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## THE TRANSITION FROM URBAN TO RURAL IN THE CHINESE REVOLUTION

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**Stephen C. Averill**

Over the past decade or so, Western studies of the Chinese revolution have focused primarily upon the beginning and the end of the extended process of violent conflict that brought the Chinese Communist Party to power in 1949. That is to say, they have concentrated either on the political-intellectual processes involved in the founding and organizational consolidation of the party during the early 1920s, or on intra-Party dynamics and Party–society interactions during the Anti-Japanese War of 1937–45.

However, much less scholarly attention has been paid to the transition from urban to rural in the Party's centre of gravity after the violent collapse in 1927 of the United Front of the Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). To most historians of China, this shift from urban to rural has not seemed particularly noteworthy or problematic, except on the level of policy and personal power relations within the CCP. It is frequently portrayed as a sudden, overnight shift—a matter of urgent necessity rather than of considered choice. Yet it is also portrayed as having been accomplished relatively smoothly, thanks in large part to Mao's omniscience—his ability quickly and effortlessly to come up with the “only correct” solution to the Party's changed situation: the strategy of building rural revolutionary base areas and conducting guerrilla warfare. The noteworthy tensions of the period are interpreted in terms of a dichotomous “two-line struggle” between urban-oriented, stodgy old Marxists of the Party's central leadership and rurally oriented, dynamic guerrilla warriors and base-builders led by Mao. The transition from urban to rural, then, is most often still seen primarily in terms of Mao's rise to power.

This essay takes a different perspective. Rather than viewing the urban-to-rural shift primarily as a conscious emergency adaptation to shifting national political circumstances that was subsequently exploited by an opportunistic and ambitious Mao Zedong, I wish instead to describe it as a stage in the evolutionary development of a rural revolutionary movement that involved the working out of relatively gradual sociocultural processes.

It is my argument in this essay that the rise of the CCP and its transition from urban to rural struggle were in fact intimately affected by significant—albeit still imperfectly understood—changes taking place in the sociology and cultural identities of a variety of rural elites. Despite growing academic interest in Chinese social and cultural history, little attention has yet been paid to the question of what happened after the termination in 1905 of the imperial civil service examination system that had played such a significant role in defining the status and power of the traditional gentry. It is widely understood that the gentry continued to fragment and diversify during the Republican era owing to processes already underway by 1911. Quite some time ago, Angus McDonald wrote a book entitled *The Urban Origins of Rural Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> I wish to focus here, in a somewhat overlapping fashion, on what might be called “the rural elite origins of peasant revolution”.

Finally, close examination of the policy disputes and power struggles that form the core of the dominant Party-centred narrative reveals that these were considerably more complicated—and the revolutionary strategies more ambiguous in their benefits—than the standard historiographical picture has it. As I detail in the final section of this essay, in Mao’s efforts to maximize his power he had to look not only up toward central Party leaders, but also down toward indigenous local revolutionaries. In the circumstances of rural southern China at the time, the “only correct” strategy of guerrilla war/rural base-building was in fact quite problematic and beset by tensions and contradictions.

The detailed empirical research underlying this essay focused primarily on those parts of Hunan, Jiangxi and Fujian provinces that comprised the Hunan-Jiangxi (Xiang-Gan) and the Central (Zhongyang) revolutionary base areas, and the bulk of the sources and examples that I will cite therefore refer to revolutionary movements in these regions.<sup>2</sup> A less comprehensive perusal of

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<sup>1</sup> Angus McDonald, *The Urban Origins Of Rural Revolution: Elites And Masses In Hunan Province, China, 1911–1927* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> This essay draws heavily on information from several important and extensive documentary collections. Chief among these are: Jiangxi sheng dang’an guan and Zhonggong Jiangxi shengyi dangxiao dangshi jiaoyan shi (eds), *Zhonggong geming genjudi shiliao xuanbian* (A Selection of Historical Materials on the Central Revolutionary Base Area; hereafter *ZYGGS*) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), 3 vols; Zhonggong Jiangxi shengwei dangshi ziliao zhengji weiyuanhui and Zhonggong Jiangxi shengwei dangshi yanjiushi (eds), *Jiangxi dangshi ziliao* (Materials on Jiangxi Party History; hereafter *JDZ*) (Nanchang), 30+ vols to date; Zhongyang dang’an guan and Fujian sheng dang’an guan (eds), *Fujian geming lishi wenjian huiji* (Compilation of Historical Materials on the Revolution in Fujian, hereafter *FGLWH*) (n.p., 1983), 20 vols; and Zhongyang dang’an guan, *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji* (Selected Central Documents of the Chinese Communist Party; hereafter *ZZWX*) (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1989), 14 vols.

materials related to other areas indicates that many of the issues described here were also faced by revolutionary movements elsewhere in the country.

### **The Rural Elite Origins of Peasant Revolution**

A generation or so ago, there was a brief surge of interest in exploring the earliest interactions between the CCP—or certain individual Party members—and the peasantry.<sup>3</sup> However, there has been surprisingly little research into the mechanisms whereby the Party's ideology and organization were transmitted into rural areas. As this essay will indicate, revolutionary ideology, organization and personnel were already in the countryside by the time the United Front collapsed in 1927. This was due partly to conscious, top-down efforts to establish a rural revolutionary presence, but also to unplanned, “natural” processes of social and political diffusion.

The revolution's transition into rural China did not take place in a single vast leap—whether in 1927 or at any other specific point—but was rather a two-stage, elite-mediated process. Each stage centred on a different social, cultural and geographical milieu, and each requires a different conceptual and methodological emphasis. The first stage of diffusion, from major cities to the peri-urban world of county seats and market towns, calls for study of cultural politics, in particular the activities of elites acting as intellectuals within local “educational circles” and their associated schools and study societies. The second stage, from county and market towns into the village-level rural hinterland, demands a focus on political anthropology, on elites acting as local powerholders in interaction with bandit gangs, sworn brotherhoods, lineages and other organized or disorganized rural inhabitants. Both stages, however, are similar in their demonstration of the mutual interaction among organization, ideology and social structures that occurs in the development of revolutionary movements.

#### *From City to Market Town*

It is now abundantly clear from studies of many different regions that China's new post-1905 educational system functioned as the key channel for the initial

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Selden, *The Yen'an Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), reissued, with new introduction, as *China in Revolution: The Yen'an Way Revisited* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); Roy Hofheinz, *The Broken Wave: The Chinese Communist Movement, 1922–1928* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Ralph Thaxton, *China Turned Rightside Up* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Robert Marks, *Rural Revolution in South China* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Kamal Sheel, *Peasant Society and Marxist Intellectuals in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Fernando Galbiatti, *Peng Pai and the Hai-Lu-feng Soviet* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985); Kathleen Hartford and Steven Goldstein (eds), *Single Sparks: China's Rural Revolutions* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1989).

spread of revolutionary movements from urban to rural environments. In part, at least, the reasons for this go back to a group of synergistic changes that occurred during the late Qing. These included a notable increase in elite associations, the growth of new institutions and the introduction of new methods for the formation and dissemination of public opinion.

All of these developments were simultaneously manifestations of and further encouragements to changes in elite activities and attitudes that continued well into the Republican era. In the context of foreign pressure and the upsurge in elite-managed reconstruction projects that followed China's mid-19th-century rebellions, elites became increasingly organized and assertive in their dealings with government officials, in efforts both to look after their own local interests and to safeguard national power and prestige. The introduction of new print media such as newspapers and journals led to more rapid and widespread dissemination of information and opinion about such issues, contributing to the growth of an elite discourse that was increasingly separate from and potentially in conflict with established traditions of a government-centred discourse fostered by the civil service examination system. And the replacement of examination-centred Confucian academies by hierarchies of partially "Westernized" schools that taught more diverse subject matter and were less directly tied to government recruitment further encouraged fragmentation of the old gentry and the emergence of new elites who were intellectually and organizationally more amenable to recruitment into political movements.<sup>4</sup> By the 1920s, after almost two decades of development of education, multiple hierarchies of new schools constituted what was almost certainly the most comprehensive set of political communication networks in existence connecting urban and rural China.

Schools served as communications nodes in several different ways. One of these was as access points for various newspapers and journals. Although the plethora of new periodicals that emerged during the first two decades of the 20th century constituted a major forum for the discourse that helped spread radical political thinking, their sheer number, together with their irregular publication, relatively high cost and limited circulation, made individual subscriptions

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: "Shibao" and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Marianne Bastid-Bruguière, "Currents of Social Change", in John K. Fairbank and K. C. Liu (eds), *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 11, Part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 535–602; Marianne Bastid, "Servitude or Liberation? The Introduction of Foreign Educational Practices and Systems to China from 1840 to the Present", in Ruth Hayhoe and Marianne Bastid (eds), *China's Education and the Industrialized World* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1987), pp. 3–20; Sang Bing, *Wanqing xuetao xuesheng yu shehui bianqian* (Late Qing Schools, Students, and Social Change) (Taipei: Dahe Chubanshe, 1991).

impracticable for many students and young intellectuals. Especially in rural regions, where alternative sources were generally quite rare, schools typically functioned as important print media collection nodes, both by virtue of their own library or reading-room acquisitions, and also by serving as convenient points through which private copies of periodicals could be passed around to multiple readers.<sup>5</sup>

Schools at each level in the educational hierarchy fostered intimate interactions among students drawn from increasingly broad geographical catchment areas, passed some of them on to higher-level institutions, and returned many of the rest to their home areas to seek teaching and other jobs. All of these activities built or expanded networks of interpersonal interaction across which the new information could flow and political ties could be constructed, and provided natural pathways connecting urban and rural areas. School vacations facilitated this spread of information. Many of the students from rural areas who attended upper primary and middle schools did so as boarders, and the regular winter and summer vacation periods served as their primary opportunities to return home to visit family and friends. In the process, they naturally shared with people in their home communities—including their peers in local schools as well as their own relatives—the perspectives they had developed while away. Through the 1910s and well into the 1920s, such interaction occurred via the unplanned natural osmosis of spontaneous conversation and the sharing of books and periodicals, but by the mid-1920s, both the CCP and to a lesser extent the non-Communist elements of the KMT began to send student cadres from rural areas home on vacation with deliberate orders to use the time to recruit new party members and form mass movement organs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Information on schools as nodes for the collection and circulation of the new media may be found in Sang, *Wanqing xuetao*, pp. 207–8; and Judge, *Print and Politics*, pp. 40–3. These points are also well substantiated by information contained in biographies and reminiscences of the early lives of many early revolutionaries, including some cited elsewhere in this essay.

<sup>6</sup> These comments on school networks, students' vacation activities, and so on, rely heavily on evidence contained in biographies, reminiscences and secondary accounts of early radical political organization in Jiangxi province that I have read. A detailed listing of these accounts here would be both impractical and tedious; samples include Lu Dangping et al. (eds), *Jiang Bozhang xiansheng shiwenji* (The Collected Poetry and Prose of Mr Jiang Bozhang) (Taipei, 1972); "Fang Zhimin zhuan" bianxie zu, *Fang Zhimin zhuan* (A Biography of Fang Zhimin) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1982), pp. 6–13; Yang Yuanming, "Xianshi Yang Shaogeng xiansheng zhuanlue" (A Short Biographical Sketch of Master Yang Shaogeng), *Jiangxi wenxian*, No. 75 (July 1976), p. 35. Lists of hometowns of personnel in provincially run schools contained in *Jiangxi jiaoyu gongbao* (Jiangxi Educational Gazette) for 1928–29 clearly indicate that schools often had well-defined catchment zones. For further discussion and sources, see also Stephen Averill, "Society and Local Elite in the Jiangxi Communist Movement", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (May 1987), pp. 279–303; and Stephen Averill, "Local Elites and Communist Revolution in

If schools served as major entry routes for new ideas and organizations, however, they also functioned simultaneously as focal points for conservative resistance to these new forces. Although the prominence of the New Culture movement and radical politics in the standard historiographical characterization of this period has largely obscured the fact, those involved in local educational circles in rural China during the 1910s and 1920s were far from uniformly liberal or radical. While the influence of what might loosely be labelled Confucian gentry culture was generally on the wane nationwide, significant numbers of people who had been educated wholly or partly according to the old imperial-era curriculum were still employed as teachers and administrators, particularly in rural counties. Still more were to be found among the boards of directors and benefactors of such schools, and among the larger constellations of local dignitaries who were concerned with local educational matters because of kinship ties or general Confucian principles.<sup>7</sup>

Under the simultaneous impact of these contradictory forces, it is not surprising that schools and the educational circles associated with them became major local arenas for contentious cultural politics. In this context, “cultural politics” refers to the processes whereby different generations of educated Chinese elites struggled to define, dominate and deploy the conceptual, symbolic and material resources of a new but ambiguously “modern” educational system. References to conflicts between factions supporting the “old learning” and “new learning”, to the relative prestige and appropriate position within lineage leaderships of individuals with imperial civil service and “modern” school degrees, and to the best contemporary use for the funds of local educational trusts whose original purpose had been to prepare students for the imperial civil service examinations give some idea of the issues involved.<sup>8</sup>

the Jiangxi Hill Country”, in Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin (eds), *Chinese Local Elites and Structures of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 282–304. Work by the Chinese scholar Sang Bing also discusses many of these characteristics of educational networks and the activities associated with them as they manifested themselves during the formation of the new school system early in the 20th century; see *Wanqing xuetang*, pp. 95, 121, 162–3, 200–1, 323–5.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of such a locally influential conservative educator, see Feng Fu, “Qingmo Jiangxi xuezhe Hu Sijing” (The Late Qing Jiangxi Scholar Hu Sijing), *Yifeng wenshi ziliao* (Materials on Yifeng Culture and History), Vol. 1 (1986), pp. 126–36.

<sup>8</sup> *Yifeng xian difang shi zhi bianzuan wei, Yifeng renmin geming shi* (Revolutionary History of the People of Yifeng) (n.p., 1985), pp. 8–14; Zhonggong Jiangxi shengwei, *Jiangxi yinglie* (Martyrs of Jiangxi) (Nanchang, 1984), Vol. 1, pp. 83–4; Ji’an xian wenyi zhan, “Sheng wei renjie, si wei guixiang—Zeng Yansheng lieshi zhuanlue” (An Outstanding Birth, an Heroic Death—a Brief Biography of Zeng Yansheng), in Jiangxi sheng minzheng ting (eds), *Bixue danxin* (Loyalty until Death) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), pp. 160–1; Fang Zhichun, *Huai nian ji* (A Collection of Cherished Memories) (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 1983), pp. 96, 101–3, 145–6; Wan Fafu, “Huang Dao tongzhi er, san

For many of the young people who would eventually become part of the revolutionary movement, participation in such conflicts intertwined with nationalistically inspired boycotts and anti-warlord agitation as complementary parts of their initial political socialization. Students were mobilized by teachers and administrators to participate in a variety of intra-elite struggles in which different schools frequently became centres for specific cliques. The students themselves also took the initiative in protesting about local matters such as the misappropriation of school funds or deficiencies in their schools' curricula and living conditions, and about major provincial or national events such as the May Fourth Incident of 1919.<sup>9</sup>

Whether mobilizing on their own or in response to calls from elite patrons, students normally undertook collective rather than individual actions. Similarly, students turned to one another as they sought to integrate urban-generated ideas diffused by school-centred networks and print media with their personal impressions of the contentious world of rural local elite politics in which they were growing up. In countless market towns and county seats as well as in big city environments, this resulted in a dramatic proliferation of youth associations.

These student organizations took many different shapes, ranging from culturally ancient, highly personalized forms such as sworn brotherhoods to newer quasi-professional and institutionally connected bodies such as student unions. Of all these organizational types, however, the informal and malleable form known as the study society (*xuehui* or *xueshe*) did the most to facilitate the transplantation of the revolutionary movement into rural China. As the presence of the word "study" implies, the vast majority of such societies were directly or indirectly centred in educational circles—that is, their members were drawn from current or recent students or faculty members, and an exchange of knowledge about texts, systems of thought or public issues comprised a major part of their *raison d'être*.<sup>10</sup> Study societies in their modern incarnations were products of the

shi" (Two or Three Things about Comrade Huang Dao), in Zhonggong Hengfeng xianwei (ed.), *Gan dongbei hongqu de douzheng, di er ji* (The Struggle of the Red Areas in Northeastern Jiangxi, Vol. 2) (Nanchang: 1978), pp. 10–12.

<sup>9</sup> Qiu Zhou, "Huiyi Yudu baodong" (Remembering the Yudu Uprising), *Jiangxi wenshi ziliao* (Materials on Jiangxi Culture and History), Vol. 8 (1982), pp. 64–5; "Fang Zhimin zhuan" bianxiezu, *Fang Zhimin*, pp. 7–25; Yan Chengliang, "Pingxiang Xiao Yulu xiansheng er, san shi" (Two or Three Things about Mr Xiao Yulu from Pingxiang), *Jiangxi wenxian* (Documents on Jiangxi), No. 39 (June 1969), pp. 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Li Wenhai, "Wuxu weixin yundong shiqi de xuehui zuzhi" (The Organization of Study Societies during the 1898 Reform Movement), in Hu Shengwu (ed.), *Wuxu weixin yundong shilunji* (Collection of Historical Essays on the 1898 Reform Movement) (Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), pp. 48–78; Min Jie, "Wuxu xuehui kao" (A Study of Study Societies during the 1898 Reforms), *Jindai shi yanjiu*, 1995, No. 3, pp. 39–76; Tang Zhijun, *Wuxu bianfa shiluncong* (A Collection of Historical Essays on the 1898 Reform Movement) (Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chubanshe, 1957), pp. 222–70; Chang Hao, "Intellectual Change



wave of elite associationalism and politicization that developed in the last years of the Qing period. Although initially most prominently associated with the activities of well-known reformist scholars such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, study societies gradually spread widely through elite circles. By the late 1910s they were visible in rural counties as well as big cities, and they had become versatile vehicles for the articulation of a wide variety of local cultural and political interests, including those of conservative older elites as well as the young members of the May Fourth generation.

As scholars such as Arif Dirlik and Hans van de Ven have pointed out, urban study societies such as the New People's Study Society (*Xinmin xuehui*) in Changsha played an important role in the formation of the CCP. Initially these societies provided localized incubation spaces within which small groups of youth could gradually formulate both personal and collective identities as radicals. Subsequently the societies served as organizational nodes that could be linked together by a few well-known intellectuals and Comintern advisors to form a loose-knit coalition—the early Communist Party—that thereafter developed a gradually deepening commitment to Marxist ideology and Leninist organizational principles.<sup>11</sup>

Study societies likewise facilitated the spread of Party ideology and organization from major cities into the county seats and market towns of rural China. However, in some significant ways the Party did not simply extend to rural areas: instead, it was successively re-created in each new area—not cloned, but re-created, sometimes not exactly identically.

In addition, the contexts were significantly different. Although in China's big-city educational circles the New Culture movement and Western ideas were overwhelmingly dominant by the 1920s, in rural areas the power of conservative educational elites remained much more intact,<sup>12</sup> and the pervasive factional struggles among local powerholders tended more often to be expressed in violent terms. In such environments, study societies were used as political vehicles by

and the Reform Movement, 1890–8", in John K. Fairbank and K. C. Liu (eds), *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 331–3; Bastid-Bruguière, "Currents", 561–2; Mary Rankin, *Early Chinese Revolutionaries: Radical Intellectuals in Shanghai and Chekiang, 1902–1911* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 139–43.

<sup>11</sup> Arif Dirlik, *The Origins of Chinese Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Hans van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920–1927* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> For examples of politically active conservative study societies, see Su Lanchun, "Huigu Ninggang de geming douzheng" (Thinking Back on the Revolutionary Struggle in Ninggang), in Jinggangshan geming genjudi dangshi ziliao zhengji bianyanxie zuoxiaozu (eds), *Jinggangshan geming genjudi* (The Jinggangshan Revolutionary Base Area; hereafter JGG) (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1987), Vol. 2, pp. 87–8; Fang, *Huai nian ji*, pp. 145–6; Yifeng xian difang shi zhi bianzuan wei, *Yifeng renmin*, pp. 8–9.

elites of all sorts; they were much less uniformly radical, and much more often action-oriented, than their big-city counterparts. In these circumstances, the coalescence of radical youth into local Party organizations tended to aim at much more precise elite targets in the countryside than had been the case in the Party's initial emergence in the cities. Moreover, both in the process of forming radical organizations and in the subsequent search for new adherents and supporters, rural party activists tended to be embedded much more than their urban counterparts in local traditions and rhetorics of elite politics.

Cadres who returned or were ordered home by urban Party organizations employed study societies as bases for political activity and used them to recruit new Party members from among the students and young teachers in the local schools with which Party cadres themselves were often associated following their return. As the formation of mass movements became a more well-developed political concern in the mid-1920s, study societies even sometimes became involved in instigating and coordinating the early stages of peasant movement organization.<sup>13</sup>

The study society model of informal political organization was so useful for the young Communists in part because it was already a familiar vehicle of rural elite associational activity. To Party cadres seeking to launch a political movement in the countryside with little guidance from above, it was logical to draw on their own upbringing, local traditions and early political experience. Conservative rural elites similarly felt familiar in using the societies for the structuring of interpersonal relations and the organization of intra-elite factional struggles. Viewed in this organizational context, the CCP cadres who formed rural study societies might be seen as young upstarts, operating within well-established parameters to compete with their elders for local power and prestige, rather than as people who sought to destroy the entire existing system of rural power relations.

Despite this institutional camouflage, the study societies set up by the rural Party cadres were intended to serve as scaffolding for the construction of new nodes of more radical organization. Party cells were established within them and their political struggles were aggressively focused to highlight issues that would gain support from the broader population and advance the Party's long-term goals. They were transitional bodies, with the structure and appearance of old-fashioned localistic elite associations, but imbued with the goals and policies of a new-style radical political party.

An excellent illustration of how the educationally centred clash between "old" and "new" cultures, the movement of individuals and ideas across China's many-tiered school hierarchies, the proliferation of informal associations, and

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<sup>13</sup> "Fang Zhimin zhuan" bianxie zu, *Fang Zhimin*, pp. 57–62; Su, "Huigu Ninggang", 87–9; Zhonggong Jiangxi shengwei, *Jiangxi yinglie*, pp. 83–4.

local elite power politics all interacted to facilitate the infiltration of ideological Party organizations into the countryside is provided by the case of Shao Shiping, a young Party member from Shaojiaban (“Shao Family Slope”) in Yiyang county in northeastern Jiangxi. People surnamed Shao predominated in this area and formed a very large lineage with eight branches (*fang*). Shao was born into the family of a poor agricultural labourer belonging to one of the least favoured branches. Despite his poverty, the generosity of teachers and relatives enabled him to complete the several grades of his village school and then the county higher primary school. While at the county school he became politicized as part of a native-place-based student study society known as the Ninth District Youth Society (*Jiuqu qingnianshe*). Upon his return home after graduating first in his class, some lineage members gathered to welcome him as a “new-style *xiuca*”, but former civil service degree-holders from the area complained that this exaggerated his achievements and demeaned theirs. Irritated, Shao arranged a test-off, in which he and his critics each wrote two essays, which were blindly judged in the county seat. Only when Shao’s essays were judged superior did the grumbling cease.

Subsequently, Shao left Yiyang for middle school and college study in Nanchang and Beiping, and while away joined the Party. Both his membership in the Youth Society and his later Party activities had acquainted him with other young radicals from Yiyang and neighbouring counties, and during the school vacation in the summer of 1925 a group of them returned to the area to begin Party and mass movement organization. As part of this loosely coordinated effort, Shao returned to Shaojiaban.

Like many such groups, the Shao lineage was dominated by a group of powerful men who controlled and profited from the “public bodies” that managed the lineage’s collective property. One such organization was the Nourish Orthodoxy Cultural Association (*Yangzheng wenhui*) that had been established to provide scholarships for poor lineage members who wanted to obtain higher-level education. Much of the association’s income was siphoned off by its corrupt elite managers, and Shao Shiping used popular displeasure with this manifest corruption as a lever to promote his organizational efforts. Specifically, he recruited a group of intellectuals and peasants to form the Good Friends’ Society (*Yiyou she*), one of whose main purposes was to oppose the Nourish Orthodoxy Association. Over 2,000 peasants surrounded the homes of two of the Nourish Orthodoxy Association’s managers and compelled them to transfer control of the organization’s funds to the Good Friends’ Society. The society’s successful challenge to a prominent symbol of local elite power encouraged other people to gravitate toward the group, and in this favourable environment Shao recruited

selected society members and others impressed by its accomplishments into a newly formed CCP/KMT organization.<sup>14</sup>

A second example relates to Wan'an county in southern Jiangxi, where teachers in county-run and market-town higher primary schools founded the local revolutionary movement in the early 1920s. The schools at which they taught thereafter remained sites of revolutionary recruitment and activity through special "clubs" (*julebu*) founded in them in 1925. When peasant associations were formed in 1926, these also were initially associated directly with these schools and clubs. Peasants and others in the county generally referred to the Party's leading local cadres as "teacher" (*laoshi*), which was common local parlance for "rural intellectuals"; and in their own communications, Party cadres used the code phrases "university" (*daxue*) and "middle school" (*zhongxue*) to refer to the CCP and Communist Youth League (CYL), respectively.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of these types of activities, by the time the CCP-KMT United Front collapsed in 1927 the Chinese revolution had traversed the first phase of its transition from urban to rural: the expansion from major urban centres to intermediate way-stations in the administrative seats and market towns of many rural counties. This diffusion was accompanied by efforts to involve peasants in the revolutionary process, first through the activities of a few precocious Party organizers such as Peng Pai and Shen Dingyi and later through the mass movements promoted by the United Front.<sup>16</sup> However, the main participants in the process at this point remained young intellectuals competing for power in political arenas traditionally dominated by local gentry.

It is important to stress that neither the social nor the political identities of the young revolutionaries were fully congruent with their status as Party members. By educational achievement and often by family connections as well, the vast majority of them also had identities as probationary members of local elite establishments, identities that coloured and helped shape their approach to the expansion of the revolutionary movement into a semi-rural milieu rather different from the urban setting in which it originated.

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<sup>14</sup> Hu Delan, "Shao Shiping qingshao nian shidai de douzheng shenghuo" (The Struggle Activities of Shao Shiping During his Youth), in Gongqingtuan Nanchang shi weiyuanhui (ed.), *Nanchang qingnian yundong huiyilu* (Reminiscences of the Nanchang Youth Movement) (Nanchang: Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi Jiangxi Sheng Weiyuanhui Wenshi Ziliao Yanjiu Weiyuanhui, 1981), pp. 67–77; Fang Zhichun, *Huai nian ji*, pp. 141–6.

<sup>15</sup> JDZ, Vol. 4 (1987), pp. 21, 39, 95–96, 106; Dai Xiangqing, "Lun Wan'an baodong" (On the Wan'an Uprising), *Jiangxi shehui kexue*, No. 4 (1982), pp. 50–1.

<sup>16</sup> Galbiatti, Peng Pai; R. Keith Schoppa, *Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Odoric Y. K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 74–5, 116.

It is commonplace for scholars to acknowledge, at least at a very general level, that the state of China's 20th-century peasant economy and society had at least some impact on the Chinese revolution—if not by “causing” it, then at least by helping to shape the way it unfolded. It seems to be equally valid, though far less common, to suggest that what is true for the peasant socioeconomy is true for elite life as well. Issues of elite definition, certification, differentiation and career patterns that developed or were intensified through the end of the civil service examinations and of the dynastic system all affected the early stages of the Chinese revolution. That is to say, discourse on these matters influenced the socialization and expectations of both the elites who became Party members and those who became their main local opponents, helped shape the social, cultural and political milieu in which they interacted, and affected the nature of the conflicts among them.

### *From Market Town to Village*

Despite the CCP's success in establishing a beachhead in the educational circles of rural counties, it generally proved much harder to expand deeper into the heart of rural society, beyond the world of market town elites into the world of the peasants. As the overall political atmosphere in central and southern China began to become more polarized in the wake of the Northern Expedition, and as the local challenges posed by Party cadres persisted and intensified, rural elites were roused to widespread and often coordinated opposition. They brought to the struggle a panoply of social connections, economic resources and coercive force, together with the hard-won experience of how best to employ their power.

For their part, the revolutionaries sought to defend and expand their position in local society primarily by relying upon the mass movements called for by the United Front program. In most rural counties, “mass movements” meant primarily peasant associations, although some counties also had small labour unions and other types of mass movement organs. By and large, these mass organs proved inadequate vehicles for the expansion of revolutionary programs. Despite the large numbers of people who participated in them—many hundreds of thousands by most estimates—most were artificial entities hastily constructed from the top down. Sometimes cobbled together from existing lineage or sectarian organizations, but most often lacking intimate connections to existing types of local social organization and patterns of behaviour; the vast majority of the peasant associations, as provincial Party leaders in Jiangxi later admitted, were overly dependent on higher-level political promotion and needed stronger guidance than overburdened and inexperienced young Party cadres could provide under the circumstances.<sup>17</sup> As a result, most of them, in Jiangxi and elsewhere,

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, comments in a Jiangxi Provincial Committee document from December 1927, collected in JDZ, Vol. 4, p. 55.

quickly collapsed in 1927 when they and local leftist Party organizations were attacked by local militias and gangs of thugs acting on behalf of right-wing elements within the KMT and conservative local elites.<sup>18</sup>

During the spring and summer of 1927, as assaults on Communist-dominated mass movement activities intensified, it became increasingly difficult for undefended, publicly visible revolutionary organs to remain in existence even in remote rural towns. In these rapidly changing circumstances, the emphasis of surviving rural Party members shifted of necessity to developing ways in which to defend themselves and to expand by force. To explore this shift, our mode of analysis must also change somewhat. From a focus on Party cadres as young intellectuals engaged in school-centred intra-elite cultural politics, we must now examine the political anthropology of cadres as would-be local elite strongmen interacting with a less literate, more parochial subset of local society.

Surviving Party cadres first sought to act through established repertoires of collective action and familiar organizational forms. Their paramount need to defend against government security forces and right-wing militias and to attack landlords and local governments led them naturally to seek aid from organized armed forces that already existed in rural society and were familiar to local people. On occasion, cadres were able to draw upon remnants of recently established peasant associations, or to mobilize groups of able-bodied lineage members; in a few instances, where Party cadres possessed the personal connections to make this feasible, local militia forces were also suborned or taken over. But a much more widely available and lastingly effective option appears to have been to seek the aid of local bandit gangs and sworn brotherhoods.<sup>19</sup>

Many gang and brotherhood leaders were accustomed to having quite fluid, ambiguous relationships with local powerholders. Indeed, the affairs of gang leaders and of local elites were sometimes so closely intertwined that it is more appropriate to think of many of the former as disreputable members of the local power structure rather than as Robin Hood-like figures in opposition to it. Gangs often relied on rural magnates to fence stolen goods or to provide semi-legitimate

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<sup>18</sup> For discussion of the collapse of peasant associations outside of Jiangxi, see FGLWH, Vol. 2, 199; McDonald, *Urban Origins*, 302–15; Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 71–97; Tanaka Tadao, *Guomin geming yu nongcun wenti* (National Revolution and the Rural Question) Translation by Li Yuwen of *Kakumei Chûgoku noson no jisshô teki kenkyû* (A Factual Study of Rural China in Revolution) (Tokyo: Shûjinsha, 1931), Vol. 2, pp. 111–42.

<sup>19</sup> Qiu, “Huiyi Yudu baodong”, 69–82; Huang Zhongfang and Li Chunxiang, *Wang Zuo jiangjun zhuan* (A Biography of General Wang Zuo) (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1990), pp. 171 and following; Chen Qihan, “Xingguo de chuqi geming douzheng” (The Early Period of Revolutionary Struggle in Xingguo), in “Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun sanshi nian” zhengwen bianji weiyuanhui (eds), *Xinghuo liaoyuan* (Sparks that Started the Pairie Fire) (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1958), Vol. 1, pp. 407–10; Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 117–21.

fronts for gang-dominated gambling operations, while magnates and officials alike frequently enlisted gangs as temporary “muscle” in factional struggles or regularized them as official militia forces. In especially violence-prone and bandit-ridden areas such as southern Jiangxi, western Fujian and southern Henan, it was not uncommon for rural magnates and even some well-educated intellectuals to command their own bandit gangs, as indicated by the following passages from a Party report on conditions in western Fujian:

At present, in Yongding, Wuping and Lianchang counties, most of the men are vagrants and bandits (*liumin tufei*), and the ordinary intellectuals (*yiban de zhishifenzi*) are all, where possible, becoming bandit chiefs ... Despotic gentry (*haoshen*) and landlords have unbreakable relations with the bandits; a majority of *haoshen* and landlords are themselves bandit chiefs, or if not then they mutually collude to bring the countryside under the control of urban political power.<sup>20</sup>

Entering into arrangements whereby gang leaders used their armed forces in conjunction with young Party cadres provided them with an alternative way to seek the prestige that came from elite association, access to resources and, of course, prospects for gaining power and wealth. For their part, Party cadres were often much more ambivalent about establishing ties with gangs, given pause both by a stream of cautionary pronouncements from higher-level Party leaders and by their own personal knowledge of the brutal and treacherous nature of the gangs' interactions among themselves and with other local powerholders. In documents from September 1927, Jiangxi provincial Party leaders urged local cadres to appeal for support directly from sectarian gangs (*huidang*), many of which in Jiangxi were also bandits, specifying that both gang leaders and followers should be approached and that they should be treated as equal partners in the struggle rather than as forces to be “used”.<sup>21</sup> Experience, however, revealed the potential problems involved in working so closely with bandits and other *lumpen* elements, and in mid-1928 the CCP's Sixth Congress tried to mandate a more restrictive policy on the matter. A section on “Relations with Bandits” contained in a Congress resolution decreed that although cadres could ally with bandits while they were making preparations for uprisings, once the uprisings had been launched the gangs should be disarmed and their leaders “exterminated” (*xiaomie*). The statement also explicitly stated that bandits who had entered the Red Army or various government organs posed a great danger and should be expelled from these organizations.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> FGLWH, Vol. 3, p. 91. On Henan, see also Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, pp. 61–71.

<sup>21</sup> JDZ, Vol. 4, pp. 21, 29.

<sup>22</sup> The section on bandits was in the “Resolution on the Question of the Organization of Soviet Political Power”, ZZWX, Vol. 4 (1928), pp 399–400. In practice, local cadres appear to have

High-level pronouncements notwithstanding, the press of circumstances often gave local cadres little practical alternative but to seek out cooperative relationships with the gangs. Perhaps the most prominent was the alliance with the bandits Yuan Wencai and Wang Zuo initiated by cadres in the Jinggangshan area on the Jiangxi-Hunan border and later extended by Mao Zedong, but many similar arrangements were made elsewhere as well.<sup>23</sup> Although the actual situation might not have been as rosy as it seemed to the CYL committee members who wrote in February 1928 that “the several hundred thousand sect bandits (*huifei*) of southern Jiangxi stand completely under the Party’s direction, and join with the worker-peasants’ spontaneous struggle”, armed bandits or sectarians were in fact incorporated into the revolutionary ranks in Ji’an, Xingguo, Xunwu, Nanfeng, Ningdu, Yudu, Xinfeng and Ganxian counties, to give but a partial list for southern Jiangxi alone.<sup>24</sup>

Party cadres were equally ambivalent about the numerous spontaneous peasant uprisings that occurred with little or no initial CCP involvement in the year or so following the breakup of the United Front. The immediate sparks for these jacqueries were diverse, but they often involved lineage and ethnic rivalries, conflicts between the populations of market towns and those of their hinterlands, and above all the imposition of taxes and levies. Most often short-lived explosions of rage rather than opening steps in purposeful campaigns for reform, these uprisings frequently frustrated and/or frightened local cadres, who considered them both primitive in conception and premature in practice, even as they lamented their own current inability to harness the emotions the uprisings released. After a lengthy disquisition on the numerous peasant assaults on county seats, clashes with warlord army units and tax resistance protests that had occurred in all parts of Jiangxi during the fall of 1927, a Provincial Committee report in November noted regretfully that local cadres had in many cases actively “constrained or obstructed” these, and had “fallen behind the worker-peasant masses”. Both in Jiangxi and in neighbouring Fujian, peasants occasionally even had to threaten to kill Party cadres in order to obtain their reluctant assistance in

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interpreted and implemented the policy in light of their own particular circumstances. See, for example, Huang and Li, *Wang Zuo*, pp. 374–76.

<sup>23</sup> Huang and Li, *Wang Zuo*, esp. pp. 374–76.

<sup>24</sup> JDZ, Vol. 4, pp. 116, 298; Qiu, “Huiyi Yudu baodong”, p. 75; Chen, “Xingguo”, 407–10; Zhong Ping, “‘Ci shi dong Jinggang’—Donggu diqu di chuqi geming douzheng” (“This is the Eastern Jinggang”—the Early Period of Revolutionary Struggle in the Donggu Area), *Jiangxi wenshi ziliao xuanji*, Vol. 7 (1981), pp. 54, 57; Luo Guibo, “Ganzhou geming douzheng shi pianduan” (Glimpses of the History of the Ganzhou Revolutionary Struggle), in Zhonggong Ganzhou shiwei dangshiban (ed.), *Ganzhou shi dangshi ziliao huibian, 1919–1949* (A Collection of Party History Materials on Ganzhou City, 1919–1949) (Ganzhou: 1989), p. 138; Chen Sheng, “Hu Zhusheng qiren” (That fellow Hu Zhusheng), *Nanfeng wenshi ziliao* (Materials on Nanfeng Culture and History), Vol. 2 (1987), pp. 66–73.



launching uprisings.<sup>25</sup> Exasperating as this may have been for provincial cadres then being pressed by national Party leaders to launch massive “autumn harvest uprisings”, local cadres’ doubts about the viability of the risings were largely confirmed: virtually all of them soon dissipated their energies in brief orgies of killing and looting, and the mobs of ill-armed peasants were soon violently assaulted and dispersed when professional troops arrived on the scene.<sup>26</sup>

Ill-timed as they were, the peasant jacqueries nonetheless aided the Party cadres in various ways. At the level of theory and strategy, the peasants’ willingness to rise up on their own seemed a concrete affirmation of the Party’s assessment that China was in the throes of a revolutionary “high tide”. At a tactical level, the uprisings provided cadres with valuable information about which issues and targets were particularly vexing to local inhabitants. Finally, the revolutionaries were able to extract from the human debris of the crushed uprisings a considerable number of new supporters who, by virtue of having their lives disrupted and property destroyed, were now “divorced from production” and readily available for full-time active participation in the movement.

By late 1927 in a few areas and by the first half of 1928 in many more, young revolutionaries had built up enough resources to take the offensive by launching a mixture of armed raids and mass uprisings. The raids were quick assaults on specific targets of practical and symbolic significance, generally carried out by the makeshift amalgamations of bandit/brotherhood gangs, army deserters and refugees from failed peasant uprisings. These constituted the closest approximation to “regular army” units that could then be found in most of the rural localities where revolutionaries were still active. Common targets of the raids included local militia units and their armories; the homes and storehouses of people who were deemed to be especially egregious exploiters or who posed particularly grave threats to the growth of the revolutionary movement; and particular market towns or county seats where economic, cultural and political forms of power were very tightly interwoven and visibly embodied in institutions and practices.

Like the raids, the uprisings sought to obtain resources, increase security and undermine existing authority and reputations, but they also aimed to seize territory and mobilize broad populations.<sup>27</sup> Participants in the uprisings included

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<sup>25</sup> JDZ, Vol. 4, pp. 44–7, 109; FGLWH, Vol. 3: p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> JDZ, Vol. 4, pp. 44–7, 59–66, 108–9, 135, 140; Vol. 5, pp. 39, 42, 46; FGLWH, Vol. 3, pp. 155–8.

<sup>27</sup> A majority of both raids and mass uprisings were launched at the direct request of provincial and national Party leaders, and may appropriately be categorized as responses to high-level leaders’ calls for “autumn harvest uprisings”. As a capitalized phrase, “Autumn Harvest Uprising” is commonly used to refer specifically to the Hunan events of autumn 1927 with which Mao Zedong was personally associated. In addition, however, substantial numbers of

large numbers of rural inhabitants who still lived with their families and were employed in productive labour, as well as the specialized full-time fighters who spearheaded the raids. In addition, Party cadres saw the uprisings as breeding grounds for new types of mass organization that could be put to political use in the areas occupied during the uprisings. As the Fujian Provincial Committee wrote apropos of this issue in August 1928:

What we call a base (*geju*) really isn't just forming a guerrilla detachment and immediately considering [that there is] a base; *the broad masses must rise up* in the base's territory, and spontaneously make demands for land and political power. If it's simply a situation where our guerrilla detachment comes but the masses are still quiet, then *at this point our task is still to rouse the masses, and not immediately to establish a soviet regime.*<sup>28</sup>

Although local cadres made deliberate efforts to channel the uprisings along lines that would further the long-term goals of the revolutionary movement, the uprisings also retained many similarities to traditional jacqueries. This was particularly the case in their vagueness of vision regarding how the immediate gains of the uprisings could be translated into more enduring local political power, and in the undifferentiated antipathy and viciousness of the violence that they frequently expressed toward inhabitants of county seats and major market towns.

The depth of rural animosity toward market town/county seat inhabitants is clearly evident in Party documents concerning uprisings in places hundreds of miles apart and with different local ecologies. A particularly striking example was a peasant uprising in mid-1928 in Yongding county in western Fujian. After an escalating series of incidents pitting warlord troops and elite powerholders against local peasants, rural people had undertaken a "rice equalization" (*ping gu*) movement to redistribute landlords' grain and other goods. Landlords who lived in the local city had responded by restricting lending and by filing numerous accusations in the county seat against participating peasants, actions that kept many peasants from entering the city for fear of arrest or harassment. The dramatic decline in peasant income from borrowing or from firewood and charcoal sales to city dwellers led in turn to a major rural economic crisis and consequent peasant outrage that sparked the uprising. Angry peasants overcame Party leaders' resistance to the unplanned outbreak by threatening cadres who

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uprisings inspired by the same national party proclamations took place in Jiangxi, Hubei, Henan and elsewhere, with many of them not getting underway until several months after the actual autumn harvest period. For material on the uprisings in Jiangxi, see JDZ, Vols 4–5; for an account of events in southern Henan, see Odoric Y. K. Wou and Wang Quanying, "Rural Mobilization in Times of Political Adversity: The Autumn Harvest Uprising in Southern Henan", *Republican China*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (November 1994), pp. 93–126.

<sup>28</sup> FGLWH, Vol. 3, p. 161. Emphasis in original.

opposed them, and launched a fierce but unsuccessful attack on the walled city. During these events, rural people spoke of their desire to “kill all city people”, and of their attack on the city and its inhabitants in terms of “Three Greats” (*sanda*): great burning (*dashao*), great killing (*dasha*) and great looting (*dashi*).<sup>29</sup>

Expression of such feelings in ways that lumped all townspeople—rich and poor alike—together into a single undifferentiated group was very worrisome to Party cadres, who were anxious to develop support among urban handicraft workers, shop clerks and peddlers as well as among peasants. Even worse from their point of view was the frequency with which peasants acted on their feelings and launched indiscriminate assaults on urban property and inhabitants. Instances of such “Red Terror” were widespread and serious enough in the divisions they engendered that they prompted high-level Party pronouncements denouncing the phenomenon.<sup>30</sup>

Because the Party-led uprisings occurred in the context of other, peasant-instigated uprisings that drew on a long-established repertoire of collective peasant action, they could be launched without need for special explanation and indoctrination by preoccupied and inexperienced Party cadres. Even though many of these uprisings were no more successful than their spontaneous peasant-led predecessors in holding onto county seats and major market towns, they nonetheless mobilized large numbers of people to engage in violent collective action, further polarizing local political arenas. Even after army units took back the towns and launched retaliatory raids on the surrounding rural hinterlands, local situations rarely settled back into their former state. Regular army units were so thinly stretched and preoccupied with other military concerns that they generally departed after brief blustering sojourns in the county seat and a few violent but short-lived sweeps through the affected countryside. Behind they left swathes of territory in which the population remained easily roused and political and military power was very much up for grabs.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> FGLWH, Vol. 2, p. 200; Vol. 3: pp. 65, 151; Vol. 18: p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> For a Hunan example of an uprising involving urban-directed “Red Terror”, see Zhonggong Chenzhou diwei dangshi bangongshi, “Xiangnan qiyi” (The Southern Hunan Uprising), in Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi ziliao zhengji weiyuanwei zhengji yanjiushi (ed.), *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao zhuanti yanjiu ji: di er ci guonei geming zhanzheng shiqi (yi)* (A Collection of Monographic Studies of Materials in CCP History: The Second Revolutionary Civil War Period [Part One]) (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1987), pp. 66–7. For a sample of party pronouncements on the subject of the “Red Terror”, see the “Political Resolution of the Sixth National Congress”, in Tony Saich (ed.), *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party: Documents and Analysis* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 352.

<sup>31</sup> These generalizations about the early post-1927 rural uprisings are based on reading of numerous documentary and secondary accounts of Jiangxi uprisings, supplemented by some readings on uprisings in western Fujian and elsewhere. For samples of the literature for

Members of Party organizations, experienced professional and newly recruited armed fighters, and entourages of family members and others displaced by and implicated in the uprisings moved fluidly across this landscape searching for places in which to put down roots. Facing off against them was the battered but resilient local elite power structure. By late 1928 the cumulative impact of several years of progressively more violent rural unrest in many parts of southern and central China had essentially emptied the villages and small market towns of their wealthiest and most powerful families. However, their influence remained manifest in a variety of ways, ranging from the proliferation of elite-sponsored militia units, to conservative appeals for intra-lineage solidarity, to reprisals against supporters of the revolutionaries.

As had been the case with the earlier school-centred and study-society-centred political conflicts, many aspects of the post-1927 struggles for control of the countryside seemed readily understandable in terms of local political contention. In the post-1927 struggles, however, the model of political behaviour evoked was not the relatively genteel disputation and discourse of “upright gentry”, but rather the violently confrontational style of “local bullies” (*tuhao*) and “despots” (*eba*) and was based on the exploitation of coercive force. Both revolutionary cadres and their conservative opponents drew heavily on bandits and sworn brotherhoods as sources of recruits for their armed forces. They sought to establish geographic strongholds or “turfs” and took full advantage of the public image-creating and psychological bandwagon effects that flowed from military success.

This final point requires some elaboration. In the parts of rural China where the revolutionary base areas grew up, the image and reality of power were subject to frequent comparison and realignment, and coercive force was a particularly salient component of political legitimacy. Under such circumstances, physical attacks and public humiliations inflicted upon individuals, institutions or places could easily spark widespread shifts of support, as people hurried to align themselves with a newly perceived winner. This sort of public support was shallow, contingent and expedient, but it was nonetheless consequential, and while it lasted it could in some circumstances generate rapid, self-reinforcing “bandwagon” effects. Local officials, conservative elites and their revolutionary challengers alike were aware of and sought to exploit the ease with which signal events could precipitate a disproportionate “tilt” in public perception.

It is important to keep the dynamics of these essentially localized struggles between revolutionaries and local elites firmly in mind in any consideration of

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Jiangxi, see the numerous accounts in JDZ, Vols 4–5; for examples from Fujian, see Fan Yuanhui, “Jinsha baodong” (The Jinsha Uprising), in Wei Jinshui and Fan Yuanhui (eds), *Minxi geming douzheng shi ziliao, di yi ji* (Historical Materials on the Revolutionary Struggle in Western Fujian, Vol. 1) (Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe 1958), pp. 6–24; and FGLWH, Vols 2–3.

the embryonic evolution of rural base areas. As Party cadres moved to consolidate and expand revolutionary movements in their localities, their notions of how to establish local power bases still owed as much to pre-existing models of strongman turf-building as to Party pronouncements on how to construct rural bases. In fact, though high-level Party documents issued during this period contained numerous general exhortations on the need to establish rural bases and soviet governments and on the usefulness of “guerrilla warfare”, they were remarkably vague on such vital matters as just what types of activity constituted guerrilla warfare, precisely how it might be used to establish and defend bases, and what strategic role rural bases were expected to play in the overall process of revolution in China. In the absence of well-articulated alternative visions, many Party cadres apparently continued to conceptualize efforts to build local revolutionary power bases by reference to models and terms drawn from existing political and military usages. As just mentioned, one prominent set of relevant conceptions was that associated with local strongmen and their “turfs”, but there were others as well.

Although Communist writers avoided the pejorative term “nest” or “lair” (*jiao*) when referring to areas under their control, the frequency with which documents from the late 1920s warned against undesirable cadre mindsets such as a “roving bandit” mentality or “mountaintop-ism” clearly indicates the continuing influence of what might be called a bandit model of base-building. In this model, bases were primarily hideouts, inaccessible places of refuge and preparation from which predatory raids could be launched. In those areas—and they were numerous—where cadres had made bandit/brotherhood gangs the core of their armed forces, or in which survivors of defeated uprisings had retreated to regroup and recruit in bandit-dominated areas, bandits likely played a direct role in diffusing this conception among local revolutionaries. Beyond this, the overall dynamic of the situation contributed to this style of thinking: the revolutionaries, like generations of local bandits before them, used armed gangs of poor people to appropriate resources from wealthy families or to stage hit-and-run raids on urban centres, then avoided retaliation by hiding in inaccessible rural hinterlands. Similar behaviour may well have encouraged similar identifications. In any event, it was not just high-level Party critics who saw resonances between the thought and behaviour of bandits and those of “mountaintop-ist” Party cadres. The connections were evident to the general populace as well, and they often allowed anti-Communist elites to make a plausible pejorative equation that “Communist equals bandit”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The fact that the appellation “bandit” (*fei*) was also a widely used pejorative cliché that warlords, political leaders and others applied quite indiscriminately to anyone who was their enemy should not blind us to the fact that in other—particular local—contexts the term could retain its original meaning. One of the clearest and most well documented examples of

Local cadres also had available another conceptualization with a somewhat different emphasis: that of the warlord base. This model focused on bases as territorial centres for resource extraction and for the support of military operations. The terms commonly used to describe such bases (*dipan*, *geju*) connoted areas acquired by forceful seizure; the word *geju* had the added connotation of a separatist regime splintered off from another political entity.<sup>33</sup> The sense of warlord bases as springboards and support structures for ambitious political and military challengers may well explain why Party leaders during the late 1920s frequently used the term *geju* to refer to the emerging areas of rural Communist influence.<sup>34</sup>

In line with these existing understandings of the meaning and function of bases, Party cadres continued through 1928 and 1929 to develop many separate small geographical nodes of revolutionary power scattered across the rural hinterlands of southern and central China. Gradually, under a combination of pressure from suppression campaigns, growing attempts by high-level Party leaders to guide, coordinate and integrate the activities of cadres in individual localities, the assistance of growing Red Armies, and local cadres' own efforts to expand and consolidate the territories under their control, some of the scattered nodes began to link up and form a few larger contiguous areas that were each administered through a unified, Party-dominated, political and military apparatus.

A base area centred on the mountain market town of Donggu in central Jiangxi was one among many examples of such agglomerative construction. The base began to form in the fall of 1927, when Party members fleeing the "White Terror" returned to their homes in the region and established a local Party branch, protected by a guerrilla unit formed from former peasant association members and a band of Three Dots Society (*Sandian hui*) sectarian bandits. After defeating landlord militias and carving out a small sphere of secure territory around Donggu, the guerrilla unit began ranging widely through the surrounding several-

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a situation in which "bandit" and "revolutionary" were heavily overlapping terms in the minds of many people was the case of the Jinggangshan base area on the Jiangxi-Hunan border. See Stephen Averill, "Ethnicity and Revolution in South China: The Case of Jinggangshan", *Republican China*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 1997), esp. pp. 62-3.

<sup>33</sup> Strongman turfs and bandit nests might of course also provide resources to help sustain their occupiers, and likewise often furthered implicit or explicit political activities, but such functions were not as central to their rationale as they were for warlord bases. Moreover, although warlord bases varied widely in size, they were generally both larger and more deeply bound up with large-scale politico-military rivalries than the bases of local strongmen and bandits.

<sup>34</sup> The term "base area" (*genjudi*), now commonly used by Party historians, appears rarely in documents until 1929, at which time it seems to have been used primarily in documents written by the Party's national leaders. The term was clearly available in the Chinese lexicon much earlier, as a nearly identical phrase (*genju zhi di*) was used by late Qing reformers and radicals who wrote for the newspaper *Shibao*. Judge, *Print and Politics*, p. 181.

county border region, contacting and sometimes absorbing a number of the other small Party branches and guerrilla bands—also often built around nuclei of bandit or sect gangs—that had begun to pop up there. After several other regional guerrilla units were formed in similar fashion, they were designated “independent Red Army regiments” and began to carry out coordinated operations, while under their protection Party infrastructure and soviet governments expanded rapidly. By mid-1929 the Donggu base included sizeable portions of at least eight counties, and it had become the most important centre of Communist power in the southern half of Jiangxi.<sup>35</sup>

With the emergence of these reasonably coherent regions of revolutionary control—which probably numbered a couple of dozen throughout the entire country—we may begin to identify the cores of the (often hyphenated) named regions that are now generally referred to as “revolutionary base areas” (*geming genjudi*) in Party histories: the Hunan-Jiangxi (Xiang-Gan) base, the Hubei-Henan-Anhui (E-Yu-Wan) base, and so forth. The emergence of embryonic base areas also marks the point in the revolutionary movement’s extended transition from urban to rural at which it makes sense to discuss the larger issues of revolutionary strategy, tactics and purpose, including the role of the Red Army and its leaders, most notably Mao Zedong.

### **Rural Base-Building and its Contradictions**

Scholarly discussions of the “Soviet Period” of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when rural revolutionary bases were sprouting in many parts of China, tend to focus primarily on Mao Zedong’s power struggle with the Party’s central leaders. As part of this conflict, it is generally agreed, debate occurred both over the viability of the strategy of rural base-building and a range of more specific policies and orientations associated with the implementation of the strategy. In this debate, Mao is most often portrayed as a stubborn individualist, convinced that through his own personal experience he had identified a rurally centred strategy for revolutionary success that was much more suited to indigenous Chinese conditions than the urban-oriented, Russian-tainted approach then being imposed by the Party’s national leadership. Mao is seen as having firmly resisted this orthodox, centrally sanctioned strategy and also the continuing efforts to force him into obedience with the Party’s established hierarchical chain of command.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> General accounts of the formation of the Donggu base include Zhong Ping, “‘Ci shi dong Jinggang’”, pp. 53–67; Chen Ronghua, “Luetan Donggu shan geming genjudi de chuangjian” (A Brief Discussion of the Founding of the Donggu Mountain Revolutionary Base Area), *Jiangxi daxue xuebao*, 1979. No. 3, pp. 27–35.

<sup>36</sup> John E. Rue, *Mao Tse-tung in Opposition, 1927–1935* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), Chs. 6 and 11; Benjamin Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*

I wish to flesh out and complicate this picture by: (1) situating Mao in the local/regional context of the base areas, rather than simply in the context of his struggle with the central leadership; and (2) pointing out areas in which the “Maoist” approach to rural base-building was regarded as problematic and controversial not only by national Party leaders in Shanghai, but also by experienced local practitioners in the base areas.

Regarding the first point, it is important to recognize that Mao’s attention during the late 1920s and early 1930s was far from being totally monopolized by Li Lisan and the other Party leaders associated with him. Mao was working in the midst of groups of local cadres, mobilized peasants and bandit/brotherhood gangs that were then in the throes of creating the rural base areas. In the process of looking “down” toward rural society as well as “up” toward the Party’s higher authorities, Mao’s position vis-à-vis local Party cadres was analogous in significant ways to that of the central authorities in relation to him. As Mao strove to resist the centralizing efforts of national Party leaders, so did lower-level cadres who had painfully struggled to create nodes of revolutionary power in their own home regions invoke *their* hard-won knowledge and experience, striving to avoid being assimilated by a centralizing regional party hierarchy headed by Mao. In other words, if Mao was engaged in power struggles, and trying to concentrate power into his own hands, there were *two* such struggles, not one: the struggle with central leaders, and the struggle to control the local base areas and their local elite Party cadre founders.

### *The Role of the Red Army*

The Red Army was the main tool for Mao and his associates in their efforts to promote the simultaneous growth and centralization of rural base areas. The weight of the Red Army presence most obviously helped in expansion by protecting nascent base areas during the crucial stage when local leaders were trying to convince the populace of the security and permanency of their movement, as a precondition for popular support of soviet government organs and radical socioeconomic reforms such as land redistribution. To win this support from rural populations accustomed to the constant ebb and flow of local factional conflicts and the short-lived and violent careers of many bandit chieftains and local strongmen, the construction of a local regime that seemed likely to deliver on its promises was a vital but difficult task. At this time,

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(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), Chs 9 and 12; Richard C. Thornton, *The Comintern and the Chinese Communists, 1928–1931* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), esp. pp. 74–80. These accounts differ somewhat among themselves: Schwartz and Rue tend to accept Mao’s originality, for example, while Thornton downplays it by arguing that the rural guerrilla strategy was developed by the Comintern rather than by Mao himself. All, however, agree that there was a persistent power struggle between central leaders and Mao in which issues of obedience and hierarchal authority played a central role.



numerous well-equipped elite-sponsored militia forces constituted formidable opponents to the locally recruited guerrilla units of the revolutionaries. The ostentatious deployment of a Red Army unit in a given area could provide cadres and the populace with a valuable aura of security. The impact was correspondingly heightened when the unit actually attacked and dispersed the militia, or frightened a warlord garrison force into remaining bottled up in a county seat rather than risk being caught in a Red Army ambush.

Besides protection, the Red Army units provided local military forces with training, advice, and new officers and cadres seconded from their own ranks. As part of this service, Red Army units devoted considerable effort to retraining or (more often) weeding out many of the bandit leaders who had been important early sources of military support for the local revolutionaries. When it reached the Jinggangshan area in late 1927, for example, one of the first actions of Mao's fledgling Red Army force was to send political and military representatives to improve the training and ideological sophistication of the local revolutionary armed forces led by the ex-bandits Yuan Wencai and Wang Zuo. When the Fourth Red Army marched circuitously through southern Jiangxi and western Fujian 18 months later, it likewise enhanced the effect of its attacks on landlord militias by simultaneously seeding local guerrilla bands and independent Red Army units—many of which were also built on bandit or sectarian foundations—with experienced Red Army cadres.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to more purely military activities, Red Army units also helped integrate disconnected base areas by moving back and forth among them, spreading information on and helping to implement programs and policies. The exasperating difficulties faced by Party leaders in maintaining a timely flow of communications between Party Central in Shanghai and even large, well-established base areas and Red Army units are well known; the dissemination of information to Party and army organs in more isolated areas was even more difficult. Exchange of information via visiting Red Army units helped to overcome the parochialism that commonly characterized the early bases, while Red Army demonstration projects and local proselytization efforts instructed and energized local populations and Party cadres alike.

The Fourth Army's passage across southern Jiangxi after leaving Jinggangshan provides abundant evidence of the interrelated complex of protective, mobilizational and communicative activities through which the most

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<sup>37</sup> Huang and Li, *Wang Zuo*, pp. 238–58; Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, *Guanshan chenchen cang—zhongyang geming genjudi de douzheng* (The Pass and the Lines of Hills are Green—the Struggle for the Central Revolutionary Base Area) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1978), Vol. 1. Mao discussed such Red Army activities frequently in his contemporary writings; for examples from 1929–30, see Stuart Schram and Nancy Hodes (eds), *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings, 1912–1949* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), Vol. 3, pp. 154–6, 273–9.

professional Red Army formations assisted the growth of local bases. After passing through a dozen or more counties and holding numerous cadre conferences, mass meetings and demonstrative attacks on landlords, in late February 1929 the army spent a week resting in the Donggu area of Ji'an county, where they held mass meetings and cadre conferences, and transferred weapons and personnel to two independent local Red Army units. From Donggu they marched into western Fujian, reaching Tingzhou on 9 March. There, after decisively defeating a local warlord, they settled in for over two weeks while Mao gave speeches in the city and made an investigation of local social conditions, Red Army leaders presided over the reorganization of local Party and guerrilla forces, and the Red Army gave 20 rifles to local Red Guards and dispersed to various places for proselytization and military recruiting work. By early April the army had returned to southern Jiangxi, where in Yudu county they engaged in a similar round of conferences, mass meetings and organization work, and designated a Red Army cadre to remain behind to head a local guerrilla detachment. A week later they were in neighbouring Xingguo county, where Mao's speech at a mass meeting in the county seat coincided (fortuitously or not) with a sudden downpour that broke a troublesome drought. During their 20-day stay in the county, part of the army conducted mass work around the county seat while the remainder moved into a stubborn "reactionary stronghold" area to suppress conservative opposition and proselytize there. After extensive investigation of local conditions, Mao wrote a new land law, while he and other Party leaders also reported to local cadres about the Party's Sixth National Congress of 1928, advised them how to establish local soviet governments, and taught a cadre training course.<sup>38</sup>

Activities of this sort helped base area organizations, but at the same time increased the Red Army's de facto influence over them. More explicit efforts to centralize and integrate the bases came in the wake of a growth in the scale and intensity of the confrontations between the Red Army and the KMT government's military suppression efforts. In late 1930 the KMT took advantage of a decline in conflicts with warlords that had hitherto tied down KMT troops elsewhere. Spurred by serious Red Army assaults on the major Yangzi valley cities of Nanchang and Changsha, the KMT began the series of massive "encirclement and suppression" campaigns that eventually led to the near-total destruction of the bulk of the base areas. As preparations for the encirclement campaigns became apparent, and during the brief lulls between the first several campaigns, the Red Army and its associated political organs (notably the General Front Committee, which Mao headed for much of this time) redoubled efforts to knit together what became known as the Central base area in southern Jiangxi and

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<sup>38</sup> Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, *Guanshan chenchen cang*, Vol. 1, pp. 1–128; JDZ, Vol. 10, pp. 16–17.

western Fujian provinces. The main rationale for this drive to centralize authority was to improve the efficiency of military and political operations in the face of the building enemy threat, but it also involved an effort to favour policies and personnel at the local level who were sympathetic to Mao's approaches.<sup>39</sup>

### *Tensions and Contradictions in Base-Building Strategies*

Local cadres' conceptions of the purposes of bases were heavily influenced by pre-existing models that stressed their role as refuges, resource centres and geographical expressions of power and prestige. Over time, however, as Communist-dominated territories expanded, an additional, more explicitly political role for bases also began to figure in intra-Party discourse. This model conceptualized the bases as exemplary miniature states, embodying an ideological and programmatic alternative to the KMT's national state and its policies. This conceptualization overlay rather than replaced the earlier understandings of the purpose of bases; it was a sign of the Party's deepening effort to construct a strategy that would encompass the expanding rural bases. At the same time, however, the growth of the bases was giving rise to a range of tensions and controversies.

For its success, the base-building strategy had relied heavily on local support for the centralizing efforts of higher-level Party and Red Army leaders, but in fact the support given was often ambivalent. Local Party leaders, having fought long and hard—and often largely on their own—to build local bases and develop their own independent power, were often unwilling to give up that power to others, especially when the others in question included large numbers of outsiders. Similarly, a significant number of one-time bandit/brotherhood gang leaders who had risen to relatively high military rank as a result of the rapid expansion of the Red Armies found it difficult to transcend their localistic backgrounds, and consequently were reluctant to have their units detached too thoroughly from the familiar “turfs” where they had originated.

Both of these phenomena were visible simultaneously in the Jinggangshan region in southwestern Jiangxi. Natives of an area long known as an insular “bandit world”, the local Jinggangshan revolutionaries had exhibited a certain degree of prickly parochialism even when Mao and the Fourth Red Army were

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<sup>39</sup> A closely related activity that served some of the same purposes was the campaign to purge alleged counterrevolutionary elements lurking within the revolutionary ranks—most notably putative members of the AB Corps, the Reorganization Clique, the Third Party and the Social Democratic Party. For complementary descriptions of the purge of counterrevolutionaries in Jiangxi, in which Mao was himself heavily implicated, see Stephen Averill, “The Origins of the Futian Incident”, in Tony Saich and Hans van de Ven (eds), *New Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 79–115; and Chen Yung-fa, “The Futian Incident and the Anti-Bolshevik League: The ‘Terror’ in the CCP Revolution”, *Republican China*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (April 1994), pp. 1–55.

present in the region, but after the army's departure, this quality became even more evident. One manifestation of this was the uncooperative attitude local cadres sometimes exhibited toward outside revolutionaries, which led to complaints from higher-level Party leaders about their stand-offishness (their attitude, said one report ironically, was one of "chanting peaceful proverbs behind a closed door") and lack of interest in expansion. At the same time, the Jinggangshan revolutionary organization was being rapidly corroded from within by ethnically tinged animosity that pitted the localistic Hakka ex-bandits Yuan Wencai and Wang Zuo against better-educated non-Hakka cadres. In early 1930 the conflict led to the brutal execution of Yuan and Wang.<sup>40</sup>

But there were also other tensions visible in intra-Party discourses concerning the location and size of base areas. As both contemporary and later observers often noted, the danger of suppression by government armies (or, in the case of the most localized and embryonic nodes of revolutionary resistance, by local militias) was a major reason why bases were typically located in areas of difficult terrain that were distant from major urban centres and transportation routes and frequently straddled multiple administrative boundaries. Less often noted, however, is that the inaccessibility which made the bases defensible also isolated them from the centres of population, communications and economic resources where they might have obtained more recruits and spread their message to new constituencies. In addition to being distant from resource-rich strategic centres, the bases—each situated on its own mountaintop, as it were—were often equally inaccessible from one another. As one Jiangxi local Party report ruefully noted:

the [highest-ranking] Party organs (such as the Special Committee) are set up on the mountain peaks, the secondary organs (such as the county and special district committees) on the mountain flanks, and the tertiary organs (such as the district committees) at the mountains' feet. Because of this, it is impossible to obtain newspapers and all the important political news; with things this way, how can a political movement be directed?<sup>41</sup>

The economic backwardness of the developing bases, exacerbated by enemy efforts to interdict the flow of goods into and out of the areas, even led some cadres in western Fujian to the discouraging conclusion that the existing small

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<sup>40</sup> ZYGGSH, Vol. 1, p. 256; Averill, "Ethnicity". For other similar examples of parochial resistance to the evolving revolution in Jiangxi and elsewhere, see ZYGGSH, Vol. 1, 339, 591–8; Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, pp. 139–55; Chen Sheng, "Hu Zhusheng qiren", pp. 66–73.

<sup>41</sup> JGG, Vol. 1, pp. 312.

rural bases were fundamentally non-viable, and that the only solution was dramatic expansion in size and the inclusion of wealthier regions.<sup>42</sup>

Yet there were certain advantages to having small, geographically cohesive bases. Such bases were relatively easy to control, manage and mobilize—no small consideration in an environment where literate cadres with administrative capabilities were scarce, and the demands upon their time and energy very heavy. Small bases were also less obtrusive, and arguably provided less incentive for an all-out enemy attack. On the other hand, when government attention was attracted, compact, cohesive bases presented convenient bite-sized targets that could easily be completely overrun or tightly blockaded. By contrast, bases that covered a larger area, even if they were geographically discontinuous and administratively unwieldy, were potentially more resilient and able to survive enemy attacks.<sup>43</sup>

Somewhat similar issues arose with regard to the proper deployment of military units. Local Red Guard units and forces recruited from bandit gangs and sworn brotherhoods were well supported by the local populace, and generally capable of intimidating landlords and providing basic security for villages against the local militias that proliferated as rural unrest grew. However, they were too poorly armed and trained to stand up to regular army units, and too rooted in their local societies and economies to be easily “detached from production” and employed outside of their home districts.

For their part, even though the large regular Red Army units played vital roles in protecting, linking and energizing the emerging base areas, they too had their disadvantages, particularly when looked at through the eyes of local cadres. For one thing, the very capability and visibility of Red Army units made them high priority targets for government troops. They acted as magnets attracting government troops to wherever they were located, including the heart of emerging base areas. Although the Red Army was adept at dodging the enemy’s clumsy blows, the newly constructed political institutions and the human and material resources of the base areas were much less mobile and more vulnerable targets.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> FGLWH, Vol. 5, pp. 368–9; Vol. 6, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> For discussion of the problems of small-scale soviet bases, see reports of Hunan-Jiangxi Border Area Special Committee from May, June and August 1929 in JGG, Vol. 1, pp. 313–14, 318–25, 347. The June report quotes at length a letter received from the Fourth Army Front Committee (headed by Mao, who was undoubtedly the author or one of the main authors of the letter), which favourably contrasted conditions in the larger Donggu base area with those in the Jinggangshan region. The full text of this letter (dated 13 April) is presently unavailable. For Fujian perspectives, see also FGLWH, Vol. 5, pp. 108, 368–69; Vol. 6, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Contemporary documents generated by Party organs at all levels frequently discussed the relationship between local and Red Army forces. They noted that Red Guards and guerrillas

The well-known debates that occurred within the Party leadership during the late 1920s and early 1930s over the proper structure and employment of the Red Armies were also echoed, with somewhat different emphases, at regional and local levels within the base areas. In the high-level arguments there were two main issues. One was the most appropriate level of “concentration” and “centralization” suitable for the armies. “Concentration” (*jizhong*) and its contrasting term “dispersion” (*fensan*) were used in discussions over whether it was more efficacious for Red Army forces to operate as dense clusters of highly coordinated, closely aligned units or as loose swarms of semi-independent forces. “Centralization” (another meaning of *jizhong*) referred to a number of overlapping issues, including the questions of how unified and hierarchical the Red Army command structure should be, what relationships different Red Armies should have to one another and to the Party’s central and local leaderships, and what relationships should exist between “regular” Red Armies and local guerrilla and Red Guard units.

Many of these questions were directly or indirectly related to the second main issue, which was whether the best strategic use of Red Army troops was as massed forces employed in coordinated assaults on one or more large Yangzi Valley cities, or as more dispersed, semi-autonomous forces protecting and expanding specific rural base areas. Arguments over all of these thorny issues were further inflamed by questions of abstract ideology, relationships between the Chinese and international Communist movements, and considerations of personal and factional power rivalries within the Party.<sup>45</sup>

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were poorly trained and localistic, but constituted essential resources both for local defence and for replenishing and expanding the Red Army; at the same time, they stressed the obligation of regular Red Army forces to train and arm local forces, and to be on hand to respond to local cadres’ requests for aid, even as they worried about the presence of the Red Army making local areas enemy targets. For examples of these references at the provincial level and below, see JGG, Vol. 1, p. 321; FGLWH, Vol. 5, p. 108; Vol. 8, pp. 175–7, 187, 206–7; ZYGGSH, Vol. 1, pp. 418–19; Vol. 2, p. 205; Vol. 3, p. 94. The Central Committee’s 7 February 1929 letter to Mao and Zhu De referred explicitly to the danger that concentrated Red Army forces, especially those headed by well-known leaders such as Mao and Zhu, would become “targets” that would “draw the enemy’s attention”. Saich, *The Rise to Power*, p. 473. That Red Army forces would become targets was, in fact, an intrinsic assumption of Mao’s strategy of “luring deep” (discussed below). See also Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, pp. 158–60.

<sup>45</sup> Older discussions in the Western literature focus primarily upon the ideological and personal power factors, and pay little attention to the other substantive practical issues mentioned above. See Rue, *Mao Tse-tung in Opposition*, Schwartz, *Chinese Communism*, and Thornton, *The Comintern*. For a few of the many references to all of these issues that appear in contemporary CCP documents, see Schram and Hodes, *Mao’s Road*, Vol. 3, pp. 100, 154–5, 177–89, 205–6, 242–3, 273–9, 574–89; Saich, *Rise to Power*, pp. 395, 437–8, 472–3; ZZWX, Vol. 5 (1929), pp. 477–90; Vol. 6 (1930), pp. 31–2, 59, 138–9, 428–64.

At the regional and local level, within the rural bases themselves, the main point of controversy involved the relative priority that should be assigned to defending territory and preserving Red Army strength. Many military leaders, notably including Mao, counted mobility and rapidity of movement among the greatest assets of the Red Army, and stressed the need for their relatively lightly armed troops to avoid combat with the larger and better equipped enemy armies unless favourable terrain, the element of surprise or other conditions worked to their advantage. For many cadres and army officers who had been raised in the territories within the base areas, employment of such guerrilla tactics was not only a logical response to their present situational exigencies, but also a well-rehearsed repertoire of local bandit gangs and sworn brotherhoods. As one colourful local brigand nicknamed “Zhu the Deaf” (Zhu Longzi) operating on the Hunan-Jiangxi border in the early 1920s, said in summing up his own experience, so long as they could “travel in circles” (*da juanzi* or *dou juanzi*) through the mountains, the question of whether his gang members could stand up to warlord soldiers in combat was irrelevant.<sup>46</sup> Aided by the absorption of many gang and brotherhood leaders into the Red Army’s officer corps, such sentiments became widespread among army leaders.<sup>47</sup>

Mao was borrowing freely from this common rural wisdom rather than articulating his own innovative thinking on the subject when he later set down in print the famous 16-character aphorism that begins “When the enemy advances, we retreat”. By 1930 he had also formulated a more generalized strategic vision of how to employ guerrilla principles on a large scale for the defence of the base areas. This approach, known as the strategy of “luring deep”, essentially sought to make a virtue out of the fact that Red Army units were high-priority targets for enemy troops by ostentatiously concentrating Red Army forces in difficult terrain deep in the interior of a base area. When government “bandit suppression” forces moved in after them, their individual units generally advanced in uncoordinated fashion, along different access routes through unfamiliar territory. This provided the lurking Red Army troops with attractive opportunities to use their superior

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<sup>46</sup> Huang and Li, *Wang Zuo*, pp. 101–2.

<sup>47</sup> Mao, Zhu De and others in the Fourth Red Army heard Zhu the Deaf’s formulation from Zhu’s bandit successors in the Jinggangshan area, and subsequently employed it themselves. Yu Boliu and Xia Daohan, *Jinggangshan geming genjudi yanjiu* (Research on the Jinggangshan Revolutionary Base Area) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1987), p. 179. The phrase “travel in circles” in fact became so widely associated with Mao and his thinking that national Party leaders sometimes used it as a shorthand reference to Mao’s tactics in documents directly or indirectly referring to him. See, for example, ZZWX, Vol. 5 (1929), p. 480; Vol. 6 (1930), p. 430; Vol. 7 (1931), p. 314.

speed and mobility to mass their full forces successively against one isolated enemy unit after another.<sup>48</sup>

Both at the tactical level of Red Guard and guerrilla units deployed around a few villages and at the strategic level of regular Red Army forces ranging across large portions of one or more provinces, this kind of “guerrilla thinking” called for maneuvering and fighting to be done on familiar terrain and among supportive populations—that is, within the base areas themselves. At the same time, however, military leaders recognized that opportunities or threats might sometimes require their armies to leave bases, either temporarily or permanently. Major expeditions into “White” territory to obtain supplies and/or to support the clusters of cadres trying to develop new foci of revolutionary activity called for the extended absence of Red Army forces from established base areas. Occasionally, however, armies under pressure from particularly persistent or large government military suppression campaigns would decide to pack up and leave a region altogether (as occurred not once but several times among Red Army forces operating in the Jinggangshan area on the Jiangxi-Hunan border). Regardless of the reasons involved, the cadres remaining in the bases were deprived both of their most effective combat force and of the aura of prestige and authority that came from association with a successful military force.<sup>49</sup>

Given the protracted nature of the struggle in which they were engaged, and the continuing disparity between the small Red Army and the overwhelmingly superior opposing government forces, it is easy to see why many Red Army officers and political cadres employed the style of warfare that they did. After all, this style of mobile warfare maximized the army’s advantages in speed and nimbleness, capitalized on the enemy’s weaknesses in coordination and information-gathering, and generally gave priority to preserving the army’s vital, painfully constructed core of fighting units over the static defence of largely interchangeable swathes of territory and their civilian inhabitants. Recognition of the advantageous features of this approach under these circumstances has doubtless played a part in forming the dominant historiographical view regarding the significance of such concepts as “the enemy advances, we retreat”, and “luring deep” in the unfolding of the revolution.

Yet there was significant opposition to this “guerrilla” approach at the time from regional and local cadres concerned about the vulnerability of the base areas

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<sup>48</sup> For discussion of the concept of “luring deep”, see Stephen Averill and Stuart Schram, “Introduction”, in Stuart Schram, Nancy Hodes and Stephen Averill (eds), *Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings, 1912–1949* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), Vol. 4, pp. xxx–xxxii.

<sup>49</sup> For examples of critical comment about the peregrinations of the Fifth Red Army on the Jiangxi-Hunan border, see JGG, Vol. 1, pp. 335, 346–8. For Henan examples, see Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, p. 159.



even when mobile warfare was successful. Government armies knew that base areas provided the Red Army with recruits, supplies and information. In addition, in well-established bases the extent of Party and governmental infrastructures increased dramatically, as did reform programs such as land redistribution. The invading government armies sought to root these out and destroy the new infrastructures. The incoming armies also took away food stocks and villagers' valuables, and dragooned local men into serving as porters. "Living off the land" via requisition of food, money and labour from people in areas in which they campaigned was standard practice for armies throughout China during this period.

The combination of these factors meant that government army incursions significantly damaged local societies and economies, and threatened the carefully nurtured sense of security without which base area institutions and programs could not function effectively. It is thus unsurprising that many local cadres focused more on the costs incurred when enemy forces ranged through the bases than on the need to preserve the fighting power and survival of the Red Army units that were being pursued. Opposition appears to have been particularly strong among cadres of local origin, whose communities and personal base-building achievements were directly threatened.

In the minds of these cadres it was far preferable for the fighting to take place outside or on the borders of the base areas, where the inevitable collateral damage caused by the manoeuvring armies would have less impact. They felt the Red Army forces should demonstrate that they were a reliable presence, committed to the long-term defence of base area territory, unlike a typical "roving bandit" force that might be here today and gone tomorrow. Without this certainty, stress levels among cadres as well as the populace inevitably rose; Party leaders on the Hunan-Jiangxi border, for example, worried that the Red Fifth Army could not be relied upon to obey Party directives, while local Party members in Longyan county in western Fujian reportedly went so far as to pack their bags each time the Red Army sortied, in anticipation of the need to flee from the enemy attacks that regularly occurred in the army's absence.<sup>50</sup>

Cadres also had to deal with the more general question of the appropriate balance between military and civilian in building the base areas. It seemed evident to many that in the short run the priority in resources and energy must be given to the military. But the drawbacks of this approach were evident as well.

The most serious of these was the diminution of the authority and prestige of Party and soviet government institutions and officials in the eyes of local inhabitants. In theory, Party, government and army organs were all supposed to grow in tandem as the base areas developed; but traditions of coercive local strongman turf-building were so ingrained among base area populations, and the

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<sup>50</sup> JGG, Vol. 1, p. 347; FGLWH, Vol. 8, p. 187.

delicate political authority of the new Communist-led regimes was so intertwined with and dependent upon military security, that people naturally tended to invest army units and leaders with more authority and prestige than their civilian counterparts. By the late 1920s, some frustrated local and regional Party/government cadres complained that local people thought of the army as synonymous with the soviet government, and slighted Party cadres. Especially when this conflation of political and military authority was combined with the Red Army's sporadic "roving bandit" tendencies, Party leaders became concerned with the problem of how to promote more unambiguous distinctions in the popular conception between their base areas and the "turfs" of warlord regimes.<sup>51</sup>

Yet another tension that developed during the growth of base areas had to do with the status and visibility of newly established political organs. Openly constituted and publicly functioning soviet governments and Party organs were confidence-building signs of permanence and commitment. They were important both for redressing the just-mentioned bias toward the military end of the spectrum, and for strengthening the impression that the Communists were viable challengers to the established government. For this reason, ostentatious ceremonies celebrating the founding of soviet government organs and public Party recruitment drives became common features as the base areas expanded to include new territories.

By the same token, the overt public activity of these institutions meant that the names of their office-holders and the physical location of their offices were quite readily obtained by government security forces and vengeful returning landlords when the base areas were temporarily overrun by enemy armies. The ease with which public organs could be located and destroyed in this way, and the increasing frequency of enemy ventures into the bases due to the interaction between the intensification of government "bandit-suppression" efforts and implementation of Mao's "luring deep" policy, led to discouraging losses of morale and confidence. In response, cadres in some particularly hard-hit areas began to call for soviet government organs to keep a much lower profile, and to maintain the secrecy of Party membership.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> For examples of tension over these sorts of issues, see JGG, Vol. 1, p. 338; FGLWH, Vol. 8, p. 132. See also Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses*, p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> For discussion of the secrecy issue and of the concrete consequences of openness in the case of the Jinggangshan base area, see Xu Chunhua, "Xiang-Gan bianjie de xidang yundong" (The Party Cleansing Movement in the Hunan-Jiangxi Border Area), in Ninggang xian zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuan hui and Zhonggong Ninggang xian weihui dangshi bangongshi (eds), *Ninggang geming douzheng ziliao congshu—Ninggang Jinggangshan geming genjudi de zhongxin (xu bian)* (A Collection of Materials on the Ninggang Revolutionary Struggle—Centred on the Ninggang and Jinggangshan Revolutionary Base Area [Continuation]) (n.p.: n.d.), pp. 261–70; JGG, Vol. 1, pp. 313–14, 347. The CCP's

Many of the tensions described above were in one way or another aspects of what was perhaps the most comprehensive and basic tension of all. This was, on the one hand, the need to maintain the flexibility, adaptability and mobility necessary to cope with the assaults of a numerically overwhelmingly superior enemy and, on the other, the need for the base areas to be held securely enough for the population to trust the Party, to allow for implementation of fundamental reforms such as land redistribution, and to embody a believable political alternative to KMT rule. It was the salience of issues such as these, as well as irrational stubbornness or ideological rigidity, that underlay the opposition of many central Party leaders toward the “Maoist” rural strategy.

### Conclusion

As this essay has shown, the Chinese revolution’s rural presence developed gradually over a period of years, not suddenly in desperation in 1927. Its extension from city to countryside evolved through a multi-stage process that was predominantly elite-initiated and elite-centred. This process owed as much to the structural and cultural features of the new educational system and the dynamics of elite local politics as to any new ideological or organizational innovations made by Mao or the Party.

The initial development of embryonic base areas in many places after 1927 likewise stemmed not from conscious application of a specifically “Maoist” type of strategy, but from the military and political exigencies that were common to local revolutionary movements that had little or no initial contact with Mao or his thinking. Conceptions about how to compete for local power and about the functions and purposes of localized “bases” drew heavily on existing repertoires of behaviour. This facilitated the sprouting of numerous small and disconnected nodes of revolutionary power, but it also encouraged the development of parochially independent behaviour by local cadres that eventually came into conflict with efforts to centralize and integrate the separate small bases into a much broader and more uniform movement.

The base-building strategy associated with Mao’s name did not emerge all at once as a fully blown, consciously articulated master plan, but rather developed over time as the product of difficult ad hoc balancing acts among complex alternatives. Opposition to Mao’s ideas and policies came not only from members

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Sixth Congress in mid-1928 had stated: “In the soviet areas, the work of the party itself and the majority of the party members themselves should be known to the public in general. Only a small organization should be kept secret”. After additional experience, party leaders realized the need for secrecy to cope with determined repression; a Central Committee resolution of mid-1929 urged cadres to “use all possibilities to pursue open activities while stepping up the party’s secret work”, and to adjust the balance between these two complementary endeavors depending on local circumstances. Saich, *The Rise to Power*, 368, 397–8. See also FGLWH, Vol. 6, pp. 24–5.

of the Party's central leadership in Shanghai—people who, it could be argued, were distant and out of touch with rural realities—but also from regional and local cadres who possessed concrete base-building experience. Although the opposition of the rural cadres stemmed in part from concern for their own personal interests, it also grew out of a recognition of the very real costs and trade-offs involved in Mao's tactics—particularly the “luring deep” concept. The Party's practices did not so much oscillate between following completely Maoist and completely non-Maoist “lines” but rather developed out of a dialectical interaction in the strategic thinking of Mao and many others. Although the rural base-building approach has been retrospectively enshrined as the “only correct” strategy for bringing the Party to power, the evidence suggests that in this, as in so many other aspects of Mao's legacy, a considerably more nuanced and critical assessment is in order.