

A Study on the Grassroots Dynamics of Frontier Customs Houses During the Full-scale War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression — Focusing on the Longzhou Customs in Guangxi

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Abstract. Located on the Guangxi section of the China - Vietnam border, Longzhou has been home to the Longzhou Customs to administer import and export affairs since it was opened as a treaty port. During the full - scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the operation of the Longzhou Customs and the activities of its staff were shaped by the war. An abnormal life of fleeing disasters, seeking refuge, and relocating became an inevitable reality for the staff and the institution itself. Around the end of the war, as local reconstruction gradually kicked off, customs staff conducted a series of surveys on local conditions to restore the operation of the Longzhou Customs, and addressed issues such as internal personnel affairs, staff living conditions, and salary disbursement. By examining the historical predicaments faced by the grassroots work of the Longzhou Customs, a frontier administrative agency, amid the evolution and reconstruction of the wartime social situation, we can understand the operational characteristics of frontier customs houses. This study provides a detailed case study for the in - depth research on the history of frontier customs in China.

Keywords: the full - scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, Longzhou Customs, grassroots dynamics

1. Introduction

As an institution responsible for import and export trade, tax collection and other local affairs in modern treaty ports, customs houses hold a significant position in the research of modern port city history, local social history, and socio - economic history. The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression was a pivotal event in modern Chinese history, and the operational reality of customs houses in the rear areas during the war offers a crucial perspective for understanding the changes in local society and the administrative status at that time. Some scholars advocate investigating the grassroots society during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, aiming to understand the impact of the war on social order by revealing the daily lives of ordinary people and grassroots officials in the wartime context. On the whole, the research on the history of customs houses during

the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression remains relatively insufficient, especially the lack of specific studies on individual customs institutions, their staff, and their living conditions in the wartime environment.

A review of the academic history shows that there is an existing research trend shifting towards the combined study of local customs and local history. As a frontier customs house in the inland areas of western China, previous studies on the Longzhou Customs have mainly focused on the relationship between frontier trade activities and regional economy, or compared the Longzhou Customs with other customs houses in Guangxi. There are no specific achievements involving issues such as the administrative predicaments of frontier customs houses during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the living conditions of customs staff.

In view of this, based on historical materials including newspapers and periodicals, customs archives, memoirs in cultural and historical materials, and customs chronicles from the wartime and post-war periods, this paper examines the local situation in Longzhou, the operational status of the customs house, and the living conditions of grassroots customs staff during and after the war, on the basis of clarifying the establishment and basic situation of the Longzhou treaty port. By re-examining the grassroots operation of the Longzhou Customs, this paper explores multiple historical details of the staff, government affairs, and frontier grassroots administration of the Longzhou Customs during the full-scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, depicts the actual operational state of the customs house and the living conditions of its staff, and analyzes the limitations of modern China's construction of frontier areas, especially frontier customs houses, during and after the war, so as to promote discussions on the history of frontier customs houses.

2. The establishment and basic situation of the Longzhou customs

The evolution of the Longzhou Customs is closely linked to the history of Longzhou being opened as a treaty port in the late Qing Dynasty. Established in 1889, the Longzhou Customs was a result of France's request to open Longzhou as a treaty port under the Sino-French Supplementary Treaty on Commerce. In the early days, CARL served as the first Inspector of Customs and was tasked with preparing and founding the customs office. Initially located on the left side of the Chen Yonglie Shrine in the western part of Longzhou City, the office was moved to the southern bank of the river in the city in 1896, where a new building for the Longzhou Customs office was constructed. From the establishment of the customs house until 1935, the position of Supervisor of the Longzhou Customs was mostly held concurrently by local officials, including 14 individuals who served as supervisors while holding posts such as subprefect, intendant, prefect-supervisor, and county magistrate [1]. From its establishment in 1889 to 1940, 30 foreign personnel from 8 countries including Britain, the United States, France, and the Netherlands served as Inspectors of Customs or Deputy Inspectors for as long as 45 years. Only during the periods of 1930-1935, the early stage of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, and from the late stage of the war to the liberation of Longzhou, when foreign inspectors left Longzhou, was the position of Inspector of the Longzhou Customs held by Chinese acting inspectors. Originally known as the Supervisor of the Zhennanguan Customs, the Supervisor of the Longzhou Customs appointed one commercial inspector at each of the three branch customs houses located at Zhennanguan Pass, Shuikou Pass, and Ping'er Pass to inspect import and export goods. However, successive supervisors of the Longzhou Customs did not interfere in the specific affairs of the customs house. Moreover, the funds for the supervisor, inspectors, and patrolmen were not disbursed by the Longzhou Customs itself but by the Wuzhou Customs. Gradually, amid the turbulent political situation, the position became a nominal one with no real power [2].

The Longzhou Customs had a relatively complete organizational structure. Its administrative work was led by the Inspector of Customs and the Deputy Inspector of Customs, with four functional departments including the Secretarial Section, Accounting Section, General Affairs Section, and Inspection Section, as well as a regular operational unit namely the Customs Police Team. In addition, it also employed office boys, sailors, handymen, night watchmen, and laborers. In terms of jurisdiction, the customs house covered three border passes directly facing Vietnam, namely Zhennanguan Pass, Ping'er Pass, and Shuikou Pass, where branch customs offices were set up to take charge of the actual work of entry and exit administration. Among the three frontier passes, the customs affairs at Ping'er Pass and Shuikou Pass were not cumbersome, so no subordinate institutions were established there. In contrast, as the Zhennanguan Branch Customs bore the main responsibility for cross - border activities, it set up a Sub - branch Customs at Guanguanai Pass, a Customs Checkpoint at You'ai Pass, and Sub - offices at Aidian and Pingxiang. Located in the remote China - Vietnam border area, the Longzhou Customs witnessed no significant growth in import and export trade volume for a long period of time due to backward transportation conditions and a social environment plagued by banditry. As recorded in the General Chronicles of Customs: "However, it is far from the coastal areas, and water transportation is not convenient. There is only the Longzhou Railway connecting to the Hanoi - Lang Son Railway in Vietnam, with extremely high freight costs. If traveling via the Xijiang River, the journey is very slow and often accompanied by dangers. Therefore, the commercial activities here are extremely underdeveloped." The goods involved in cross - border trade were mainly daily necessities for local residents, with occasional exports of local specialties such as tung oil and star anise. Bulk industrial raw materials and products were even scarce [3]. Nevertheless, during the full - scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, thanks to its unique geographical location, Longzhou and its customs house became an important gateway for material transportation in the rear areas.

3. The local situation in Longzhou and the operation of the customs house during the full - scale war of resistance against Japanese aggression

After the outbreak of the full - scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the progress of the war exerted a profound impact on the local society of Longzhou. As the eastern regions were gradually occupied by the Japanese army, the transportation routes for the National Government to receive overseas aid and conduct cross - border activities shifted to the border provinces in western China. Among these, Longzhou in Guangxi, with its geographical advantage of being adjacent to Vietnam, became a crucial gateway for the National Government to transport materials. Consequently, the once desolate and quiet Zhennanguan Branch of the Longzhou Customs suddenly flourished. A travel note published in a newspaper by a traveler mentioned that the Longzhou Customs set up a Guanguanai Pass more than ten miles within the national territory of Zhennanguan Pass, through which all incoming and outgoing passengers and goods had to pass. "As a result, the market at this pass gradually thrived. It gathered merchants, drivers, and government personnel in charge of transportation, and the number of restaurants and hotels kept increasing. At noon every day, the place was bustling with people. Cars lined up from inside the town to the outside, stretching for one or two miles, waiting for inspection one after another. When there was a traffic jam, the waiting time could even last a whole day or half a day." [4]

Benefiting from its geographical location adjacent to the China - Vietnam border and the construction foundation laid by its opening as a treaty port in the late Qing Dynasty, Longzhou experienced an "abnormal prosperity" in the context of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. In 1939, officials at all levels of the National Government, intellectuals, social

celebrities, and materials transported during the war all passed through Longzhou. Among them were Ma Xiangbo, Shi Jianqiao, and senior officials of the central organs of the Kuomintang, who took the route via Longzhou to Vietnam and then proceeded to other places. Materials such as tin ore, automobiles, and gasoline from the Southwest Transportation Office of the National Resources Commission were transported to Longzhou and then to Kunming. During this period, the number of exit and entry passports issued by the Border Defense Supervisor's Office soared, reaching a maximum of 300 per day [2]. "Large trucks loaded with materials and streamlined sedans suddenly streamed into Longzhou one after another. A large number of staff from institutions of higher learning, scholars, officials of all ranks, and their relatives also arrived in batches." In the wake of this, various forms of daily consumption in Longzhou City developed in a diversified manner. "The catering industry emerged as the times required, with restaurants, porridge shops, noodle houses, cafes, and beverage stores opening one after another." The city of Longzhou was equally bustling at night: "After dark, Limin Street was crowded with people and vehicles. Everywhere was filled with vehicles being loaded with goods. The lights interweaved and reflected each other, and the rolling of car wheels continued throughout the night, presenting a scene of intense busyness." [5]

However, the "prosperity" of Longzhou and Zhennanguan Pass was short-lived and brought about disasters during the war. The entry - exit inspection station set up by the Longzhou Customs at Guanguanai Pass of Zhennanguan Pass was overwhelmed by the large volume of import and export goods. Coupled with the complicated inspection procedures, the transportation of materials was hindered. According to the entry - exit management documents formulated by the Zhennanguan Branch of the Longzhou Customs, the customs house had very detailed operational specifications for the inspection of goods entering and exiting the pass at that time. The Pingxiang Checkpoint of the Longzhou Customs was tasked with a wide range of work, including cargo loading, seizing smuggled goods, collecting inspection fees for imported goods, and issuing certificates for exported goods [6]. Although it was inherently the responsibility of the customs house to impose strict management on various import and export materials, excessive refinement under the special circumstances of the war might have rendered the specifications counterproductive. As described in a newspaper article: "Recently, due to the brisk flow of goods of various transportation companies and the complicated inspection procedures, goods have piled up around the pass like hills. Some unscrupulous staff, taking advantage of the eagerness of merchants to pass through the inspection as soon as possible, sought personal gains. If merchants offered bribes, their goods would be inspected immediately upon arrival without any delay. On the contrary, the goods of those who did not offer bribes had to be piled up and waited for inspection, and in some cases, the waiting time could be more than a week." [7]

The continuous increase in the number of materials and personnel passing through Longzhou and Zhennanguan Pass to enter or leave the country imposed great pressure on the work of the frontier customs house. According to the Guangxi General Chronicles of Customs, the number of regular staff at the Longzhou Customs remained only 3 to 5 per year from 1889 to 1938. After the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, China's coastal areas were blockaded by the Japanese army. A large number of domestic and foreign personnel and materials were transported through Longzhou, leading to a sharp surge in the business volume of the Longzhou Customs. The number of on - the - job staff at the Longzhou Customs jumped to 39 in 1939 and further increased to 46 the following year [8]. Even with the addition of more than a dozen customs personnel during the war, they were still overwhelmed by the large - scale cargo transportation and import - export inspection work. A growing pile of goods that could not be inspected and cleared in a short time accumulated near the pass.

Longzhou's special geographical location and wartime functions made it a key target of Japanese air raids. Between August and September 1939, the Japanese army continuously bombed the transportation routes and towns in the areas adjacent to Longzhou and Zhennanguan Pass. Reports indicated that the purpose of the Japanese army was to destroy the local transportation conditions and the stored resources. A large quantity of goods, including gasoline, kerosene, diesel, tung oil, automobiles, and tungsten, whether for private commercial use or controlled by the Trade Office of the National Resources Commission, were completely destroyed. Both the Longzhou Customs and the Zhennanguan Checkpoint were bombed to the ground. In the post-war memories of interviewees, Japanese warplanes frequently flew to Longzhou to launch attacks for several consecutive months in 1939 [9]. The war in the Longzhou area along the China - Vietnam border persisted endlessly, forcing the local residents and grassroots staff living and working there to flee and relocate. An employee of the Southwest Trading Company Transportation Office under the National Resources Commission, using the pseudonym "Guangdi", published an article in a magazine recalling his experience of fleeing from Longzhou during the war. The article stated that in the late autumn of 1939, when the Japanese army bombed and attacked Longzhou City, the residents of the city and the staff working at Zhennanguan Pass on the China - Vietnam border fled to Dong Dang, a city in Vietnam, to take refuge from the war [10]. Despite being a Vietnamese city, Dong Dang was home to a large number of refugees and merchants from China during the war, and the streets and restaurants were filled with people speaking various accents from different parts of China. At night, "shrill Peking opera tunes, unmelodious Cantonese operas, and occasionally a line or two of popular national salvation songs could be heard from the various restaurants and pubs in Dong Dang." [11] With the evolution of the international anti-fascist war situation, the Japanese army suffered successive defeats in the Pacific theater, resulting in a shortage of supplies for both its land and sea forces. During its strategic contraction, the Japanese army took the land transportation route connecting China and northern Vietnam as the target of its military operations in this region [12]. Longzhou and its surrounding areas became a key node in the Japanese army's mission to open up the China - Vietnam border transportation route. At that time, newspapers published numerous reports on the war situation in the Longzhou area along the China - Vietnam border. Xinhua Daily reprinted a news item stating that the Japanese army stationed in Vietnam had crossed the Guangxi border and was advancing towards Longzhou [13]. As late as July 1945, the war situation near Longzhou still continued. Shanghai News pointed out: "Since the 19th of this month, the Japanese army units stationed in northern Vietnam have launched an offensive in the rain. They first attacked and captured the enemy positions near Xiadong, threatening the vanguard of the main force of the 151st Division of the enemy's Second Front Army in Jingxi. Another unit attacked and occupied the Donggang area, and then broke through the positions of the Yunnan army stationed in the dangerous mountain cave positions. Since the 23rd, they have bombed and burned several Yunnan army military facilities and military supplies depots. In the evening of the 24th, a unit broke into Longzhou and Pingxiang, launching a devastating attack on them." [14]

Under the war situation, the local situation in Longzhou remained chaotic for a long time, making it impossible for commercial activities and the operation of administrative institutions to proceed normally. Fleeing from disasters and relocating became the daily life of the local people and staff. The regular administrative operation of the Longzhou Customs was disrupted, and customs staff, along with local residents, had to flee during the war. Due to the lack of historical materials, we cannot fully understand the state of the Longzhou Customs during the relocation process, but the existing materials still reflect the predicaments faced by the Longzhou Customs during the war. Influenced by its geographical characteristics as a border area and historical factors, Longzhou

became a gateway and channel for the National Government to transport materials across the border during the war, and the Longzhou Customs played a certain role in this process.

4. The living conditions and predicaments of grassroots staff at the Longzhou customs around the victory of the full - scale war of resistance against Japanese aggression

The existing archives of the Longzhou Customs mainly record the local situation of Longzhou as a frontier port, economic conditions, customs personnel management, and the post - war recovery of customs assets around the victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. These rich and detailed frontier customs work documents provide researchers with new materials to observe the historical situation of the Longzhou Customs around the victory of the full - scale War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression from the perspective of historical participants and micro - history.

According to the existing archival records, Acting Chief Inspector Shi Yuquan led Chen Bingcheng and He Jianxiong to take up their posts at the Longzhou Customs by boat from Nanning on June 3, 1945 [15]. In a report sent to Huo Qiqian, the Inspector of the Nanning Customs, on July 20, Shi Yuquan vividly described the specific scenarios of the Longzhou Customs staff fleeing and relocating during the war: On July 19, upon learning that the Japanese army was launching an attack near Longzhou, "the whole city fell into chaos. We immediately hired porters to transport public property and luggage across the river. However, all the ferries were requisitioned by the garrison troops, making it almost impossible to cross the river. Finally, with the permission of the garrison troops, we successfully crossed the river to the north bank and gathered at the Security Command to prepare for evacuation." The report also mentioned that "since Longzhou is adjacent to Vietnam with only a short distance apart, the Vietnamese enemy frequently harassed the border areas. Therefore, Longzhou was under constant threat of danger at any time, and it was unpredictable whether a fourth evacuation would occur in the future." [16] Shi Yuquan's prediction turned out to be reasonable. Less than a week after the emergency relocation of the Longzhou Customs on the 19th, on July 23, the customs house received another message that the Japanese army was attacking and harassing Longzhou. "The whole city became tense again, and government institutions and residents scrambled to prepare for evacuation." The customs staff were eager to cross the river to take refuge, but they had no choice but to wander around the riverbank, at a loss for what to do, as all the boats were requisitioned by the border defense troops. After crossing the river, they heard that the Japanese army had been repelled and the local situation had turned from danger to safety. Unexpectedly, at six o'clock in the evening on the same day, they learned that the Japanese army had captured Pingxiang, so they had to carry out an emergency evacuation again. From early morning to evening, Shi Yuquan and the staff of the Longzhou Customs rushed around trying to hire a boat to escape. With the help of personal connections, they spent a large sum of money to hire a boat and left Longzhou in the middle of the night. The next morning, the Longzhou Customs staff arrived in Shangjin and temporarily settled there to wait for further news. The article depicted the scene of local residents fleeing from Longzhou during the war: "Refugees, carrying the elderly and holding the young, jammed the roads. They evacuated all night long, and the sight was heartbreaking." Meanwhile, in Longzhou City, "the situation was precarious. Ten out of every ten shops were closed, all industries were depressed, and the city was like a dead one. Transportation came to a standstill, commodity prices soared, transportation tools were in short supply, and everything was extremely dangerous. The resumption of office work at the customs house was of no practical use at all." [17]

On August 31, 1945, Shi Yuquan sent an investigation report written from the perspective of customs work to Huo Qiqian, who was stationed at the Nanning Customs. The report focused on analyzing the post - war trade environment and local social situation of the Longzhou port. The

report argued that the social environment of Longzhou City had stabilized after the war, and the frontier affairs departments had gradually returned to Longzhou to carry out their work. It specifically mentioned: "All coastal areas in China have been successively recovered, and the international situation has improved. If the internal affairs in Vietnam can be resolved at an early date, transportation routes in various directions are expected to be restored. The development of trade and the import and export of goods are just beginning to thrive. The eastern and western sub-branches of this customs house, such as those in Pingxiang, Zhennanguan Pass, Shuikou Pass, and Shuolong Pass, are located at key border passes. It seems that we should consider the actual situation and resume their operations one after another if possible." However, the actual economic situation of the frontier port still faced quite tricky problems: "The prices of daily necessities in this city are still rising, but the value of the Vietnamese currency has plummeted. It has dropped from 70 Chinese national currency per Vietnamese dollar to more than 30 Chinese national currency per Vietnamese dollar. We will submit a further report on the subsequent situation." [18]

As time went on, Shi Yuquan made a judgment on the local society of Longzhou and its possible future development trend. He believed that "due to the shortage of transportation tools in this city, there are no buyers or prices for incoming goods. In addition, a large number of goods have been accumulated in Yongning for a long time. Therefore, even though the transportation between China and Vietnam has been resumed, merchants find no profit in doing business here. Some even suffer losses repeatedly and are greatly disappointed." [19] Years of war not only deprived Longzhou of its wartime prosperity but also destroyed the material foundation for the development of social economy. An article published in the Daily Tribune in 1947 stated: "Today's Longzhou is beyond recognition. Broken walls and debris are everywhere. The once quiet and beautiful park has now turned into a ruined wasteland. The magnificent iron bridge has also collapsed, showing a desolate and dilapidated look. The houses where people live are made of bamboo strips with thatch as the roof. To put it bluntly, these houses are not even as good as the toilets of high-ranking officials and nobles!" [20]

After the victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the vitality of the local society in Longzhou recovered to some extent compared with the wartime period, although such recovery was not entirely sound. A report on the cross-border trade and smuggling situation in Longzhou mentioned: "Since the resumption of transportation between Guangxi and Vietnam, the number of merchants traveling back and forth has been increasing day by day. Due to the complex situation of armed revolutionary organizations in Vietnam, the withdrawal of border defense troops in Guangxi, and the slow progress of the recovery work in the newly recaptured counties, there is a lack of coordination between various regions. Disbanded soldiers and bandits are seizing the opportunity to stir up trouble. Therefore, along the route from Yongning to Longzhou, Longzhou to Pingxiang, and further to Zhennanguan Pass, Dong Dang, and all the way to Hanoi, incidents of robbery and murder are often heard." To cope with the precarious social situation, the people engaged in cross-border trade reached an agreement with the local Security Command. The government and the people cooperated to jointly maintain the smooth progress of cross-border trade: "Merchants all traveled in groups, equipped with self-defense weapons. Every day, more than a hundred people came to the county government or Zhennanguan Pass to apply for entry and exit documents, and sometimes the number even reached 300. The registration period provided an excellent opportunity for them to form groups. Merchants would gather and set off spontaneously without prior organization. At the end of this month, at the request of the Chamber of Commerce, the Security Command of this region approved the dispatch of security forces to provide systematic and phased escorts for merchants to facilitate their travel between Guangxi and Vietnam." [21]

At the same time, Shi Yuquan drafted and sent several official telegrams, addressing daily matters such as the living needs of subordinate customs staff, their behaviors during the war, leave applications, and salary disbursement.

4.1. The problem of customs staff living separately from their families

On August 22, 1945, Shi Yuquan sent a report to the Nanning Customs regarding the family living situation of Staff Member He Jianxiong:

"I was ordered to serve at the Longzhou Customs alone, leaving my family to reside in Tiandong. At present, with soaring commodity prices, supporting two separate households has put me in a tight financial situation, making my life extremely difficult. Fortunately, the war has now ended, the overall situation has stabilized, and the border area has become increasingly peaceful. The local conditions in Longzhou are gradually recovering and prospering. To reduce my financial burden and make it easier to take care of my family, I plan to bring my family to Longzhou to live together as soon as possible." [22]

From this customs document, we know that He Jianxiong had been engaged in customs work before the victory of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and had long lived separately from his family. Due to the meager local salary and the skyrocketing prices, the customs staff found it difficult to make ends meet. With the gradual conclusion of the Sino - Japanese War, they hoped to live with their families to support each other.

4.2. The problem of customs staff selling public property during the war

On September 5 of the same year, Shi Yuquan submitted another report on the behaviors of customs staff during the war:

"It is ordered that Peng Zhaobin, a sailor of this customs house, who arbitrarily sold a public boat, shall be instructed to compensate according to the selling price, pay the full amount immediately, and be dismissed from his post. We shall handle the matter in accordance with the order... According to his statement, when he evacuated to Qincun last year, he took his wife and three children with him, and the whole family of five lived on the customs boat. Initially, they were safe. However, as the enemy and puppet troops frequently harassed the area, often committing murder and robbery, most of the refugees in the Qincun area fled to the nearby mountain peaks to take refuge. At that time, due to the harsh circumstances, there was no place to take the boat, and it was impossible to keep it safe. Rather than abandoning the public property and letting it be completely lost, he chose to sell it so that the government would not suffer a total loss. As soon as your excellency arrived in Longzhou to resume the customs work, I immediately reported the situation truthfully without any concealment. Now, in accordance with the order, I have paid the full selling price and sincerely request that, considering the fact that I have a weak wife and young children to support, leniency be granted, and I be exempted from dismissal... In addition to depositing the money into the account, upon investigation, what the sailor said is true. He returned from the evacuation completely penniless and is living in extreme hardship, which is indeed excusable. In view of the above - mentioned circumstances, I hereby report the handling situation by telegram and request your office to review and give instructions." [23]

This document records the case of Peng Zhaobin, a sailor who arbitrarily sold a customs boat when the Japanese army attacked Longzhou during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. The customs boat was public property, and selling public property should have resulted in dismissal in accordance with the regulations. However, in the subsequent part of the document,

Shi Yuquan explained the reasons for selling the boat. After returning to the customs house, Peng Zhaobin reported his actions and returned the full amount of money obtained from selling the boat. Shi Yuquan stated that except for the act of selling the customs boat, the sailor had always been loyal and responsible in carrying out the tasks assigned by the customs house. Perhaps selling the boat was an act of desperation.

4.3. The medical and health problems of customs staff

The customs telegrams also revealed the backward medical and health conditions in Longzhou after the war. The leave application submitted by Customs Supervisor Chen Bingcheng fully reflected the entire process from his illness to seeking medical treatment. The customs document stated: "Having been suffering from severe gastric ulcer recently, I have followed the diagnosis of the president and attending physician of the Provincial Hospital in this city and must go to a hospital in Hanoi, Vietnam as soon as possible for an X - ray examination. I hereby attach a copy of the No. 4 medical diagnosis certificate issued by the hospital and request that it be forwarded for review..." [24] The attached medical diagnosis certificate in the telegram indicated that he "was suspected of having a gastric ulcer", and the treatment suggestions provided were only general medical advice such as "confirm the diagnosis and determine the treatment plan" and "consume nutritious and easily digestible food" [25]. Due to the backward local medical and diagnostic conditions, the ill staff of the Longzhou Customs had to seek medical treatment abroad by taking advantage of the geographical proximity to Vietnam. Shi Yuquan believed that Chen Bingcheng was in good health when he arrived in Longzhou to resume the customs work. However, since the beginning of autumn, his gastric illness had worsened due to the changes in climate. He hoped to receive treatment as soon as possible. He also stated that "at present, the volume of goods transportation at this sub - branch is small, and the tax collection work is relatively simple. The transportation between China and Vietnam is quite convenient. Considering that the hospitals in the province are not equipped with X - ray machines, to prevent the deterioration of his condition, I have decided to allow him to go to Hanoi for medical treatment today." [24]

Unfortunately, Chen Bingcheng's wish to seek medical treatment in Vietnam did not come true. Due to the harassment of the Japanese army in Vietnam, the X - ray equipment in the hospital run by the French in Hanoi had been moved to other places. The hospital was actively making preparations to resume the service after the situation stabilized [26]. As a result, Chen Bingcheng's plan to seek medical treatment across the border naturally fell through. In addition, the long and tiring journey, coupled with "the lack of medical supplies and drugs during this period, made it impossible to receive effective treatment". His condition deteriorated day by day and became increasingly uncontrollable. He had no choice but to temporarily return to work at the Longzhou Customs and wait for another opportunity to seek medical treatment.

4.4. The problem of delayed salary payment for customs staff

The issue of salaries for customs staff also became increasingly prominent. On December 1, 1945, customs patrolmen Li Peian, Zhu Puxing, and night watchman Jiang Quannan jointly submitted a petition requesting the payment of their back salaries. This document fully reflected the destitute living conditions of the grassroots staff of the customs house:

"We, the undersigned patrolmen, stayed at the main customs house last winter. We received an order from Li Jiayu, the former director of the Inspection Section, who came from Baise, stating that our salaries would continue to be regularly disbursed by the Accounting Section starting from

November 25, the 33rd year of the Republic of China. We have been performing our duties in accordance with the order, and our salaries have been disbursed by the Jingxi Sub - branch Customs... However, Jiang Quannan has not received any salary for staying and guarding the customs property since November 25, the 33rd year of the Republic of China, and no salaries have been paid since February this year. We have dedicated ourselves to the customs service for more than ten years. We have always performed our duties diligently, worked with integrity, and have never had any savings. Our entire families, with mouths to feed, rely solely on our salaries for their livelihood. Since the resumption of office work at the Longzhou Sub - branch Customs on July 8, we have been re - employed. However, all our expenses from February to June were covered by borrowing money from relatives and friends, and we still haven't repaid the debts. In addition, after the looting, our houses were completely destroyed, and our tragic situation is beyond description. For these reasons, we jointly submit this petition, requesting that you take our difficulties into consideration and approve the payment of our back salaries from February to June. If we can receive the salaries, it will help us make ends meet and sustain our lives. We will never forget this great kindness." [27]

In the turbulent border society during the war, delays in salary payment were common. It can be seen that the daily expenses of the staff at the Longzhou Customs were barely covered by their salaries. When the war spread to Longzhou, a remote border town, even the customs staff who stayed behind to evacuate the residents were forced to take actions such as selling customs boats out of practical considerations. After the war, the extremely backward local medical and health conditions made it impossible for the ill customs staff to receive effective treatment locally, forcing them to take leave to seek medical care abroad. The salaries of the employed staff were often in arrears, putting their families in dire straits and leaving them with no choice but to borrow money to make up for the deficit. Previous studies generally believed that the living conditions of staff in modern Chinese customs houses were relatively better than those of most ordinary people or personnel of the same rank [28]. However, the living situation of the staff at the Longzhou Customs after the war presented a completely different picture: as government employees, they were separated from their families, received meager salaries, suffered from untreated illnesses, and struggled to make ends meet. Their living conditions were almost as miserable as those of refugees. The social activities in Longzhou, the operation of the customs institution, and the daily lives of the customs staff were severely damaged by the war.

5. Conclusion

The rapid occupation of the eastern regions in the early stage of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression prompted the Longzhou port, as a frontier gateway for foreign exchanges, to play an important role during the war, providing convenience for the transportation of materials and the flow of personnel in the rear areas. Although the Kuomintang government at that time had considered that Longzhou and Zhennanguan Pass under its jurisdiction might become one of the key channels for material transportation during the war and planned to build a railway from Nanning to Zhennanguan Pass to enhance the transportation capacity between Nanning and Longzhou, making preparations for the construction of major transportation routes in the rear areas for a prolonged war of resistance, the plan failed to be completed as scheduled due to various local constraints [29]. This reveals the flaws in the operation of the wartime system during that historical period. When these systemic flaws spread to the local level in Longzhou, they manifested as the practical predicaments of the grassroots customs staff being at a loss in their work and living in extreme hardship during the war. The group of administrative staff at the Longzhou Customs, represented by Shi Yuquan, had

abided by the rules and regulations as much as possible. Their individual behaviors and handling of affairs also followed the relevant provisions to the greatest extent, and the post - war situation did not fall into complete chaos. However, every individual in the tide of history is constrained by the institution they serve, the local area they are in, and the political power system. Shi Yuquan and his colleagues at the customs house not only had to fulfill the work tasks assigned by their duties but also exerted their individual initiative both within and at the boundaries of the rules to continuously respond to the volatile frontier situation. Amid the drastic historical changes brought about by the war, the hidden structural flaws in the regular operation of various levels of society and administrative institutions became increasingly prominent. Through the arduous operation of the Longzhou Customs during and after the war and the numerous predicaments faced by the daily lives of its staff, we can gain insight into the flaws in the modern Chinese customs system.

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