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Farming in Water, Living on Land: a Study of the Transformation of a Fishing Community in Taihu Lake Area

My field site, Miaogang Fishing Community, is located by the east Taihu Lake, which belongs to Wujiang City, Jiangsu Province. Miaogang is a community with nearly 1,600 villagers. As an administrative village, it was established in 1969. At that time, a settlement was built for the fishermen who lived on water. Besides the local Taihu Lake fishermen, other fishermen from surrounding areas joined in and formed a new village. It was named as “Miaogang Fishing Community” in 2003. Though houses were allocated to the fishermen families in 1969, most people did not commonly live on land until they became involved in crab farming after 2000.

In 1980s, the government allowed fishermen the right of fencing water in Taihu Lake for fish or crab farming. Fishermen then started farming aquatic products on water. Since the on-water work required by the crab raising (Chinese Mitten Crab 大闸蟹) was less on-lake intensive, the fishermen did not need to spend most of the time on water. They finally settled on land.

What powers influenced the fishermen to move from water to land? The state power, the economic factors and the custom of fishermen, such as their marriage system and folk religion, interacted and strongly remolded the fishermen’s society in

the past decades.

1. The On Water Fishermen Society and State Administration

Before 1949, the Taihu Lake fishermen who later formed the Miaogang fishermen village mainly lived in the rivers along the east Taihu Lake. They lived by selling the aquatic catches to the towns. They only intermarried with the fishermen from a similar background in local area. In order to find a suitable spouse, besides the normal marriage modes, some special marriage styles were popular among them, which enabled the fishermen to find spouses in the limited fishing society, like adoption marriage and exchange marriage. Adoption marriage means that the son-in-law or daughter-in-law was raised from infancy with their spouses as brothers or sisters till they got married. Exchange marriage is a kind of marriage that arranged the reciprocal exchange of spouses between two families. The traditional marriage patterns shaped the complex family relationships and blurred family boundaries among the fishermen society. Their marriage net work was a tiled one that laterally and equally connected the small boat fisherman together.

Fishermen in Jiangsu and north Zhejiang Province practiced a folk religion called “Hongsanjiao(紅三教)” by PRC government after 1949, which also organized the fishermen into religious organizations. Spiritually, the fishermen who lived in different places but belonged in the same organization believe they were in the same family with the worshiped gods and ancestors. In the first half of the 20th century, the Taihu Lake was always in turbulence, being harassed by bandits and different armies.

The religious organizations were also institutions that helped the fishermen to develop self-protection mechanisms.

After 1949, the new government consolidated the control over Taihu Lake, registered the fishermen and grouped them into working teams, and religious activities were forbidden. In the Fishing Socialism Reform(漁業社會主義改造) in 1969, the government built a fishermen's settlement near Miaogang Town for the local and Lili fishermen. However, because the fishermen still had a large amount of on water work required by the brigade, they preferred to live on water and the houses allocated were mainly for tool storage and occasional overnight stays. The fishermen were required to sell their catch to designated supply and marketing cooperatives(供銷社), but they could fish anywhere and in the traditional way with a couple working together in a boat. In this way, the local fishermen still generally maintained their daily social network through the interaction during fishing, but their connection with spiritual family and the market was cut down, replaced by the state institutions.

After the 1970s, birth control became more and more strict, and the reducing number of young people has made traditional marriage styles disappear. More intermarriages between Taihu and Lili fishermen in the same village occurred than inter village marriages, which meant their marriage network changed at the same time that the marriage styles adjusted. In 1980s, after the collective disbanded, the fishing village established several collective factories and the fishermen started running businesses independently. The improved living standard and the on land working opportunity offered by the collective factories opened the door for the fishermen to

marry with non-fishermen, so that some females from far-away places married in. The marriage network was no longer limited among fishermen's society. Since the married-in women's parents had little influence over the villagers, the patrilineal family power was strengthened.

2. The Formation of Fishermen's On Land Society

In 1964, the Taihu Lake Fishing Administration Committee of Jiangsu Province (江蘇省太湖漁業生產管理委員會), which was an administrative unit under the Fishing Administration of Jiangsu Province(江蘇省海洋漁業局), was founded to lead and administer fishing, to protect the aquatic resources, and to mediate the fishing disputes in the lake. After the fisheries law, established in 1983, opened the rights to fence water, the committee started to promote water fencing fish/crab raising on the lake in the late 1980s. Led by the village cadres, the village started to raise crab in 1990, both by the collective and by individuals. In 1995, the Lake Committee laid down the crab raising permit system that only the professional Taihu fishermen household who owned fenced water areas could get official permits. Besides this, the government was seldom involved in economic activities after the crab raising developed. In ten years the crab industry was established and became a successful business and the local economy began to boom. During this process, a local fishermen-centered social network formed.

In most of the time, the fishermen run business taking nuclear family or stem

family as a unit, seldom forming a partnership. Generally speaking, more Taihu fishermen own water areas, raise and market their crab by themselves. More Lili background fishermen peddle or resell crab in markets. Two economic elites appeared, both of whom draw lots of support from government and later participated in the local political life, one of them called Sun Xingliang.

The government owns the lake and controls the use rights, the fishermen rely on the water area to develop the crab industry, all the economic reforms and activities are “use right” related. The crab raising permit is distributed to households, so keeping the patrilineal practice is important, though it is not easy to maintain under the one child policy, especially for the family with only one girl. The fashion among fishermen is to marry people from outside, even if he or she comes from far away, which is very different from the neighboring farmers who prefer to marry locals. In this way, it is much clearer and easier to distinguish the fishermen’s families, and the families are stratified.

The crab industry requires less on-lake work, nowadays except during the crab season for those who run crab businesses outside, so people spend most of the time in the village. With more time on land after raising crabs on water, the fishermen like spending time with friends and relatives in the village, for purpose of leisure and the exchange of information.

Local religious activities revived since individual operation was permitted again. In 1980s, the police once cracked down on the fishermen’s folk religion, the aim of which was to limit the cross-region religion organizations, which kept influence the

revival of local religion. In the next decades, religious organizations are reorganized, with several new organizations being formed, and new heads tracing their relations with the past heads. The former members who belonged to the same organization originally are now scattered among the new organizations which group the fishermen within a village. Morally, as cadres did in the past, the religious leaders direct the members to behave well.

The religious organizations organize their members into groups; each group is responsible for different ritual preparations. Usually, the relatives are in the same group. The leaders also help their members solve problems between living people and ancestors, ghosts or deities, by adjusting and reinforcing their relationships. Through the operation of rituals, the clan in the real world is better united. The religious organizations reorganized the villagers, partially replacing the working teams, which gradually reflected in other aspects of daily life. At the same time, religious differentiation also resulted in group demarcation in the village.

3. The Modified State-Society Relationship: the Net Pen Reform in 2008

After the crab raising permit system was established in 1995, the Lake Committee always tried to find ways to strength the control over the fenced water areas. Before the large-scale blue-green algae tide broke in Wuxi 2007, they had already formulated a plan to reduce and reallocate the fenced water areas. The problem of pollution put the Net Pen Reform on the table.

During the Net Pen Reform in 2008, the government reclaimed all the fenced

areas of water and reallocated new pens evenly to the qualified households. This is a turning point towards the post-reform era. Now each household can no longer use more than 10,000m² of water and no longer has the right to fence water freely. The Lake Committee controls the use rights of the whole lake for raising crabs. The control of fencing rights provides the government with a new way to rule the fishermen's lives, which leaves a restricted but adequate social space for the local people.

Miaogang fishermen showed their solidarity. They appealed against certain conditions several times and some special policies were executed as a result. The tight social network cultivated by the social and religious activities showed its power and they quickly mobilized themselves. Since the reform, most people raise crab with relatives or people who worship together in nearby places. The local cadres played important roles in striving for fishermen's benefits. They convinced the Lake Committee to implement flexible policies and supported the fishermen's interests. Now the cadres do not have many resources from above, so they share the same interests as the other fishermen, and rely on the personal relationships to enable their work. So the local cadres tend to protect the villagers' benefits, though their power is limited.

After the reallocation, 18 fenced water area owners complained that their areas were too solid to drive bamboo piles into, even after the remedial measure was done. The city government persuaded Sun Xingliang's company to rent the problematic

units for a three year period. Since the use right of those fenced water units was for private use, the contract with the company was legally in the grey zone, so the articles in the contract were not clear, which set the stage for a conflict one year later. After the contract was signed, no matter what happened to these 18 units, it would be a civil affair, unrelated to the government.

After one year, those 18 owners noticed their areas were the best, so they asked to have their areas back. Sun Xingliang accepted, but asked for the first year's rental back as a penalty. Up to the end of 2009, all the owners had given the money back, except two who insisted that they did not need to. The two owners understood the use right following the traditional concept that the items in the area were already used, so they did not need to pay, while Sun understood it using the modern use right concept, which meant the owner broke the contract and wanted to retrieve the usage of water area. In this term, the water was not lost, but the tenant lost the right to use it for the next two years, so he deserves compensation.

Actually, the two owners are father and son, and the three are closely related. The father's wife is Sun Xingliang father's sister, who was adopted by that family when she was a child. The two families belong to different religious organizations, and now control different social power. Faced with the interests of their own families, the two sides decided to break up their relationship. Sun then used his close relationship with local police and officials. The authority from the state effectively frightened the father and son, and they soon returned the money and took back the fenced water area.

Conclusion:

From the collective era to the end of the first decade of 21st century, the state power changed from unified administration to a hands-off approach; however, recently it has taken over economic control again. Though the state has been withdrawn from society most of the time, it still maintains its influence over the local society. Although the fishermen are greatly empowered by local economic development, and local society is gradually restrengthening after economic reform, they are still under the effective control of the state. Compared to the past, the fishermen's original on water society is demarcated into small ones, in which the families are stratified under the political and economic change. So on one hand the fishermen still show their unity when facing common challenge, on the other hand they are differentiated. Because of the differentiation, the state could keep its influence.