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Contentious Cantonese

Rock Fights and the Culture of Violence in the Early Modern Canton Delta

This article examines an important but little studied aspect of folk culture in the Canton Delta in the early modern period (roughly 1800s–1940s); namely, ritualized rock fights. The yearly rock fights were popular forms of entertainment and competitive sport not only in China but also in Korea and Japan. They were ritualized annual events occurring during the lunar New Year holidays, and Double Five and Double Nine festivals. Many people regarded the rock fights as necessary for the community's well-being and good health. For the youthful rock fighters, who came mostly from poor, marginalized families, such blood sports were a necessary preparation and training for martial skills needed in life. These acts of violence and blood rituals were part of a well-established folk tradition deeply embedded in the everyday life and folk customs of southern China.

Keywords: violent sports—blood rituals—fertility rites—hooliganism—martial skills—machismo

Asian Ethnology Volume 83, Number 2 · 2024, 231–251

In the section on local customs in the 1871 gazetteer of Panyu County, Guangdong, the author included a short notice of what he considered a "barbarous custom" (*manfeng hansu*) prevalent among the villagers of the two townships (*xiang*) of Shawan and Jiaotang. To paraphrase the author:

> During the lunar New Year, when there was little else to do, boys would split up into gangs and amuse themselves by fighting in vacant fields outside villages. The rough-and-tumble play began with rock throwing but soon would escalate into fisticuffs and stick fights. Parents and elders, who found the sport entertaining, would crowd around the youths to encourage them to fight all the more. Whenever one side began to lose a battle the adults would join in the ruckus, picking up spears and shields and going at one another with all seriousness. What began with a few tens of young boys inevitably degenerated into a bloody affray involving hundreds of people. Yet even if someone were seriously injured or killed, no one would report it to the authorities for fear of being ridiculed as milksops by their neighbors. (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b)

The annual rock fights were an old and ubiquitous tradition not only in Panyu and the Canton Delta but also in other areas of China, as well as in Korea and Japan. Rock fighting, in fact, was deeply entrenched in Chinese folk culture. The fights were multifaceted, and different people interpreted them in different ways or emphasized different aspects. In this article I focus on three key meanings of rock fights: one, as popular spectator sports associated with the culture of the lower classes; two, as platforms where fighters could show off their martial prowess and toughness; and three, as blood rituals essential for forecasting the well-being of local communities. Rock fighting, I argue, was but one of the many forms of customary violence that pervaded the lives of working-class Chinese in the early modern era.[1] Rock fights are important because they provide an illuminating snapshot of the everyday assumptions, values, habits, and culture of ordinary Chinese, especially of those inhabiting the lower end of the social hierarchy.

In the Canton Delta, rock fights were popular forms of entertainment and competitive sport, which also had important sacerdotal functions. Although the rock

fights had been banned by officials and deplored by most literati, they remained widespread not only in the Canton Delta, but also in northeastern Guangdong, southern Fujian, and western Taiwan, as well as in Korea and Japan, well into the twentieth century. The appendix sketches the available information from written sources on rock fights in southern China. Although I discuss rock fighting more generally, my focus is on the ritualized annual rock fights usually occurring during the lunar New Year holidays, as well as during the Double Five (*duanwu*, fifth day of the fifth lunar month) and Double Nine (*chongyang*, ninth day of the ninth lunar month) festivals. It was no coincidence that the yearly rock fights were held on days of great significance for agriculture, as they were meant to assure good harvests as well as to protect against pestilence in the coming year (Sōda 1997, 205). But unlike other festivals, which were often associated with orthodox, state-recognized temples or lineage-based ancestral halls, rock fights in the Canton Delta, at least, were loosely organized rough-and-tumble sports closely associated with working-class culture.

While in the past rock fighting was a ubiquitous sport across much of China, it nonetheless presents scholars with several methodological problems. For one, there are virtually no substantive written sources on rock fights in China, but only a few scattered remarks, always negative, in local gazetteers, newspapers, and literati jottings, as well as in several descriptive accounts by Western observers. Because of the scarcity of textual materials, I have had to rely heavily on fieldwork: interviews conducted in 2002 of village elders (all men, mostly in their sixties and seventies) in Shawan and Jiaotang, and in 2010 of villagers and local cultural experts in several locations in Panyu. My information was collected from group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and random conversations with villagers. Because I was told that in most areas in Panyu rock fights ceased in the 1940s, my elderly informants in 2002 relied on their own reminiscences from when they were children and on stories that their elders had told them. None of my informants, however, said that they had participated in rock fights. In my follow-up interviews with villagers in 2010, it was already difficult to find anyone with direct recollections of rock fights; it seems that the living memory of rock fights had virtually disappeared. Because of the sparsity of written sources, I have also supplemented my information on rock fights in the Canton Delta with information on rock fights in other areas of China and East Asia, which according to Sōda Hiroshi (1997) had similar "ritualized sports."

Another problem concerns how we should designate the rock fights. In China there never was any single or standardized name for the sport of rock fighting, but rather different areas had different names throughout history. In general, the terms were largely descriptive. In Guangdong they were characterized as "rock throwing fights" (*zhi shitou jia*), "using rocks to throw at one another" (*yi shitou xiang zhi*), "overhand rock [throwing]" (*jieshi*), and so forth (Liu 1993; *Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b; Wang 2006, 141). In Fujian and Taiwan, the sport was variously portrayed as a popular amusement, using such terms as "fighting with rocks for sport" (*doushi wei xi*), "playing at rock throwing" (*zhishi zhi xi*), "rock fighting sport" (*dashixi*), and other similar terms (Chen 1997 [1826], 29; *Yunxiao tingzhi* 1816, 3:11b; Guo and Zhang 2002). Rock fights were fundamentally local phenomena that differed from place to place and from time to time.

Ancient antecedents: *Jirang*, *seokjeon*, and *injiuchi*

Rock fighting was a competitive sport with ancient antecedents. It is likely, as the Japanese scholar Inō Kanori has argued, battles with stone throwing were intricately connected with China's ancient divination rituals and warfare (Inō 1917, 78). According to popular legends, the sport, which came to be known as *jirang*, dated back more than four thousand years among Chinese elites as a hunting competition, with important sacerdotal and portending aspects, in which wooden sticks were thrown (figure 1). Over time sticks were replaced with bricks and rocks. As rock fighting evolved, it became an increasingly important competitive sport useful for training skills needed in hunting and warfare. Following the fall of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), *jirang* became widespread throughout China among commoners, both young and old. By the twelfth century, however, it remained popular only as a children's sport associated with the Cold Food (*hanshi*) and Tomb Sweeping (*qingming*) festivals during the fourth lunar month, and in some areas of south China with the Double Nine festival. In the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods, the sport had evolved into "tile fighting" (*dawa*) contests between teams of boys who pitched broken bits of roof tiles and stones at one another. Although in ancient times many people, including literati, considered rock fights a respectable sport, by the late imperial era it had become characterized as a "noxious custom" (*esu*) among the lower orders (Wang 2006, 141).[2]

Both Korea and Japan had similar ritualized rock or stone fights, whose antecedents traced back to ancient China. As in China, rock fights in Korea and Japan had various designations; the most commonly used term in Korea was *seokjeon*, and in Japan *injiuchi*. In Korea rock fights date back to the mid-Samhan period (57 BCE–668 CE), and were closely associated with the agrarian cycle and fertility festivals, most commonly occurring during the first few weeks of the lunar New Year and on the Dano (Double Five) festival. According to the *Book of Sui* (*Sui shu*), the official history of the Chinese Sui dynasty, in the seventh century *seokjeon* enjoyed royal support and had become a part of state-sponsored festivals. By the seventeenth century it was deeply entrenched as a widespread blood sport among the Korean masses, with one source associating it with adolescent gangs of "rabble and riff-raff" due to excessive rowdiness and violence. Much like the scene describing rock fights in the Panyu gazetteer,

Figure 1. Ancient Chinese sport of *jirang*. Source: Ancient sketch redrawn by author, not in copyright.

Figure 2. Woodblock Print by Hishikawa Moronobu of Japanese Rock Fight. Source: Brooklyn Museum, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/120849; public domain.

George Gilbert, a foreign resident in Korea in 1892, witnessed two villages engaged in rock fighting that involved eight hundred to one thousand adolescent and adult combatants. As he recounted: "Young men start throwing stones at one another in the early afternoon, and continue to do so until evening. Once adults arrive at the field, the stone fighting becomes more severe" (cited in Park 2011, 130). According to Robert Niff, the fights often involved hundreds of participants who armed themselves with "polished stones, iron and wooden cudgels, armor made from twisted straw, wooden shields, and leather caps" (Niff 2009; also Hulbert 1905, 51). The rock fights were not only popular spectator sports considered useful for martial training, but they also had profound religious and shamanistic overtones for predicting agricultural success in the upcoming year. As late as the 1970s there were still reports of stone fighting in some rural areas (Hulbert 1905, 50; Sōda 1997, 208; Park 2011, 131; Siegmund 2018).

In Japan rock fighting is equally ancient, with some sources claiming that it dated back to the pre–Bronze Age Yayoi period. Usually referred to as *injiuchi*, the root term *inji*, according to several scholars, means "stoning." As in China and Korea, in ancient Japan stone throwing was commonly used in warfare on battlefields. Later on in the Heian period (794–1185), rock fighting became a popular children's sport that took place during the lunar New Year and at the Double Five festival. In the sixteenth century, feudal lords or daimyo, such as Takeda Shingen, even organized special stone-throwing companies of soldiers. Figure 2 is a late-seventeenth-century woodblock print by Hishikawa Moronobu depicting two teams of rock fighters, each designated by distinct banners. Here too battles usually started between teams of adolescent boys who were later joined by older men. They used rocks and sticks to

fight, and had shields and helmets for protection. As elsewhere, Japanese believed that the winning teams would have good luck, and their villages abundant crops in the following year. Although popular among the samurai warrior class, because of their excessive violence rock fights were banned in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), and during the following Meiji period (1868–1912) they had all but disappeared (Amino 1992, 33–38; Amino 1993, 145–96; Frédéric 2002, 387).

Pugnacious youths and rock fights

The annual rock fights in the Canton Delta, which I concentrate on in this study, for the most part took place outside villages in vacant fields rather than in front of temples or ancestral halls. In general, villagers in Panyu told me that battles were fought on neutral grounds—public spaces or no-man's-lands deemed appropriate for fighting as they belonged to no particular group or faction. Qu Dajun, writing in the late seventeenth century, recorded that the rock fights in Panyu occurred in the "mountainous backwoods" (*shanye*), that is, in rustic, uncultivated fields on the outskirts of towns and villages (Qu 1700, 9:25a), and the 1871 Panyu gazetteer similarly relates that the rock fighters gathered in the "village wilds" (*cunye*), that is, in uninhabited areas outside villages (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b). One eyewitness, the Rev. John Henry Gray, recorded that each year in the suburbs beyond the walled city of Canton peasants convened in the "open plains," in areas often surrounded by rolling hills, to "attack each other with stones" (Gray 1878, 1:256). For the most part, the same was true for locations of annual rock fights in other areas of China and in Korea and Japan.

In southeastern China, the annual rock fights occurred in the same areas where armed affrays or feuds (*xiedou*) were commonplace and widespread (Lamley 1977). On the one hand, like armed affrays, rock fights were fought between individuals or teams in rival villages or lineages, as well as between members of opposing groups within a village or lineage. In some cases rock fights may have functioned as substitutes for armed affrays. But on the other hand, unlike the armed affrays, which were usually well-organized, large-scale conflicts between lineages or subethnic groups that frequently continued for months or years without end, rock fights were mostly unstructured displays of masculine violence between rival, often bitterly antagonistic, neighborhoods, villages, families, and surname groups that took place during particular festivals and were of short duration (usually one or two days). They also served different purposes. While it is tempting to view rock fights as more "civilized" forms of feuds, this was not the case.

Judging by the printed descriptions and testimonies from oral interviews, the annual rock fights were basically free-for-alls and "sporting battles of strength" (*douli zhi xi*) (Qu 1700, 9:25a; and fieldnotes from Panyu and 2002 and 2010). What the youthful fighters fought for was reputation and prestige. For them broken teeth and scars were badges of honor. Apparently anyone and everyone could join in the battles. There were few winners; most were losers. Fighting was a means of gaining respect and dominance over others. They created what Eric Dunning has called an "aggressive masculinity," whereby one's ability to fight was the key to power and status (Dunning

1983, 137; also Dunning 2000, 157; and Bourgois 1989, 8–9). Rock fights also were important release mechanisms for the pent-up tensions, frustrations, and antagonisms that had accumulated over the previous year. They can hardly be called civilized sports, because there were no set rules and they were brutal and bloody. Indeed, the avowed purpose of rock fights was the shedding of blood. It was not uncommon for participants, and sometimes even spectators who got too close, to be maimed or killed (fieldnotes from Panyu, May 2010; also Qu 1700, 9:25a; Gray 1878, 1:256–57).

Although ostensibly open to anyone, nonetheless most of the rock fighters in Panyu came primarily from marginalized families, the sons of the working poor. While fighters ranged in age from roughly ten to forty, the majority were adolescent boys between fifteen and eighteen years of age. For the young boys rock fights were rites of passage that tested their machismo and marked a transition into manhood. Based on my interviews, in many cases, they were the sons of so-called "Danmin" (or more derogatorily as "Tanka," literally "egg families"), who were mostly tenants and hired workers from satellite villages that were both economically and politically dependent on dominant lineages (Siu and Liu, 2006; Watson 2004a, 146–48). Written sources described the fighters as "pugnacious youths" (*dazai*), a Cantonese term that typically associated individuals with heredity servile groups with low social status (Qu 1700, 9:25a; Chan 1989, 312, 318, 333). In the delta they were the village outcasts, people that dominant groups disparagingly referred to as "trivial people" (*ximin*), "floating twigs" (*shuiliu chai*), and "lowly households" (*xiahu*). They were little different from the "bare sticks" (*guanggun*) or, as they were more commonly referred to in the Canton Delta, "rotten lads" (*lanzai*), who regularly filled the ranks of local guardsmen units, bandit gangs, and pirate bands. They existed on the fringes of polite society and took sport in upsetting social conventions (Liu 1995, 35; Watson 2004b, 251–65; Antony 2023, 20–43, 80–82). My local informants in Panyu described the rock fighters as hooligans (*liumang*), as macho youths who swaggered about the streets and lanes acting tough. Some villagers added that they belonged to local juvenile gangs (fieldnotes from Panyu in June 2002 and May 2010).[3]

Rock fighting was a manly sport, one in which females played no direct roles as combatants. People considered it too violent and dangerous, as well as unfeminine. Nonetheless, females did participate from behind the scenes as auxiliaries. Mothers and sisters attended the battles as devoted spectators, cheering on their sons or brothers and nursing the injured. Standing behind the front lines, women and girls helped the fighters by keeping them stocked with a steady supply of rocks and refreshments. In the early twentieth century, at least according to my Panyu informants, teenage girls worked the crowds selling snacks, fruits, and even toys to crowds of onlookers (fieldnotes from Panyu in June 2002; also Chen 1997 [1826], 29; *Sing Tao Daily* 2018). Writing about traditional stone fighting in Korea, Felix Siegmund has hinted that women attended rock fights in order to gauge the manliness and martial virility of robust male combatants (Siegmund 2018). Perhaps the same was true in China. Rock fights, in any case, delimited and safeguarded clear gender roles and identities within the participating communities.

Both Shawan and Jiaotang, which were the centers of annual rock fights in the Canton Delta, were also notorious bandit haunts since at least the Ming dynasty.

This was particularly true in that nebulous area along the border of these two rural districts, an area where political jurisdictions were vague, and gentry and lineage authority were weak. It was an area with numerous impoverished satellite villages where most people made their living by fishing, ferrying, and other menial jobs, the sorts of work that drew little respect and provided meager earnings. The lower delta was an area crisscrossed with a maze of creeks and streams and dotted with many hillocks, one of which was known locally as Rat Hill (Laoshushan), located adjacent to the present-day and still poor village of Jinshan (see figure 3). Despite the repeated attempts to eradicate brigands in this area, Rat Hill remained a notorious outlaw lair throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the 1770s and 1780s, bandit chiefs such as "Black Bones" Mai and Liang Yaxiang made Rat Hill their base from which gangs of eighty or ninety men would set off to plunder villages, markets, and shipping in the delta and along the coast (*Junjidang lufu zouzhe*, QL 45.9.18, and QL 45.9.27; also *Canton Register*, March 15, 1836, 9:43; Antony 2016, 196–97; Antony 2023, 78–101).[4] As late as the 1930s, there were still reports of bandits in this area (*Jiu Guangdong feidao shilu* 1997, 13). According to my Panyu informants, these were the sorts of people who participated in rock fights in their youth and who later as young adults joined bandit gangs or village guard units. Not coincidentally, as several villagers in 2002 told me, rock fighting previously had been a popular activity nearby Rat Hill (fieldnotes from Panyu and 2002 and 2010).

Another area mentioned in the Panyu gazetteer that was particularly famous for its yearly rock fights in the late nineteenth century was called Dragon Bridge (Longqiao). It was a rural mart on one of the small tributaries of the Pearl River southeast of Canton and not too far from Rat Hill (see figure 3). At that time Triad gangs oversaw the market, giving it a reputation as a rough area known for violence and unruliness (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b; and fieldnotes from Longqiao, May 2010).

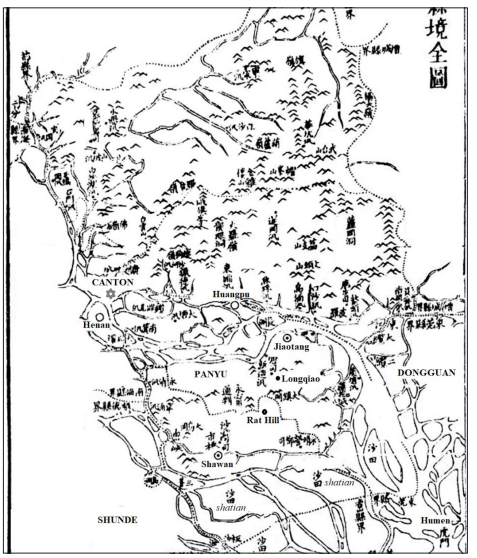

Figure 3. Map of Panyu County, Guangdong, c. 1871. Source: Gazetteer of Panyu County. *Panyu xianzhi*), Guangdong, 1871, not in copyright.

Even as late as 2018, "black societies" (*heishehui*) still lorded over the town through intimidation, extortion, and murder (see Antony 2023, 295n17). Villagers I talked to around Longqiao also associated the rock fighters with Triads, bandits, and hooligans.

Because boys growing up in poor lower-class families had to be tough just to reach adulthood, learning how to fight at an early age was essential for survival in a world that they found excessively competitive and unfair. Children born into impoverished families were more likely to be exposed to violence than those born in literati families. In the latter case, children internalized rules and values that

encouraged them to become law-abiding subjects who viewed violence as wrong. In the former case, however, violence was an integral part of the socialization process, an inevitable fact of growing up (Dunning 1983, 137, 139; Englander 2003, 37–39). For the children of the laboring poor, I would argue, fighting was not merely a favorite pastime but also a routine factor of daily life and even a necessity.

As a number of psychologists have shown, children learn violent behavior by imitating aggression in adults, and children who grow up in violent environments are more likely to be violent themselves. If violent behavior is learned behavior, then children raised in families that approve and encourage aggression will believe violence is correct and acceptable behavior. Under these circumstances, explains Elizabeth Englander, "violence occurs because the person has been *rewarded* for being violent, or has seen others rewarded for being violent." In other words, there were positive reinforcements for aggression and violence. What is more, other studies have found that aggressive behavior that began in childhood usually continued into adulthood (Englander 2003, 39, 57–58, 94–98; also Dunning 2000, 160; Boulton 1994, 23–41).

In early modern Guangdong (as in many other areas of China), children in poor marginalized families frequently grew up in environments that approved and encouraged violent activities. The annual rock fights in Shawan and Jiaotang townships, as elsewhere, were not simply mock battles. The violence was real and at times deadly. Those pugnacious youths fought to the shouts and urgings of parents and elders who regarded the brawls as lively spectator sport. Rock fights were held during festivals as festive, bacchanal occasions. Fighters boasted, bawled, and cussed as crowds cheered them on. The battles also provided opportunities for gambling, drunkenness, and the undesirable mixing of the sexes, activities that usually met with great displeasure from officials and literati (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b; also Niff 2009).[5]

In the 1860s, John Henry Gray witnessed several rock fights near Canton. One involved about seven hundred fighters, who ranged in age from eighteen to forty, and attracted a huge crowd who viewed the fracas from hillsides overlooking the field where the fighting took place. In the festive atmosphere combatants took time out from the fighting to mingle with spectators and to buy soup and fruit from the hawkers working the crowds. On another occasion Gray witnessed a rock fight on Henan (Honam) Island (see figure 3), in the suburbs of Canton, where so many people were seriously injured that the village elders called upon police to put a stop to the melee. Accordingly, the next morning police "seized one of the ringleaders, and bound him to a tree. The peasants, however, drove them back, loosed the prisoner, and renewed the rough scenes of the day before" (Gray 1878, 1:256–57). This was no political or antigovernment protest, but rather a demonstration of spontaneous anger on the part of spectators. The annual rock fights apparently were too popular to be curtailed.

Rock fighting and martial training

The annual rock fights were important popular spectator sports originally rooted in military training and should be understood as part of the broader martial culture prevalent in early modern China (see Waley-Cohen 2006). The use of stone weapons in

combat, of course, was ancient, certainly dating back to the Neolithic era. For Korea, according to Park Daejae, even in the first century, because iron weapons were not yet widespread, stones remained as the primary weapons of war. It was likely the same in China and Japan, and in fact the military use of stones continued into modern times (Park 2011, 132; Inō 1917, 78). Even the advent of modern gunpowder armaments did not automatically or totally replace stones as weapons. Besides swords and guns, rocks remained in common use as hand-launched missiles. Rock fights, in general, provided useful training for both defensive and offensive maneuvers in combat. They furthermore served to sharpen the competitive spirit and male bonding among team members. Rock throwing, for instance, was an essential element in close-range naval combat in the Ming and Qing periods, and thus important for naval warfare training. For these reasons, aboard warships and merchant junks there were always ample supplies of rocks that were used as missiles to ward off pirates.[6] Pirates and bandits likewise used stones as weapons ("Military Skill and Power of the Chinese," 173; *Nawenyi gong zouyi* 1968 [1834], 12:91b; *Xingke tiben*, JQ 8.4.20, and DG 3.5.19; *Waijidang*, DG 13.9.19). The annual rock fights, like the competitive dragon boat races during the *duanwu* festivals discussed by Andrew Chittick, served to promote a martial culture, and more specifically provided a venue for violence and a potential recruiting platform for guardsmen units and bandit gangs (Chittick 2010, 70).

For the sons of the laboring poor, the rough-and-tumble sport of rock fighting was necessary preparation and training for martial skills needed in life. On the one hand, rock fights may have been important to village and lineage leaders who viewed them as useful training grounds for young boys and adolescents who would someday serve in their guardsmen units. Although verbally condemning rock fights, local leaders may have tolerated them precisely for this reason. On the other hand, bandits and pirates, who mainly came from the ranks of the laboring poor, were also known to seek out individuals with the martial skills one could learn from juvenile street gangs and rock fighting. The skills that boys learned from rock fighting helped to toughen them so that they could, as one Panyu villager told me, "eat bitterness" (*chiku*), which was a quality essential for both guardsmen and bandits. Rock fights allowed boys to hone in and show off their martial prowess (fieldnotes from Jinshan village in Panyu, June 2002).

For commoners, rocks were one of the most accessible and versatile weapons. They cost nothing to procure, and they were readily available and easy to use. During the Double Five festival, for instance, dragon boat teams prepared for the inevitable fights by stocking their boats in advance with rocks and other hand weapons (Zhang Qu 1738, 47; Gray 1878, 1:259–60; and *Lianjiang xianzhi* 1967 [1932], 19:23a). According to Derk Bodde, these races "took on the nature of a naval battle, with competing boats pursuing or grappling one another, and contestants or spectators on the banks throwing stones at each other" (Bodde 1975, 314). In the autumn of 1809, when pirates attacked Xijiao village in Shunde County, people simply picked up stones by the wayside to pelt the attackers and drive them away (*Shunde xianzhi* 1853, 17:18a). It also was common practice for villagers to stockpile rocks in their stockades and blockhouses as defensive weapons to use against bandits and rival lineages. Figure 4 is a display of small stones kept in one of the blockhouses (*diaolou*) in Zili village in Kaiping (fieldnotes from Kaiping, April 2007).

Figure 4. Display of rocks used as defensive weapons, Zili village, Kaiping. Photo by Robert J. Antony, 2007.

It was not uncommon, too, for foreigners to be targeted by rock-throwing Chinese. In Canton on the morning of February 24, 1807, a scuffle erupted outside the foreign factories when drunken British sailors from the East India Company ship *Neptune* were pelted with rocks and bricks by an angry Chinese mob. According to one witness, Peter Auber, the Chinese "continued throughout the day to throw stones at the factory and at every European passing," despite efforts from Hong merchants to disperse the crowd (Auber 1834, 225). In his reminiscences in *Bits of Old China*, William Hunter recalled that once when returning from an excursion in the suburbs of Canton, he and his companions were accosted by a band of boys who incessantly shouted "*fankwae*" ("foreign devils") and threw lumps of mud, stones, and old worn-out shoes at them. The boys chased them down the lane, and Hunter could only escape by running away (Hunter 1885, 66–67). As another foreign resident later remarked, rock battles not only afforded combatants the chance to show off their martial skills but also to torment foreigners with "good fun" (Downing 1838, 1:119).

Rock fights as blood rituals

For villagers in Panyu and elsewhere, the annual rock fights were revered blood rituals. People regarded them as necessary for the community's well-being and good health, as well as for predicting bountiful harvests based on beliefs that the rocks possessed magical powers to drive away calamity and death (fieldnotes from Panyu, June 2002 and May 2010; for Korea, see Park 2011, 131). People in southern Fujian depicted the sport as "throwing rocks as a portent" (*zhishi zhi zhao*) (Zhang Yongxin n.d.). Participants believed that the winners in these battles would have good luck over the forthcoming year. Villagers in Panyu, as in Fujian and Taiwan, understood that unless blood was shed in these annual rock fights, misfortunes—bad harvests, famines, typhoons, pestilence, ill health, bankruptcies—would befall them (fieldnotes from Jinshan village in Panyu, June 2002; also *Yunxiao tingzhi* 1816, 3:11b; DeGlopper 1995, 144).

Coming as they did at the time of the lunar New Year, marking the opening of spring, rock fights also were vernal fertility rites. The shedding of blood literally and symbolically impregnated the earth with life's essence. In this sense rock fights were rites of rebirth and renewal. It is significant too that the rock fighters, those pugnacious youths, were mostly adolescent boys. Because pubescent lads were

Figure 5. Rock Fight on Double-Nine Festival, Canton Delta, c. 1880s. Source: Dianshizai huabao, 1887, not in copyright.

considered especially animated with positive *yang* forces, their blood was particularly potent (De Groot 1910, 6:1195; Gray 1878, 1:265). As ritualized behavior, rock fights were a product of particular cultural assumptions regarding the relationship between bloodletting, fertility, and health.

We also find further evidence for this bloody vernal ritual from the rock fights in eighteenth-century Yangjiang, a county on the southwestern fringe of the Canton Delta. There the annual rock fights were not held during the lunar New Year but rather during the Double Five festival at a place locally known as the "Killing Mound" (Sidagang) (Qu 1700, 9:25a; *Yangjiang zhi* 1925, 7:11b). The fifth lunar month, a time of seasonal change, had always been a period of rampant pestilence and plagues, especially in the miasmatic south (Law and Ward 1982, 54).[7] Rock fights served as annual exorcistic rites of passage from one season to the next and were meant to cleanse communities of disease-causing evil spirits through a show of physical force.

The rock fights in Yangjiang were held on the Double Five festival, Wolfram Eberhard has posited, because of the need for "scapegoats" to ward off the "overwhelming dark powers" that were present at this time of year. The rock fights actually predated the now more typical dragon boat races, and according to local lore were linked to the bloody fertility rites of the Dai aborigines who inhabited much of south China before the influx of Han Chinese. To assure the fertility of their rice fields Dai gods demanded human sacrifice, the victim often being a Chinese settler who was kidnapped and fattened for this purpose. Villagers also offered a virgin to the ill-fated stranger who was encouraged to impregnate her. At the festival the victim was dismembered and the body parts distributed among the villagers, who then interred them in their fields to ensure good harvests. Later, Eberhard suggested, as more Han Chinese moved into the region, another form of ordeal had to be found, namely rock fights that often lasted until someone was slain. Wild singing and dancing accompanied the fights, and the whole festival ended with a great sex orgy in the nearby woods. Both the rock fights and the later dragon boat races were believed to bring good luck and protection to the winners; they also both had prophylactic values for warding off evil and disease (Eberhard 1972, 78–85; also Chittick 2010, 78–80).

Ritual rock fights also took place during the Double Nine festival, held on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, a time that marked a cyclical change from summer to autumn and was considered a "noxious season" when demons and all sorts of pests went about causing trouble. To protect themselves from danger, people climbed atop

hills and cleansed themselves by drinking chrysanthemum wine and placing leaves of the *zhuyu* plant on their bodies and on doorsills.[8] As depicted in figure 5, as part of the festival celebrations, each year hundreds of young boys formed teams and took to the vacant fields and hills near the Five-Story Pagoda (Wucenglou) in the Canton suburbs and near Dog-Head Hill (Goutoushan) in Enping County to do battle with rocks. For the youthful combatants this was a blood sport essential for proving one's masculine virility and martial skills, as well as for bringing good luck to the winners and bountiful harvests to their communities. Chrysanthemum wine, the *zhuyu* plant, and rock fights all had cautionary properties for guarding against ailments caused by demons (Wang 2006, 141).

In traditional China, violence and blood-letting rituals were key features of both popular culture and folk religion. People enjoyed watching rock fights because, as psychologists have informed us, violence has a dramatic appeal (Goldstein 1998). Blood spectacles, such as the rock fights, were grand theatrical performances. Watching violence was not only a popular form of amusement, but also something imbued with magico-religious significance for both the performer and the audience. Much like the martial temple performances described by Avron Boretz, rock fights were "a species of dramatic performance, the aesthetic power of which is inseparable from its perceived ritual efficacy" (Boretz 2011, 14). The act was more than simply violence for the sake of violence. Beyond entertainment, bloody spectacles were auspicious occasions for young and old, male and female.

The shedding of blood also gave meaning to violence. Blood was the vital force of life so important in warding off evil spirits, curing illnesses, ensuring fertility, bringing good luck, and assuring abundant crops (De Groot 1910, 6:968–69, 1178–79; Willoughby-Meade 1928, 156). These acts of violence and blood rituals, epitomized in the ritual rock fights, were part of a well-established folk tradition that was deeply rooted in the everyday life and folk culture of early modern south China.

Rock fights and the culture of violence

The Cantonese people had a somewhat deserved reputation for violence and disorderliness. In the minds of many Chinese officials and literati, the people of Guangdong were by their very nature and habit contentious and violent. In fact, I would argue, in the early modern period violence had become a part of routine life for a substantial portion of Guangdong's population, but especially for the laboring poor who lived precariously on the margins of respectable society (Antony 2016).[9]

Although, over the course of several centuries, by the late imperial period China's educated elites came to increasingly identify themselves, at least in part, by their condemnation of most forms of violence, I argue that among ordinary folks both real (physical) and symbolic (mimetic) violence remained an intrinsic and ubiquitous part of their daily lives and mentality.[10] "For men with few prospects for conventional social stature and economic stability," writes Avron Boretz, "violence . . . becomes a viable medium for self-production" (2011, 10). Indeed hardship, poverty, and prejudice made violence an overwhelmingly accepted, even necessary, part of life for the laboring poor. For them it was essential for success and maintaining credibility.

For the educated elites, violence, as expressed in rock fights or banditry, was something they associated chiefly with the unenlightened and boorish lower orders. Violent play among children was strongly disapproved among literati families, but, as we have noted, not among many commoners. For the ruling class only necessary, justified violence—such as the punishment and torture of murderers, rebels, bandits, and other hardened criminals—was acceptable, and in these cases the actual violence was normally conducted by menials and rarely by scholar-officials themselves (ter Haar 2000, 124, 136–37). The violence that would have seemed senseless and irrational to China's elites, I would suggest, was perfectly reasonable and deliberate to the poor and marginalized in society.

Rock fights, in fact, were inherent components of Guangdong's culture of violence. For most ordinary villagers, violence was an innate and pervasive part of their routine lives and mentalité. Violence was unavoidable; it permeated people's daily lives in street fights, bloody sports and amusements, operatic performances, religious ceremonies, folklore, and public floggings and executions (Antony 2020). The rock fights discussed in this article were embedded in a working-class culture where fighting and aggression were appropriate behavior and often served as a means to acquire status, honor, and prestige. Champions of rock fights were treated as local heroes, renowned in their communities. They were real people who attained their status by being the meanest, toughest, and most ruthless fighters. People living in a hostile, brutal, and exploitative environment had no difficulty viewing violence as necessary for their survival. The working-class culture of violence had a logic of its own, distinct from and in opposition to the sociocultural norms of dominant Confucian-based society (see Dunning 2000).

We can agree with Elliot Gorn, who wrote about violence in the antebellum American south, that fighting hardened working-class men for a violent social life in which the exploitation of labor, the specter of poverty, and a fierce struggle for status were daily realities. As he put it: "The touchstone of masculinity was unflinching toughness, not chivalry, duty, or piety. Violent sports, heavy drinking, and impulsive pleasure seeking were appropriate for males whose lives were hard, whose futures were unpredictable, and whose opportunities were limited" (Gorn 1985, 22, 36; for China, see Antony 2016, 2023). The culture of violence was a culture of survival for poor and marginalized members of society. Rock fights were but one of the many customary forms of violence that pervaded the lives of lower-class Chinese in the early modern era. The constant, routine exposure to brutality and violence undoubtedly allowed some people, either consciously or subconsciously, to accept violence as an unavoidable part of human nature and social relations. The daily exposure to violence perhaps, as several scholars have argued, desensitized people and allowed them to accept violence as a normal part of life (Dunning 1983, 137; Felson 1996, 120; Englander 2003, 104).

Conclusion

A different sort of Cantonese history, society, and culture emerges from this study of rock fights. It is not the one we are most accustomed to reading about in history

books. Nonetheless, this culture of violence was just as real and important as the mainstream elite culture espoused by officials, Confucian scholars, and landed gentry. To fully understand Chinese society, culture, and history, we need to also look into the lives and mentalité of those people at the lower end of the social order, not only of the men at the top. Although the sources are fragmentary, nonetheless the lives of the inarticulate cannot be ignored merely because they have left us few records. Rock fighters and the downtrodden were as much a part of China as were officials and gentry-scholars.

Rock fights were rooted in a rough-and-tumble lower-class culture in which violence played a key role in survival. In fact, among the working poor there were frequent positive reinforcements for aggressive and violent behavior. For combatants, rock fights provided valuable martial training that would be needed throughout life. They were strictly a male prerogative that both assessed and asserted a young man's masculinity and vigor. The fights taught boys how to be tough and withstand hardships; for the winners, fighting was a key to prestige, respect, and getting ahead in life. Winners were treated in their communities as heroes. Annual rock fights were a popular source of amusement that also provided a safety-valve for accumulated tensions, as well as important community-wide sacerdotal functions for securing good health and bountiful harvests. The fighters themselves embodied both the heroics of knights-errant (*youxia*) and the brutality of hooligans.[11] With rock fights there were no clear boundaries between participants and spectators, entertainment and daily life, or the secular and sacerdotal.

We must take care not to interpret the rock fights and culture of violence as unique or aberrant features of Chinese history and society. We should never exoticize the sport of rock fighting as an exclusively bloody Chinese or Asian custom. It is important to remember that ancient Roman gladiatorial contests and Aztec ball games, as well as modern boxing, football, rugby, and hockey in Western societies are also widely popular blood sports. Despite enormous cultural differences, Chinese exhibited characteristics shared across the globe.

Notes

1. In this article I use the term "working class" to simply denote that socioeconomic group of individuals and their families who, for the most part, are manual laborers whose jobs provide low pay, require limited skills, and demand physical labor.

2. On the growing disfavor for violent sports among the elite over the late imperial period, see ter Haar 2000.

3. Similarly, Inō Kanori (1917, 77) described the rock fighters in Korea as hooligans.

4. In the notes, when giving dates, the abbreviations QL, JQ, and DG stand for the Qing-dynasty emperors Qianlong, Jiaqing, and Daoguang's reigns, respectively. These abbreviations are followed by the reign year, lunar month, and date according to the Chinese lunar calendar.

5. Similarly, Chen Shengshao (1997 [1826], 29) described the merriment of a rock fight in southern Fujian: "Women and children are giggling and everywhere is filled with laughter"; and

in Korea Homer Hulbert (1905, 51) described how "crowds on the hills roar with delight and urge on the conflict."

6. Most traditional Asian vessels carried rocks and stones as ballast, which would have been readily available for use in fighting.

7. In Xinhui County (Guangdong), instead of rock fights during the *duanwu* festival, in some areas villagers beat dogs with rocks and sticks so as to drive away evil spirits (*Xinhui xianzhi* 1841, 2:63a).

8. *Zhuyu* or *cornus mas*, commonly known as cornel (or Cornelian cherry) is a species of shrub or small tree in the dogwood family; Chinese believe that its red berries have medicinal value and the leaves and branches have magical powers to exorcise evil spirits.

9. Guangdong was certainly not alone in having a penchant for violence. Rowe (2007) demonstrates how people in Macheng, Hubei, nurtured a tradition of violence that dated back to the Yuan dynasty; and Boretz (2011) has argued that Taiwan and Fujian had a longstanding ethos of violence, which was a defining characteristic of working-class culture.

10. Symbolic (or mimetic) violence here refers to violence expressed in iconography, literature, mythology, magic formulas, and ritual practices. Distinctions between real and symbolic violence were not always clear.

11. In China, knight-errant refers to the good outlaw, someone who rights wrongs and protects the weak, as epitomized in such popular novels as *Water Margin*; see Antony 2023, chapter 1.

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APPENDIX

PROVINCE	PLACE	LOCATION	TIME OF YEAR	TERMS	AGE
Guangdong	Panyu Shawan, Jiaotang	village wilds	lunar New Year (2nd-7th days)	throwing rocks at one another (*shitou xiangzhi*)	youths
Guangdong	Panyu	mountainous backwoods	lunar New Year		youths
Guangdong	Yangjiang	Killing Mound	Double Five		old and young villagers
Guangdong	Canton suburbs, Honan, Yim-poo	open plains	lunar New Year	attack with stones	18—40
Guangdong	Canton suburbs	fields near Five-Story Pagoda	Double Nine	overhand rock throwing	youths
Guangdong	Enping	Dog-Head Mound	Double Nine	overhand rock throwing	youths
Guangdong	villages near Canton		lunar New Year and Double Five		
Guangdong	Chaozhou, Chaoyang		lunar New Year	tile fighting	
Guangdong	Chaozhou, Xiajiushi		birthday of local deity		
Fujian		fertile fields	lunar New Year	fighting with rocks for fun (*doushi wei xi*)	first youths, later fathers and older brothers
Fujian	Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Xinghua		lunar New Year	rock fighting as portent (*zhishi zhi zhao*)	youths
Fujian	Xiamen	along the coast	15th day lunar New Year	rock fighting for fun (*zhi shi zhi xi*)	
Fujian	Yunxiao	near Xiaoyin Temple and near tomb of previous official	lunar New Year	rock fighting for fun (*zhi shi zhi xi*)	
Fujian	Longhai, Zhangzhou		5th day lunar New Year	throwing rocks (*zhishi*)	youths
Fujian	Tongan, Zhangzhou	fields	lunar New Year		
Fujian	Xinghua		lunar New Year's day		first youths, later fathers and older brothers
Taiwan	Jinmen Nanshan, Beishan villages	secluded area along coast	Qingming to Double Five	rock fighting (*doushi*), throwing rocks at one another (*xiangzhi shitou*)	villagers
Taiwan	Taizhong	outside city	Double Five	rock fighting (*doushi*)	
Taiwan	Pingdong, Jiayi, Yunlin, Zhanghua, Taizhong		Double Five	rock battles (*shizhan*)	
Taiwan	Lugang (Lukang)	fields outside city	lunar New Year and Qingming		first youths, later fathers and older brothers
Hunan	Qianyang Lixi, Mohui		lunar New Year	rock fighting (*da yan*)	

Sources: *Panyu xianzhi* 1871,6:12b; Qu Dajun 1700, 9:25a; Gray 1878, 2:256-257; Wang Jiaju 2006, 141; *Canton Register* 9.8 (Feb. 23, 1836); *Lingdong Daily* (Feb. 21, 1904); Chen Shengshao 1826, 29; Zhang, Undated; *Xiamen zhi*, j.15; Yunxiao tingzhi 1816, 3:11b; DeGlopper 1995, 140-142; Ino 1917, 77; *Qianyang xianzhi* 1874; "Duanwu jiajie, Taiwan pian" June 18, 2018.

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