

Impacts of Timber Trade on Social Economic Life during the “Ming & Qing” Dynasty in South-western China — The Evidence from Qingshui River Basin

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This paper is primarily concerned with the Chinese history and rural society, using the example of Sanmentang village as a case, to illustrate the internal relations of timber trade activities and regional social change in the downstream areas of Qingshui river basin. It probes into the complicated relationship between nongovernmental contracts and local timber trade during the period of late Ming dynasty (AD1368-1644) and early Qing dynasty (AD1644-1911) in China. It explores regional social history, social structure changing process and its main driving factors. The findings reveal the direct effects of commercial activities on regional economic development, and its indirect impacts on local community. Findings also reveal the historic significance of stone tablets and contractual documents in old China. Finally, relationship of “timber trade → economic development → social change” is shown to be evident.

INTRODUCTION

Guizhou province lies in the south-western China (Figure 1). Qingshui River, originates from central Guizhou, is one of the upstream tributaries of Yuan river (Figure 2). The Yuan river runs to Dongting lake and afflux to Yangtze River (see Figure 1), which facilitates the timber trade along Qingshui River basin. Because of the warm weather and adequate rain, especially in the middle and downstream of Qingshui River, this area is very suitable for wood growing. Accompanied by its confluence to Yangtze River, the timber trade at Qingshui River basin was thus developed in the nationwide commercial net since late Ming dynasty. Meanwhile, due to the development of timber trade and under the direct national forces, local social structure and social order were hereupon tremendously changed. (Xu, 1999)

Qingshui River basin, a less developed area in south-western China, witnessed a social and historical process of timber trade during the Ming and Qing dynasty period. This case study, primarily based on the inscriptions in Sanmentang village, illustrates the internal relations of timber trade and rural social change, through the description of local rural social life and the explication of village social history changing process. The stone tablets, working as the main and the most precious material of this research, threw light on the changing process of village social history in the downstream areas of Qingshui River. It

made it possible to study the relationship between the commercial development and rural social change in southwestern China. (Barth, 1969)

FIGURE 1
LOCATION OF GUIZHOU PROVINCE (THE RED POINT) AND YANGTZE RIVER
(BLUE LINE)



The timber trade at Qingshui River basin reflects the community history in these villages. It shows that during that time, there were lots of economic disputes. One of the core systems for timber trade at Qingshui river basin was called ‘Dangjiang’. It services for timber merchants and takes charge of the timber trade fair. Once at a time, the Maoping village, the Wangzhai village, and the Guazhi village in the upstream of Qingshui River basin (Figure 2) took turns to perform ‘Dangjiang’. People called these three villages as ‘Sanjiang’. But for the sake of local economic interests and social resources, villages in the downstream areas fought for the rights of performing ‘Dangjiang’. As a result, a fight for the controlling of ‘Dangjiang’, between the upstream and downstream villages of Qingshui River basin, happened and lasted for quite a long time. (Zhang, 2002)

Looking back in its history, in the 5th year of Yongzheng period (AD 1727), the central government of Qing dynasty wanted to expand its area land and performed an action of ‘developing western territory of China’, villages at Qingshui River basin were from then on really incorporated into direct reign of the central dynasty. During the years of Xianfeng (AD 1850-1861) and Tongzhi (AD 1861-1875), with the re-adjustment of regional social relations, villages at downstream areas got some rights and interests. Finally, the fight for the power of ‘Dangjiang’ ended up with dividing the six villages into two main parts, respectively the inside part and the outside part of Qingshui River basin. These two main parts share the profits of performing ‘Dangjiang’. In which, the Maoping village, the Wangzhai village and the Guazhi village, located on the upstream of Qingshui River basin, were called the inside part; the Qinglang village, the Benchu village and the Sanmentang village, located on the downstream of Qingshui River basin, were called the outside part (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
HYDROGRAPHICAL CHART OF GUIZHOU PROVINCE AND THE LOCATION OF
SANMENTANG VILLAGE (THE RED POINT)



Family Clans in Sanmentang Village

The ‘Xing Long Bridge’ stone monument, which still exists in Sanmentang village, reflects the jurisdictional history of this village. This bridge was first built in the 39th year of Wanli era (AD 1611), donated by the clan of Xie in Sanmentang village. Inscriptions on it indicated that at least from the completion of building this bridge, Sanmentang village had already been under the jurisdictional system of Tianzhu County in Guizhou province.

As recorded in the stone monument of ‘Inscriptional Record of Nanyue Temple’, which was set up in the 34th year of Qianlong period (AD 1769), three of the family clans in Sanmentang village, respectively the initiator R.H.Wang, the scholar G.L. Xie, the believer F.S. Wang, J.S. Wu, and D.X. Wang etc., appealed building this bridge. Some of the inscriptional record of the Nanyue Temple reads that ‘God, the master of man, is so sacred. It makes human beings feel at home. How could there be no habitat for the God? Thus, people reached at consensus, donated money and timber, to build this temple. In winter time of the 26th year of Qianlong period (AD 1761), artisans began constructing this holy temple’.

All the donors’ name of building this bridge were engraved in the tablet, among which 101 numbers of the clan of Wang, 22 numbers of the clan of Wu, 19 numbers of the clan of Xie are mentioned. However, there is a left unsolved question that why the clan of Liu was not concluded in this project, since till that time, the clan of Liu had already been one of the major families in Sanmentang village. Since evidence shows that, in the 32th year of Qianlong period (AD 1767), S.A. Liu, a scholar at that time, inscribed on the ‘Second-repairing Ferryboat Inscriptional Record’, lots of names with the surname of Liu were there.

As for the origin of the name of this village - ‘Sanmentang’, there are mainly three versions, according to the respondents, respectively legends about the natural landscape, about the earliest settlers and about the first ancestor in this area.

TABLE 1
ORIGIN OF THE SANMENTANG VILLAGE

The origin of Sanmentang village	Legends
1. The natural landscape	Allegedly, there were tens of fishponds and three gates in this village. ‘San Men’ means ‘three gates and ‘tang’ means ‘pond’. Thus it was given by the natives the name- ‘Sanmentang’, referring to the natural landscape of ‘three gates and the ponds’.
2. The earliest settlers	In history, three family clans of Wang, Xie and Yin were said to be the earliest settlers in this area. They came here and developed this place. In Chinese language, the ‘three families’ means ‘three clans’. Thus this village was called this name- ‘Sanmen’. In this case, ‘Sanmen’ means ‘three clans’, ‘Tang’ means ‘place’.
3. The first ancestor	Another way of saying it was that the ancestor of the clan of Wang first came here and settled. According to legend, this ancestor, with the surname of Wang, came from ‘Sanmen Tan’, a place located in the downstream of Qingshui River. He lived by fishing, and once at a time, he fished along the river up to this place. Later he got married here and settled down. According to the accent of people from Hunan province, the pronunciation of ‘Tan’ is the same to ‘Tang’. So when people called this place, they said this was the place where that fisherman from ‘Sanmentang’ lived. Subsequently, ‘Sanmentang’ was known to the people around. Thus ‘Sanmentang’ was actually Wang’s hometown- ‘Sanmen Tan’ in old times.

Obviously, according to these legends, there was a tendency to take the clan of Wang as the main family in Sanmentang village. Presently, the clan of Wang is still the biggest one in Sanmentang village.

There is an ancestral temple of the clan of Wang in Sanmentang village, which is called the Taiyuan Ancestral Temple. Purportedly, it was built at the beginning of Qianlong period, destroyed by the war in Xiantong period (AD 1850-1875), and was rebuilt in the 34th year of Kuang-hsu period (AD 1908). Another well-protected ancestral temple in Sanmentang village was the ancestral temple of the clan of Liu, which was also built in Qianlong period, destroyed in Xiantong period, and was rebuilt at the beginning of Kuang-hsu period. During the period of People’s Republic of China (AD 1912-1949), it was renovated into the combined architectural appearance of China and the west. History about the ancestral temple of the clan of Liu was recorded by the clan of Liu. As recorded, in Daoguang period of Qing dynasty (AD 1821-1850), an ancestor of the clan of Liu, named J. Liu (alternate name: F.B. Liu), migrated from Liping county to Sanmentang village and settled down. At the beginning of Kuang-hsu period (AD 1875-1908), he set up this ancestral temple of the clan of Liu with the help of his descendant, in order to offer sacrifices to the ancestors (Yang, Yang and Yao, 1997).

The evidence is not sufficient to testify the migration history in Sanmentang village. But according to the stone inscriptions, the clan of Liu in Sanmentang village participated in public affairs very actively. And it shows that the clan of Liu was in extreme relationship with other clans in this area.

In the 2nd year of Jiaqing period (AD 1797), ‘the Xinglong temple’ was rebuilt by the force of all residents in Sanmentang village. As recorded by the stone inscriptions, its reestablishment was led by the believer T.Y. Wang and the scholar Z.K. Liu, joint by believers of W. Liu, B.X. Wang, B.J. Wu, X.S. Liu,

T.H. Wang, X.C. Wang, T.G. Wang and M.Z. Xie. Around 300 names were engraved on the ‘Rebuilding Inscription Record’, together with the amount of their donations.

In history, Sanmentang village was one of the ‘Forty-eight villages’ in the downstream of Qingshui River. In these forty-eight villages, all the residents followed the traditional rule of ‘Kuan’. ‘Kuan’ is the Dong language. Dong minority is one of the 55 minority groups in China. It was first recorded in the documents of Song dynasty (AD 960-1279) in China. Its practical significance lies in three aspects. First, it is the covenant made by the self-government in the village. Second, it is the agreement among villages in one area. Third, it is the implementation of the regulations. It restrained and regulated people’s behavior, and usually functioned in a particular way to resolve civil disputes and social contradictions in old times.

During Jiaqing period (AD 1796-1820), the timber trade along the Qingshui River began to flourish. All the family clans in Sanmentang village took active part in enlarging the ‘Xinglong temple’. It is a huge stone tablet, more than 4 meters high. This temple was built to commemorate the event of timber trade, as it was profoundly a symbolic event in local economy development. After this event, the relationship among clans in Sanmentang village became even more harmonious, and it made way for further social force gathering (Zhang, 2004).

On the back of this stone tablet, there is an inscription of the ‘rebuilding inscriptional record’. As recorded, in the 7th year of Daoguang period (AD 1827), the Xinglong temple was destroyed to ashes because of Zhurong, and the power pressure given by the Sui emperor. In Chinese history, Zhurong was the God of Fire, and the Sui emperor was an ancient tribal leader of Han Chinese mythology. He invented artificial fire. From then on, the residents in this village were living unbearable life. In order to change their life, in the 20th year of Daoguang period (AD 1840), they gathered voluntarily to rebuild the Xinglong temple. In this action, the clans of Liu, Wang, Wu, and Xie were the leading force. Apart from these four family clans, there were also a few other clans participated in the donation and construction of this temple, such as the clan of Yang etc. But the monument highlighted the status of the four major family clans specially. The leading roles of the four clans, respectively of Liu, Wang, Wu, and Xie, in public affairs of the Sanmentang village, were thus particularly confirmed.

In history record, different family clans in Sanmentang village acted as a united part in notable events or activities. On the surface, all residents lived harmoniously. However, the truth was that conflict always existed. Inscriptions showed that the major family clans, especially the clans of Liu and Wang, always wanted to be the king clan. Each clan wanted their family members to benefit the most. It can be deduced that the conflicts among each family clan in Sanmentang village must had formed a very special historic developing process. (Liu, 1999)

Residents’ Self-Consciousness in Sanmentang Village

In the developing history of Sanmentang village, the four major family clans acted as the social subjects. Each family clan identified their social identity and status, and explicated the self sense of presence, by participating in village public affairs in this area. For instance, there were seven ancient village gates in Sanmentang village. Each was set up by one particular family clan, and given the special name, respectively the Gate of Wu, the Gate of Xie, the Gate of Liu, the West Gate of Liu, the South Gate of Wang, the West Gate of Wang, and the East Gate of Wang. What’s more, the stone paths in this village were paved section by section, with one particular family clan be responsible for one section. Everyone family clan donated and built one section. Then this section of stone path was named after this family clan. For example, ‘the path of Wu’ was built by the clan of Wu.

Self-Consciousness in Road Construction

As shown on the stone inscription, as early as in the 27th year of Qianlong period (AD 1762), the family clan of Wu rebuilt ‘the Path of Wu’ in Sanmentang village. The Confucian scholar X.C. Peng inscribed for the monument. Part of the Inscriptional Record of Rebuilding ‘the Path of Wu’ reads that: ‘Village road, even though not the traffic main artery, manifests merits and virtues. Residents of the clan of Wu, devoted to rebuilding this path, and appealed to others’ action too. It’s a testimony of virtue’.

The clan of Wang, for another example, also took actions on social identity and status establishment. Family members from the clan of Wang donated and paved the long stone path of ‘the Wang’s Path’ in the 3rd year of Daoguang period (AD 1823). This path stretches from the riverside all the way up to the village center. 137 people donated for this event. To commemorate this, the scholar Z.S. Wang from the clan of Wang inscribed on the stone tablet. Part of the inscription reads that ‘In the Jiaqing Jimao period (AD 1819) of China, residents volunteered to rebuild the village roads. Some opposed, and some insisted rebuilding it. Objectors said that the Emperor of Rao (BC 2377-2259), the head of the national alliance in ancient China, paved the original roads, the grass was still there, the earth had been three feet thick. Thus, there was no need to get it rebuilt. Other objectors said that in this remote area, there was little traffic, so rebuilding was not required. Finally, people who insisted rebuilding it thought these roads meant a lot, which deserved rebuilding. They said the ancestors devoted a lot to these roads, which couldn’t be kept destroyed like this. Hence at a time of peace and harvest, residents started reconstructing the roads’ (Faure and Xiu, 1995).

From this inscriptional record, two facts are clarified. On one side, clansmen of the Wang had already built the stone paths even earlier, and in the year of Jiaqing Jimao period (AD 1819), it was ready to get rebuilt. On the other hand, as mentioned, it was at a time of peace and harvest, based on which people began to think of building up harmony and donating to rebuild the roads. Meanwhile, it’s noteworthy that each of the four major family clans donated and built roads of their own clan. Actions of building these roads and other public facilities were organized by each clan. After the completion, stone tablets were usually set up to record the events.

Self-Consciousness in Bridge Construction

Stone inscriptions can always reflect the local history. In Sanmentang village, most of them can even brilliantly expound the dominant roles of the clans. On this point, the inscriptional records further instruct the constructions of bridge, or wells, or other activities in Sanmentang village.

In the 34th year of Qianglong period (AD 1769), the clan of Liu didn’t have the right to participate in setting up ‘the Nanyue Temple’, since they were not regarded as the ancestors in Sanmentang village. In the 3rd year of Daoguang period (AD 1823), however, clansmen of Liu volunteered to build the village gateway bridge. Thus, a spectacular monumental stone tablet, ‘The Bridge of Revival’, was made to get this event recorded permanently. On the stone inscription of ‘the Bridge of Revival’, it reads that ‘In the 41th year of Wanli period (AD 1613), T.W. Liu and C.W. Liu set up the original stone bridge here. Since then, the village began to thrive, people started to accumulate wealth. In the 13th year of Qianlong period (AD 1748), this bridge was damaged. Descendents of T.W. Liu and C.W. Liu started rebuilding it. In the 18th year of Jiaqing period (AD 1813), the bridge construction was completed’.

As recorded, 26 descendents of T.W. Liu and 6 descendents of C.W. Liu donated for building this bridge. Only the clansmen of Liu participated in this event. It was maybe because at that time, the clan of Liu had already become a major family in Sanmentang village, or maybe the clan of Liu was in the effort to become the major family clan in this village. Through this social activity, the clan of Liu activated their self-awareness and declared their strength and unity to other family clans in Sanmentang village.

Self-Consciousness in Well Construction

There are over ten wells in Sanmentang village, all made of stone. Two of them are built by only women residents. It’s said that the clansmen were busy with the timber trade at that time. Only the women residents were left at home. So, the women had enough time to go through such affairs. In the 3rd year of Xuantong period (AD 1911), 19 women constructed a well in Sanmentang village. All of them were from the clan of Wang. After its completion, they set up a stele to illustrate why only women participated in this event.

Part of the inscriptional record of the well reads that ‘This well, with long history, dates to the emperor Rao’s time (BC 2377-2259), is unparalleled. It supplies drinking and domestic water. It builds up harmony in this village. Till now, stones are destroyed, mud comes inside. In every spring and summer,

when it rains, the clean water becomes muddy. Clanswomen of Wang noticed this, so gathered and discussed for its repairing. The donation came only from the clan of Wang’.

This is a quite meaningful inscription. As mentioned, 19 women from the clan of Wang donated for the well repairing. The donation amount ranked from 240 penny to 1,200 penny. The primary intention of setting up this monument was two-fold. On one hand, it meant to commemorate these clanswomen’s charitable deeds. On the other hand, it cherished the ancestors’ contribution. Furthermore, it emphasized that the donation came only from the clan of Wang, to show that the Wang’s ancestors first came here. The clan of Wang wanted to commemorate the ancestors’ merits in this way.

It can be deduced from this event that through the repairing of this well, there was a motivation of making this activity ritualized by the locals. The clansmen of Wang intended to appeal for their distinct way of social life style, under the background of regional commercial development. This was a village with several major family clans. The relationship between each clan was complicated. The act of the clan of Wang undoubtedly had its special meaning. (Luo, 2001)

The Ferryboat Building and Management

There are 12 stone tablets about ferryboat building and management in Sanmentang village. It records that in old times, to provide convenience for the cross-river exchanges aside Qingshui River, the local residents from Sanmentang village and neighbor villages made joint contributions to build ferryboats. It also reflects, from the other side, the interaction among villages in different historical periods (Qian, 2010).

In Sanmentang village, there is a stone tablet of the ‘Inscription of the Ferryboat Rebuilding’, set up in the 32nd year of Qianlong period (AD 1767). It records how the monk Wutou called people together to build ferryboats. Part of the inscription reads that ‘Qingshui River runs by Sanmentang village. It’s the main thoroughfare. Before there is ferryboat, only private boats make convenience for traffic, which benefits only one family or one person. In the 5th year of Yongzheng period (AD 1727), the monk Wutou called people together to build ferryboats. He called for people to raise money, and then started building boats. Everyone can benefit from this’.

Taking the monk Wutou’s deeds as a clue, the historical process of transforming from private ferry boating to public boats sharing in Sanmentang village is revealed. As recorded in the inscription, in the middle of Qianlong period (AD 1736-1796), the monk Wutou came to the village again. He went to the Xionglong Temple, discussed with the local residents, about how to make sustainable shipbuilding and repairing, and how to employ boatmen in the long run. He called for donation for this event. But this event was not implemented. In the 24th year of Qianlong period (AD 1759), Wutou passed away. In the 28th year of Qianlong period (AD 1763), R.H. Wang, Z.F. Xie, T.X. Liu from Sanmentang village, S.Z. Wu from Bao village, and J.X. Liu from Zhong village followed Wutou’s last wish, organized donation in nearby villages, and went on implementing this event. Several neighbor villages, including Sanmentang village, united as a big social organization to promote the progress of ferryboat affairs, with the old as the central power. The complex interaction between Sanmentang village and other villages was thus reflected.

It can be seen from the ‘Inscription of Ferryboat Reestablishment’ that in the 28th year of Qianlong period (AD 1763), R.H. Wang, Z.F. Xie, and T.X. Liu from Sanmentang, S.Z. Wu from Bao village, and J.X. Liu from Zhong village organized donation for this event. All the donors’ name, and the amount they donated, and the specific expenses are recorded. Except for this stone tablet, there is another stone tablet, which was set up in the 36th year of Qianlong period (AD 1771). It’s the ‘Inscription of Bridge and Road Donation’. In this inscription, it records more detailed instructions on the use of donation, which supplied very valuable resources for researchers to understand the actual operation of voluntary ferryboats in Sanmentang village.

It reads that ‘All the donation is amounted to 141 Liang of silver (later 32 Liang added). This donation event was handled by four persons, respectively the scholar S.B. Liu, believer R.H. Wang, Z.S. Wang and T.J. Wang. They did donate again for 4 Liang of silver. Among all the donation, 27 Liang of which was used for stone tablet and pavilion, 62 Liang and 5 Qian (1 Qian = 5gram) + 36 Liang and 8 Qian + 35 Liang of silver was used for opening farmland. In the 14th year of Qianlong period (AD 1749), three

villages co-built the Yanxi Bridge. 19 Liang of silver was left and donated to ferryboat affairs. One more piece of land was bought. 134 Liang and 3 Qian of silver was used for three more pieces of farmland. The left money would be used for repairing. This is monitored by members of all family clans.'

Some matter-of-fact details related to ferryboat affairs were exposed from the inscription above. Meanwhile, the actual operation mechanism of traditional rural social life in Sanmentang village, under the condition that the commercial degree had reached a certain level, could be got understood better by other researchers.

First, local gentries played an important role in village public welfare like this. As recorded in the 36th year of Qianlong period (AD 1771) on the tablet, the donation was handled by four persons, respectively the scholar S.B. Liu, believer R.H. Wang, Z.S. Wang and T.J. Wang. Even it seemed more like to be symbolic, but they did donate again for 4 Liang of silver. They got some power because of this behavior, such as the power of deciding which piece of land to buy and how to manage the donation etc.

Second, it can be seen from the inscription that much farmland was bought by the donation. These pieces of farmland were the basis for voluntary ferryboat affairs. Boatmen lived on the harvest of the farmlands to ensure their basic life. They might farm the land by themselves or rent them to others. Later on, they bought timber forest for the repairing of ferryboat. What's more, they built a house of three floors as boatmen's residence, to ensure the stability of ferryboat affair (as recorded on a stone tablet set up in the 8th year of Xianfeng period (AD 1857), in the winter of the 7th year of Xianfeng period (AD 1856), neighbor villages volunteered to build a house, to keep ferryboats, and to supply residence for boatmen). Based on this supporting condition, the voluntary ferryboat service passed down without interruption.

Third, feudal land tax was required for these farmlands. But those for ferryboat use were seedling fields, so the tax was comparatively lower. The same was true of other fields. As a result, no matter the boatmen cultivated the lands by themselves or not, they had to pay feudal land tax to the government.

Fourth, the inscription stated clearly that the entire donation, which was more than 100 Liang of silver, was used for ferryboat affairs. After purchasing ferry land, 'the left money would be used for repairing'. The cost for boatbuilding was 'handled by other members of four family clans' to ensure that the donation was used openly and properly.

For another, government resources were essential during the process, although the voluntary ferryboat affairs were a kind of local event. In the 50th year of Qianlong period (AD 1785), a stone tablet of 'Inscriptional Record of the Bans' was set up in Sanmentang village. Ten clauses of bans were issued to the villagers around, which were mainly some requirements and behavioral norms. It reads that 'Boatman should take turns to be on post. Every year on the 1st January of Chinese Lunar New Year, the boatman should be changed. People who resists would be handed over to the government.'

From one of the ten clauses stated above, the voluntary ferryboat plan in Sanmentang village was conducted under the system of taking turns, with boatman changed in each year. In addition, all kinds of mechanisms were established, various power and resources, including which from the government, were collected to ensure and maintain the normal operation of the ferryboat plan.

'Dangjiang' and Its Impact on Social Economic Life

It's especially noteworthy that such big number of inscriptions exists in this village. There must be some reasons. To some extent, it might be probably referable to its special geographical location, since Sanmentang village is the confluence of three rivers and nine streams, and the gateway for timber trade along Qingshui River basin.

Sanmentang village locates on the verge of Qingshui River. Its special geographical condition makes it famous for timber storing and rafts parking and departing. It has already been influenced, in very early years, by the commercial network of national marketing from the downstream areas of Qingshui river and Yuan River. But for a variety of historical reasons, the regional commercial markets in Sanmentang village started only from the Kuang-hsu period (AD 1875-1908), when the outside part of three villages could dominate development with the inside part of three villages at the same time. Sanmentang village, as one of the outside part of three villages, thus began to run timber trade, and supply place for rest and help people purchase timber.

Sanmentang village became one of the outside three villages, not only due to its unique geographical conditions and social background, but also because of its particular techniques of processing lumber and plants. In activities like timber logging and transportation, the quality of wood was usually the focus point for bargaining. The timber, however, had all kinds of flaws. Purportedly, the woodworkers around Sanmentang village were best at dealing with these problems. They could minimize the defective rate and improve the general grade of timber. That's why afterwards the amount of timber trade in Sanmentang village accounted for 70% among the entire outside part of three villages. (Zhang, 2004)

In short, Sanmentang village had become an important wharf for timber trade in the downstream areas of Qingshui River, during the Kuang-hsu period (AD 1875-1908). It attracted major commercial factions like the most famous three factions from Anhui province, Jiangxi province and Shanxi province, like the five gangs from Tianzhu county of Guizhou province, Qianyang county of Hunan province, and Zhijiang county of Hunan province, and other scattered merchants, to do business here. 'The three factions' and 'the five gangs' were the most important commercial groups for timber trade in the Qingshui river drainage basin since from the Qing dynasty of China.

There used to be a system specially made for the timber trade in Sanmentang village. The professional staffs of timber trade acted as purchasing agents. They bought the timber and sent them along the river, to the clients by boat. Meanwhile, they employed boatman to take care of the timber, and send them again to the downstream areas. But with time went on, this system lost its validity gradually. People usually went directly to tributary streams to buy woods from lumbermen. What undeniable was that these commercial activities of timber trade produced a lot of job offers to residents in Sanmentang village. Some were responsible for accounting and other matters; some were responsible for affairs such as timber measurement and management, wood processing instruction etc.; some were responsible for safeguarding boats, sending timber and so on. (Herman, 1997)

Actually, timber trade, as a kind of regional commercial activity, impacted on local economic and social life all long. Only under this circumstance could it be understandable that so large amount of stone tablets and inscriptions in different historical periods were left in this village (Xiu, 1990). The rebuilding of 'the Bridge of Revival' in the 3rd year of Daoguang period (AD 1823), for instance, implied that villagers in Sanmentang had already been concluded to the timber trade of Qingshui River at that time. We can see from the inscription on tablet that 32 people donated for bridge rebuilding. The per donation amount stretched from 1 Liang to 20 Liang of silver. Most of them donated more than 10 Liang of silver. If they were not concluded to the timber trade of Qingshui River directly or indirectly, or were simply engaged in traditional farming, they could not have the ability to donate this much money. (Xu, 2000)

In addition, residents in Sanmentang village built roads, streets, bridges, and set up stone tablets. The stones were mainly bought from Dayan Tang village, which was around 60 miles away from Sanmentang village. This reflected the considerable economic strength of Sanmentang residents. And this economic strength was undoubtedly primarily benefited from the commercial and economic activities of timber trade.

One more case in point, there was a stone tablet of 'Shade Tower' in Sanmentang village. From the inscription, the growth of economic power in this village could be indirectly testified. This tablet was set in the 6th year of Jiaqing period (AD 1801). The stone tablet of 'Shade Tower' recorded how the tiles and wood branches of old tower were sold to accrue interest. Names of 125 clansmen of Wang, and their amount of donation were listed on the tablet. It reads that 'In the 41st year of Qianlong period (AD 1776), tiles and wood branches of old tower were sold, 8 Qian and 2 Cent was gathered. Till to the 1st year of Jiaqing period (AD 1796), 25 Liang and 6 Qian of silver was gathered. In which 2 Liang and 4 Qian was used to buy land, and to treat the public for food etc, 23 Liang and 2 Qian was left and saved. Till to the 3rd year of Jiaqing period (AD 1798), 28 Liang and 7 Qian of silver was gathered again. In all the gathered and save silver, 3 Liang and 2 Qian was used for trees-cutting and laying work, 27 Liang and 9 Qian was used to buy timber, 21 Liang 5 Qian was paid to carpenter, 6 Liang and 5 Qian was used to buy tiles, 3 Liang was used for tablet carving, 1 Liang was used for public meal, incense and lucky money.'

Two important pieces of information can be seized from the monument above. The first is about the act of 'giving out money and growing interest'. As recorded, the amount of primary capital was 8 Qian

and 2 Cent. Twenty years later till to the 1st year of Jiaqing period (AD 1796), the amount was up to 25 Liang and 6 Qian. Another two years later, 5 Liang and 5 Qian more of interest was produced. The second is about the expenditure on 'Shade Tower'. A total of 63 Liang and 2 Qian of silver was used on tower building affairs. Except for the amount of silver got from 'giving out money and growing interest', the additional 34 Liang and 5 Qian was donated by the masses whose names were recorded on the tablet.

Unfortunately, no further materials were found to testify where the capital silver was put to produce interest. But at that time in Sanmentang village, there were no other special products except for frequent timber trade. So, it could be deduced that most probably this much high interest came from wood trading or shipping. Just as reflected in the words of mouth, in the downstream areas of Qingshui River, there was a group of timber trader named 'the gang of Deshan'. These merchants attached their business with 'the faction of Linjiang' (one of the 'three factions') from Jiangxi province, and bought timber in the inside part of three villages area. It might not be single phenomenon of timber trade in this region. What's more, it could also be deduced that during the Yongzheng period (AD 1723-1735), before the regulations were set, villages located on both sides of Qingshui River in the downstream areas, Sanmentang village included, were likely to have already developed timber trade.

The tablet of 'Inscriptional Record of Bans', set up in the 50th year of Qianlong period (AD 1785), reads that 'on wharfs of both sides, woods or ships were not allowed to block the traffic. When meeting others, people should follow the bans and give the way to others. It indicates that in the Qianlong period, when the regulations of taking turns to 'Dangjiang' had already been established, Sanmentang village was not only a place where timber was transited, but also an important commercial port. At least in the busy seasons of timber trade transport, there were indeed a lot of timber and ships docked. Merchants might process the timber, midway stop or bargain here. That's why woods or ships were not allowed to stop for long time, because it might block the traffic. Under this circumstance, people should follow the bans and give the way to others.

CONCLUSION

Logically speaking, in the long period of local economic and social activities, which were related to timber logging and transportation trade, residents of all family clans in Sanmentang village should have built a certain economic foundation. Only under this circumstance could so many stone tablets be possible to get set up. By the way, it gives financial support to build temples, stone streets, bridges and ferryboats, and it also shows the importance of these items in social life. It builds economic basis for the ritualization of various donation activities, and shows its precious value. For instance, on the right side of the 'Inscription for Ferryboat Affairs', which was set up in the 2nd year of Jiaqing period, there is a stone tablet reading that '15 Liang and 8 Qian of silver was used for boatbuilding, 7 Liang and 3 Qian of silver was used for pavilion and inscription'. Ferryboats were practical needs for residents, but at the same time, it's also important to show the symbolic significance of the pavilion and inscription, and it deserved money. That is to say, in a sort of sense, pavilion and inscription are as important as ferryboat building to local residents in Sanmentang village. And maybe this is the habitual traditional village life style, which native people usually take for granted.

ACKNOWLEDGE

This research was supported by the major research projects of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Ministry of Education, China. Between Mountains and Rivers -- The Development and the Crowd of Qingshui River and Duliu River Basins in Southeastern Part of Guizhou Province since Qing dynasty, undertaken by the Historical Anthropology Research Center of Sun Yat-sen university. (Project No. 15JJD770021)

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