

Military Officers from Zhoushan Stationed in Chinese Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty: A Case Study of the Campaign against the Pirate Cai Qian

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Abstract: The Taiwan Strait relations during the Qing dynasty represent a critical dimension in the broader narrative of China's frontier governance. As part of the "seven-province bulwark," Chinese Taiwan occupied a pivotal position within the southeastern coastal defense system, serving both as a geopolitical outpost and as a buffer against maritime threats. Zhoushan, as a vital military stronghold in Zhejiang's coastal defense network, maintained a garrison structure that was strategically intertwined with Chinese Taiwan's defense and administrative apparatus. The Zhoushan-based military officers dispatched to Chinese Taiwan functioned as key agents in the Qing Empire's efforts to consolidate control over the island and to safeguard its maritime frontiers. Despite their significance, the role of this military cohort has not been subjected to systematic academic scrutiny. Current scholarship on Qing-era Zhejiang–Taiwan relations predominantly concentrates on civil bureaucratic institutions, migratory societies, or the biographical study of individual military figures. Such approaches often neglect the structural and operational mechanisms through which the Zhoushan military contingent contributed to maritime governance and cross-strait stability. This study seeks to address this lacuna by examining historical episodes in which Zhoushan officers assisted in the suppression of piracy in Chinese Taiwan. Through this lens, it reconstructs the institutional logic and social practices that underpinned their involvement in Chinese Taiwan's local governance, and evaluates their historical agency in shaping Qing-era cross-strait dynamics. By providing a microhistorical analysis grounded in empirical evidence, this article contributes to the reevaluation of maritime governance strategies during the Qing dynasty. It also offers theoretical support for contemporary efforts to enhance national cohesion and advance the strategic vision of transforming China into a maritime power.

1. Introduction

In 1683 (the 22nd year of Emperor Kangxi's reign), following the surrender of the Zheng regime, Chinese Taiwan was reincorporated into the direct administration of the Qing central government, marking a significant turning point in the history of China's frontier governance. As part of the "Strategic buffer for the seven provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangdong, the capital

region (Yan), Liaoning, and modern-day Shandong (Shan Zuo)"^[1]—namely Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangdong, Yansui (modern Hebei), Liaodong, and Shandong—Chinese Taiwan served as a crucial buffer safeguarding the southeastern coastal region. Its strategic position was central to both national maritime defense and the imperial economic system. Zhoushan (historically known as Dinghai Town or Dinghai County, including areas of present-day Zhenhai in Ningbo; for consistency, the modern term "Zhoushan" is used throughout) functioned as a key port and military stronghold in Zhejiang, tasked with defending the coasts of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian against foreign threats and piracy. Since 1684, when the Dinghai garrison commander was relocated to Zhoushan, the linkage between Zhoushan and Chinese Taiwan in maritime defense grew increasingly close. Through trans-regional military deployment and coordinated operations, the Zhoushan military officer corps played an active role in Chinese Taiwan's governance, effectively forming an integrated "Zhoushan–Chinese Taiwan" maritime defense network.

Existing scholarship has primarily focused on Chinese Taiwan's military system under Qing rule. Xu Xueji's *The Green Standard in Chinese Taiwan during the Qing dynasty* (1987)^[2] provides a systematic overview of the island's garrison structure, yet it does not explore the cross-regional deployments of Zhoushan officers in depth. Lai Huimin (2024)^[3], utilizing Qing imperial archives, notes that the military commander of Zhoushan often held concurrent responsibilities for naval defense in both Chinese Taiwan and the Penghu Islands. Xia Zhigang (2017)^[4] documented the careers and achievements of nearly 70 Dinghai commanders but offered limited discussion on their involvement in Chinese Taiwan's maritime defense. Chen Kongli (2003)^[5] argued that stationed military officers helped consolidate Qing control in Chinese Taiwan through measures such as land reclamation and disaster relief, yet he did not identify the specific contributions of Zhejiang officers. Le Chengyao (2006)^[6], a scholar from Zhoushan, highlighted the case of Dinghai commander Zhang Chaofa, who promoted the migration of settlers from Fujian and Zhejiang to the eastern region of Kavalan (present-day Yilan) during his tenure in Chinese Taiwan, showcasing the proactive role of military elites in frontier development. While these studies are well-substantiated, they have largely overlooked the Zhoushan military cohort as a distinct group and failed to analyze the structural, geographical, and cultural affinities between Zhoushan and Chinese Taiwan that may have facilitated the success and local acceptance of these officers.

Throughout the Qing period, military officers from Zhoushan remained active in the Taiwan Strait, exerting profound influence on Chinese Taiwan's local society. One of their most significant achievements was the suppression of maritime disturbances and piracy. This study takes as its starting point the campaign against the pirate group led by Cai Qian, using it as a lens through which to examine the Zhoushan officers stationed in Chinese Taiwan. Through this case study, the paper seeks to uncover the operational logic behind their governance practices and to assess their historical contributions to the development of cross-strait relations. These findings shed light on the indigenous logic of traditional Chinese maritime governance and offer valuable historical insight for advancing contemporary cross-strait integration. Moreover, such a microhistorical inquiry contributes empirical and theoretical support for the strategic vision of building China into a maritime power and for reinforcing a shared national identity within the Chinese nation.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1. Military Officers from Zhoushan Stationed in Chinese Taiwan

During the Qing dynasty, the selection of coastal military officers emphasized regional experience and geographic familiarity. The natural island environment of Zhoushan, the seafaring proficiency of its local population, and the region's longstanding expertise in coastal defense collectively laid a solid foundation for the deployment of Zhoushan officers in Chinese Taiwanese

affairs. The core analytical value of studying these officers lies in revealing the Qing state's personnel logic of geo-strategic adaptability in maritime frontier governance. Immersed since youth in the complex hydrography of the East China Sea's archipelagic zones, Zhoushan-born officers developed a deeply localized understanding of maritime defense. When dispatched to serve in Chinese Taiwan, they brought not only conventional military training but also sophisticated knowledge of seasonal monsoons, ocean currents, navigation routes, and the behavioral patterns of pirate groups.

Such embodied expertise enabled Zhoushan officers to participate effectively in Chinese Taiwan's military defense and local governance. The transfer of these experiential forms of knowledge fostered the cross-regional transplantation of Fujian–Zhejiang maritime defense practices into the Chinese Taiwan context, and helped construct what may be termed a shared cognitive framework of East China Sea–Taiwan Strait defense. Moreover, as a critical military hub along the southeast coast, Zhoushan functioned as a major source of military personnel and logistical support for Chinese Taiwan.

The term "military officers from Zhoushan stationed in Chinese Taiwan during the Qing dynasty" as used in this study broadly encompasses three categories:

(1) Officers whose contributions to the pacification and stabilization of Chinese Taiwan are recorded in local gazetteers of Zhoushan, such as Dinghai Gazetteer and Dinghai County Gazetteer—figures like Lan Li and his descendants, and Li Changgen;

(2) Officers who held military posts in Zhoushan before achieving distinguished service in Chinese Taiwan, such as Ye Ji and Qiu Liangong;

(3) Officers born in Zhoushan who served directly in Chinese Taiwan, including Guo Jiqing and Liu Chengkui.

Collectively, these individuals not only reinforced Chinese Taiwan's internal security but also enhanced its military coordination with the coastal mainland. They represent a microcosm of the Qing-era integrated defense system encompassing Zhejiang, Fujian, and Chinese Taiwan.

2.2. The Cai Qian Incident

The adage "winning the empire is easier than governing it" aptly describes the challenges faced by the Qing dynasty after Chinese Taiwan was reincorporated into the Chinese realm. During the reigns of Emperors Qianlong and Jiaqing, piracy in the Chinese Taiwan Strait emerged as one of the most acute governance crises. Among the numerous pirate factions, the group led by Cai Qian was by far the most formidable, conducting widespread raids across Fujian, Zhejiang, and Chinese Taiwan.

Cai Qian, a native of Tong'an in Fujian, came from a destitute background and was orphaned at an early age. Frequent natural disasters and economic hardship led him to take up piracy around 1794 (the 59th year of Qianlong's reign). At its height, his organization numbered nearly ten thousand men and effectively disrupted maritime trade by blockading sea lanes, plundering merchant vessels, and extorting "departure taxes" from traders in the coastal waters of Fujian, Zhejiang, and Guangdong.

In 1802 (the 7th year of Jiaqing's reign), Cai led his fleet in an attack on the islands of Dandan Shan near Xiamen and later extended his operations to Chinese Taiwan's Luermen area. He successfully defeated the Wenzhou naval forces at Fuyingyang. In 1804, declaring himself the "Prince of the Seas" (Zhenhai Wang), he launched a campaign into Fengshan (modern-day Kaohsiung), besieging the Chinese Taiwan Prefectural City. He continued to harass the coastal waters of Fujian and Zhejiang and, in 1807, engaged Qing forces off the coast of Heishui in Guangdong, where Li Changgen—the Zhejiang admiral and one of the Qing navy's most esteemed

commanders, known as the "foremost among naval generals"^[7]—was killed in battle. At the height of his power, Cai Qian's influence was unrivaled. It was not until 1809 (the 14th year of Jiaqing) that he was finally encircled and defeated by Qing commanders Wang Delu and Qiu Liangong, eventually choosing to blow up his own ship rather than surrender. Wang Delu (1770-1842) served as the Governor of Fujian at the time, while Qiu Liangong (1761-1817) was the Governor of Zhejiang. They joined forces to deal a severe blow to Cai Qian at Dinghai Yushan, and later annihilated his forces at Heishuiyang sea area. It is worth mentioning that Qiu Liangong had previously served as the Commander of Dinghai Garrison.

Cai Qian's rise to piracy was rooted not only in personal poverty but also in broader structural conditions: population pressure, land enclosure, and recurrent natural disasters created widespread suffering along China's southeastern coast. His ability to rally thousands of followers reflects deep-seated social discontent and the political vulnerabilities of the time. In some modern narratives, Cai is even portrayed as a "patriotic anti-Qing hero" rather than a mere outlaw—an interpretation that reveals the complex interplay of socioeconomic grievances and political resistance during this period.

The campaign to eliminate Cai Qian's pirate group was thus more than a military confrontation; it was a critical test of the Qing state's capacity for maritime governance and social control. The Qing court had to rely not only on military force to quell threats from the sea, but also on civil governance to address the root causes of unrest. The Cai Qian incident exposes the challenges faced by the state in balancing coercion and administration in a volatile maritime frontier.

3. Three Phases of the Suppression Campaign: From Tactical Innovation to Strategic Encirclement

The campaign to suppress the pirate organization led by Cai Qian was not merely a military operation—it also served as a critical opportunity for the Qing dynasty to strengthen coastal defense, modernize military tactics, and enhance its capacity for governance. Throughout this process, military officers from Zhoushan played an exceptionally prominent role.

According to the Dinghai Gazetteer, as early as the Qianlong reign, the General Commander of Dinghai Garrison frequently held concurrent responsibility for coordinating naval operations between Fujian and Zhejiang. This institutional arrangement provided formal support for the involvement of Zhoushan officers in military affairs in Chinese Taiwan. During the chaos caused by Cai Qian, the central government mobilized naval forces from Zhoushan, constructing a cross-regional collaborative command structure that underscored the flexibility and adaptability of the Qing military system. The Qing state's ability to deploy and rotate forces across provincial boundaries not only enhanced its tactical effectiveness at the time, but also offers a historical precedent for thinking about modern cross-strait emergency coordination mechanisms.

The suppression campaign can be roughly divided into three distinct phases: adaptive adjustment, protracted attritional warfare, and final strategic encirclement.

3.1. Adaptive Adjustments in Equipment and Tactics (1802–1806)

The initial failures of the Qing forces in suppressing piracy were primarily due to the outdated performance of their naval vessels. Cai Qian leveraged Fujian merchant ships as mother vessels to transport modified Tong'an sampans. These sampans, characterized by their flat bottoms and towering canopies, were engineered for enhanced speed and maneuverability, thereby facilitating efficient navigation. This strategic adaptation of existing vessels exemplifies Cai Qian's innovative approach to naval architecture and maritime operations.^[8] In contrast, the Qing navy's Tong'an sampans used by the navy were "only 20 feet in height and 22 feet in width, with no more than ten

cannons installed on each ship".^[9]

Upon assuming the position of General of Dinghai Garrison, Li Changgen (1751–1807) overcame significant opposition to initiate reforms in shipbuilding. He had ships constructed at the Dinghai shipyards modeled after the pirate vessels. Thirty "Ting" class boats were created. Each ship was "120 feet long, 28 feet wide, with 20 cannons installed, and could carry 200 soldiers"^[10]. These ships, with their sharp hulls and broad, fast-moving decks, were able to perform well in battle, and, combined with a "linked bombardment" tactic, reversed the Qing navy's previous disadvantages in mobility.

In 1804, Cai Qian took advantage of a shift in naval forces between Fujian and Zhejiang to launch another raid on Chinese Taiwan, with 50 boats in tow. Wu Qigui (born in Dinghai, Zhoushan), the General of Jinmen, was ordered to sail with a fleet of warships alongside Chinese Taiwan's Governor to investigate and suppress the enemy, but he was repeatedly delayed by storms, misled by false intelligence, and failed to set sail in time, thus allowing Cai Qian to land at Huwei(now Danshui Town).^[11] This failure exposed significant flaws in the coordination mechanisms between Qing naval forces. As a result, the Governor of Fujian and Zhejiang, Yu De, submitted a memorial accusing Wu Qigui of "delaying and watching from the sidelines"^[12]. The Qing court dismissed him from his post and ordered an investigation with the possibility of a death sentence.

This event marked a turning point in the Qing dynasty's naval strategy. In the following year, Li Changheng was promoted to the Governor of Zhejiang and granted the authority to "command the naval forces of both provinces." He established the strategy of "the Zhejiang fleet focusing on patrolling the northern seas, while the Fujian fleet specialized in attacking the bandit strongholds of Chinese Taiwan and the Pescadores"^[13].

3.2. The Protracted Struggle in the Taiwan Strait (1806–1809)

3.2.1. The Battle of Lugang (Luermen)

Cai Qian exploited the geographical features of Luermen, where the harbor is narrow and winding, with the tide rising to over a meter in depth and receding to expose sandbars. In February, he led 80 ships to enter the harbor during high tide, arranging his fleet in a way that would enable both offensive and defensive strategies^[11]. Li Changgen, leading 20 boats from Dinghai, bravely landed on the shore, while Xu Songnian (who was serving as a deputy general) was ordered to defend the Zhangkeng sea area. Xu used fire ships to burn three of their supply boats and captured one pirate ship^[14]. During the 17-day artillery battle within the harbor, each ship of Qing was equipped with a hundred fireballs and fire-spouting tubes, and under the cover of night, they used favorable winds to launch them. Cai Qian's fleet, with its retreat route cut off, was forced to scuttle more than 30 warships to break through. Over a thousand people drowned, and floating corpses covered the sea^[8].

3.2.2. The Land Battle at Zhuzaiwei and the Use of Fire Attacks

In alliance with the leader of the Chinese Taiwanese Tiandihui, Chen Zhouquan, Cai Qian constructed fortifications at Zhuzaiwei (modern-day Ren De in Tainan), creating a joint defense system involving both land and sea forces. Li Changgen adopted Xu Songnian's suggestion to launch a combined land and sea assault, ordering Xu to lead 500 elite soldiers to "step into the seawater and climbed ashore", using the low tide as an opportunity to launch a surprise attack on the enemy camp^[11]. According to the *Taihai Jiwenlu (Record of the Taiwan Strait)*, the Qing forces "advanced with short swords in hand, braving cannon fire, and set fire to the enemy's grain stores

and camps." The pirate camp was engulfed in flames, causing Cai Qian's forces to panic and retreat, trampling over one another^[15]. The battle resulted in the beheading of 1,200 pirates, the capture of 37 enemy leaders, and Cai Qian's flight with only 20 ships to the Guangdong offshore waters^[16].

3.3. The Final Battle at Yushan and the Destruction of the Pirate Regime (Jiaqing Year 14, 1809)

After three years of recovery, Cai Qian reorganized his forces by allying with Zhang Baozi from Guangdong and remnants of the Annamese pirate fleet. His revived force consisted of "90 large ships, 150 small ships, and 13,000 men."^[17] In August 1809, the Qing fleet, under the leadership of Wang Delu and Qiu Liangong, with support from Sun Dagang and Zhan Gongxian, encountered Cai Qian's pirate fleet off Yushan Island (in modern-day Zhejiang's Xiangshan offshore). They immediately formed a "V-shaped battle formation," with Qiu Liangong's fleet of 18 boats taking the lead. He used long hooks to ensnare the pirate ships and deployed a series of cannon fire in quick succession^[16]. Wang Delu's fleet of 22 ships attacked from the right wing, while Sun Dagang's forces blockaded the White Dog Ocean to cut off Cai's escape route.

In the decisive battle, Cai Qian's flagship was marked with a three-meter tall banner reading "King of Zhenhai Weiwu," and it concentrated its firepower on the Qing flagship. Qiu Liangong's ship, the "Zhenhai," had its mast shot down, but he transferred to a small boat to continue overseeing the battle, personally throwing fire grenades to burn the enemy's rear buildings^[11]. Zhan Gongxian's forward vessel breached the pirate fleet, killed the steersman, and captured 51 pirate leaders, including the notorious Wang Niao^[16]. By dawn the next day, Cai Qian's fleet was broken into three parts. His flagship was hit and caught fire. Realizing his defeat was imminent, Cai Qian set off the powder magazine, killing himself and his family of over 250 people^[8].

In this victory, the Qing forces captured 28 large ships, sank over 40 pirate vessels, and countless pirates drowned. From this point onward, the vast pirate threat in the southeastern seas was eradicated^[17].

4. A Multi-Dimensional Examination of Historical Significance

4.1. Exemplary Value of Cross-Regional Collaborative Mechanisms

The collaborative military operations between the Fujian and Zhejiang Navy broke the Qing Dynasty's traditional military approach of "defending by boundary." Li Changgen established the "Unified Suppression Regulations," which stipulated that "Zhejiang ships crossed into the Fujian waters to pursue, while Fujian ships entered Zhejiang waters to assist in defense. Provisions and ammunition were supplied mutually by the administrative offices of the two provinces."^[13] In the tenth year of Jiaqing (1805), Hu Zhensheng, the Zhejiang general, transported timber for shipbuilding to Fujian, but was attacked by fire ships from Cai Qian's pirates. The Fujian Navy, under the command of Wu Qigui, was punished for not providing timely reinforcements. This event, on the contrary, prompted the Qing court to strengthen the guilt by association law for ineffective assistance in suppression^[11]. As a result, the naval forces of the two provinces shifted from "fighting independently" to "integrated tactics."

This collaborative model reached its peak during the Battle of Yushan. In this decisive battle, the Fujian Navy, skilled in fire attacks, and the Zhejiang Navy, proficient in artillery fire, combined their strengths, showcasing an exceptional level of joint naval combat in the age of cold weapons.

4.2. Rebuilding Maritime Social Order and Economic Revival

During the period of Cai Qian's rebellion, Chinese Taiwan experienced a severe disruption of its economy: "Rice and grains could not be transported inland, and merchant ships dared not venture out to sea, causing the price of rice to rise to 3,000 wen per dan"^[15]. After the rebellion was quelled, the Qing government opened the ferry trade between Chinese Taiwan's Lukang, Tamsui, and Fujian's Xiamen and Fuzhou. It also established an "official transportation bureau" dedicated to rice and grain transport. By the end of Jiaqing's reign, "Chinese Taiwan's annual sugar export reached 800,000 dans (a dan equals approximately 50 kilograms), a 60% increase compared to pre-war levels"^[18].

The Zhejiang military officers in Dinghai focused on dividing and dismantling pirate forces after the war. For example, when Xu Songnian was serving as the Fujian Navy's commander, he used fishing boats disguised as merchant ships to lure pirate ships into an ambush. This tactic continued to be used during the suppression of Zhang Baozai's remnants during the Daoguang period^[14]. The restoration of social order laid the foundation for large-scale reclamation projects in Chinese Taiwan during the Daoguang period, such as the development of the six communities in Puli.

4.3. The Legacy of Military Spirit

The combat characteristics of the Zhejiang military officers became a spiritual benchmark for the Qing Navy. Li Changgen, for example, "led every battle in the front and never left the frontlines even when injured." His famous act of "sending his teeth to his wife" (after losing teeth in battle, as a symbol of his resolve to die fighting) was recorded in the Qing History.

Although Wu Qigui was demoted for his early mistakes, his bravery in close combat, especially "being the first to board enemy ships," was still considered exemplary for naval officer training. The Jiaqing Emperor personally ordered his reinstatement to the Fujian Navy, reflecting the Qing government's tolerance for practical talents^[11]. This "focus on practical experience rather than seniority" approach in selecting personnel ensured that commanders did not lose heart after defeats, and they were able to rise again, continuing to lead with determination.

The young officers, such as Jiang Jiyun and Zhan Gongxian, who fought alongside Sun Dagang, gradually matured into key figures in the First Opium War. Jiang Jiyun, who had served as Chinese Taiwan's deputy general, commander of Hailan Town, and Xiamen Town, became known as "the first to resist the British in Fujian" after his heroic actions in defending the coastal cannon platforms in 1841^[16]. Zhan Gongxian, who personally led the defense of the Pescadores Islands and achieved the only victory in Chinese Taiwan's defense during the Opium War, was later appointed as the Zhejiang Navy and Army Commander, serving in Ningbo and receiving the title "Zhenwei General."

Li Changgen's adopted son, Li Tingyu (1792-1861), also made a name for himself during the Opium War, defending the Humen Cannon Platform with Guan Tianpei against British forces. The Zhejiang officers from Dinghai showed unwavering loyalty and responsibility to their country through their actions. They incorporated personal sacrifice into the larger national cause, and their resilient character, forged through battle, became a beacon of inspiration for future generations, motivating them to defend national sovereignty with courage and determination during times of crisis.

5. Conclusions

The efforts of the Dinghai military officers in suppressing Cai Qian's rebellion essentially represented a power restructuring between the central government and local maritime forces during

the Qing Dynasty. After the military suppression, the central government's civil governance over Chinese Taiwan also benefited from the contributions of the Zhoushan military officers. For example, in 1811, when a conflict broke out between the Zhang and Quan factions in Chinese Taiwan, Qiu Lianggong, a military officer from Zhoushan, allocated military grain to stabilize the local food prices and sent troops to maintain order at the entrance of Luker Men, thus preventing the situation from escalating.

This prolonged 15-year campaign not only reshaped the military geography of the Southeast maritime region but also created a practical example of "national unity." Through cross-regional cooperation, technological innovation, and post-war governance, the central government demonstrated its capability in maintaining sovereignty over Chinese Taiwan.

The activities of the Zhoushan officers reveal the potential role of geo-cultural identity in cross-regional governance, aligning with the current emphasis on the function of cultural ties in the "Cross-Strait Shared Historical Memory" initiative. Zhoushan, as a key point in the Fujian-Zhejiang coastal defense system, had military responsibilities that went beyond local defense. These officers played an essential role in the reconstruction of Chinese Taiwan's social order through resource transport, intelligence exchange, and joint fleet defense. This cross-regional governance model broke traditional rigid boundaries of jurisdiction and duty, presenting an early form of "Nodal Governance." The extension of functions beyond administrative boundaries resonates with the innovative policies of "trial and demonstration" in the current "Cross-Strait Integration and Development Demonstration Zone," creating a cross-temporal and spatial dialogue.

The actions of this group of military officers have important implications for regional security governance, cultural identity across the Taiwan Strait, and the maintenance of maritime rights. The standard practice of Zhoushan officers being dispatched to Chinese Taiwan, as revealed in this article, not only provides micro-level evidence for the historical and legal basis of "One China" but also echoes the "historical continuity narrative" emphasized in the current Chinese Taiwan Question and the New Era of Chinese Unification White Paper.

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