

# A Textual Research on Cui Yuan's Alleged Water Management Merits to the Dujiangyan Irrigation System

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## Abstract

Both the Qianlong and Guangxu editions of the *Guan County Gazetteer*(*Guanxian Zhi*) record that the renowned official Cui Yuan of Eastern Han dynasty served as the Magistrate of Guan County (Guanxian Ling) and made significant contributions to the governance of the Dujiangyan Irrigation System. However, an examination of authoritative historical texts, such as *the History of the Later Han (Hou Hanshu)* and *the Sichuan General Gazetteer (Sichuan Tongzhi)*, reveals no explicit record of Cui Yuan serving as the Magistrate of Guan County. By synthesizing relevant historical materials, this study confirms that it is historically improbable for Cui Yuan to have contributed to the Dujiangyan Irrigation System maintenance and governance.

## Keywords

Cui Yuan; Magistrate of Guan County; Water Management Merits; Textual Research.

## 1. Introduction

The Dujiangyan Irrigation System represents the genesis of prosperity in the Sichuan basin. The water management merits of Dujiangyan comprise two categories: the foundational achievement of Li Bing, the Governor of Shu Commandery, who is credited with the system's creation; and the maintenance efforts attributed to subsequent generations of the latter officials include Wen Weng, Zhuge Liang, and Ding Baozhen. The Qianlong edition of *the Guan County Gazetteer* records: "During the Han Dynasty, Cui Yuan served as the County Magistrate. He excavated irrigation ditches for farming, and the farmers relied on these benefits, singing in praise of him: 'Heaven has sent down a divine ruler / Bestowing upon us a benevolent father / He governs the people with far-reaching virtue / Distributing his grace in due order / He digs ditches to broaden irrigation / And opens channels that fall like sweet rain.'" [1] Similarly, the Guangxu edition of *Revised Guan County Gazetteer*(*Zengxiu Guan Xian Zhi*) notes: "Cui Yuan, according to Zhong Wan's *Biographies of Good Officials (Liangli Zhuan)*, served as the Magistrate of Guan; he opened ditches for tillage, and the people relied on his benefits, composing songs to praise him." [2] It is evident that Cui Yuan's alleged water management merits were highly celebrated and extolled by the local populace.

## 2. Cui Yuan's Life and Official Career

Cui Yuan (courtesy name Ziyu) was a renowned calligrapher, writer, and scholar of the Eastern Han period. He was born in Anping, Zhuo Commandery (modern-day Anping, Hebei) in the second year of Jianchu (77 CE) and died in the first year of Han'an (142 CE).

*The History of the Later Han* describes Cui Yuan as a precocious talent who "lost his father early, was dedicated to learning, and fully inherited his father's scholarly mantle. At eighteen, he traveled to the capital to study under the Palace Attendant (Shizhong) Jia Kui to resolve doubts and rectify the fundamental principles of the Classics." [4] Following the murder of his elder brother, Cui Zhang, Cui Yuan killed the antagonist in revenge and lived as a fugitive until a general amnesty allowed his return. He remained at home for decades, only "becoming a

commandery official in his forties.”[4] However, “his past deeds came to light, leading to his imprisonment in the Fagan County jail of the Dong Commandery... Eventually, he was released under an amnesty and returned home.”[4] Cui Yuan’s career was tumultuous. He was “summoned to the staff of Deng Zun, the General of the Duliao (Duliao Jiangjun). Not long after, Deng was executed, and Cui was dismissed and returned home... Later, he was again recruited into the office of Yan Xian, the General of Cheji (Cheji Jiangjun),”[4] only “to be implicated and dismissed again when the Yan brothers was executed during the early reign of Emperor Shun.”[4] At that time, “Chen Chan, serving as the Colonel Director of the Retainers (Sili Xiaowei), summoned Cui Yuan and said: ‘Just let Su Qi submit his memorial; I, Chan, shall testify to your innocence.’ Cui Yuan replied: ‘These are but the naive words of a child. I hope that you, Sir, the Colonel Director of the Retainers, will not speak of this again.’ He then resigned and returned home, refusing to respond to any further appointments from the provincial or commandery governments.” [4] Later, he firmly “declined a recruitment offer from the General-in-Chief (Da Jiangjun) Liang Shang on the grounds of illness.” The following year, however, he was “nominated for his talents and was appointed as the Magistrate of Ji County (Ji Ling). It was in Ji County that Cui Yuan frequently spoke of beneficial policies and opened several hundred qing of rice paddies for the people. During his seven years in office, the common people extolled him in songs.”[4] Later, “at the beginning of the Han'an era, Hu Guang, the Grand Minister of Economy (Da Sinong), and Dou Zhang, the Royal Treasurer (Shaofu), jointly recommended Cui Yuan. They lauded him as a veteran scholar of great virtue who had demonstrated a clear track record in governance, arguing that he should not remain in a subordinate position for long. Consequently, he was promoted to the post of Chancellor of Jibei (Jibei Xiang).”[4] Soon after, “Du Qiao, the Palace Counselor (Guanglu Dafu), acting as one of the Eight Commissioners (Bashi) inspecting the commanderies and kingdoms, impeached Cui Yuan on charges of bribery and corruption. Cui was summoned to the judicial department(Tingwei) for trial. He submitted a memorial to defend himself; his arguments prevailed, and he was subsequently exonerated and released. However, he soon fell ill and passed away at the age of sixty-six.”[4]

It is evident that although Cui Yuan’s official career experienced numerous fluctuations, he never held any office in the Shu (Sichuan) region. His trajectory-from “being nominated for his talents and appointed as the Magistrate of Ji County” to his dismissal following an impeachment and his subsequent death at the age of sixty-six-leaves no room for a tenure in Shu. Furthermore, there is no record of Shu being within his primary areas of activity throughout his life. During his period as a fugitive seeking revenge for his brother, although his exact whereabouts are unrecorded, it would have been impossible for him to serve as a County Magistrate and leave behind hydraulic merits during that time. The historical records state that “he first became a commandery official in his forties,” yet they do not specify the name of the commandery. A close examination of this period reveals that from his first appointment at age forty (117 CE) to his return home following an amnesty in the first year of Yongning (120 CE), the duration was merely three to four years. During this brief window, he was notably incarcerated in the Fagan County jail. Moreover, the Qianlong edition of *Ji County Gazetteer*(*Ji Xian Zhi*) records: “Cui Yuan... was appointed Magistrate of Ji. ... He taught the people to open several hundred qing of rice paddies... After seven years in office, his civilizing influence was widespread, and the people sang: ‘Heaven has sent down a divine ruler / Bestowing upon us a benevolent father’... He was later promoted to Chancellor of Jibei (Jibei Xiang) and eventually Prefect of the Director of the Imperial Secretariat (Shangshu Ling). Upon his death, he was buried in Luoyang.” [5] Consequently, it can be concluded that Cui Yuan never governed Guan County and thus does not hold the historical status of a contributor to the Dujiangyan irrigation system management.

### 3. Evolution of the Administrative Name of Guan County

*The Guan County Gazetteer (Republic of China edition)* records: "When King Hui of Qin conquered Shu, he established a commandery. The Han Dynasty followed this precedent, placing it under Yizhou. The Shu Commandery administered fifteen counties; among them, Pi, Jiangyuan, and Mianchi all spanned across the territory of the present-day county." [6] "In the fourth year of the Yuanfeng era of Emperor Wu (110 BCE), the northern part of Shu Commandery was separated to form the Wenshan Commandery. During Emperor Xuan's reign, it was reintegrated into Shu Commandery as the Northern Defender (Beibu Duwei). Meanwhile, Pi, Jiangyuan, and Mianchi remained under the jurisdiction of Shu Commandery, a status that remained unchanged throughout the Eastern Han." [6] It is thus evident that during the Pre-Qin and Han periods, Guan County did not exist as an administrative entity; the land of present-day Guan County was governed under the jurisdictions of the three counties of Pi, Jiangyuan, and Mianchi.

During the Shu-Han period (221–263 CE), "Mianchi County was incorporated into Wenshan Commandery, and Du'an County was established on the former lands of Mianchi." [6] Thus, the territory of present-day Guan County was designated as Du'an County, a status that persisted through the Jin Dynasty. In the Yongming era of the Southern Qi (483 CE), "Qiji County was separated from Jiangyuan County, and both Qiji and Du'an were placed under the jurisdiction of Wenshan Commandery." "During the Xiao-Liang period, the Qiji Commandery was concurrently established, and it was not until the Later Wei (Northern Wei, 386–534 CE) that Guankou Town (Guankou Zhen) was first founded." [6] This marks the earliest appearance of the character "Guan" (灌) in the historical administrative nomenclature of the region.

In the third year of the Tianhe era of the Later Zhou (568 CE), "Wenshan Commandery was abolished; Du'an was incorporated into Pi, and Wenshan County was established at Guankou. In the following year, Qiji was renamed Qingcheng County." [6] During the early Renshou era of the Sui Dynasty, Wenshan County was abolished and merged into Pi County. In the first year of the Wude era of the Tang Dynasty (618 CE), "Wenshan County was abolished and Panlong County was established, which was soon renamed Daojiang. The county seat was moved back to the former site of Du'an." [6] During the Zhenguan era, "it was renamed Guanning, and the Zhenjing Army (Zhenjing Jun) was stationed at Guankou." [6] In the 18th year of the Kaiyuan era (730 CE), the character for Qing in Qingcheng was changed. During the Meng-Shu (Later Shu) period, the Zhenjing Army was reorganized into "Guan Prefecture, governing the two counties of Daojiang and Qingcheng; subsequently, eight townships in Qingcheng, including Guoxing, were partitioned to establish Yongkang County, which was then placed under the jurisdiction of Shu Prefecture. Later, this county was abolished and downgraded to Sijie Town." [6] In the fourth year of the Qiande era of the Northern Song (966 CE), "Guan Prefecture was renamed the Yong'an Army." [6] In the third year of the Taiping Xingguo era (978 CE), the Yong'an Army was renamed the Yongning Army; shortly thereafter, "its seat was changed from Yong'an to Yongkang," [6] while it continued to govern the two counties of Qingcheng and Daojiang. In the fifth year of the Xining era (1072 CE), the Yongkang Army was abolished and downgraded to the Yongkang Fort (Yongkang Zhai). Consequently, Daojiang County was reassigned to Peng Prefecture, and Qingcheng County was reassigned to Shu Prefecture. However, in the ninth year of the Xining era (1076 CE), "the fort was restored to its status as an Army, and it resumed jurisdiction over the counties of Daojiang and Qingcheng as before." [6] In the first year of the Yuanyou era of Emperor Zhezong (1086 CE), the Yongkang Army was re-established, still overseeing the two counties of Qingcheng and Daojiang. At the end of the Southern Song Dynasty, the Yongkang Army was once again abolished and reduced to the Guankou Stockade (Guankou Zhai)." In the early Yuan Dynasty, "the Army was upgraded to Guan Prefecture." In the thirteenth year of the Zhiyuan era (1276 CE), "the counties of Daojiang

and Qingcheng were abolished and merged into Guan Prefecture; it was then placed under the jurisdiction of the Chengdu Route (Chengdu Lu)."[6] Finally, in the ninth year of the Hongwu era of the Ming Dynasty (1376), "the Prefecture was demoted to a County, belonging to Chengdu Prefecture." [6] This administrative status as Guan County continued through the Qing Dynasty. "In the Republic of China era, the Prefecture was abolished, and Guan County was placed under the jurisdiction of the Xichuan City (Xichuan Dao). Soon after, the Dao system was also abolished, and the county became directly subordinated to Sichuan Province." [6] Throughout these changes, it remained known as Guan County.

The character "Guan" (灌) first appeared in the historical toponymy of the region with "the establishment of Guankou Town during the Later Wei period"; however, its administrative status at that time was merely a "town." It was not until the Zhenguan era of the Tang Dynasty that "the area was renamed Guanning" and formally established as Guanning County, marking its first instance as Guanning County. The definitive designation as "Guan County" did not occur until the ninth year of the Hongwu era of the Ming Dynasty (1376), when Guan Prefecture was demoted to Guan County.

Consequently, the assertion that Cui Yuan served as the "Magistrate of Guan County" is inconsistent with the historical evolution of the region's administrative nomenclature.

#### 4. Qian Mao's Doubts

According to Qian Mao's observation: "*The General Gazetteer of Sichuan* does not list Cui Yuan's name. Why, then, does the current *Guan County Gazetteer* cite Zhong Wan's *Biographies of Good Officials* to claim that Cui served as the Magistrate of Guan? This is likely an error. Moreover, since Zhong's book is no longer extant today, could there be any other basis for this claim?" [3] It follows that since *the General Gazetteer of Sichuan* contains no record of Cui Yuan's official service in the region, and *the Guan County Gazetteer* relies on the long-lost *Biographies of Good Officials*, the attempt to classify Cui Yuan as an official of Guan County and a contributor to the Dujiangyan Irrigation System management is highly unreliable.

Through an extensive review of relevant literature, electronic databases, and extant historical gazetteers of Sichuan across various dynasties, the author has found that the earliest record of Cui Yuan serving as the Magistrate of Guan County appears in the Jiajing edition of *the General Gazetteer of Sichuan: Records of Literature and Art (Sichuan Zongzhi: Yiwen Zhi)*. It similarly states: "According to Zhong Wan's *Biographies of Good Officials*, Cui Yuan served as the Magistrate of Guan." [7] As previously discussed, since "Zhong's *Biographies* is no longer extant today," this record cannot be considered a valid piece of historical evidence.

In addition, *the Taiping Yulan*, a leishu (encyclopedic work) of the Song Dynasty, records that this was attributed to the achievements of Cui Yuan during his tenure in Jixian County. [8]

#### 5. Conclusion

In summary, the possibility of Cui Yuan ever entering the Shu region is extremely remote, and it is highly probable that he never presided over the historical Guan County. A comprehensive examination of relevant historical records fails to yield any evidence supporting his tenure as the Magistrate of Guan County. Therefore, it can be concluded that Cui Yuan was not a historical contributor to the Dujiangyan irrigation system management. It is plausible that his well-documented achievements as the Magistrate of Ji County-where he "taught the people to cultivate hundreds of qing of rice paddies"-were erroneously attributed to Guan County through folk mistransmission.

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