

The Shed People in the Qing Dynasty and Social Changes in Northwest Jiangxi Province*

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The shed people began to have a presence before the Qing Dynasty. Since the Qing Dynasty, the number of shed people in northwest Jiangxi has increased sharply, which has triggered a series of social problems. This paper delves into the evolution of the relations between the indigenous people and migrant people in northwest Jiangxi after the migration of the shed people. Then, it probes into the changes in state policies resulted from the migration of the shed people and the social and economic changes generated by those policy changes.

Keywords: shed people, indigenous and migrant people, social changes

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there have been constant social volatilities and population migration around the mountainous border regions of the Hunan and Jiangxi provinces. Therefore, the shed people played a significant role in economic development. The shed people belong to one of the migrant population groups that appeared in the Qing Dynasty. Because of the lack of cultivated land in their hometown, a large number of shed people had to migrate to distant mountainous areas in order to maintain their subsistence. The shed people found a way to feed a whole family by reclaiming the mountains and doing farm works. According to the historical records, “there were people dwelling in the mountains inside counties of the Jiangxi, Hunan and Fujian provinces by making sheds for settlement; the shed people made their living by planting hemp seedlings and bamboos, forging iron with a furnace, and cultivating mushrooms on paper pulp, which are reasons why they were called shed people”.¹ Therefore, the appellation of shed people originated from Jiangxi, Fujian, and Zhejiang provinces. With the abundant resources in the mountain, the shed people mainly engaged in the production of agriculture and handicrafts. Apart from the mountain regions in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangxi provinces, the shed people have a wide presence in mountain regions of Hunan and south Anhui provinces. This paper only focuses on the shed people of northwest Jiangxi province during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Research findings of the shed people in other areas like Fujian province and south Jiangxi province are copious, and thus details will not be discussed in this paper.

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¹ *General Study of the Qing Dynasty's Documents, Vol 19, Chapter one.*

Northwest Jiangxi is called “the throat of Wu and Chu and the thoroughfare of the seven provinces”. From a geographical perspective, Northwest Jiangxi refers to the northwest regions of Jiangxi province. According to the *Compilation of Jiangxi Provincial Situation*, Jiangxi province is divided into six geomorphic regions and nine geomorphic sub-regions based on its geomorphic similarities and differences of the origin, form, and utilization. Parts of counties including Xiushui, Wuning, Ruichang, Tonggu, Jingan, Yifeng, Shanggao, Fengxin, Jiujiang, Yichun, and Xingzi, as well as Pingxiang City, are classified as middle-lower mountains and hilly areas in northwest Jiangxi province.² The mountain regions in the northwest Jiangxi province cover a vast land, which is composed of the Mufu mountain, Jiuling mountain, and Wugong mountain around the borders of Hunan, Jiangxi, and Hubei provinces. Most of these mountains are at an elevation of over one thousand meters. There are valleys between the mountains, where the shed people in the northwest Jiangxi cultivate the land.

This paper has two research objectives: the first is to discuss the changes in state policies caused by the long-term evolution of the relationship between the indigenous and migrant people after the shed people moved in during the Qing Dynasty; the second is to explore the social and economic changes brought about by the changes in states policies. Analyzing such changes is favorable for the understanding of the ethnic relationship and cultural traditions of the northwest Jiangxi province in contemporary times, which will also enhance the local government official's competence in governance and promote the harmony of the society.

The Relationship Between the Indigenous and Migrant People: Confrontation and Integration

At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the per capita arable land in Fujian and Guangdong provinces continued to shrink due to the increasing population, and wars and chaos continued to rage at that time. Besides, the northwestern part of Jiangxi was deserted and the government officials actively appealed to the public for land reclamation. Therefore, the shed people firstly migrated into the hilly areas of western Jiangxi province, including places like Wanzai County, Pingxiang City, and Yichun City. Such places are known as “Three Gates and Nine Scenes”, which are frequently mentioned by local officials and indigenous people. Since the late Ming Dynasty, hilly areas including the three places have become the largest destination for shed people to gather around and settle down. Most of the shed people came from Fujian, Guangdong, and other provinces. “In the beginning, the shed people settled in a scattered way, and they returned in winter for spring gatherings. Since the Chongzhen Period of the late Ming Dynasty, the shed people’s life has been prosperous, with groups gathering together and sheds connecting closely”.³ The main economic activities of migrants were tenant farming and food production. The initial grains they planted were stapled grains and then cereals such as corn and sweet potatoes were cultivated. In addition, several economic crops such as ramie, lonicera, tobacco, sugar cane, and tea plants were nurtured. Due to the mild climate, abundant rainfall, fertile soil, and abundant bamboo resources in northwest Jiangxi, some of the immigrants were engaged in the papermaking industry. According to Li Rongbi, a candidate from Wanzai County who was qualified for the Emperor’s interview in the imperial examination (referred to as Jinshi in Chinese), “the sheds covers hundreds of kilometers, and the shed people makes living by

² *Compilation of Jiangxi Provincial Situation*, Nanchang: Jiangxi People’s Publishing House, 1985, 1-7.

³ Kangxi Period, *County Annals of Yichun City*, Vol. twelve, <Customs>

making papers with bamboos". Some well-capitalized migrants from northwest Jiangxi established large-scale paper-making workshops, which flourished the paper-making industry in the area.

The relationship between the indigenous and migrant people was generally harmonious in the early stage when the shed people moved into the region. The indigenous people had no strong hostility to the shed people in that many deserted farming lands in mountainous regions in northwest Jiangxi were need to be brought into cultivation, whereas the local labor force was inadequate and thus the migrant labor force was expected to engage in land reclamation and plant production. According to the *Pedigree of the Family of Zheng in Shed Areas of Piangxiang City*, "in the early stages of their settlement, the shed people would close their doors and return to Fujian province in December every year for Chinese New Year, and the utensils inside the sheds were not lost when the shed people came back in the spring". "It was the so-called Ren-Li, naming harmonious neighbors". Therefore, it can be seen that the neighbors enjoyed a harmonious relationship with each other. The shed people and indigenous people had constant trade and intermarriage, and then developed the relatives by marriage of their sons and daughters.

The confrontation between the indigenous and migrants has a long origin. The sharp confrontation was mainly caused by economic competition. From the early years of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng to the early period of the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the number of shed households in Jiangxi Province increased greatly. During the Qianlong period and in Wuning County, for instance, "the households moved from Hubei Province to cultivate the mountainous lands reached over ten thousand, taking over all hills and forests".⁴ In the early years of the reign of Emperor Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty, the population in Ningdu County increased sharply because of the huge inflow of shed people from Fujian Province. The households of shed people in Lianhua County increased sharply after the expansion of the shed population, and thus Lianhua County was upgraded as Lianhua Ting (a higher level above a county). The reason for this is that the shed people had to leave hometowns to reclaim farming land because of the increased population and lack of land. In addition, it has a lot to do with the state policy issued by the central imperial court in the fifth year of the reign of Emperor Qianlong, which stipulated that households cultivating deserted land can be exempted from taxation. According to the *Records of Laws and Systems of the Qing Dynasty*, "the households that cultivated an area within two mu (0.0667 hectares) in the administrative regions of Jiangxi, especially in rugged mountains and valleys, can be exempted from taxation".⁵ Without the burden of taxation, a large number of the destitute farmers were encouraged to reclaim the deserted land while facing and tackling various risks and difficulties. Due to the rising burden of land capacity caused by the increased population and a series of social and environmental problems generated by overexploitation of the mountain, the indigenous people began to have conflicts with the shed people.

However, the shed people became increasingly prosperous through continuous efforts. "There was a phenomenon that men and women engaged in farm work on high hills and steep cliffs, and lacquer, hemp, ginger, and taro were full of vigor with unique soil conditions." The shed people had to lease farmland for subsistence when they moved into the local place, but later they owned private fields and houses. According to the records of Ningzhou town (present Yunnan Province), "the ancient houses and sheds were assets of the shed people, and the

⁴ Qianlong Period, *Annals of Wuning County, Vol. ten, <Customs>*

⁵ Guangxu Period, *Records of Laws and Systems of the Qing Dynasty, Vol. 164, Tax-free Farmland Designated by the Ministry of Revenue*, quoted from PENG Yu-Xin, *History of land reclamation in the Qing Dynasty, China Agriculture Press*, p. 146.

amount of grain was adequate while the population was scarce. Since the thirtieth year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi, the population of the state has been increasingly growing. Therefore, people from provinces like Fujian and Guangdong move into this town along with their whole families and framing plows. Because of the low tax rate and good fertility of the long-deserted land, the shed people who had no private land strived to cultivate crops with access to such land. Consequently, after a few years of cultivation, they enjoyed a pleasant rural lifestyle with self-sufficient farmland and houses.”⁶ It can be inferred that the shed people in northwest Jiangxi province gained their own property due to diligent farm work. They dwelled in the shed area instead of returning to their hometown in winter and migrating in spring. As a result, the harmony between the indigenous and shed people began to fade and conflicts started to appear. The indigenous people were jealous of the industrial expansion of the shed people. Finally, the indigenous landlords and squires further exploited the shed people by enhancing the rent of mountains and farmland, which caused further burdens to the shed people. With political support from the government officials, some wealthy households even directly dispossessed the shed people of their farmland and mountain property. Meanwhile, local governments also imposed an additional tax on the shed people and constrain them from the feudal clan system and cultural education. Hence, the shed people could no longer endure such suppression and revolted in the end.

The shed people’s struggle against oppression and exploitation of the indigenous people in northwest Jiangxi can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, Qiu Yanghuan, the leader of the shed people from Fujian Province, commanded thousands of people (followed by tens of thousands of retainues) to the border of Wanzai County and Ningzhou Town and broke the gate of Wanzai County thirteen times. They burned villages and robbed the general public, and they were not appeased by the government until April in the 17th year of the reign of Emperor Chongzhen in the late Ming Dynasty (1644). In the second stage, the shed people from Fujian and other provinces united the army of Wu Sangui (one of the three seigniors who provoked a rebellion to the central court of the Qing Dynasty). With Pingxiang, Liuyang, Wanzai, and northern Yichun City as the center, and Xinchang and Shanggao Counties as the frontline, they were stationed in Pingxiang City for two years. As a result, Wanzai and Xinchang Counties were collapsed three times. The shed people did not surrender in Wanzai County until the 16th year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty, because the major army of seignior Wu Sangui was trapped in Hengshan City of Hunan Province and thus the shed people could not be rescued. Under the circumstances, the local economy was severely damaged. The indigenous people tended to attribute such damages to the shed people because they allied themselves with the seignior Wu Sangui, which deepened the indigenous people’s hatred of the shed people. Therefore, under the lead of the army of the Qing Dynasty and the support of the indigenous people, a large-scale united military campaign was launched to repel and suppress the shed people. The campaign was completed under the conduct of Zhao Yingkui, the commander in chief of Yuanzhou County of Yichun City. According to the County Annal of Wanzai, “chaos led by Zhu Yiwu, leader of the shed people in the Qing Dynasty, was rampant in the 13th year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi, and the central army was sent to suppress the rebellion and appease the remainders while the disorganized shed people would not be harmed.” It can be concluded that the major participants of the rebellion were expelled, whereas the shed people who did not engage in the event could be registered as lawful households. However, on account of

⁶ Qianglong Period, *Yining County, Vol.2, Land Taxation<Residence>*

the revolt, the imperial court of the Qing Dynasty implemented extremely strict management of the shed people in all regions of Jiangxi Province. In the second year of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, the imperial governor Pei Xiandu inspected the situation of the shed people in all regions of Jiangxi Province and established harsh regulations of residence registration and management. Migrants from Fujian and Guangdong Provinces came into Jiangxi Province and lived in mountains by making sheds and planting indigo and tobacco. Such migrants were called the shed people, and they often became robbers once leaving the mountains. Wen Shanggui from Wanzai County and Liu Yungong from Ningzhou County were typical leaders of the revolt of the shed people, but they were arrested by the imperial governor Pei Xiandu and punished by the law. After the establishment of the regulations of residence registration, the imperial governor reported to the Emperor and said that the shed people were disorganized and that the shed people either scattered in mountains or became tenant farmers just because they had no stable residence. "I conducted a strict inspection of the shed people, and over fifteen thousand households were registered and will be identified as residents annually so that your majesty shall award them" (PENG, 1992, p. 186).

Why did the shed people that moved into northwest Jiangxi Province since the reigns of Emperor Tianqi and Emperor Wanli in the Ming Dynasty frequently conduct revolts against the government in the late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty? Why would campaigns for expelling shed people occur? The reasons are closely connected with the social conditions in the late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty. However, the main reason is the deep economic conflicts between the shed people and the indigenous people.

Social Changes in Northwest Jiangxi Province

The shed people had a significant role in the economic development of the northwest Jiangxi Province after their large-scale migration into that region. Because of the escalation of the conflicts between the indigenous and shed people, and the revolts in the late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty, the imperial court of the Qing Dynasty paid more attention to the issue of the shed people. Consequently, the establishment of policies from the imperial court for the shed people was accelerated, and changes of such policies have resulted in the evolution of economic and cultural progress.

Changes of Policies from Local Governments

In the early years of the Qing Dynasty, the shed people in northwest Jiangxi Province aggressively participated in the Rebellion of the Three Seigniors and then fought against the government with armed forces. During the period of suppressing the Rebellion of the Three Seigniors, Emperor Kangxi expelled the shed people in counties of Yuanzhou back to their native hometown. The campaign was carried out in 1678 under the conduct of Zhao Yingkui, the commander in chief of Yuanzhou. "Thousands of shed people households were expelled back to their native hometowns and never allowed to migrate back".⁷ Later policies for shed people were getting different. "The shed people planting hemp seedlings had no official records of paying taxes and undertaking corvee because the shed people were migrants from Fujian Province and lived around the border of Yichun City and Hubei Province. The deep mountains and steep valleys were desolate and barren before the migrant people settled in. Then, the places became prosperous after the migrants cultivated the land with hemp seedlings.

⁷ *A Script of County Chief Zhao Zi for the Issue of Expelling Shed People in Local Areas for the Stability of the Empire*, the 22nd year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi, *County Annals of Yichun City*.

Therefore, the migrant people turned into shed people, and they were registered as 2,680 shed households by officials.”⁸ Such groups of people were not listed as taxpayers by the imperial court in the early stage, but they have been registered into the documents of taxation and corvee since the reign of Emperor Kangxi. Ever since the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, policies for the shed people have been discussed many times. Full contacts have been made between the Emperor and court officials, central and local governments, and local government and migrants. The imperial policy for shed people was officially issued in July of the third year of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng (1725). The policy was composed of four parts: implementing the registration system of the shed households; allowing the shed people to be registered as residents; allowing the shed people to attend educational tests; strengthening the management and control of crucial counties and prefectures in Jiangxi province that have a large number of shed people. However, the imperial policy was not fully implemented by the local government, which was especially true in the residence registration of the shed people. In line with the policy, the shed people who had private property and desired to be registered as residents should be registered into the household system and enjoy equal rights as the indigenous people. Nevertheless, the local government differentiated the “shed households” (also referred to as “migrant households”) and the indigenous households in terms of their residence and education system. Such an identical difference laid down certain hidden dangers. In the third year of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, Zha bina, governor-general of the present Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi Provinces, and Shanghai City, officially proposed and approved of the shed people’s right to attend the imperial examination. Additional seats should be given to the shed people beyond the enrollment plan. Meanwhile, the policy also stipulated that the kids of the shed people cannot take the test unless they finished five years of study in tuition-free schools of the registered region, which constrained the shed people from entering schools. In the late period of the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, the restriction was basically canceled. From the above discussions, it can be seen that the imperial recognition of the shed people in the late Qing Dynasty was improved.

Changes in the Society, Economy, and Culture

In northwest Jiangxi regions of the so-called “Three Gates and Nine Scenes” like Pingxiang City, Yichun City, Wanzai, Shanggao, Yifeng, Tonggu, and Fengxin Counties, the shed people opened up more than fifty kilometers of deserted mountains. The migration of the shed people played a significant role in promoting the economic development of northwest Jiangxi Province. The shed people were encouraged to settle down in those regions because of the state and government’s recognition and the settlement of issues relating to residence registration and school entrance examination. The economic changes and development were also boosted due to the integration of the shed people and indigenous people. It is recorded in the *Annals of Yuanzhou Government* that since the arrival of Fujian migrants, men and women began to engage in farm work on high hills and steep cliffs, and lacquer, hemp, ginger, and taro were full of vigor with unique soil conditions. The indigenous people cultivated the land by learning from the shed people and gained many benefits. In addition, the planting of cereals like corn and sweet potatoes in northwest Jiangxi was promoted on account of the shed people’s exploitation of the mountains. In previous years, the harvest of crops and wheat could be easily affected by natural disasters, which could easily lead to food crises, followed by rising food prices and social disorder. The planting of cereals

⁸ *Annals of Yuanzhou Government*, in the Reign of Emperor Kangxi.

alleviated this crisis, especially corn and sweet potatoes, which can adapt to all kinds of climates. Such crops could be nurtured on barren soil or even sand and gravel, which require little cost and human labor from cultivation to harvest. After the middle age of the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the major crops and food of the farmers in mountainous areas were sweet potatoes and corn. The middle-class farmers with affluent life also made up for the shortage of the staple food through the two kinds of cereal, or they would take out some rice and wheat for sale in the market in order to meet other needs (PENG, 1992, p. 186). Therefore, the shed people made a great contribution to the exploitation of mountains and the promotion of cereal and crops.

The economic contribution of the shed people was not only agriculture, but also the prosperity of the handicraft industry, such as the prosperity of the bamboo and paper-making industry in Pingxiang City, and the mass production of hand-made linen in places such as Wanzai County and Yichun City. The shed people made such contributions because of their continued diligence after the import of advanced cultivation techniques.

However, the shed people's exploitation of the mountains in northwest Jiangxi Province caused inevitable negative impacts, of which the most serious was the destruction of ecology and the environment. In Wuning County of northwest Jiangxi Province, there was once a phenomenon of water loss and soil erosion because of overexploitation. "The shed people usually reclaimed the farmland in mountains with five or six feet in-depth and planted crops beyond the land capacity without dredging. The land was drowned by water when heavy rainfall struck the mountain, and the fertility of the land was exhausted after tens of years of destruction".⁹ Before the residence policy for shed people was established, the shed people were considered migrants and not allowed to possess their reclaimed land. Therefore, they tended to seek quick success for reclamation and take little effort in cultivation. Furthermore, the immoderate deforestation in the mountain destroyed plants and harmed the entire ecology.

The migration of the shed people also promoted the changes in education and culture and had a profound impact on the life and language customs in northwest Jiangxi Province. With the gradual improvement of the economic situation, the shed people paid more attention to education and managed to send their children to school in order to help them embark on an official career path. Many shed people became senior government officials. For instance, Chen Kun, grandfather of Chen Baozhen (a senior court official), moved from Fujian Province to Yining County in northwest Jiangxi Province and was accredited by the imperial court as an imperial Confucian at the age of seventy because of constant learning. Before his success of official career, Chen Kun maintained subsistence by living in a shed and planting indigo. Women of the shed people discarded the custom of foot-binding for the convenience of labor work, which boosted the emancipation of the indigenous women's minds to not bind their feet. In addition, the local language custom in northwest Jiangxi Province was affected by the pronunciation of migrant shed people's language.

Conclusion

As a whole, the relationship between the local people and the guest is harmonious, but the long-standing contradictions make the shed people frequent. For this reason, the government has issued a series of shed people

⁹ Qianlong Period, *Annals of Wuning County*, Vol. 10.

policies. Under the influence of the policy, the social economy and culture in Northwest Jiangxi have undergone great changes.

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