear that their intention to control waterways had nothing to do with the tenets of the White Lotus. As in the above-report noted, Yan Shilian and his men actually did not carry their weapons with them when they entered the city. So, clearly they had no intention of rebelling against the government. Using Ho-Fung Hung's categories, they were at most violent protestors (Hung, 2011: 59-60). According to Xiao Qirong, these people were tired of government's neglect of water control in the area and used violence to "struggle for their rights to survival and development" (2008: 114). But the fact that the magistrate labeled them White Lotus rebels and bandits gave the state a perfect excuse for a military crackdown. The goal of the government, of course, was not to settle conflicts over water control, but to wipe out any potential threat. What must have particularly frightened the government officials was that Yan and his men were highly disciplined. With this kind of quasi-military organization and its actions, particularly their besieging of the yamen compound, the policy of any government had to be absolutely zero tolerance.

According to Marxist ideology, this is a perfect example of a peasants' revolutionary rebellion, as the peasants were so oppressed and exploited that they rebelled against the oppressing and exploiting class—in this case, the magistrate and the sub-prefecture yamen. It is probably by this logic that Morita viewed this case as representing a peasants' anti-feudal movement in the Qing dynasty. The reality, as discussed above, is that Yan Shilian and his men had no intention of overthrowing the regime and establishing a new one, as Zhu Yuanzhang and Li Zhicheng had done; nor did they want to be bandits holed up in remote mountainous areas and frequently plundering and terrorizing the locals. What they wanted was approval from the local government allowing them to collect fees for a dike project. To the Qing government officials, however, this was a typical rebellious behavior that threatened social order and imperial rule, and could not be tolerated under any circumstances. Yan Shilian was soon arrested and sentenced to death.

In another case, the participants in a battle in Mianyang even dared to fire on the Qing soldiers who were sent by the government to suppress the disorder. This should be understood as self-defense, and again, not as rebellion. In

this case the government also called the leader a bandit and sentenced him to death (but he was released later) (Xiantao shuili zhi, 2008: 474). In fact, the Qing government usually labeled those who were directly involved in violence over water control as bandits. In 1882, the residents who lived on either side of the Zibeiyuan engaged in violent conflicts. According to a memorial, "in this past winter and this spring, crafty people living on both banks each recruited bandits to burn and kill each other" (Zai xu xing shui jin jian, 1970 [1942]: 471).

That is to say, officials themselves usually did not view the peasants as rebels or enemies of the government. In 1876, the prefect of Jingzhou went to Jianli to investigate a conflict over the closure/opening of a river outlet. After an on-site investigation, he thought that the outlet should not be blocked. This irritated the residents of Jianli, who insisted that the outlet be blocked. They threw dirt clods at the prefect's sedan chair; the enraged prefect ordered the responsible people arrested; the locals then erected many banners (reading "The officials compel the people to change") in fields and swarmed before the prefect to rescue their fellow villagers, and in the melee the magistrate of Jianli (who was protecting the prefect) was wounded by accident (Zai xu xing shui jin jian, 1970 [1942]: 388-89). This is another good example that demonstrates that Chinese peasants were not always docile subjects, nor rebels brimming with revolutionary ardor; they were struggling for control over waterways for their own interests and even dared to fight against governmental officials, but they definitely had no intention to kill or overthrow them. The prefect went back to Jingzhou in great haste and reported the event to his superior, who preferred to quickly send troops to crackdown on the peasants. The prefect, however, thought that might stir up a true rebellion, and troops were not dispatched. In a word, even the prefect knew that those people were not rebels.

In the Republic, the distribution of flyers, the gathering of hundreds or thousands of laborers, and the use of weapons to threaten others in conflicts over water control, however, continued to be viewed as illegal and something not to be tolerated. Thus, when these occurred again in 1913—the thirteenth clash in the Zekou feud—the military governor of Hubei sent troops to suppress the peasants. After this crackdown, the seven-decade-long feud finally ended (Qianjiang shuili zhi, 1997: 117).

Other organized violent conflicts over water control, however, continued. In Jianli in 1921, a battle was fought between residents of Mianyang and Jianli over the control of a dam; one person died, forty-eight houses were burned, and lawsuits followed. In 1949, residents of an upstream polder and a downstream

polder fought over drainage; three were killed and several died in jail (Jianli shuili zhi, 2005: 383).

In a word, in the Qing and the Republic, the official reaction to organized violent conflicts over water control usually relied on the exchange of documents first, and troops were only sent to settle a conflict when it was almost out of control.

Changes in the PRC Era

From the above discussion it can be seen that organized violent conflicts over water control in the Jianghan plain continued in the PRC era. The scope and frequency of these conflicts, the government's attitude toward them, and the measures applied by the government to handle them, however, changed.

A major cause of the violent conflicts over water control in the late Qing and the Republic was frequent water calamities, particularly flooding. Such conflicts could have been diminished if the calamities had been abated. The new government of the PRC spent a great deal of time and energy on the improvement of water conservancy; thereafter water calamities, as well as the ensuing conflicts, indeed declined. The major measures applied by the PRC government have included the nationalization of rivers and lakes, the adjustment of administrative boundaries, and the strengthening of dike management.

Since the Jianghan plain is dotted with rivers and lakes, and the rivers usually run through many counties and prefectures, and many lakes are located among several neighboring counties, management of them is difficult. And poor management contributed to frequent conflicts. As early as in 1950, the PRC government decided to nationalize these waters, an important new policy included in the Agrarian Reform Law (Article 18, 1950). In the pre-1949 era, they were usually privately owned—even though they were not really "owned" by private entities, which was infeasible in some cases since nobody could, for instance, own the Yangzi River, but they were de facto managed by different groups such as clans (Shishou xian zhi, 1990: 207). The nationalization of these rivers and lakes largely reduced conflicts over control of them.

Frequent floods also reshaped local landscapes, such as villages being in effect moved from one side of a river to the opposite side of it after the change of river's course. Furthermore, as we have noted, violent conflicts over the control of waterways were not uncommon, particularly conflicts over drainage and irrigation involving neighboring polders or villages that belonged to

different counties. To reduce this kind of conflict, the PRC government adjusted administrative boundaries according to the nature of the local waterways, such as using the Han River as a boundary between two counties in the lower Han River valley (Xiantao shuili zhi, 2008: 43). In another example, in 1957, when a conflict over water conservancy broke out, a production team in Zhongxiang was incorporated into neighboring Jingmen (Zhongxiang shuili zhi, 1998: 242). Similar kinds of adjustments of administrative boundaries were used to forestall clashes over dikes, which could snake through several counties and prefectures. In late Qing, people were usually not enthusiastic about building "others'" dikes, another cause of conflict (Xiang di cheng an, 1969: 130). Thus, in the lower Han River valley, the PRC government adjusted the jurisdiction over the southern bank of a stretch of the dike that had previously been managed by Tianmen county. In the readjustment, that stretch was placed under the jurisdiction of Mianyang county; and some dikes on the northern bank, previously managed by Mianyang and Qianjiang, were turned over to Tianmen. By 1955, all Han River dikes managed by Tianmen were located on the northern bank of the Han River (Tianmen xian zhi, 1989: 137).

As mentioned earlier, the Jianghan area had numerous dikes, and many times conflicts were caused by the rupture of dikes. In the Qing and the Republic, the state was only responsible for the management of some important sections of river dikes, and left the rest for the locals to manage (Zhang Jiayan, 2006). Dike disputes at the polder level also became a "persistent ailment" in some places (Hubei xian zheng gai kuang, 1934: 1004). The newly established PRC government paid special attention to the reinforcement of the dikes in the Jianghan area, including the establishment of dike bureaus to manage not only river dikes but also polder dikes. It also emphasized the importance of annual flood control, the construction of new dikes, and the reinforcement of existing dikes (SZ 34-2-45; SZ 113-2-11; SZ 113-2-35; Jianli xian zhi, 1994: 159; Hubei shuili zhi, 2000: 8). In the pre-1949 era, the major dikes of the Jianghan plain frequently broke; however, they have remained safe since 1954—so safe that there has not been a single breach. This great achievement automatically eliminated, or at the very least reduced, violent conflicts caused by the rupture of dikes.

If a conflict occurred, the PRC government usually handled it with administrative means, mostly by promoting reconciliation, but if necessary severely punishing the leaders involved. For example, in 1952, in Zhongxiang, rising lake water after a downfall flooded farmland of Jianxin township. Its residents planned to dig out a bridge to speed drainage, which would enlarge the flooded area of Xuanlian township. This township organized scores of militia and

martial arts masters to safeguard the bridge. The county government stepped in and meditated a settlement, thus forestalling violence (Zhongxiang shuili zhi, 1998: 241). In 1973, in Jianli, after a downpour flooded the paddy fields of Wuxing brigade, members of this brigade secretly twice dug out the dikes of neighboring Heshan brigade (to promote drainage). A conflict ensued and the county court promptly sent personnel to the scene and they headed off a violent outcome (Jingzhou diqu zhi, 1996: 643). In Qianjiang in the post-1949 era, all conflicts over water control between townships were settled through consultation organized by upper-level government (Qianjiang shuili zhi, 1997: 315). If the situation was really serious, troublemakers would be punished. For instance, in 1954 in Honghu, to drain some flooded land, three hundred or so men of a downstream polder and a hundred or so men of an upstream polder turned a deaf ear to cadres' exhortation and fought each other in a pitched battle. Troops were sent in to suppress the violence; three leaders were arrested and it was suggested that they be sentenced to death (SZ 34-2-489).[11] This was a special case, since thereafter the PRC government has hardly ever sent troops to settle conflicts over water control.

The reasons for violent conflicts over water control were usually complicated; it was difficult to find a solution that satisfied everyone involved. This is particularly true for historical conflicts; otherwise, they would not have lasted for decades or even centuries. The PRC's principle in handling these conflicts and averting violence is mutual beneficial cooperation. This principle was made clear in the agrarian reform regulations in Hubei: "Small benefits must yield to large benefits, present benefits must yield to long-term benefits, and local benefits must yield to benefits for all. The upstream and the downstream, and the left bank and the right bank look after each other" (SZ 37-1-9). This principle was applied in the Xiaozhiyuan case in Shishou. Residents of Shishou and Jiangling had been fighting over the blockage/opening of the mouth of the Xiaozhiyuan rivulet for two centuries. In 1951, persuaded by the upper-level government and following the principle of "small benefits must yield to large benefits," the residents of Shishou agreed to open the mouth (SZ 34-2-117). The same principle was applied in many other similar cases with a long history, such as in Tianmen (where two polders [upstream 72 polder vs. downstream 72 polder] fought over drainage), Jianli (where the issue was drainage along the Laolinchang rivulet), and Jiangling (where two large polders struggled for the control of drainage and irrigation). In all of these cases, the government asked both sides of the conflict to cooperate with each other

[11] The final punishment is unclear (it was not recorded in the archives).

and built new waterways and thus end the source of conflict (Tianmen xin zhi [chugao], n.p.; Jianli xian zhi, 1959: 119-20; Jiangling xian shuili zhi, 1984: 165).

In handling violent conflicts over water control, the PRC government frequently made it clear that these were contradictions among the people, not class contradictions. The peasants of Huanggang, on the northern side of the Yangzi River, and the peasants of Echeng, on the southern side, had fought for the ownership of newly formed islets for about a century since the reign of the Xianfeng emperor (r. 1850-1861). Both sides fought again in 1950. The government immediately stepped in. To clear up historical animosity among the peasants, the PRC government emphasized that "all peasants belong to one family" (SZ 34-2-178). In other words, according to the new ideology, this was a contradiction among people, not a people-enemy contradiction. In 1959, for the managerial convenience of a water control project, three villages of Jingshan were planned to be incorporated into Anlu. In the process, conflicts arose between those who agreed with this decision and those who opposed it. An impulsive cadre viewed this as a class contradiction and ordered the militia to arrest the "ringleaders." However, for this he was criticized (SZ 34-4-390). That is to say, this was a contradiction among the people, not a people-enemy contradiction. In the same year, residents of Hanchuan and Mianyang fought over drainage after a rainstorm. During the fighting, both sides had team heads as commanders. As a result, among four hundred or so participants, one drowned, sixty-two were wounded, and ten were seriously injured. The work team sent to the scene to handle the issue made it clear at the outset that this was "a purely internal conflict" (SZ 113-2-263). Once again, this was not a contradiction between different classes. This is also the principle local cadres followed in solving strife over the control of lake weeds (one of the worst feuds in local history) in the lower reaches of the Han River in the 1950s and the 1960s (SZ 114-2-89; SZ 114-2-126). It is worthy of note here: the 1950s-60s was still an era when the ideology of class struggle was in command.

To be sure, new policies and treatment of organized violent conflicts over water control in the PRC did not completely uproot them, as can be seen in the above discussion. Here, I give one more paradigmatic example to wrap up. On May 29, 1979, a serious battle was fought between a production team of Jingshan and a production team of Yingcheng over the use of reservoir water for irrigation. These two neighboring teams shared a small reservoir that provided irrigation water for them both; they had cooperatively used the reservoir for a long time. In May, the area was hit by drought and the water in the reservoir was reduced. One team did not want the other team to take water from the reservoir. Several dozen peasants, from either side, engaged in a battle that

resulted in one death, five seriously injured, and many wounded. Work teams sent by the county, district (prefecture), and provincial government rushed to the scene to settle the dispute. Although cadres denied their involvement in the fighting, the investigators found that this was indeed an organized conflict, with both brigade and team cadres more or less involved in the organization and mobilization of villagers. This case was regarded as the most serious conflict of the year (SZ 67-5-91ab; Hubei shengzhi minzheng, 1994: 347-48). The fact that even the provincial government sent a work team to handle the case, and that the case was recorded in many gazetteers, including the gazetteer of Hubei province, all indirectly indicate that this was indeed a serious or typical case at that time. In the Qing dynasty and the Republic, however, this case would have been too trivial to be mentioned or recorded.

In sum, all the examples show that organized violent conflicts over water control did not disappear in the PRC era, but their frequency has been largely reduced, their scope has been getting smaller and smaller, and they have become less and less violent and fatal.

Conclusion

This article revises our understanding of China's peasants, the relationship between the peasants and the government, and the relationship between human beings and their environment. It is not enough to just see the peasants and the state as two opposing parties. This article also looks at the conflicts among the peasants themselves. Here too, it is not enough to view the relationship between the peasants and the state from a political angle alone; it is essential to also take an environmental perspective.

In this article, I have briefly discussed organized violent conflicts over water control in the Jianghan plain in the period from 1839 to 1979. During this one-and-a-half centuries, China's polity had changed from an empire to a republic to a socialist regime, but organized violent conflicts over water control persisted over time. What differed was their form, scope, and frequency, as well as the government's treatment and the results.

Large-scale conflicts mostly occurred among residents who lived upstream and downstream or on different banks of the same river, over the closing or opening of an outlet or a dike rupture. Smaller conflicts could occur among residents of two neighboring villages struggling for control over the same irrigation ditch, or residents of two neighboring counties fighting for control over a drainage ditch. The participants would use farm tools, knives, and even

hunting guns as weapons, and often lives were lost. The organizers of these conflicts usually had a military background or experience, or were community leaders such as clan leaders and rural cadres. The distribution of flyers, the establishment of dike bureaus, and clan regulations were all means to organize and mobilize villagers to participate in conflicts.

Although their organizations seem to have had some quasi-military aspects, the peasants were definitely not rebels motivated by revolutionary ideology as Marxist scholars have long contended. Neither were they bandits of the White Lotus type, as the Chinese imperial government had traditionally claimed. Those who participated in these organizations never intended to overthrow the government—whether it was feudal or republican. What they wanted was to control a certain waterway or dike in order to protect their farmland and village from flooding. But both the imperial and republican governments could not tolerate these kinds of quasi-military organizations—they viewed them as a threat to their rule—and therefore they sent troops to put them down. In the PRC, the government has made it very clear that this kind of conflict is "a contradiction among people," not a people-enemy contradiction.

According to Michael Mann, traditional China had high despotic power (a high level of centralized state power) but low infrastructural power (the state's power to control local society was weak) (Mann, 1984). That is to say, in both the Qing dynasty and the Republic, the Chinese government's control of rural society was weak, while in the PRC, the state has both high despotic power and high infrastructural power and has strictly controlled rural society, at least before the rural reform.

Thus, in the pre-1949 era, in most cases, it was the peasants who initiated conflicts over water control; only after the situation was almost out of control would the state step in. The major local officials, that is, the county magistrate and prefect, in fact were not very enthusiastic about dealing with such conflicts. They preferred to seek peace from both sides, but this usually did not work. Thus in many cases the conflicts recurred again and again and dragged on without a solution.

Collective action or group protest is a hot topic in the study of contemporary China. It has been argued that the traditional ways of protest, such as going to the capital to petition (capital appeals), continue to exist or have been revived in today's China (Ocko, 1988; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Hung, 2007, 2011). But organized violent conflicts over water control in rural Jianghan diminished drastically after the establishment of the PRC. In the post-1949 era, the Chinese government has sought to reduce these violent conflicts over water control by

building more water conservancy projects, adjusting administrative boundaries (to make them fit best with the natural flow of rivers), and penetrating into the villages to control rural society. Large-scale organized violent conflicts over water control have almost disappeared; small, but still violent, conflicts continue, but have become less frequent and violent. The state had to intervene, mostly through "administrative mediation," or a legal venue if necessary, for a peaceful solution.

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