

On Qing Dynasty's Response to the Yuanfa Li Uprising from Memorials during the Reign of Emperor Daoguang

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Abstract: In 1849, Yuanfa Li, a leader of the Tiandi Hui (the Heaven and Earth Society) gathered a crowd and started the armed struggle under the slogan of “robbing the rich and assisting the poor.” This historical event was called as the Yuanfa Li Uprising. In the rebellion, Yuanfa Li led peasants to kill the county magistrate and fight against Qing army's invasion of the Xinning county. In response to this uprising, the Qing government ordered the encirclement and suppression many times. But the suppressing process was not smooth because of the poor communication and the disordered command. The response to this incident reflects multiple problems of the Qing government at the time of domestic strife and foreign aggression.

1. Introduction

After the mid-19th century, with the defeat of the Opium War, China was forced to open up to the world. At the same time, the Qing Dynasty suffered from insuperable internal conflicts. People's livelihood was threatened; there were more and more rebellions all over the country. The Qing government entered the state of domestic strife and foreign aggression. In this context, the occurrence of any event was related to the military forces, the financial forces of the Qing government and the internal communication ability of the administration system. The system was once in good operation, but at that time it began to show some disadvantages. As Feili Kong pointed out in his book *Soulstealers*, there were intricate problems in the communication system of the Qing dynasty.

The Yuanfa Li Uprising was a rebellion which happened under that background. This incident was “insignificant” compared with the large-scale Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement which took place afterwards. However, through studying the historical data, a phenomenon can be found. In respond to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement, the Qing government exposed many problems; most of these problems had been revealed when the Qing dynasty dealt with the Yuanfa Li Uprising. Therefore, it is necessary to make a further analysis on this incident.

2. Yuanfa Li and “the Yuanfa Li Uprising”

Yuanfa Li was born in 1828 in Shuitou village, Xinning of Hunan Province. He died in 1850. Li was the leader of Hunan peasant uprising in the late Qing Dynasty. He joined the Bangbang Association in 1847. In the autumn of the same year, he participated in the peasant uprising led by Zaihao Lei and was responsible for the reconnaissance and liaison. After Zaihao Lei's uprising was suppressed, Yuanfa Li continued to fight against the Qing government. In the summer of 1849, he founded the Bazi Association with Youxing Xie and others. In November of the same year, he recalled soldiers of Zaihao Lei's army and new members of the association to launch an uprising. They conquered the County Government of Xinning at one stroke, captured and killed the county magistrate, and established organizations at all levels for the uprising army. Li sent people to Lingchuan, Guangxi to contact with Tiandi Hui, asking them to launch another uprising in response. At the end of November, he led the army to withdraw from Xinning and move to Xing'an, Lingchuan, Yongfu and other counties in Guangxi. He called for “robbing the rich to help the poor” and got wide response from the local people. The Qing government was shocked by the defeat of the Qing army on the border of Hunan and Guangxi. At the end of March 1850, Li's army was

defeated in a fierce battle with the Qing army in Guizhou; the military strength was sharply reduced. Li led the army to Guangxi again, hoping to meet with Qiuquan Hong (the leader of the the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom). But he failed repeatedly in Yongfu, Lipu, Xiuren and other places. On April 15, on the way back to Xinning, the rebel army was ambushed by the Qing army in Jinfengling area. Yuanfa Li was wounded and fell down the ravine, and then he was captured by the Qing army.

The Yuanfa Li Uprising was a big peasant uprising on the eve of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. In this uprising, Yuanfa Li raised the flag of Zaihao Lei's rebel army. He first founded the "Baozi Association" and called for "the revenge for Zaihao Lei". Later, in the late night of October 13, the twenty-ninth year of Emperor Daoguang' reign, he revolted and conquered the Xinning County, killing Wan Dingen, the magistrate of the county, and Yang Shi, the wife of Li Bo, a former magistrate of the county.

Among the existing studies, the number of papers on Yuanfa Li Uprising is not very large. Meanwhile, these articles are limited to the analysis of the causes and effects. Guanwu Ma of Guangxi University for Nationalities analyzed the reasons of the Yuanfa Li Uprising in *On the Uprising by Yuanfa Li and Zaihao Lei*. Firstly, the feudal exploitation as well as natural and man-made disasters led to the extreme poverty of peasants' life. Secondly, after the Opium War, a large number of transport workers in northern Guangxi and southern Hunan lost their jobs. Their active participation is one of the important reasons for the uprising. Thirdly, the historical tradition of the struggle against the Qing Dynasty is another reason for this uprising. Based on collected data and previous studies, this paper makes a superficial analysis on the Qing government's response to the Yuanfa Li uprising.

3. The Game between the Qing Government and the Rebel Army

After the incident, the Emperor Daoguang ordered Dexin Feng, the new governor of Hunan Province, to suppress the rebellion, and ordered Zuchen Zheng, the governor of Guangxi Province, to "strictly regulate civil and military officers of the province to prevent the spreading of rebellion." Dexin Feng sent Qunying, the commander in chief of Yongzhou town, and Bingkun Yang, the Tao-tai of Changbao, to cooperate with Zhongyuan Jiang, the head of the county's local troops, and blew down the city wall. On November 30, Yuanfa Li led the people to rush out of the county town in the dark and entered Luoyuandong. Then, with the cooperation of people in Dajuandong, he killed the Qing garrison Zhao Xiong, Budao Hou and Bingnan Liu. Under the leadership of Yuanbao Li, people of Xing'an and Quanzhou in Guangxi came to support; the number of people in the army increased to two to three thousand. In the first month of the thirtieth year of Daoguang, the peasant army entered Xingan and Longsheng of Guangxi from Hunan. On the 18th, in Chang'an fort of Suining, the Qing army's general Malone was killed. Zhengfeng Min, the governor of Guangxi cooperated with Chu army to stop the attack. The peasants went through Huaiyuan and entered Guyi; they killed the beadles Zongwu Deng and Binghua Su. Then they went to Sixiangsuo and Huanglinsuo in Guizhou. On the 27th, the troop defeated Zhongyuan Jiang and expanded the army to more than 5000 people. Yutai, the governor of Huguang (now Hunan and Hubei Province), Xiangrong, the new governor of Hunan, together with the officers and soldiers of Guangxi, Guizhou and Hubei provinces, blocked the front and attacked the back of the rebellion army. In February, the rebel army retreated to Tongdao County, Hunan Province, then entered Jingzhou and Huaiyuan. They passed through the Hulujiang River and entered Guizhou Province again. The army killed Xinjing Ha, the garrison of Qing army, and threatened the Liping Prefecture. In March, the rebel army was defeated by the Guizhou troop and retreated to Guangxi. They passed through Longsheng, Huaiyuan, Rongxian, Yining, Luorong, Yongning, Yongfu, Yangshuo, Lipu, Xiuren and other counties, and even reached Liutang, 60 Li (nearly 30 kilometers) away from Guilin, the province capital. In late April, the peasant army was surrounded in Jinfengling. They garrisoned through the terrain advantage. They fired guns, and rolled down wood and stones. The Qing army attacked upwards through several branches. On the 23rd, Yuanfa Li was injured and tumbled down the cliff to be captured by the Qing army.

4. The Qing Government's Response to the Uprising

4.1 From the Wording of Zouzhe (Memorials) of Local Officials to the Emperor

First is the expression of the rebel. In memorials from October 21, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang to June 12, the thirtieth year of Daoguang, the risers were called as “bandits”; Yuanfa Li and others were called as “bandit leaders”. For example, in the memorial of Gongzhen Wan on October 12, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, “the bandits swarmed into the city and killed the officials”; “the bandits dared to gather people to cause trouble”. On November 16, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, Yutai's memorial called the uprising as “the case of bandits killing the officials and occupying the city”. In addition, on the first day of November, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, Dexin Feng wrote in another memorial that, he would “punish as strict as possible to warn the tenacious bandits”. From the name “bandit”, we can see that in the minds of the officials in charge, Yuanfa Li and other people's behaviors were similar to those of bandits: attacking cities and killing officials. They were “bandits” rather than the “army”. They had no strict organizational structures or purposes, no clear political orientation. Their behaviors were similar to plunder. In this case, the official's subconscious definition of the uprising reflects the arrogance of the ruling authority. They were not aware of the seriousness of the incident. It also showed a kind of eased mindset from the supreme ruler to the lower level officials. They did not aware of the crisis or the concept of ruling threat. They called the leaders as “tenacious bandits”, showing that they did not regard the incident as a malignant event. The word “tenacious” reveals that the authorities did not handle the event effectively in the past, which led to the “tenacious” “bandits” .

Second is the description of the incident. In Yingjun's Memorial on October 26, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, “there were bandits in Xinning County, gathering a crowd and making disturbances“. On November 14, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, Dexin Feng wrote, “this case has the plot of provocation”. It can be seen that the ruling authorities define the incident as “trouble making” and “provocation”. In memorials of the Qing government when it handled peasant uprisings in the Northeast during the periods of Xianfeng and Tongzhi, the authorities called the bad deeds of similar scale as “trouble making” or “provocation”; the participants were called as “bandits” and “bandit leaders”. One reason is the psychological superiority of the imperial rulers for a long time. But we can still find the relaxed attitude towards the event. Perhaps this attitude also foreshadows the speed and effectiveness of the mobilization.

The Yuanfa Li Uprising took place on October 13, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang. In Dexin Feng's memorial on November 14, he wrote, “it is reported that the bandit leader is Yuanfa Li. I need to check whether it is true.” That is to say, one month after the incident, officials still did not know the leader of the rebellion. In previous memorials, they wrote, “the surname of the bandit leader is Li. He is known as the big brother. Yuanpo Luo, Guangdao Li, Guanghui Li and other people invited Changshi Yang to become sworn brothers.” The memorial of Dexin Feng on November 30, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, expressed that, “the bandits dared to enter the city and kill officials. They must be the remaining members. The leader, whose surname is Li, may be a relative of Hui Li”. At that time, more than two months had passed since the incident happened. Due to the limitation of data, the author could not know the situation of the confrontation between soldiers and peasants in Xinning County, and could not make the conclusion that the response speed was very slow. But considering the general situation and the historical conditions at that time, two months should not be short.

4.2 Government Departments Send Troops

On October 26th, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang, Hunan governor Yingjun submitted memorials to the throne, saying he had sent troops to Xinning County. “The Biaoxie Army of Yongzhou, Changsha, Hengzhou, Zhenhantiabiao and Chenyuan Road allocated 1800 soldiers each to cooperate with us.” “I rushed to the Yongzhou Town, in order to dispatch officers and soldiers to encircle and suppress the rebellion army.” On October 28, Zuchen Zheng, the governor of Guangxi, sent troops to block the uprising army. “All the places adjacent to Guangxi should be protected by soldiers”. On the first day of November, Dexin Feng, the governor of Hunan Province submitted

memorials, expressing the situation of deploying forces in Xinning. “There were 450 soldiers in the second battalion of Suining. I rushed to Jingzhou and ordered to hire village soldiers to defend the rebel army.” In the period from October 21, the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang to June 12, the thirtieth year of Daoguang, there were 12 memorials of military mobilization. Most of them were concentrated in the first three months. The number is large, which is not commensurate with the level of dealing with “bandits”. Regardless of the actual effect of the redeployment, it can be seen that the neighboring provinces were actively carrying out military actions.

There seems to be a deviation. From the governor of Hunan Province to the officials of neighboring provinces, from the central court to local officers, they were all actively operating, which could be seen from the number of troop deployments. However, the effect was not consistent with the positive attitude; those efforts failed to produce the proper impacts, which could be found from the long-time battles.

4.3 The Contents of Memorials

On the first day of November 29, Dexin Feng reported that “more than 300 bandits were killed in the fight and countless were killed in the explosion”. Generally speaking, in memorials of war situations during this period, words like “countless” were often used. In the historical context at that time, this vague and exaggerated expression can be understood as a way of respecting the imperial power and habitually expressing the efforts. But from the deeper consideration, this vague expression shows that officials do not know the actual situation of the war very well. They were not rigorous. In addition, Dexin Feng's memorial on the third day of December of the twenty-ninth year of Daoguang said, “on the the twenty-ninth day, the application of mines blew down the city wall which was as wide as three Zhangs (nearly ten meters)”, and “on the 30th day, countless bandits were killed.” In other words, nearly two months after the incident, officers and soldiers recovered the Xinning County occupied by Yuanfa Li and his army. At the end of the memorial, when summarizing the incident, Peng Dexin wrote that “today's battle showed our morale. We recovered the city really quickly.” That is to say, at this time, the recovery of Xinning County was “very quick”. At least in Dexin Peng's eyes, there was no delay. Peng held relaxed attitude. We can also infer that the Qing government approved the speed of handling this incident. If the government had repeatedly urged, supervised, and issued orders with strict tone, Dexin Peng would not describe the handling speed as “quick”. It can be further seen that the Qing government recognized the previous practices. Does this represents the attitude of the court towards the incident of Yuanfa Li?

It can be seen from the memorial, although the city of Xinning was conquered, the event was far from over.

In June 12, the thirtieth year of Daoguang, Yuanfa Li was captured alive. The Privy Council issued an appeal to Yutai, the governor of Huguang, ordering “officials need to escort Li to Beijing carefully”. More than half a year passed from the recovery of Xining to the capture of Yuanfa Li. In this period, we can roughly outline the fate of Dexin Peng. On June 14, the thirtieth year of Daoguang, the Privy Council issued an order. “The governor of Hunan Province, Dexin Peng, should remove from office. In the case of handling banditry in his province, due to the lack of troops, he spoiled the opportunity to win the battle. Peng also trusted his subordinates' report of recovering the city, so he submitted the memorial and withdrew the troops. Although not intentional, he can hardly absolve himself from the blame of poor management. According to the proposal, Dexin Feng should go to Xinjiang to make atonement.” In the first half of the year, Dexin Peng moved troops and dispatched generals, making a lot of efforts to recover the Xinning County. All of these turned into nothing in an instant. The conclusion was that Peng did not suppress the rebellion effectively and spoiled the opportunity. The statement reflects the relaxed attitude of the government towards the incident. On the contrary, the Qing government's temporary affirmation of Dexin Peng's recovery of Xinning shows the government's laxity and recklessness.

Under the background of the times, we may summarize some problems existing in the Qing Dynasty at that time. We can also understand the issue as, Dexin Peng did the thing under the influence of the whole bureaucracy system of the Qing Dynasty. This kind of lax, procrastinating

and hypocritical working style is reflected in the response to Yuanfa Li uprising.

5. Conclusion

As we can see from the above analysis, there was a relatively chaotic situation when the Qing government responded to Yuanfa Li's rebellion and uprising. On the one hand, it was caused by the untimely communication of information. On the other hand, it also exposed the policy swing and unwillingness of the Qing government in dealing with such issues. The influence of Li Yuan's uprising was the result of many factors in the Qing Dynasty at the time of domestic strife and foreign aggression.

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