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A Brief Introduction to the Qingshui River Manuscripts

QU Jian¹

(PhD Candidate, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg /
Visiting Researcher, Max-Planck Institute for European Legal History)

The Qingshui River Manuscripts (清水江文书) refer to a large number of Ming-Qing (1368–1911) written contracts as well as various other kinds of documents that were found in the Qingshui River Basin of southwest China. Over the last decade, these manuscripts have been enjoying increasing popularity among scholars. This short paper intends to offer some basic information for understanding the Qingshui River Manuscripts in their entirety.

1. The moment of discovery

Although there are a handful of discussions in Republican-era (1912–1949) periodicals, mostly concerning the timber industry in eastern Guizhou province,² these manuscripts attracted serious scholarly attention only after the discovery of some 300 paper contracts in Wendou Village in 1964.³ After this discovery, more manuscripts were subsequently found and collected from villagers by researchers and local archives and, as a result, by 1999 the number of discovered manuscripts in the region had exceeded 4,000.⁴

Systematic surveys were carried out at the beginning of the 2000s thanks to a collaboration between the local government and various academic institutions. At present it is well recognized that the total number of Qingshui River Manuscripts, including those that have not

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² See, for example, Hu Jingxiu 1941, pp. 41-42; Jing Cheng 1940, pp. 55-57.

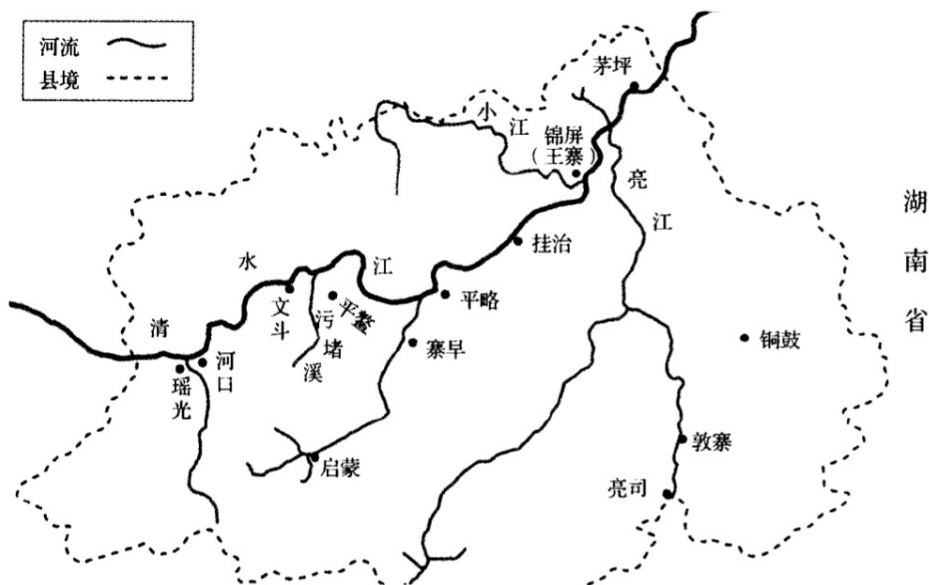
³ See Guizhousheng bianjizu 1988, pp. 222-223; Wu Caimao 2016, p. 2. According to one statistic, research papers in the field may now be counted by the thousand. See Yang Junchang 2017, p. 134.

⁴ See Wu Caimao 2016, p. 2.

yet been discovered or collected, is huge. It is estimated by some at more than 500,000,⁵ while a more conservative estimate is approximately 300,000 manuscripts.⁶

2. Where and when?

These manuscripts were named “Qingshui River Manuscripts” by academics, after the region in which they were found.⁷ The middle and lower reaches of the river flow through several ethnic minority counties, such as Jinping (锦屏), Jianhe (剑河), and Tianzhu (天柱) of the Southeast Qian Autonomous Prefecture of Miao and Dong (黔东南苗族侗族自治州), Guizhou province. This region in southwest China was considered to be the central part of the *Miao Jiang* 苗疆 (or Miao frontier area) during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).⁸



Map of Jinping County and the Qingshui River⁹

The manuscripts that were collected from remote Miao villages along the river date from the middle and late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the Republican period, although it is reported that in fact only 13 Ming manuscripts have been published until recently.¹⁰ Even at the present moment, as the findings from my field research suggest, people in this area are still producing manuscripts following the continued tradition of earlier times.

⁵ See Zhang Ming et al 2016, p. 111.

⁶ See Zhang Yingqiang 2015.

⁷ See Zhang Yingqiang 2013, p. 33.

⁸ See Lin Qian et al. 2012, pp. 5-11.

⁹ Daniels 2004, p. 147.

¹⁰ Lin Qian 2015, p. 54.

3. The content

As far as we can see, all of these manuscripts were written in Chinese, with Suzhou numerals being used as shorthand in number-intensive manuscripts. These manuscripts represent a broad spectrum of subjects, including worship, funeral activities, litigation, marriage, genealogy, taxes, succession, the separation of families, etc. While covering a range of genres related to everyday life, contracts account for the majority of these manuscripts.



Contracts from the Qingshui River region¹¹

The most unique feature of these contracts stems from the fact that the overwhelming majority of them are “white (unsealed) deeds”, which are widely considered to be “unregistered, had not paid taxes, and had no validity in court”.¹² It has been shown in a study that only 6.65% (424/6,378) of the examined contracts are “red (sealed) deeds”.¹³ Compared to the respective number of the Huizhou manuscripts, the portion of white deeds in the Qingshui River Manuscripts is considerably higher,¹⁴ which suggests weaker governmental and legal control in this region.

4. Major collections and publications

In addition to limited university and private holdings, the major collections of these manuscripts, which amount to 103,556 by 2012,¹⁵ are stored in six county archives in the region, including originals and copies (in both paper and digital form). It has been reported

¹¹ Picture created by the author, with materials extracted from Zhang Yingqiang and Wang Zongxun 2007, 2009, 2011, vol. 1-3.

¹² Duff 2017, p. 145.

¹³ See Liu Yanan and Wu Caimao 2012, pp. 38-39.

¹⁴ See Kishimoto Mio 2003, p. 182.

¹⁵ It should be noted that by now the number is undoubtedly much higher, about 240,000, according to a government official of Jinping county. See Ma Guojun and Li Hongxiang 2012, p. 75.

recently that the archive in Jinping County might possess the largest collection with over 60,000 manuscripts, most of which have by now already been digitized but are only accessible from the archive's intranet.¹⁶ The archive also owns a purpose-built museum which houses a special collection of manuscripts from the county.

The publication of the Qingshui River Manuscripts was mainly promoted by universities and research institutes. The first compilation of these manuscripts was published in Japan by the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.¹⁷ Large-scale publication programs were then launched by, in chronological order, the Sun Yat-sen University, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Guizhou University, and Kaili University. Up to now, at least 30,000 manuscripts have been published.¹⁸

Overall, it is of crucial importance that these materials become more accessible to researchers of all disciplines. A more comprehensive study of these old texts will be possible only by doing this.

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¹⁶ See Long Linglie 2018, p. 10.

¹⁷ Daniels et al 2001, vol. 1.

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