



# The Whole Story of the Shanhe Weirs Water Case in the Baishaxi Stream Basin of Jinhua in the Late Qing Dynasty

Qi He, Zilong Chen, Fanxi Jin, Xinyi Feng, Tianzhen Wang

College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 18312928462@163.com

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## Abstract

In the late Qing Dynasty, the 36 Weirs of Baishaxi Stream in Jinhua fell into frequent disputes. A particularly intense struggle for the water rights (legal or customary entitlements that determine how individuals or groups can access, use, and control water resources) of the Shanhe Weirs erupted between the Yin and Yu lineages downstream, turning local documents such as county gazetteers (xianzhi) and temple gazetteers (miaozhi) into a battlefield for power. The Yu lineage, whose water rights had been gradually eroded due to a conflict over the Yushan Weir, faced mounting survival pressures. Seizing the opportunity presented by their clansman Yu Jinfu's role as a co-editor of the Guangxu-era Jinhua County Gazetteer, they leveraged the compilation of the Water Conservancy Gazetteer to tie the Yushan and Zhongji Weirs to their lineage's interests, attempting to solidify their water rights through this official text. The Yin lineage, after winning the lawsuit over the Shanhe Weirs, found themselves unable to alter the already published county gazetteer. Instead, they turned to folk documents such as the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer, using handwritten copies and printed editions to reinforce the legitimacy of their water rights claims. This dispute was not merely a struggle for water resources but also a microcosm of the weakening state governance and intensifying involuntarily competition (a form of intensified competition in which increasing effort or input yields diminishing returns, often leading to stagnation rather than progress) in local society during the late Qing, reflecting the broader resource dilemmas faced by late imperial China.

## Subject Areas

History

## Keywords

Rural Lineages, Irrigation Conflicts, County Gazetteer Compilation, Cults of Water Gods

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## 1. Introduction

Jinhua Nanshan Baishaxi Stream, also known as Bailongxi Stream, originates from the Mountain named Lion at the junction of Suichang and Wuyi counties. It flows from the north through Menzhen into Jinhua County, then turns south to empty into the Wujiang River, with a total length of 65 kilometers, collecting more than 30 tributaries along its course. Due to the low terrain of the Wujiang River, it cannot directly irrigate the plains along Baishaxi Stream. Meanwhile, Baishaxi Stream itself is “deep but with a low water level” ([1], vol. 3, p. 8), making it difficult to naturally irrigate the higher lands on both banks. As a result, agricultural water use in Baishaxi Stream basin mainly relies on manually constructed irrigation projects ([1], vol. 3, p. 8; [2], vol. 1, p. 7). The allocation of water intercepted by weirs is crucial for farmland irrigation, serving as a lifeline that sustains local livelihoods and the survival of villages.

Residents along there constructed the 36 Weirs of Baishaxi Stream, “determining the volume of water flow based on the size of the fields, and regulating the length of waterways according to the distance of the Baishaxi Stream”. Moreover, “each weir had its own reservoir, and each reservoir was equipped with water-blocking structures” ([1], vol. 3, p. 8; [2], vol. 1, p. 11) to retain water for irrigation. From an administrative division perspective, the 36 Weirs of Baishaxi Stream irrigated farmlands in southwestern Jinhua County, eastern Tangxi County, and southeastern Lanxi County. Through long-term historical development, it has formed a water conservancy system that “connects Fucang mountain at its head and spans Gucheng village at its tail, comprises thirty-six weirs in total, irrigating thousands of acres of farmland”. It should be noted that the name “36 Weirs of Baishaxi Stream” serves as a generic term for the numerous weir-type irrigation projects along Baishaxi Stream, with their specific locations and names not being entirely fixed across different historical periods.

The Yin and Yu lineages discussed in this paper were powerful lineages situated at the confluence where the lower reaches of Baishaxi Stream empty into the Wujiang River. The Yin lineage relocated to Linjiang Village during the Ming dynasty, then settled on the western bank of Baishaxi Stream; the Yu lineage moved to Donglinjiang Village (present-day Dongyu Village) in the late Yuan dynasty and then settled on the eastern bank.

Furthermore, since weir-type irrigation projects were typically sited upstream of the farmlands they irrigated, downstream villages that relied on this water had to negotiate both the volume and timing of water usage with upstream villages. Sharing a single watercourse, the 36 Weirs of Baishaxi Stream functioned as an

integrated system, operating on the principle that “the first weir does not impede the second, and the second weir does not impede the others; thus, all thirty-six weirs as a whole will not hinder one another” ([1], vol. 7, p. 37). Conversely, if problems arose at any point between upstream and downstream villages, water disputes would ensue. Such conflicts frequently occurred in the Baishaxi Stream basin during the late Qing dynasty, and it was against this backdrop that the water disputes between the Yin and Yu lineages emerged.

Water disputes persisted among these lineages reliant on irrigation, with competitions frequently emerging between the eastern and western banks as well as between upstream and downstream areas in the Baishaxi Stream basin. The western bank of Baishaxi Stream featured higher terrain with predominantly sandy soils, resulting in severe water percolation; although arable land was limited there, the demand for irrigation water remained substantial. In contrast, the eastern bank possessed flat terrain with clayey soils, and despite its extensive farmland, required relatively less irrigation water. During the late Qing dynasty, disputes over water allocation in dry seasons and the apportionment of weir maintenance costs frequently arose between the eastern and western banks, stemming from disparities in both landholdings and water consumption.

During the late Qing dynasty and the Republican period, the Yin and Yu lineages became embroiled in disputes over water usage rights concerning the Shanhe Weirs (comprising the Upper Weir and Lower Weir). Both parties sought to establish their respective advantages in water resource allocation through means such as contributing to county gazetteer compilations and disseminating temple records. The conflicting accounts found in county gazetteers, temple records, and lineage genealogies ultimately reflect the covert competition among stakeholders pursuing their own interests.

This raises the following questions: What were the underlying causes of the water disputes over the Shanhe Weirs? What claims did the opposing Yin and Yu lineages respectively put forward, and through what channels did they seek to safeguard their respective interests?

## **2. Motivation of the Yu Lineage in the Water Dispute**

The Yu lineage’s attempt to seize the water rights of the Shanhe Weirs can be understood in light of its gradual loss of control over the Yushan Weir. From the mid-Qing period onward, the Yu lineage of Donglinjiang was repeatedly embroiled in disputes with the Ye lineage of Mahai and the Zheng lineage of Xiaoxi over the irrigation waters of the Yushan Weir. As the balance of power increasingly turned against them, the construction of a new weir emerged as a possible means of relieving the pressure.

Both the Yu and Ye lineages had migrated to Donglin Village and Mahai Village along the lower reaches of the Baishaxi Stream during the late Yuan and early Ming periods. However, the warfare at the end of the Ming dynasty scattered their populations and destroyed their genealogical records. It was not until the Kangxi

reign that the two lineages gradually recovered. The Yu lineage rebuilt its genealogy in 1681 (the twentieth year of Kangxi), and the Ye lineage followed in 1712 (the fifty-first year of Kangxi). As their populations expanded and their economic strength recovered, the demand for irrigation water grew accordingly, laying the groundwork for subsequent conflicts.

The first major dispute broke out in 1739 (the fourth year of Qianlong), when the Yu and Ye lineages brought their conflict over the Yushan Weir before the local authorities. As the source records, “the litigation lasted thirteen years before the case was concluded” ([3], vol. 1, p. 1). In 1751 (Qianlong 16), the Yu lineage obtained a favorable ruling that allowed “the farmland of an entire locality to benefit from irrigation” ([3], vol. 1). The legal struggle, however, proved extremely costly for the Ye lineage, which reportedly “expended nearly one-third of its accumulated property in the process” ([4], vol. 5, p. 1). Yet the dispute did not end there. In the autumn of 1771 (Qianlong 36), “another serious conflict erupted” ([4], vol. 5, p. 1). Violent clashes between the two lineages resulted in fatalities and ultimately drew the attention of the Qing central government. In 1773 (Qianlong 38), the Ministry of Justice issued a ruling that significantly restructured the distribution of irrigation rights. As the source records, “the Ye lineage was permitted to install only a single waterwheel at its small dam inside to lift water for irrigating the higher fields, while the remaining water was to be directed to Houchen Pool for the irrigation of Yu lineage farmland” [5]. The ruling effectively established a shared irrigation schedule between the Yu and Ye lineages, and the terms were inscribed on a stone stele to publicize the settlement. As a consequence of these disputes, the Ye lineage lost the majority of its former water rights to the Yushan Weir, as the genealogy notes, “the twists and turns involved are too complex to be fully captured in writing” ([4], vol. 5, p. 1). Although the erection of the Qianlong-era Yushan Weir stele temporarily settled the dispute between the two lineages, it also created new tensions, as the Yu lineage later invoked the stele’s provisions to justify further claims over water rights.

In practice, however, the Yushan Weir served more than just the Yu and Ye lineages. Other local groups—including the Wang lineage of Zhuyuan, the Shen lineage of Dongya, the Huang lineage of Yantou, and the Zheng lineage of Xiaoxi—also depended on its waters for irrigation. The Zheng and Wang lineages had long remained on the sidelines of the Yu–Ye dispute, confident that “their registered lands already enjoyed adequate irrigation”. Consequently, they did not challenge the Yu lineage’s claim that the Yushan Weir and the Yupi Weir were effectively the same system. However, this situation changed dramatically in the thirty-seventh year of Qianlong, as the genealogy notes, “the Yu lineage suddenly erected a stele at the county office declaring that the waters of the Yushan Weir were to be used exclusively by the Yu and Ye lineages”. Overnight, the Zheng, Wang, and Shen lineages found themselves deprived of access to the waters of both the Yushan and Yupi weirs, facing the alarming prospect that “their fields would be left to dry up without irrigation” ([6], vol. 5, p. 1). The Yu lineage’s ma-

nipulation of the stele thus provoked a strong response, and these lineages quickly intervened in the dispute.

In 1782 (Qianlong 47), under the leadership of the Wang lineage of Zhuyuan, six lineages renegotiated the irrigation arrangements for the Yushan Weir. While the earlier allocation had granted 70 percent of the irrigation period to the Yu lineage and 30 percent to the Ye lineage, the revised agreement introduced additional provisions, which notes “the Ye lineage first released water for four days, then downstream lineages that includes the Yu, Wang, Zheng, and Shen were to share ten days of irrigation time”. As a result, the Yu lineage’s ten-day water period (approximately 70 percent) now had to be shared with these additional groups, and all water from the Yushan Weir was required to pass through the Ye lineage’s small dam inside. In exchange for the right to pass irrigation water across their lands, the Wang, Shen, and Zheng lineages transferred certain fields to the Ye lineage and paid additional grain rent ([4], vol. 5, p. 142; [6], vol. 1, p. 1). With the intervention of these groups, the Yu lineage could no longer dominate the system alone; its share of water rights diminished, while the Ye lineage gradually gained the upper hand.

By 1882 (Guangxu 8), Yu Jinqi, the elder brother of Yu Jinfu, presided over a new edition of the Yu lineage genealogy. The Map of the Yushan Weir engraved in this genealogy depicted the irrigation period as equally divided between the Yu and Ye lineages, while excluding the Zheng lineage of Xiaoxi, the Shen lineage of Dongya, and the Wang lineage of Zhuyuan ([3], vol. 2). The publication of this map clearly served to defend the Yu lineage’s claims to water rights. Whether or not the map accurately reflected the actual distribution of irrigation rights at the time, it undoubtedly represented the Yu lineage’s official position in the Guangxu period. It is therefore highly unlikely that the lineage would deliberately understate its own share of irrigation time. Even under this representation, which excluded the rights of other lineages, the Yu lineage could claim no more than about half of the irrigation period of the Yushan Weir. This suggests that by the late Qing period the Yu lineage’s share of irrigation water had steadily declined, and its economic interests were increasingly threatened.

The Yu lineage’s control of the Yushan Weir had thus fallen from more than 70 percent in 1773 to less than 50 percent by the late Qing period, creating a serious challenge to its livelihood. Under these circumstances, the attempt to construct a new weir to divert irrigation water becomes readily understandable. Yet the creation of a new waterworks inevitably disrupted the established order of local irrigation rights. Without official recognition from local authorities, such an undertaking would almost certainly provoke collective resistance from neighboring lineages.

It was in this context that members of the Yu lineage, while participating in the compilation of the Guangxu edition of the Jinhua County Gazetteer, strategically reinterpreted several weirs associated with their irrigation interests—including the Shanhe Weirs, Yushan Weir, and Zhongji Weir—as waterworks that “flowed



Jinqi) and Yonggeng (style name Jinfu), were both registered government students, and both of their sons-in-law likewise held posts within the Jinhua county government ([3], vol. 1, vol. 2, vol. 8, p. 82, vol. 9, p. 65). Over several decades, the successive efforts of four generations—Mao, Qi, Guang, and Yong—gradually established the Yu lineage as a family that combined administrative expertise with the cultural prestige of the scholarly elite.

Particularly noteworthy is that grandfather Yonggeng, better known as Yu Jinfu, a government student, served as a sectional compiler of the Jinhua County Gazetteer in 1894 (the twentieth year of the Guangxu reign) ([3], vol. 1, p. 1, vol. 9, p. 69; [7], vol. 1, p.1). At the same time, his elder brother Yu Jinqi, also a government student, served as the general manager responsible for the revision of the Yu lineage genealogy in Donglinjiang Village ([3], vol. 1, vol. 9, p. 65). With Yu Jinfu directly participating in the compilation of the gazetteer, the Yu lineage thus possessed a concrete channel through which it could influence the process of gazetteer writing.

Further evidence of this influence can be found in the “Biographies of Virtuous Women” (Xianfu Zhuan) section of the Guangxu Jinhua County Gazetteer. The wife of grandfather Qipei, surnamed Weng, is included among these exemplary women ([7], vol. 10, p. 35). Apart from the fact that she lived to the age of ninety-two, however, no other notable deeds are recorded about her. Without the active efforts of the Yu lineage to promote the stories of their ancestors and the acceptance of these narratives by the gazetteer compilers, it would seem difficult for a woman to be presented as a moral exemplar for the entire county merely on the basis of longevity. For Yu Jinfu, however, who served as a sectional compiler of the gazetteer, including his grandmother in the county gazetteer could simultaneously function as an act of filial piety that enhanced the prestige of his lineage and as a legitimate component of his editorial work. From these few lines in the “Biographies of Virtuous Women”, one can glimpse the significant influence that the Yu lineage exerted over the compilation of the county gazetteer.

#### 4. The Controversy and Omissions in the Guangxu Jinhua Xianzhi

Under the influence of Yu Jinfu, the Guangxu edition of the Jinhua County Gazetteer displays an evident bias in its account of the water rights of the Yushan Weir. In this gazetteer, the description of Yushan Weir is unusually detailed. Whereas most other weirs are recorded in only a few to a dozen characters, Yushan Weir receives the longest annotation in the Water Conservancy Gazetteer (104 characters). The entry reproduces the principal content of the Yushan Weir Stele, particularly emphasizing that “the remaining water was entirely directed to Houchen Pond, from which it was lifted to irrigate the fields of the Yu lineage” ([7], vol. 3, p. 9). However, it omits the existence of the agreement reached in the forty-seventh year of the Qianlong Emperor, which was unfavorable to the Yu lineage.

A striking contrast can be observed in the Jinhua County Gazetteer. Although the Yushan Weir stele had been erected in the thirty-eighth year of the Qianlong reign, the editors of the Daoguang gazetteer made no record of it. Instead, they wrote that “Yushan Weir lies below Mount Yushan... together with the Yupi Weir and the Yulin Weir, each diverting water from Baishaxi Stream to irrigate farmland” ([8], vol. 1, p. 48). The three weirs are thus placed on an equal footing. The editors remained silent regarding the internal allocation of water rights and maintained a neutral stance. Nevertheless, by acknowledging the existence of Yupi Weir, the gazetteer effectively rejected the Yu lineage’s claim that “Yushan is in fact Yupi (Weir)” ([6], vol. 1, p. 1; [8], vol. 1, p. 51). This position objectively corresponded to the water-rights claims advanced by the Zheng, Ye, Wang, and Shen lineages. It is difficult to imagine that, without covert support from members of the Yu lineage, the compilers of the Guangxu gazetteer would have departed from the earlier neutral approach and inserted such a strongly biased account into the Water Conservancy Gazetteer.

If the Yu lineage’s assertion over Yushan Weir was an attempt to restore former water rights, then their reinterpretation of the Zhongji Weir as a weir “diverting eastward to the Yu lineage” represented a different strategy—an attempt to create a new channel for securing irrigation resources.

In the Mountains and Rivers Gazetteer of the Guangxu Jinhua County Gazetteer, a Zhongji Weir irrigating the Yu lineage on the eastern bank was inserted between the Upper River Weir and the Lower River Weir, and the direction of irrigation attributed to the Shanghe Weir (Upper River Weir) was also altered. This change not only contradicts the earlier Daoguang gazetteer but is also inconsistent with the account recorded in the Water Conservancy Gazetteer of the same Guangxu gazetteer. The editors claimed that the revision was based on Shen Baolin’s Investigation of the Sources and Courses of Baisha in volume four of the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer ([7], vol. 3, p. 8, p. 36; [8], vol. 1, p. 49). In fact, however, the record in the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer is consistent with the Daoguang county gazetteer: it contains no reference to Zhongji Weir and does not specify whether the Upper River Weir irrigated the upper or lower terraces ([9], vol. 4, p. 100). Consequently, the authority and objectivity of the newly compiled Guangxu Jinhua County Gazetteer have been called into question.

Although the Guangxu gazetteer “extensively consulted a wide range of sources and provided more detailed factual information than earlier gazetteers”, it nevertheless “diverged from them in many respects; the gentlemen who assisted in the compilation at the time held differing opinions, and many issues remained unsettled after discussion” [11]. As a result, the work was ultimately shelved and never widely published. Examination of the “gentlemen who assisted in the undertaking” reveals that most were xiangsheng (county-level Confucian students) from various localities of Jinhua County ([7], vol. 1, p. 1). At a time when the late Qing regime was beset by instability, the project lacked strong supervision from the central government. Moreover, some of the compilers harbored parochial biases

in favor of their own local communities. The quality of the gazetteer thus proved uneven and failed to command broad confidence. The county magistrate Qian Renlong in the early Republic may have known something of the circumstances behind the compilation. Yet by then “time had passed and personnel had changed; most of those who had assisted in compiling and proofreading the work had already died” [7]. For the sake of preserving local culture, he nevertheless arranged for the gazetteer to be printed and widely distributed. The disputed passages contained therein consequently spread as well, eventually giving rise to this controversy in the early Republican period.

## 5. The Yin Lineage’s Response

The Yin lineage raised strong doubts about the Zhongji Weir, which the newly compiled county gazetteer attributes to the Yu lineage. They noted that in the Mountains and Rivers Gazetteer in Jinhua County gazetteer, a weir named Zhongji unexpectedly appears between the two weirs located along the upper and lower reaches of the Linjiang River. The gazetteer further states that it “flows eastward and is associated with the Yu surname”, a claim they regarded as highly puzzling ([10], vol. 12, p. 1-3).

The Yin lineage argued that earlier gazetteers contained no record of Zhongji Weir and that no trace of it could be found along the riverbanks. Yet the name had already appeared in the Wanli-era Tangxi County Gazetteer. Because the weir lay near the boundary between Tangxi County and Jinhua County, the gazetteer noted that it and the ten weirs downstream fell under Jinhua’s jurisdiction and were therefore not recorded in detail ([2], vol. 1, p. 11). The Qianlong-era Tangxi County Gazetteer places Zhongji Weir downstream from Hanlong Weir (the fifth weir). Although located within Tangxi territory, it clearly irrigated farmland in Jinhua County along the lower Baishaxi Stream. In the early Qing, the weir was rebuilt at a site known as Sandu ([1], vol. 3, p. 8). After the implementation of the Shunzhuang system in 1733, however, the territorial affiliation of local administrative units became unclear. The surviving late Qing fish-scale land registers of Tangxi likewise contain no record of Zhongji Weir ([11] [12]), though these archives are incomplete, with about one-fifth of the original volumes missing.

By the Republican period, investigators compiling the county gazetteer were unable to identify the weir’s location ([13], vol. 5, p. 42). It is therefore possible that, as waterways shifted over time, Zhongji Weir’s administrative affiliation changed from Tangxi to Jinhua. Irrigation maps preserved in weir records and lineage genealogies nonetheless show several canals on the eastern bank of Baishaxi Stream downstream from Yushan Weir connecting to the main channel ([14] [15], vol. 1). Archival sources and field investigations further indicate that in the Republican period Zhongji Weir irrigated more than twenty mu of farmland in Dongyu Village. After the expansion of Yushan Weir in 1954, its irrigation function disappeared, leaving only a sluice opening ([15] [16]). These findings suggest that the gazetteer’s claim that “Zhongji Weir flowed eastward to irrigate

Yu lineage fields” was not entirely unfounded. Nevertheless, once the county gazetteer was invoked by the Yu lineage to assert water rights, it inevitably threatened the interests of the Yin lineage on the western bank.

With the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the Yu lineage could no longer exert influence over the new government, and the Yin lineage began to counterattack. In the fifth year of the Republic (1916), the Yin lineage filed a lawsuit and received the support of Qian Renlong [7], the magistrate of Jinhua County. They subsequently erected a commemorative stele in the Yin ancestral hall to proclaim their victory. By that time, however, the new county gazetteer had already been widely printed and circulated, making revision or withdrawal virtually impossible.

Confronted with an unalterable and widely circulated county gazetteer, as well as the uncertain political climate of the early Republic, the Yin lineage found little security even after obtaining a favorable ruling. Amid this uncertainty, they turned to local tradition for a more stable foundation.

Compared with the county gazetteer, successive editions of the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer, particularly the section “An Investigation of the Origins of Baisha” (Baisha yuanliu kao), consistently recorded the Shanhe Weirs in ways that aligned with the Yin lineage’s claims to water rights. This encouraged the Yin lineage to treat the temple gazetteer as an important legal-historical basis for defending their interests. As one genealogy records: “Because Shanhe Weirs is still related to the Yu surname... the entire Investigation of the Origins has therefore been faithfully copied and printed in the lineage genealogy, without altering a single character, so as to clarify the irrigation boundaries of the weir waters and the names of the villages concerned, to be observed permanently.” ([10], vol. 12, p. 12)

For the Yin lineage, therefore, the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer was not merely a religious text but also a historical document defining the ownership of water rights.

Both the Guangxu Jinhua County Gazetteer and the Republican-era Tangxi County Gazetteer, in their descriptions of the mountains, rivers, and weirs of the Baishaxi Stream basin, take the Yuanliu Kao in the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer as their reference model. This indicates that its contents had been incorporated into the system of official gazetteers, becoming an important basis for local water management. For example, in noting the water rights of more than ten Baisha weirs that irrigated farmland in the county, the Guangxu Jinhua County Gazetteer explicitly cites Shen Baolin’s Yuanliu Kao. As recorded in Guangxu Jinhua County Gazetteer: “Baishaxi stream... First Weir... Second Weir... Third Weir... (annotation) according to Shen Baolin’s Baisha Creek Gazetteer (Yuanliu Kao).” ([7], vol. 3, p. 36) Similarly, the Republican Tangxi County Gazetteer records: “Shetou Weir, forty li south of the county seat, with Wuting Village channeling water into the western stream... the four weirs on the right are supplemented on the basis of the Baisha Yuanliu Kao.” ([13], vol. 5, p. 43)

It is also noteworthy that the seven lineages involved in disputes over the water rights of Shanhe Weirs and Yushan Weir—the Yu, Yin, Zheng, Ye, Shen, Wang,

and Huang—were all leading patrons of the Baisha Temple across successive generations. This overlap of identities meant that the temple gazetteer, recognized collectively by these village lineages, effectively became an important discursive medium through which the Yin lineage asserted its claim to the ownership of Shanhe Weirs.

Consequently, temple renovation projects from the Daoguang period to the Republican era became key arenas for the Yin lineage to advance its water-rights claims. The reprinting and distribution of the temple gazetteer during Baisha Temple celebrations further reinforced the legitimacy of these claims. Thus, the Yin lineage's copying of the temple gazetteer and participation in water-deity rituals, though seemingly passive, in fact constituted a powerful counter to the Yu lineage.

While the Yu lineage sought to secure water rights over Shanhe Weirs by influencing the compilation of the county gazetteer, the Yin lineage enhanced the legitimacy of its claims by copying and circulating the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer. The practical effectiveness of this strategy largely depended on the extent to which printed editions of the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer circulated and the influence they exerted within local society—issues that require further investigation.

## 6. Conclusions

The water-rights dispute over the Shanhe Weirs was not merely an isolated conflict between lineages; rather, it represented a microcosm of the structural crisis that increasingly emerged in the late Qing within the integrated irrigation system of the Thirty-Six Weirs of the Baisha Stream. The Baisha Stream was characterized by the condition that the channel was deep while the water flow remained shallow. Combined with the uneven topography along its banks and variations in soil quality and other natural endowments, these environmental differences had already laid the groundwork for competing interests. As a hydraulic system whose allocation of water resources had become increasingly refined—indeed increasingly intensified—the Thirty-Six Weirs functioned as an interconnected engineering network. The principle that “if the first does not obstruct the second, and the second does not obstruct the third, then the entire system of thirty-six weirs will remain unobstructed” underscored the system's internal interdependence. Precisely because of this systemic linkage, any imbalance at a single point could trigger a chain reaction, amplifying localized tensions into watershed-wide irrigation disputes.

During the late Qing and Republican periods, irrigation disputes in the Baisha Stream basin were not only the product of competition for resources but also constituted a profound performance of local power structures within the textual sphere. In the struggle over the water rights of the Shanhe Weirs, the Yu and Yin lineages each attempted to establish discursive dominance amid the shifting rural order by employing different textual strategies (deliberate ways of constructing and using texts to shape meaning, authority, or interpretation in a given context). The Yu lineage relied on the key positions held by its members in the compilation

of county gazetteers. Through selective recording and strategic additions and deletions, they linked hydraulic works such as the Yushan Weir and the Zhongji Weir to lineage interests, seeking to legitimize their water-rights claims through the authority of official texts. By contrast, when official channels proved ineffective, the Yin lineage turned to the Zhaoli Temple Gazetteer, a locally revered religious text, and elevated it as the central documentary basis for defending their water rights. Through printing and manuscript circulation, they further expanded its social influence. Since the late Qing, the operation of power in Chinese rural society became increasingly complex, and local texts such as county gazetteers and temple gazetteers turned into arenas of political contestation. The seemingly static written records in fact carried dynamic interests, while the apparently sacred texts reflected deeply secular struggles for power.

The dispute over the Shanhe Weirs demonstrates that the Thirty-Six Weirs irrigation system of the Baisha Stream—an integrated hydraulic network in which the movement of one part could affect the whole—was ultimately unable to escape the mounting water-resource crisis of the late Qing period. As a result, local society became increasingly embroiled in frequent irrigation conflicts. From the mid-Qing onward, rapid population growth and the expansion of cultivated land gradually pushed against the limits of natural conditions. Water, forests, land, and other resources grew increasingly scarce, drawing local communities into intensifying competition. Although local officials attempted to mediate such disputes through measures such as gazetteer compilation and the erection of commemorative steles, their governing capacity steadily weakened amid the turmoil of the late Qing, leaving them unable to resolve the deeper structural contradictions underlying resource allocation. The local hydraulic crisis faced by the Thirty-Six Weirs of the Baisha Stream thus reflected the broader resource predicament confronting late imperial China.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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