

Local Officials and Powerful Families

-- The Folk Mainstay of Anti-pandemic Forces in Severely Stricken Areas During the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract

Plague, as a natural disaster, was often mentioned with flood, drought and locust disaster in ancient China. The main resistance to natural disasters in the folk society of ancient China was official assistance. But the actual delivery of official aid to the people required the support from large families, who were the only ones capable of implementing specific disaster relief measures. Meanwhile, folk doctors in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, based on countless experience accumulated by predecessors and their own medical experience against plague, began to understand that plague was not one illness, but a combination of multiple diseases. They put forward various ways of preventing the disease from further spreading. But to adopt these methods, people had to rely on the big local households. Therefore, the key to civil epidemic prevention in the Ming and Qing Dynasties lied in the actions of the large local families. And the big families also required leadership and coordination from some “authorities”, so the local epidemic prevention finally fell on the shoulders of the local magistrates.

Keywords

Fighting against plagues in Ming and Qing Dynasties; Local anti-epidemic specifics; Local powerful families.

1. Central and Local Epidemic Prevention

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, plagues occurred frequently in the Jiangnan region. Large ones spreading to the south of Yangtze River recorded in history as “people died in piles”, “bought land as group of graves” and “exiled in great famine, died along the road” were no less than 103, with a great outbreak in about every five to six years.

In terms of time. According to the History of the Ming Dynasty and Emperor of the Ming Dynasty Record, there were no less than 73 large plagues affecting the Jiangnan region during that period, excluding small ones with less impact. Plagues broke out the most frequently during the Yongle period, with no less than one per year. Major plagues spreading to the Jiangnan area recorded in Qing History Draft was no less than 30, and the number may be easily overlooked compared with that of the Ming Dynasty.

In terms of region. Apart from those took place in the south of the Yangtze River, large plagues affecting this area were mainly from Shuntian (now Beijing) (10 cases) and Guanzhong (8 cases), as well as regions of Shandong, Henan and Huguang. Spontaneous plagues of the Jiangnan area were mainly in the Taihu Lake Valley, including Sunan area of Jiangsu and Hangjiahu Plain of Zhejiang. Ningbo (3 cases) and Shaoxing (2 cases) of Zhejiang province also recorded several large outbreaks.

In the case of surging plagues, the main direct resistance against it was the national aid. However, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, apart from material relieves, the state could do nothing but dispersing some prisoners or soldiers to other places to prevent concentrated

outbreaks in local areas, which, completely contrary to the modern policy of centralized isolation, increased burden to the social pandemic prevention .

In the 14th year of Chongzhen's reign (in 1641) in March, a severe plague began to spread. The emperor instructed the troops to advance with sick soldiers dispersed to Weihui and other counties and the remaining staying in Runing for two months. Since people were disrupted, they marched to the area between Xiping and Xincai. [1]

In the 16th year of Chongzhen's ruling period (in 1643), there was an epidemic in autumn. Prisoners were released. [2]

It can be seen that in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the epidemic prevention idea of the authorities was essentially different from that of today. In modern times, suspicious people would be gathered together. While in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was believed that they should be evacuated in the wake of a pandemic so as to avoid concentrated outbreaks in local areas. But the move actually exacerbated the widespread of the disease. The government, after causing great adverse effects, continued dispersing suspicious people to "remote areas" to stop the epidemic, which was actually designed to safeguard the security of the so-called "core" areas.

However, while releasing suspicious people, the Ming government also allowed big cities to accept refugees from everywhere, which was equivalent to taking suspicious persons into the core areas. There was a record about the capital receiving and helping the refugees during a great plague in Jiajing's reign of the Ming Dynasty.

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In the 40th year of the Emperor Jiajing's reign (in 1561), Renchen year (the 29th year of the Sexagenary Cycle) in April, an epidemic broken out in the capital. The emperor ordered officials to distribute congee and medicines with great concern. Rice of 4000 dan and money of three million from the emperor's warehouse were given out to refugees in accordance with their numbers. Different amounts of fares for returning home were distributed according to the distance. [3]

Therefore, the Ming Government, instead of taking dispersing the people as the main means of fighting against the epidemic although with the awareness, focused on providing relief goods , accepting and aiding refugees from outside the capital to implement the "benevolent policy". It guaranteed the safety of the refugees to some extent but in material means only. Meanwhile, the Ming government neither carefully studied nor recorded the distribution of the relief goods. The fare given to the refugees for returning home was simply "determined by the distance ". For the government, "to give" was the main responsibility, while "how to give" had nothing to do with the authority especially the central government.

Different from drought and flood disasters, medical level was also a major reference for the study of social resistance to the pandemic. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were already doctors majoring in epidemic research. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, Wu Youxing, a famous doctor in Jiangsu, first suggested that "plague" was not one illness, but a mixture of multiple diseases:

Wu Youxing, courtesy name Youke, was from Wu County of Jiangnan. He was born in the Ming Dynasty and lived in the Dongting Mountain of Taihu. In the year of Xinsi (the 18th year of the Sexagenary Cycle) of Chongzhen, there was a severe plague in the northern and southern Zhili, Shandong and Zhejiang. Wu treated the illness as typhoid but in vain. After investigating the source of the disease, based on his experience, Wu wrote Treatise on Plague, indicating "Typhoid infects people from tiny apertures of the body and goes into the veins. From the outside to the inside, it passes six meridians... There are nine variants, outside or inside, developing into respective diseases... During this period, if eleven restrictions are violated, there will be more variants and complications different from each other. Prescriptions have to be

made according to the theories and distinguishing of symptoms.” There was no treatise on plague in ancient times. Youxing’s book took the lead. [4]

After the first medical monograph on the treatment of plague by Wu Youxing, there emerged medical scientists specializing in plague study such as Dai Jianzhang, Yu Lin and Liu Kui in the Qing Dynasty. [5] Liu Kui realized that it would still be difficult to curb the spread of the plague due to the shortage of doctors and expensive medicinal materials even if the doctors found a treatment. Therefore he was dedicated to finding and using inexpensive medicines. It can be seen that with the efforts of famous doctors of various generations, the medical community in Ming and Qing Dynasties gradually mastered scientific method to fight against plague, but this method was still limited by the number of doctors and the supply of medicinal materials, and it was difficult to form an overall prevention system in Chinese society back then.

To sum up, both the central government and doctors in the society could help to control plague to some extent and they did play a significant role. But their efforts, with certain limitations, could not cover every aspect of the society compared with the spread of plague. Therefore, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the crucial groups to fight against the pandemic were local governments and big families.

2. Local Specific Measures to Fight Against Plague

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, local governments were often closely connected with large households. Local officials, although appointed by the central government, depended on the support of large families in terms of fighting against natural disasters in particular. In the fifteenth year of the emperor Zhengde’s ruling period of the Ming Dynasty,

Zhang Fengfu, the governor of Songjiang prefecture and junior president of the censorate, was obstructed by local “elders” in adding the depletion of paid grains and taking in other properties instead of silver cloths as taxes:

Yan Tai of Huating County, venerable with age, submitted the report about contributing millions of dans (1 dan≈60 kgs) of grain reserves...Rice of one dan should be added the depletion of six dou (1 dou≈6 kgs)and seven sheng (1 sheng≈0.6 kgs), Jin Huayin of one liang, plain grains of four dans , fine cloths of one pi (1 pi≈13.33 meters), plain grains of two dans and coarse cloth of one pi. Plain rice can be exchanged at the least with one dan. There was no shortage of official’s salaries and grains for officers, armies and teachers, and still surplus grains to help the famine refugees. During the year of Hongzhi, the added depletion of fields was first implemented in different regions. [6]

It was the local governments and large families that formed the strongest and most effective defense against plague in the Ming and Qing Dynasties of civil society.

The fighting against plague of local officials and big families was mainly in three ways: 1. allocating disaster relief materials from the central government; 2. gathering local plague prevention forces; 3. pacifying local people. Take Gu Yunyuan, the magistrate of Ouning during the Wanli Period of the Ming Dynasty as an example. In the face of plague, he firstly called the jailers of the county government to clean up prisons and other government agencies as well as relevant appliances, and then gathered doctors for the treatment of the county with local strengths. Eventually "countless survived":

Gu Yunyuan, courtesy name Maoshan, was the son of Meng Yu, the deputy prefecture governor of Qizhou who was honest and upright. In the year of Wuxu (the 18th year of the Sexagenary Cycle) of Wanli’s reign, Gu Yunyuan boarded the Scholars section and was awarded Ouning magistrate. During the plague, he ordered jailers to clean the jails and labor places with medicines, and arranged good doctors to treat patients in the town. Numerous people were saved. [7]

When a plague broke out, ordinary people were not capable or courageous enough to assist local governments in fighting it. As a result, in addition to local officials, large local households were often required to play a part in social relief work that ordinary people dared not or failed to complete. During the reign of the emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty, there was a large family of Zhang Zhenglong in Zhouzhuang. In the 54th year of the Sexagenary Cycle, when a large-scale and severe plague occurred in Zhouzhuang and the residents dared not go out to the street, he went door to door to deliver medicines:

Zhang Shilong, courtesy name Junmao...In the year of Dingsi (the 54th year of the Sexagenary Cycle) during the reign of Kangxi, people dared not knock on each other's doors facing a big plague, while Shilong delivered medicines from door to door [8]

Such examples can be found in county annals of Jiangnan such as Huang Du, a rich man in Xinchang records, and Lu Run, a well-off man recorded in Changshu Annals. In addition to gathering local anti-epidemic forces, appeasing the people was always an aspect that local officials and powerful families attached great importance to during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In the fight against plague, except for medication, disinfection, isolation, evacuation and other extremely significant matters, calming the public panic was also crucial. Local officials and big families had two main measures to appease the public: properly burying the dead and praying for the living.

One of the most important respects of coping with plague was proper disposal of victims' remains. High-tech and efficient cremation for body treatment is adopted in modern society. From the records about the response to plague, remains disposal was always regarded as a major measure in appeasing the people. But those records focused on the outcome and rarely mentioned about the treatment way. Shanghai Records (of Hongzhi's ruling period) in the Ming Dynasty recorded that Qu Tingfa, in face of a plague in Shanghai when returning home after resignation, paid to keep and bury unknown victims himself. The case was kept in the record but the disposal way was not specified: In the year of Dingwei (the 44th year of the Sexagenary Cycle), people suffered from famine and plague. (Qu Tingfa) provided free congee and countless people dying in hunger lived on it. Unknown bodies used to be dumped in random, while Qu Tingfa gained fame in the Yangtze River Valley for his keeping and disposing the remains. Many large families moving from other places also actively supported and placated local people affected by the epidemic. Records of Suzhou Prefecture in the Ming Dynasty recorded that Weng Can, a man from a powerful family, when living in Suzhou, bought land as burial place for victims in a plague: Wengcan, courtesy name Chunshan, was from Dongshan of Dongting. There was a severe plague during his short living period in Linqing and people died in piles. He bought land for burying the deceased. To comfort people affected by plagues, it was important to bury bodies of the victims and it was even more important to pacify those still suffering from it. In ancient China, the way to appease people was always offering sacrifices, both for the government and for folk society.

Sacrifices for disasters as widespread as plague were usually sponsored by government representatives, assisted by local residents, and conducted jointly. The ritual usually lasted for weeks, during which any "paranormal" or unnatural phenomena would be attributed to the ritual. The priests presiding over the sacrifice were officials appointed by the central government and local ones. It was rare for the central government to send officials to preside over sacrifices. Only when multiple natural disasters occurred in large that the central government would send senior officials. Ming Tong Jian recorded a plague breaking out in the eastern and central Zhejiang in the 10th year of Zhengtong's reign (in 1445)

Ningshao of Zhejiang and other places were in a long drought. The emperor ordered Wang Ying, the assistant minister of the Ministry of Rites and royal tutor, to host sacrifice in Nanzhen. Wang Ying burned joss sticks and paper money and prayed sincerely. At that time people were

stricken by the plague and plenty of them died. Wang Ying exorcised evil spirits for the people while fasting for three days. A big rain poured down with two inches of water on the ground. It stopped and revealed stars while Wang made the sacrifice. The next day there was a heavy rain again which flushed away the disease to the fields and people all cheered with excitement, "this is the rain of the assistant minister." [9]

At that time, the drought and plague in Ningbo raised enough concern of the central government to send the minister of Rites to preside over sacrifices. General conciliation for plague victims were conducted by local authorities. Sacrifices, for the local government and people to give regular blessings, were held on a scale in a fixed time with or without disasters to pray for favorable weather and a good crop year. This large-scale sacrifice, though sponsored by local authorities, rarely went wrong under the coordination of the local officials and large households. Therefore, in case of disasters such as plague, local residents would not take it as an outcome of failing to offer sacrifices to the gods but the haunt of so-called "evil spirits". For example, during the Chenghua period, Kuaiji County (shaoxing, Zhejiang Province today) elaborated on local sacrifice: the country worships gods and makes sacrifices under strict principles. Before long luck will be sent down to bless the people. By the end of the year the time is not right and the circumstance is not favorable. With abnormal thunder and lightning and lack of sunshine, evil spirits turned into plague which led to the frequent famine, vagrancy and suffering of people unspeakably...good fortune and dignity will help in anti-epidemic and turn the disaster into blessings [10].

Therefore, sacrifices, held in the wake of plague for exorcising evil spirits rather than blessings basically, were about praying for "force" attempting to resort to the power of "God of War". For example, in the fifth year of Yongle's reign (in 1407), there was a great plague in Shaanxi and officials were sent to Xiyue for holding sacrifices; in the ninth year of Yongle's ruling period (in 1411), "officials were sent to Xiyue for sacrifices" in the time of the plague; in the tenth year of Yongle (in 1412) , "epidemic, ordered Wang Ying to host sacrifices". Back then, two sacrifices for driving the plague were both held in Huashan mountain of Shaanxi, which was regarded as "the God" capable of exorcising evil spirits. Although no specifics were written down for the sacrifices in Zhejiang, local records mostly described them as "giving paper money, praying sincerely" with the purpose of "driving out evils". After all, sacrifices were for self-consoling, and praying to Buddha could not really eliminate the epidemic. Therefore, they were held to appease the people and create some time for local officials to fight the plague. If local officials failed to control the disease for a certain period of time, they might be dismissed or even banished in order to pacify the affected people:

In the 16th year of the Emperor Hongzhi's reign, the year of Wuzi (the 25th year of the Sexagenary Cycle), a plague broke out in Yunnan. Ministers of Nanjing and Jingshi were ordered to govern the provinces and Fan Ying, the assistant minister of the Ministry of Penalty of Nanjing were sent to Yungui to inspect officials and console the people...There were several big fires in Qujing and disasters in Guizhou. Since the calamities

appeared unusual, the emperor figured that the officials failed in their duties which led to the resentment of the people. Therefore Fan Ying was sent for inspections. Upon arriving, Ying dismissed seven hundreds incompetent officials. [11]

Therefore, although sacrifice naturally manifested mysticism, its main purpose was to soothe nervous victims to develop anti-epidemic forces. Without progresses made in the fight against the epidemic and people successfully appeared, the local officials would fail in their duties and it would lead to reorganization of the force against the plague.

3. The Main Forces Against Plague in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

To sum up, we can conclude that the epidemic prevention forces in Jiangnan area during the Ming and Qing Dynasties consisted of the government and the civil society. The government, in most cases, merely supplied opportunities of organizing forces and part of anti-epidemic materials. While the civil forces contributed a considerable part of efforts and specific measures. Among these non-governmental forces, the most prominent were the doctors who accumulated experience through multiple generations. They made the most direct contribution, provided the most scientific methods and promoted the fight against plague. However, due to limitations of information exchange and the times, the number of doctors well-known for treating plague was much less than that of epidemic cases only in Jiangnan area during the Ming and Qing dynasties, which means that it was difficult to prevent every plague by medical technology alone at that time. Therefore, large households and local officials active in the civilian battlefield against the epidemic became the main forces against plague, whose actions often determined whether a place could survive the plague crisis or not. The successful cases among them were eventually recorded in the local Chronicles and even official history books as examples for later generations to consult and unsuccessful cases were also kept in history books to warn the descendants not to make the same mistakes again.

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