

The Qing Response to the Miao Kings of China's 1795-7 Miao Revolt*

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Hmong Studies Journal

Volume 17, 37 Pages

Abstract

This study examines Qing imperial attention to the messianic “Miao kings” of China’s 1795-7 Miao revolt -- how state agents defined and handled these native contenders, as well what the rendering implied for ideas of regional Miao people and Hunan “Miao Frontier” planning. As will be seen, the Miao King Shi Sanbao, and Wu kings Wu Tianban and Wu Bayue, were consistently disparaged by governmental observers as false, deceptive, and crazed. This crafted image – shaped from reports, confessions, sentencing, punishment, pictures, and proclamations – served to clarify an imperial vision of rebel organization, specific challenges, and larger Miao “lunacy.” The framed Qing response was accordingly oriented not just toward the ritualized correction of leaders, but also the segregation of their Miao (Hmong) followers.

Keywords: China, Qing dynasty, Hunan Miao Frontier, 1795-7 Miao Revolt, Miao King, Wu King, Miao (Hmong)

* This essay was prepared with the support of a grant from the R.O.C. Ministry of Science and Technology, MOST 103-2410-H-030-011-. My thanks to *Hmong Studies Journal*'s two anonymous reviewers for their comments, as well as to the historian Donald Sutton, whose pioneering work on China's Hunan Miao Frontier has served as a basis for this study.

Introduction

The 1795-7 uprising of China's west Hunan "Miao" 苗 (Hmong) hill people against the encroachment of Han Chinese settlers was a watershed in both the history of the region and the local Miao's relationship with the larger Qing (1644-1911) imperial state.¹ The swift retaliation of the Chinese armies, and more protracted efforts of provincial officials and settler communities, served not just to quell this disturbance, but create a militarized fortification system that significantly limited the autonomy of the "Miao Frontier" (*Miaojiang* 苗疆) natives. These changes both consolidated an imperial image of the Miao people and precipitated a new "phase in Miao ethnogenesis" among the folk themselves.²

¹ Although the highland folk discussed here share an ethnic connection with the Hmong people more broadly, this essay will adhere to the conventions of Qing imperial sources, secondary historical studies, and modern Chinese ethnic categorization in referring to them as "Miao."

² For discussion of the late eighteenth century history of the Hunan Miao, see Donald S. Sutton, "Ethnic Revolt in the Qing Empire: The 'Miao Uprising' of 1795-1797 Reexamined," *Asia Major*, third series, 16.2 (2003), 105-7; Donald S. Sutton, "Ethnicity and the Miao Frontier in the Eighteenth Century," in Pamela K. Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald S. Sutton, eds, *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 190-227; Daniel McMahon, "Restoring the Garden: Yan Ruyi and the Civilizing of China's Internal Frontiers, 1795-1805," University of California, Davis dissertation, 1999, chs 2-3; Daniel McMahon, *Rethinking the Decline of China's Qing Dynasty: Imperial Activism and Borderland Management at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge

The purpose of the present essay is to explore Chinese perspectives that shaped these outcomes, as evidenced by the writing and actions of agents of the Qing regime's late eighteenth century bureaucracy. This is, most basically, a study of imperial "discourse." It seeks not so much to define the actual nature of the Miao challengers in the context of highland rebellion as to identify the simplified images attributed to (and, indeed, imposed upon) these challengers, as well as something of the implications of such rendering for regional Qing planning.

Specifically, the article discusses imperial responses to the proclaimed "Miao kings" -- the sole "Miao King" (*Miao wang* 苗王) Shi Sanbao 石三保 and two "Wu kings" (*Wu wang* 吳王), Wu Tianban 吳天半 and Wu Bayue 吳八月. These native leaders drew upon local authority, clan connections, Miao legend, and shamanistic claims of divine support to defy Qing sovereignty. As will be seen, state observers disparaged them as dangerous, false, deceptive, and even insane. The fuller imperial image crafted -- shaped from reports, confessions, sentencing, punishment, and proclamations -- served to define a simplified vision of insurgent hierarchy, specific threats to empire, and general Miao "lunacy" (*dian* 癲). Definition of the Miao kings,

Press, 2015), Ch. 4; Wu Xinfu 吳新福, *Zhongguo Miaozu tongshi* 中國苗族通史, vol. 1 (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe, 1999), Ch. 4.

that is, framed a bureaucratic response oriented not just toward the (discursive, ritual, and corporeal) correction of the condemned, but also toward the larger and long-term segregation of the regional Miao population.

The Miao Frontier and Miao Revolt

The region of the 1795-7 Miao rebellion occupied an approximately 5000 square mile tract of mountains at the far periphery of China's Yun-Gui, Upper Yangzi, and Middle Yangzi macroregions.³ This land spread along the western border of Hunan province, at the edges of the Hunan basin, encompassing the three core subprefectures (*ting* 廳) of Fenghuang 鳳凰, Yongsui 永綏, and Qianzhou 乾州, extending westward into Guizhou province's Songtao 松桃 Subprefecture, as well as northwestward into Sichuan provinces's Xiushan 秀山 County. It was a land of dense mountains and jutting peaks, cut by swift rivers. The area's few sizable river valleys permitted rice cultivation and housed the Qing's administrative seats. Settlement higher in the hills was more scattered, transient, and insecure, with subsistence ranging from swidden plots for the cultivation of sweet potato and maize to the seasonal cultivation

³ See G. William Skinner, "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China," in G. William Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 214-15.

of forest products such as timber, tree fungi, and saltpeter.⁴

This territory is commonly known as the Hunan “Miao Frontier” in recognition of the inter-marrying clans of the Red Miao (and to a lesser extent, Black Miao) who took these highlands as their traditional homeland.⁵ The larger region, however, was

⁴ Concerning geographical information on the Hunan Miao Frontier, see McMahon, “Restoring the Garden,” 35-41; McMahon, *Rethinking*, 87; Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 105-7; Sutton, “Ethnicity,” 191-3.

⁵ For discussion of these groups on the Hunan Miao Frontier, drawn from personal observation, see Yan Ruyi 嚴如煜, comp., *Miaofang beilan* 苗防備覽 (1820) (hereafter: MFBL), *juan* 卷 8-9. For Miao customs, see 8:2a-13a; for Gelao customs, see 9:5b-9a; for Yao customs see 9:9a-12a.

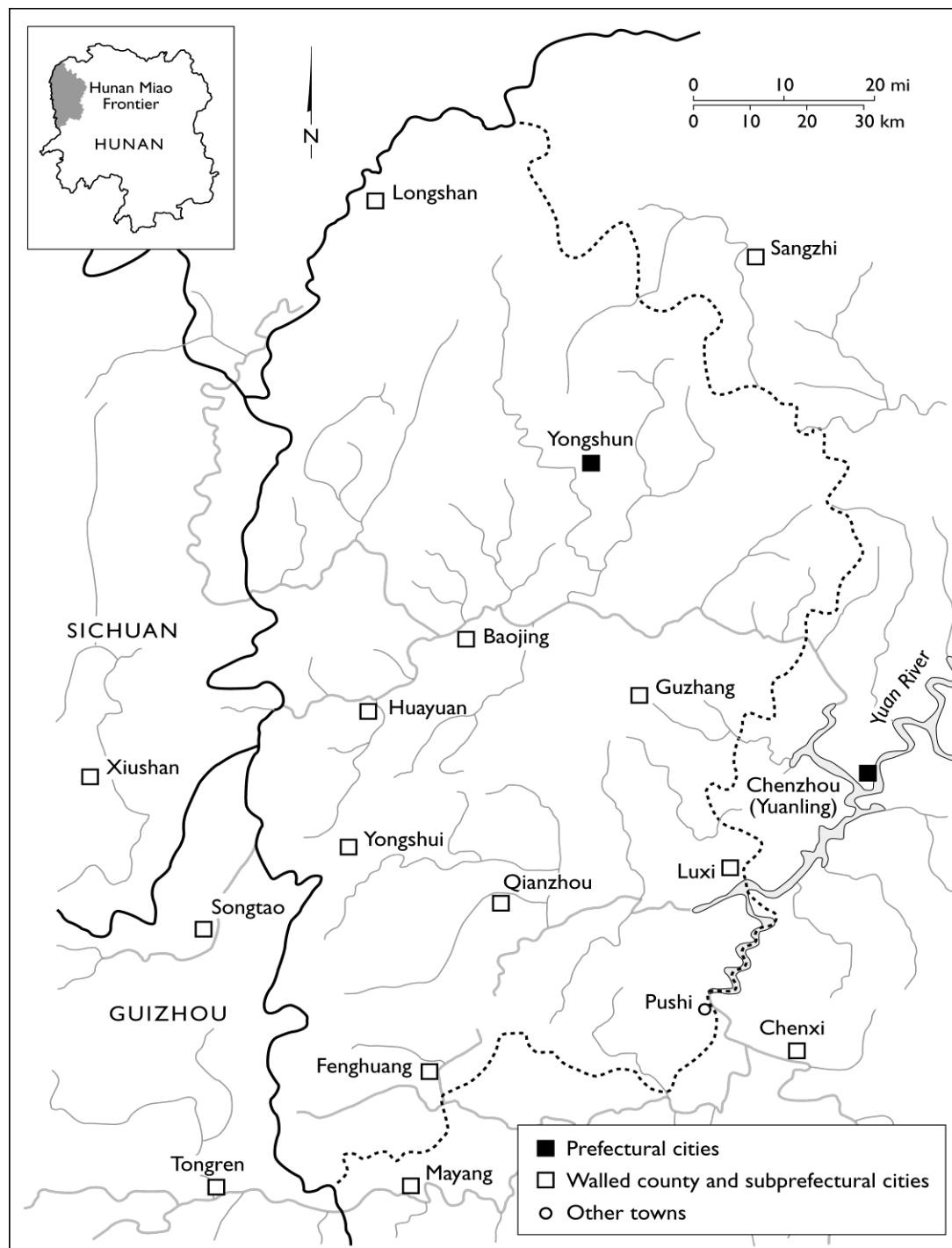


Figure 1: Hunan Miao Frontier

also the abode of other indigenous peoples, such as the Gelao 仡佬, Turen 土人, and

Yao 瑶 – groups with distinct customs and identities, but who also inter-married with the Miao clansmen. In addition, this land was increasingly occupied by Han Chinese settlers flowing in from densely populated lowland regions of Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, and Guangdong provinces.⁶

To the end of the seventeenth century, the Miao Frontier remained a “nonstate space,” open to intermittent migration, but largely beyond the direct reach of Chinese imperial regimes.⁷ The Ming and early Qing governments viewed these distant highlands with caution and advanced steps to separate them from the imperial interior, such as prohibitions on travel and inter-marriage, a “border wall” network of boundary

⁶ McMahon, “Restoring the Garden,” 44-51.

⁷ The term “nonstate space” is employed by James Scott in his controversial work, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009). On p. 13, he defines them as “locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority. A Ming emperor had something like this in mind when he described the southwest provinces of his kingdom: ‘The roads are long and dangerous, the mountains and rivers present great obstacles, and the customs and practices differ’ ...such places have often served as havens of refuge for peoples resisting or fleeing the state.” Yan Ruyi noted these conditions of difficult terrain, altitude, climate, and customs on the Miao Frontier, referring to the area as a “remote region” (*aoqu* 奧區) and a place “where the long whip [of the state] cannot reach” (*bian chang mo ji* 鞭長莫及). See MFBL 8:17a-17b; Yan Ruyi, *Leyuan wenchao* 樂園文鈔 (1844) (hereafter: LYWC), 5:16b-17b.

fortifications, and “loose rein” alliances with tribal chieftains.⁸ Such quarantine measures, however, were largely discontinued from the early eighteenth century as the native chieftain system was abolished, civil administrative units (*gaitu guiliu* 改土歸流) were implemented, and lands were opened to Han in-migration.⁹

The ensuing decades witnessed a population explosion on the Miao Frontier, among both Miao and Han, with the rapid transfer of the best fields and lands into the hands of Chinese settlers. It was a pernicious pattern much lamented by contemporary observers, associated with the impoverishment of the Miao, corruption of local “hundred household” (*baihu* 百戶) leaders, improper relations between Miao and “treacherous Han” (*Hanjian* 漢奸), fury and “confusion” (*huo* 惑) of native folk, and eventual outbreak of revolt.¹⁰ These were consequences that engendered a

⁸ McMahon, *Rethinking*, 87, and “Restoring the Garden,” 69-72; Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 108-9.

⁹ Concerning changes connected with the *gaitu guiliu* policies, see McMahon, “Restoring the Garden,” 72-80; Sutton, “Ethnicity,” 196-211; Donald S. Sutton, “Violence and Ethnicity on a Qing Colonial Frontier: Customary and Statutory Law in the Eighteenth-Century Miao Pale,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37.1 (2003): 41-80; Wu Xinfu, *Zhongguo*, Ch.4.

¹⁰ See McMahon, *Rethinking*, 87-90; Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 110-11. For extensive discussion of related problems, see McMahon, “Restoring the Garden,” 51-67, 72-88; LYWC *juan* 卷 5. The *baihu* were imperially-sanctioned village-level leaders charged with maintaining order in accordance with Qing objectives.

millenarian perspective among the Miao.¹¹ With the native attacks of late 1795, as insurgents “descended like a flood...burning homes, slaughtering settlers, and acting unlawful in the extreme,” members of the Qing bureaucracy came of necessity to recognize not just a breakdown of imperial administrative control, but a systemic deterioration of this border society.¹² The relevant conditions, causes, and agents of this disorder, however, were defined on the state administration's own terms.

China's west Hunan Miao revolt was the largest outbreak in a century to fall firmly within the bounds of imperial territory, albeit in an “inner frontier” periphery along the edges of the Qing “interior” (*neidi* 內地). As many as 50,000 Miao struck out against the real and perceived grievances of Han Chinese settlement, loss of native land, economic exploitation, and official abuses. Led by clan leaders and kinsmen such as Shi Sanbo, Shi Liudeng 石柳鄧, and Wu Bayue, the Miao burned Han villages,

¹¹ In his study of “apocalyptic faith,” James Rinehart argues that social crisis could trigger a resurgence of millenarian belief and violent action in support of dreams of renewal – dynamics that, in turned, sharpened the identity of the believers as different and special. Michael Barkun further observes that millenarianism might be more specifically a colonial response to “intervention or invasion by a superior foreign power that attempts to impose its cultural values on the life of the lesser society.” See James F. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Terror: Prophets of Terror* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 24 (Barkun quote), 144 (and Ch. 5 generally).

¹² For this quote, see *Qingdai qianqi Miaomin qiyi dang'an shiliao* 清代前期苗民起義檔案史料 (hereafter, QQMQDS) (Guizhou: Guangming chubanshe, 1993), vol. 2, 163-4.

seized farms, looted the market town of Pushi, and even briefly occupied the Qianzhou administrative seat before retreating into fortified hamlets deep in the mountains. The Qing regime was shocked and chagrined. Emperor Qianlong (r.1735-99) personally oversaw the restoration of imperial order, an effort requiring nearly two years, 180,000 troops, and a staggering expense of some 20 million taels.¹³

The Perceived Perils of the Miao Kings

Who then were the Miao kings and what role did they play, or were attributed, in this borderland uprising? Our central source of information are Qing governmental records, including military reports, memorials of provincial officials, recommendations of the Grand Council, edicts of the Qianlong emperor, as well as the formal depositions of Miao insurgents, most notably those of Wu Tianban, Shi Sanbao, and Wu Bayue. These documents, culled from Beijing's Number One Historical Archive and the Guizhou Provincial Archives, have been compiled in the published collection *Archival Materials on the Miao Uprisings of the Former Qing Period* (Qingdai qianqi Miaomin qiyi dang'an shiliao): a work used extensively in this study.

¹³ See McMahon, *Rethinking*, 88-92; For an overview of this revolt, see Wu, *Zhongguo*, 379-404; for a discussion of the problems of the revolt, as articulated by Yan Ruyi, see McMahon, "Restoring the Garden," 80-8.

According to the confessions of captured Miao, the whole affair began when native villagers “went insane” (*fadian* 發癲). As recorded, the clansman Shi Youbao 石由保 and others shouted out that they should “kill the guest folk” (Han settlers), and “the Miao King will appear in our village!” These spontaneous seizures rippled through the hamlets, including Cucumber Village, where the headman Shi Sanbao also “abruptly went crazy and without being aware of it said that Heaven above was descending. He called on the Miao to assist [him] in becoming the Miao King.” Later coming to his senses, and fearful of a state reprisal, this chief had his cousin, a literate landowner named Wu Bayue, write to the hamlets that “Heaven has called [Shi] to be the Miao King” and bade them to rally to his defense. “If you help us burn and kill the guest families,” the statement read, “not only can we regain fields to farm, we can also appoint officials.” In response, “everyone was willing and more and more people came together” to “loot and slaughter settlers everywhere.”¹⁴

This outbreak exhibited several distinctive elements that, once known, mandated immediate imperial attention. The first was the purported “lunacy” (*dian* 癲) of the Miao. Their liminal state, convulsions, yelling out, and messages from “Heaven” all indicated a resurgence of traditions of shamanistic spirit possession – what the historian

¹⁴ For these quotations, see QQMQDS, vol. 3, 230-3.

Donald Sutton terms “shaking.”¹⁵ Highland Miao folk, apparently without training or even volition, acted as if they had been seized by divine will, and their inflammatory words incited the “looting and slaughter” of imperial subjects.¹⁶

A core element of this outburst was the “Shakers” shout that the “Miao King” had returned. This referenced a belief reflective of a social phenomenon James Scott calls “prophets of renewal.”¹⁷ The concept is that in a time of trouble, at a moment of need, a savior appears to unite a distressed people, using magic and military might to restore righteous rule. Such group millenarianism focused on a returning hero serves, in James Rinehart’s words, “as a tool for mobilization and a call for political action in

¹⁵ Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 117-8, 120-1. For related information on the religious culture of the Miao Frontier, see Donald S. Sutton, “Myth Making on an Ethnic Frontier: The Cult of the Heavenly Kings of West Hunan, 1715-1996,” *Modern China* 26.4 (Oct. 2000): 448-500. Concerning shamanism as an element of Hmong culture and tradition more broadly, see Maren Tomforde, *The Hmong Mountains: Cultural Spatiality of the Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2006), Ch. 6; and Patricia V. Symonds, *Calling in the Soul: Gender and the Cycle of Life in a Hmong Village* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2004).

¹⁶ As Shi Sanbao stated: “Sometimes I was *dian* and sometimes not.” See QQMQS, vol. 3, 231. What the Qing authorities meant by the term, beyond a derogatory reference to people they held to be acting irrationally, is open to debate. In some instances, it seems to suggest spirit possession; in other cases, it arguably only referenced a state of mind that precipitated widespread pillaging and violence.

¹⁷ Scott, *The Art*, Ch. 8.

the presence of perceived sociopolitical turbulence.”¹⁸ Faith in a Miao King has been observed in a range of Hmong communities. This has included those in West Hunan in the 1450s, 1790s, and 1940s, Thailand in the early 1960s, as well as (as James Scott tells us) many more in the long history of highland Southeast Asia.¹⁹ Indeed, Nicolas Tapp remarks on the “frequent recurrence of such movements throughout recent Hmong history.”²⁰ It should be noted, however, that the outbreak of Miao (or Hmong) King claims should not imply that all within those communities accepted the assertion or that millenarian resistance all occurred in the same way. Local conditions clearly mattered, framing the content and dynamics of belief. This is evidenced by the defining role of Christian religion on restive Guizhou Miao in the nineteenth century, as well as the impact of the Nationalist state presence, and leading female spirit mediums, on the west

¹⁸ Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith*, 9.

¹⁹ For discussion of the Miao kings in western Hunan in the 1940s, see Paul R. Katz, “Jumping Immortals – Religion and Resistance among the Western Hunan Miao during the Republican Era” (unpublished manuscript, presented as a lecture at the R.O.C. Academia Sinica, Institute of Modern History, 12 September 2013). Concerning other instances of Miao King claims in southwest China, see Siu Woo Cheung, “Millenarianism, Christian Movements, and Ethnic Change Among the Miao in Southwest China, in Stevan Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995), 217-49, esp. 244-5. For discussion of the Hmong King belief in Thailand, see Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Ch. 7. See also Scott, *The Art*, Ch. 8.

²⁰ Tapp, *ibid*, 136.

Hunan Miao revolt of 1942.²¹

In the 1790s West Hunan case discussed here, the Miao King mantle was assumed by Shi Sanbao, a respected village headman and clan chief. Fellow Miao commanders, Wu Tianban and Wu Bayue, additionally took the title of “Wu King” – claiming to be a transmigration (*zhuanshi* 轉世) of the famed anti-Manchu Han Chinese general Wu Sangui 吳三桂 (1612-78).²² These were men whose legitimacy was systematically rejected by the Qing bureaucracy, but who yet provoked near-obsessive imperial

²¹ See Cheung, “Millenarianism” and Katz, “Jumping Immortals.” Indeed, it can be argued that the influence of the Miao kings has often been overstated. Even in the case discussed here, the political authority of the native community was fragmented, Miao state-building was limited, and a significant proportion of the regional Miao assisted pacification on the Qing side. For a study assessing the methods and impact of the Miao kings see Daniel McMahon, “Were the Miao Kings Prophets of Renewal? The Case of the 1795-7 Hunan Miao Revolt” (unpublished manuscript).

²² QQMQDS, vol. 2, 120, 121, 370; vol. 3, 112-13. Wu Sangui, as a contender to Qing rule, had control over Hunan and Guizhou for several years in the late 1670s, the memory of which lingered. For a biographical sketch of Wu, see Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1943-4), 877-80. After the death of Wu Tianban and Wu Bayue, the title of Wu King was briefly passed on to Wu Bayue's sons Wu Tingli 吳廷禮 and Wu Tingyi 吳廷義. See Hu Qiwan 胡起望, “Qian-Jia Miaomin qiyi canjia ren gongdan jianshu” 乾嘉苗民起義參加人供單簡述, in Hu Qiwan and Li Tinggui 李廷貴, eds, *Miaozu yanjiu luncong* 苗族研究論叢 (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe, 1988), 198-200, 207-8. For the confession of Wu Tingyi, see QQMQDS, vol. 2, 370-1.

attention.

The appearance of these challengers precipitated a range of related concerns. The first was the claims of shamanistic trances, as Miao villagers avowed that Heaven had favored rebel lords bent on the violent appropriation of imperial lands. The Qing dynastic institution, centered on the “Son of Heaven,” claimed both a direct link to the divine and a monopoly on spiritually-sanctioned authority. Thus spontaneous suggestion of a Miao King, even as a symbolic presence, created a competing center that potentially subverted imperial subjects and subtracted from the demesne of the Qing ruling house. The proclamation of a succession of Wu kings – said to be the return of one of the mightiest early challengers to Manchu rule – was clearly no less disconcerting to the imperial bureaucracy.²³ Such assertions of autonomous legitimacy had, in addition, a more immediate impact on the conflict. As Donald Sutton points out, spirit possession “became a means of mobilizing a people scattered over hundreds of miles who had no established leaders outside the [trans-village level] Qing *baihu*

²³ Concerning the Qing's war with Wu Sangui, see Lawrence D. Kessler, *K'ang-Hsi and the Consolidation of Qing Rule, 1661-1684* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), Ch.

4. Grand Councilor Heshen 和珅 (1750-99) noted that Wu Sangui had “the most grievous crimes to the vilest degree.” “How then could [Shi and others] have said that Wu Tianban was Wu Sangui transmigrated and titled him Wu King?!” See QQMQDS, vol. 3, 252. For similar formal queries, see QQMQDS, vol. 3, 123 and 258; Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 124-5.

system,” allowing them to gather, organize, and rise up.²⁴

The danger, however, was not just the contenders themselves, as pretender kings, but also their promises to “appoint officials.” It was the prerogative of Chinese imperial states to choose their own ministers. The making of autonomous appointments was therefore deemed both unlawful and an unforgivable gesture of disrespect. As Sutton observes, “the revolt had seemed to challenge the principle of imperial sovereignty, a principle inseparable from the emperor’s person, and it had violated cosmic harmony and bureaucratic hierarchy.”²⁵

A third concern, a matter of priority to Emperor Qianlong, was the involvement of “treacherous Han” (*Hanjian*) in the uprising. Qianlong had long advocated separation of Han and Miao folk as, he believed, *Hanjian* would otherwise infiltrate Miao lands, “teach them bad ways,” and form disruptive and unlawful alliances. At the outbreak of the conflict, he made sharp inquiries, attributing the core of “the present resistance and widespread plunder” to “the plotting of *Hanjian*.”²⁶ Subsequent investigations revealed that in fact there had been Han settlers in the camps of Wu

²⁴ Sutton, *ibid*, 119.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 147. Concerning the interrogation of rebel leaders in regard to appointment of native officials, see QQMQDS, vol. 3, 123, 125, 233, 361, 371, 416.

²⁶ Sutton, *ibid*, 128 (quote) and “Ethnicity,” 204-6.

Tianban and Shi Sanbao, including men who had sworn blood oaths of loyalty, led Miao troops, worked as spies, provided supplies, and burned villages.²⁷

Imperial Interpretations of the Miao Kings

An official picture of the Miao kings quickly emerged – as figures either insane or else “feigning insanity” (*jie feng* 借瘋) for selfish ends.²⁸ Setting the tone, Emperor Qianlong changed the name of Wu Tianban (“Heaven’s-half” Wu) to Wu Bansheng 吳半生 (“Half-a-life” Wu), indicating that this rebel had no connection with Heaven and indeed was not long for this world.²⁹ Upon Wu’s capture in late 1795, Governor-general Fu’kangan described him as “crafty by nature, having incited the

²⁷ See QQMDS vol. 2, 276, 280, 330, 338, 362, 437, 484, 485-7, 507, 549-51; vol. 3, 148-9, 394. Shi Sanbao stated that “the Miao never trusted [the Han men] and would not follow them into battle.” See QQMDS, vol. 2, 550-1; vol. 3, 256-7. Some scholars, however, argue that Han Chinese involvement in the revolt was significant. See, for example, Hu, “Qian-Jia,” 195-8.

²⁸ QQMQDS, vol. 2, 190; vol. 3, 66-7, 120-5, 141-2, 230-3, 252-8, 370-5. Fu’kangan 福康安 (d. 1796), for example, reported that the rebels’ “dancing with flags, beating of gongs, and running riot” was feigned in order to gather mass support. See Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 120, fn.46. Shi Sanbao further stated that Wu Tianban “was young and feared the Miao would not trust and obey him, so he could only say that he was the transmigrated Wu King.” See QQMQDS, vol. 3, 234.

²⁹ QQMQDS, vol. 2, 516; vol. 3, 51. See also Sutton, *ibid*, 117, fn. 26. Qing sources thereafter refer to Wu Tianban as “Wu Bansheng.”

masses and perpetrated wrongs.”³⁰ The Grand Council similarly observed that Wu Tianban had “incited and enticed the Miao, led the masses to burn and rob...and everywhere assisted evil and perpetrated wickedness.”³¹ In similar form, Grand Councilor Heshen wrote that the “exceedingly evil, unreasonable, unlawful, and rebellious Miao” Shi Sanbao “was the first to lead the masses in the uprising on the pretext of madness. He took as his name the burning and looting of the guest people and called himself the Miao King to confuse the Miao people.” “Shi Sanbao,” that is, “dared, under the brilliance of Heaven, to incite and confuse...even to the point of slaughtering officials and pillaging the subprefectural towns.”³²

The formal deposition of the native lords, responding to questions prepared by Emperor Qianlong, shows a consistency of content.³³ The captured acknowledged that

³⁰ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 67.

³¹ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 112.

³² For these quotes, see QQMQDS, vol. 3, 252. In the same interrogation, Shi Sanbao was further asked: “Why speak of a Miao King? Is it not that you had betrayal in your heart?” See p. 258.

³³ Hu Qiwan, “Qian-Jia,” 195-6. Some scholars argue that such confessions served as an instrument to induce submission and “subordination to hierarchical authority.” Thomas Stephens, for example, asserts that those deposed were required to acknowledge “the correctness of whatever authority, in its wisdom, saw fit to do or say,” although other scholars observe that confessions (and the Qing laws addressing them) also focused on identifying genuine perpetrators and gathering accurate information. See Alison W. Conner, “True Confessions? Chinese Confessions Then and Now,” in Karen G. Turner, James V. Feinerman, and R. Kent Guy, eds, *The Limits of the Rule of Law in China* (Seattle: University

they were leaders of the resistance, proclaimed by the “crazies” to be divinely anointed kings, as well as had called for land return and appointment of officials. They likewise noted that the troops under their command included Han Chinese, whom they marshaled to “burn and rob” the settler villages. Finally, given the chance to surrender to Qing authority, they had refused.³⁴ These men, however, consistently downplayed their actions, pleading that they had been confused, were just one leader among many, did not truly appoint officials or rely on treacherous Han, and wished in their madness only to reclaim lands, not challenge the sovereignty of the Qing state.³⁵

The Miao kings, thus, were depicted by Qing authorities as not just the core leadership of the resistance, but unscrupulous men who had actively “enticed,” “incited,” and “confused” Miao folk into wanton slaughter, all in willful contravention of the orthodox legal, moral, and spiritual order. They were both catalyst and cause of the turmoil and accordingly perpetrators of political offenses comparable to those committed by the greatest enemies of the Qing order. Fukang'an charged that Wu Tianban “had reached the limits of crimes (tolerated by Heaven)” (*e guan man ying* 惡

of Washington Press, 2000), 146-50.

³⁴ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 121-5, 141-2, 252-8, 370-2.

³⁵ As Wu Tianban said: “This insignificant one went crazy...and they said I was the Wu King transmigrated. I was young so I believed them and revolted.” See QQMQDS, vol. 3, 121. For related examples, see pp. 123, 125, 233-4, 257, 361, 371, 416.

貫滿盈) and “Heaven has snatched up his soul” (*tian duo qi po* 天奪其魄), as well as that Shi Sanbao had “incensed gods and men alike” (*shen ren gong fen* 神人共憤).³⁶ Heshen repeated this rhetoric, concluding with the final bureaucratic verdict that the Miao kings, like Wu Sangui, had performed “the most grievous crimes to the vilest degree” (*zui da e ji* 罪大惡極).³⁷

The Punishment of the Miao Kings

In the course of pacification, the messianic lords were not just defined, but also censured in specific ways. This was an act of imperial retribution. As Fukang'an asserted, “even if they were killed by slow slicing” (*lingchi* 凌遲) – the most brutal of Qing penalties – “it still would not be sufficient to compensate for their guilt.”³⁸ State justice, as a form of imperial ritual, however, was also an act of *adjustment*. It served to rectify imputed injury not just to the Qing order, but also to the larger “cosmic harmony” that this order sustained. At the same time, the implementation of imperial

³⁶ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 67.

³⁷ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 253.”

³⁸ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 67. Heshen requested this penalty and it was approved by the emperor. See p. 253; and also Sutton, “Ethnic Revolt,” 145, 148. Other important rebel leaders were similarly executed. See QQMQDS, vol. 3, 268, 356. Concerning *lingchi*, and views on it, See Timothy Brook, Jerome Bourgon, and Gregory Blue, *Death By a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

punishment formally severed the links that connected dissenters to challenging political and spiritual (or even ethnic) systems. They were reordered then excised, thereby facilitating a larger process of Qing regeneration.

Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, Donald Sutton posits that the penalty of the Miao challengers, and contenders like them, was grounded in the physical, but reconstituted in controlled discursive forms. In the process of deposition, in particular, Qing interrogators “did not simply extract the truth but produced words through the infliction of pain and rendered them into official language.” In this way, coercive questioning “with its ritualized logic erased the criminal’s will by marking his body, forcing him to conform to his proper role as a subject.”³⁹ Shamans thereby became “lunatics” (*dianzi* 癲子), ethnic restoration became immoral opposition to proper authority (*ni* 逆), and local lords became cunning rebels (*jiao zei* 狡賊). Or, as one general reported of the interrogation of Wu Bayue, “All was confessed without contradiction. Truly he had the most grievous crimes to the vilest degree.”⁴⁰ The “transubstantiation” achieved of this agony-etched rendering was then duly recorded, copied, and dispatched to the appropriate government offices for perusal and

³⁹ For these quotations, see Sutton, *ibid*, 148.

⁴⁰ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 344.

safekeeping – made, in a sense, immortal and immutable.⁴¹

Physical ordering, however, was at the heart of this punishment, in which challengers were refashioned to fit the imperial image imposed upon them. The captured Miao kings were subjected to the penultimate penalty of slow slicing – execution via progressive dismemberment, often continuing after death. The Qing law code stipulated *lingchi* for those guilty of high treason or extreme violations of cardinal relations, such as patricide or regicide. It was an act popularly regarded with horror as, like all punishments involving the cutting of the body, it purportedly disrupted “somatic integrity” and hence “the capacity of the body to remain whole, in death as well as life.”⁴² To be dismembered was to be eternally severed not just from one’s ancestors, but all of humanity. Such was multi-faceted negation, of a severity commensurate with the extent of separation inflicted.⁴³

This processing, to again use a Foucaultian term, was also a spectacle. The Qing government arranged circumstances to its own satisfaction, as bodies addressed gave way to simplified reports and severed remains. The procedure, however, was not just

⁴¹ Some Miao rebel leaders were defiant, evasive, and deceptive even under torture. Emperor Qianlong, for example, stated that “Wu Bansheng is unwilling to divulge the real story” thus requiring further incarceration and interrogation. See QQMQDS, vol. 3, 119-25.

⁴² Brook, *Death of Thousand Cuts*.

⁴³ Ibid, 11-13.

internal to the imperial bureaucracy, but at stages intentionally public, reaching beyond administrators in an effort to touch the societies in which the Miao lords operated. Condemned leaders were often put on display. Miao general Long Laoer, for example, was tortured then moved from village to village in a cart. After Wu Bayue's confession, a crowd was gathered to watch him be castrated and decapitated, with his head publicly exhibited.⁴⁴ Wu Tianban and Shi Sanbao were sent on to the capital, but on Heshen's recommendation the crimes of the culprits were announced to the people of west Hunan in order to "realize the laws of the nation and quicken their hearts" (*yi zhang guo xian, er kuai ren xin* 以彰國憲而快人心).⁴⁵

This rationale also explains the "battle copper prints" commemorating Qing victory over the Miao, of which two specifically depict the capture of Wu Tianban and Shi Sanbao.⁴⁶ These images present a backdrop of imperial troops subduing terror-struck Miao insurgents, while in the foreground the lords are led, bound and barefoot, before Qing commanders. Each picture lists the circumstances of the arrest, in Shi's

⁴⁴ Sutton, "Ethnic Revolt," 145-8. Concerning the execution of Wu Bayue, see QQMQDS, vol. 3, 340.

⁴⁵ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 252. On the dispatch of the Miao leaders to Rehe for deposition by the Grand Council, see Wu, *Zhongguo*, 395-6.

⁴⁶ These prints of the Qianlong campaigns, contributed by the Berlin State Library – Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, are accessible via the World Digital Library at <http://www.wdl.org/en/search/?series=paintings-of-the-campaign-against-and-pacification-of-the-miao-tribes>.

case repeating that he had “feigned madness to confuse the folk and wrongly call himself the Miao King.” Here again, preferred imperial distinctions were accentuated in visual and discursive terms as the rebel challengers stood awaiting the justice of their rightful rulers. It is not clear how widely these paintings were circulated among Miao Frontier natives. But certainly they were viewed more broadly within the Qing interior, set among similar images of late eighteenth century imperial campaigns, military victories, and subdued frontier folk.



Figure 2: “Capturing Liaojiazhong and Seizing Rebel Leader Shi Sanbao.” Shi Sanbao is the prisoner on the lower left-hand corner of the painting. (Source: <https://>

[www.wdl.org/en/item/7757/#series="+paintings-of-the-campaign-against-and-pacification-of-the-miao-tribes](http://www.wdl.org/en/item/7757/#series=) .)



Figure 3: “Capturing Gaoduozhai and Seizing Rebel Leader Wu Bansheng.” Wu Tianban is located in the bottom center of the painting, before Yunnan-Guizhou governor-general Fu Kangan and Sichuan governor Helin 和林 (d. 1796). (Source: [https://www.wdl.org/en/item/7756/#series="+paintings-of-the-campaign-against-and-pacification-of-the-miao-tribes](https://www.wdl.org/en/item/7756/#series=) .)

The Followers of the Miao Kings

Qing attention to the leadership of the Miao revolt, particularly the messianic

Miao kings, served an additional purpose. If more subtly, the discursive positioning of the unforgiven in relation to a divinely-sanctioned Qing sovereign and institution concurrently worked to illuminate the challengers' connection to local followers and, by extension, those folk's connection to the empire. Arguably, state discourse positioned local people in relation to two poles, either closer to the good (emperor) or treacherous (lords), with the conclusions drawn contributing to an epistemology of local imperial knowledge. The imputed link to men defined as the essence of evil bespoke both a population's potential and the preferred means of managing them.

Following standard eighteenth century methods of rebel pacification, the Qing administration adhered, philosophically, to Mencian tenets of the basic goodness of people and, pragmatically, to a need to restore unruly regions to normal patterns of imperial life. In the west Hunan case, this mandated a general perspective that Miao folk were not truly bad – that is, that *as* bad -- and that most of them would not impede restoration. The distinctions made, however, were often fuzzy and contradictory. The Miao Frontier indigenes were formally imperial subjects, but were also commonly regarded with a countervailing sense of being separate and savage, largely of a kind with those who had led them into rebellion.

Elements of this view were offered to Shi Sanbao during his deposition:

You Miao folk live on our lord's land and eat of his food (*shi mao jian tu* 食茅踐土). You have received the profound benevolence and deep favor of the emperor's love and support for over a century. He has treated you no differently from his other subjects and has not permitted local officials to harbor even the slightest prejudice against you...You have human form and, in your reason, should be sensible of this. How could you dare to cause a disturbance?⁴⁷

The Miao, that is, had been formally accepted within the empire and “seen as one with a common benevolence” (*yi shi tong ren* 一視同仁). Like the rebel lords, however, they had the appearance of being subjects, but lacked the sensibility and sense. Here, Shi Sanbao averred that “the Miao... all know of the emperor's profound kindness,” but had revolted because they were poor and landless. “In their hearts they would not submit and so they went crazy and burned and robbed the guest people.”⁴⁸

It is in this context that we should consider the role and significance of the term most commonly applied to the Miao in the course of the revolt: *dian* 癲 (crazed). This

⁴⁷ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 257.

⁴⁸ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 257.

identification has an elegant simplicity when used to reference autonomous religious activity, explaining extra-ordinary action while negating suggestion of genuine divine sanction. Its implications, however, reach beyond general Orientalist views of the Miao as untrustworthy, simple, or unformed. To be crazed was to be flawed, but it was also to be beyond oneself, consumed, and accordingly not fully accountable for one's actions. The application of the term as an imperial category mandated the question of what set off the seizures, with official answers underscoring native impoverishment, state abuse, and challengers "faking insanity" to fan the flames of native incapacity. The conditions of craziness attributed to the natives, that is, depicted them not just as perilous, but also as pitiful and manipulated.

Such estimation framed imperial policy, with lasting consequences. The Qing administration offered clemency if the surrendered "cleansed their hearts and corrected their countenances, as well as were soon to sincerely submit to civilization (*guihua* 歸化)."⁴⁹ In fact, the military made decisive use of surrendered Miao to divide rebel forces and end the uprising. In later years, these state allies were organized and deployed in support of regional reconstruction projects such as fortification, policing, and military agricultural colonies (*tuntian* 屯田).

⁴⁹ QQMQDS, vol. 3, 38-39, 54.

There were, however, familiar limits to the imperial embrace. Many Qing observers warned of restive natives whose “hearts would not submit” even after their formal surrender. The Miao, like the Miao kings, were deemed yet prone to “madness” – a view seemingly corroborated by a decade of bitter postwar instability. In 1802, Long Liusheng, claiming to be the next Miao King, briefly led eight hamlets in revolt; two years later, Shi Zongsi rose up with a claim that the six cannons in his possession were a gift from the gods.⁵⁰ Accordingly, governmental authorities held that the Hunan Miao were to be neither mobilized for larger imperial projects nor more firmly integrated with the Qing interior, but rather kept separate (particularly from “treacherous” Han) and under surveillance.

The result over sixteen years, 1796-1812, was the creation of a “new order” of militarized ethnic segregation predicated on the belief that that Miao remained wild (*ye xing* 野性), recalcitrant, and vulnerable. This was initiated with placating promises by Sichuan governor Helin to return Miao lands, but turned quickly to aggressive efforts to keep “arrogant” Miao weakened and restrained. As advocated by the Fenghuang Subprefectural Magistrate (later Supervisor of Borderland Affairs *zongli bianwu* 總理邊務) Fu Nai 傅鼐 (d. 1812), postwar Miao were resettled as tenant farmers on

⁵⁰ McMahon, *Rethinking*, 90, 93; QQMQDS, vol. 3, 421-2.

military colony fields while concurrently being hemmed in by fortified defensive networks manned by Qing soldiers and Han Chinese settlers. Externally, marriage and land sales between Miao and Han were forbidden, as trade was strictly regulated. Internally, newly secured separation was structured with a native officer system, the building of Confucian schools, prohibition of shamanistic practices, and general suppression of the Miao's "vile customs" (*e su* 惡俗). The natives were to remain under these conditions until such time as they had forsaken the idea of the Miao kings and, in Fu Nai's words, become "both Miao and subjects" and "no different from the Han."⁵¹

If we consider the subsequent history of the west Hunan Miao, we find echoing patterns of native resistance and Chinese governmental response. The segregated system shaped of fortification and tenancy declined by the 1820s, although the basic structure remained in place until the 1930s.⁵² Scholars such as Jeffery Kinkley have suggested that its extended existence – in which the Miao were mobilized to ensure

⁵¹ Concerning the postwar system established on the Hunan Miao Frontier, see McMahon, "Restoring the Garden," 116-46; McMahon, *Rethinking*, 93-7; Wu, *Zhongguo*, 404-13. Concerning Fu Nai's plans for the ordering and moral reform of the Miao, see *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* 皇朝經世文編, He Changling 賀長齡 and Wei Yuan 魏源, eds (1826-7), 86:7a-8a, 88:1b-2a, 2b (quote).

⁵² McMahon, "New Order," 97-9.

their own isolation – contributed to an enhanced native autonomy and sense of identity.⁵³ This in part explains their defiance to state-building initiatives in the 1930s, as well as the Miao and Wu king claims of the 1942 uprising.⁵⁴ Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, more forceful governmental efforts were advanced, in keeping with notions that locals were best kept both distinct and open to cultural transformation. The Miao were classified as an official Chinese minority group and the Hunan Miao Frontier was reorganized as the “West Hunan Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture.”⁵⁵ In this change, the Red Miao were lumped together with other Miao peoples, governance was divided between different minorities, a degree of autonomy was formally permitted (if not entirely realized), and greater state efforts were directed toward social assimilation -- rendering regional folk into more

⁵³ Jeffery C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 17-18.

⁵⁴ See Katz, “Jumping Immortals,” 11-17; Wu, *Zhongguo*, Ch. 6.

⁵⁵ The Tujia are accounted descendants of older waves of Han Chinese migration to the region, although also with a history of intermarriage with the Miao. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many were initially classified as “Miao.” In the autonomous region, they have a population of approximately 860,000, in contrast to some 790,000 Miao residents. For related information, see Melissa J. Brown, “Ethnic Classification and Culture: The Case of the Tujia in Hubei, China,” *Asian Ethnicity* 2.1 (March 2001), 57-60.

standard socialist and national citizens.⁵⁶

Conclusion

To return to our original question, what does the Qing bureaucratic treatment of messianic Miao kings tell us about imperial efforts to secure the unruly Hunan Miao Frontier at the turn of the nineteenth century? As this essay argues, the discursive framing of these leaders underlay specific measures for both pacification and social ordering. The consistent rendering of the challengers as treacherous, deceptive, greedy, manipulative, inhumane, outrageous, and crazed served to clarify the nature and organization of the Miao insurgents, casting the kings as the penultimate commanders while utterly denying either their political or spiritual legitimacy. The nature of the lords' imperial processing – arrests, depositions, confessions, charges, executions, and proclamations -- further served not just to censure the contenders, but recreate them both physically and symbolically. It asserted the appearance of justice done and wrongs redressed while reaffirming (in paper, public, and flesh) an imaginary of Qing sovereignty, particularly over the folk of the Miao Frontier. The Miao kings' "inscription" was clarification, recalibration, and spectacle.

Qing management of native pretenders, however, provided more than just an

⁵⁶ For related information, see Wu, *Zhongguo*, 902-6, 934-56. Concerning modern customs, see Ch. 8.

object lesson displaying the wayward illegitimacy of the lords and righteous wrath of the empire. Formal depiction of Miao leaders, echoed in state punishment and ritual, concurrently illuminated larger bureaucratic perspectives on Miao followers. In the case examined here, the tone was set and structured by the Qianlong emperor, as well as perpetuated by the Grand Council and favored ministers such as Heshen and Fukang'an. The connections traced were fairly conventional for the second half of the eighteenth century. Chinese sources depicted the Miao folk as linked to the rebel lords, sharing in a common deviance with them, albeit having to an extent also been duped and misled. Native "lunacy," that is, was depicted as a pervasive, if lamentable, phenomenon. In imperial eyes, it was thus not sufficient to simply extirpate the Miao kings. The Miao people more broadly required sustained segregation from the imperial body until such time as their perceived predilection for ingenuousness and madness had been corrected.

Abbreviations

- LYWC Yan Ruyi 嚴如燧 . *Leyuan wenchao* 樂園文鈔 (Writings of Yan Ruyi). Preface, 1844.
- MFBL *Miaofang beilan* 苗防備覽 (Guide to defense against the Miao). Yan Ruyi 嚴如燧 , comp. 1820.
- QQMQDS *Qingdai qianqi Miaomin qiyi dang'an shiliao* 清代前期苗民起義檔案史料 (Archival documents on the Miao revolts of the former Qing period). Guizhou: Guangming chubanshe, 1993, vol. 2-3.

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