Bandits, Bosses, and Bare Sticks

Beneath the Surface of Local Control in Early Republican China

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In many parts of rural China, bandits could establish their independence from official control, sometimes acknowledging it, sometimes repudiating it. In favorable environments, bandit gangs could wield virtual autonomy; elsewhere, pragmatism and local affinities encouraged a live-and-let-live relationship among the four main contenders: the magistrate, the military, the local gentry, and local bandit gangs. The balance of power among these four deeply affected peasant fortunes, and this article sets out to examine the nature of things beneath the surface of local control in early Republican China. It should be understood that the image presented here does not necessarily apply to the

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This article is a revised version of a small part of a major study of banditry and rural unrest in northern China (mainly Henan province) between 1911 and 1928 (Billingsley, 1974). In other parts of the study, now being rewritten for publication, I analyze the various types of rural unrest; the origins of a bandit gang and the lives and perspectives of its members; the relationship between bandit gangs and the political authorities at local and national levels; the transformation of banditry during the warlord period; and the role of bandits in the Chinese revolutionary movement.*

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situation in other parts of China, nor even to that in Henan at all points in time. It provides, by drawing on local records and eyewitness accounts, a scenario of a state of affairs in the Chinese countryside that does not seem to have been adequately described up to now.

Eric Hobsbawm (1959: 13) has observed that bandits have always been of more concern to the police officer detailed to catch them than to the social historian. This is not only a shame, but a vast oversight on the part of the latter, for banditry was one of the commonest reactions of the peasantry everywhere to oppression and hardship. It was, consequently, a major feature of the lives of an enormous number of people, as well as an important factor in the local balance of power. By the end of the warlord period in China, for example, "almost everyone" in south and west Henan was said to be involved in banditry, while in famine-stricken Zhili in 1928 active bandits were said to number 20% of that province's population (Minguo ribao 20/10/28, quoted in Zhu, 1930: 299-300). By 1931 Sichuan bandits were estimated at 1.5 million (Lü, 1936: 159), closely followed by Manchuria with 1 million (excluding a further 2 million organized in secret societies; Kuchiki, 1966: 436). The social historian simply cannot afford to ignore so many people.

Banditry was a perennial feature of traditional rural China, though its dangerous path was permanently trodden by no more than a tiny minority of the peasantry that gave it birth. While this traditional banditry changed but little before the twentieth century, the numbers engaged in it had already begun to increase by the late nineteenth century, and within a few tumultuous years after the revolution of 1911 its transformation began.

First to appear were the "soldier-bandits" *(bingfei),* huge gangs of disbanded, deserting, or unpaid soldiers. Though rarely distinguished by commentators from the old-style bandits *(tufei),* their emergence toward the end of the 1910s, along with that of the warlords, was to raise the phenomenon of banditry to a new and different level.[1] Universally regarded as a scourge, these armies of half-disciplined men, many of them mounted, could cross an entire province in a matter of days, sacking towns and

cities as they went. For most of the 1920s, the soldier-bandits made rural Chinese life a misery. Nevertheless, their appearance contained the seeds of another, still more significant development: the fashioning of motley gangs of éléments déclassés into disciplined insurrectionary peasant armies. Their experiences in the ranks taught the soldier-bandits lessons: above all, the nature of rational cooperation and the strength of organization. For most, only one stage removed from the peasant village, these were novelties.

Traditional banditry knew little of these things. A product of a peasant society unaffected by outside forces and with horizons limited by parochialism, blood ties, and the "tyranny of work," it provided a last resort for men who could not or would not lie down. The majority of bandits were propertyless, for those with fields to till do not make sustained fighters. They were also generally males, for two main reasons. First, the work cycle in north China—especially the single-crop mountainous and northernmost districts—provided long periods of inactivity for men, during which they might take to banditry to eke out the family income; women, whose domestic role allowed them no such leisure (to say nothing of the moral pressures on them) found it much more difficult. Second, for those too poor to own land in a society where prestige was measured by landholding, particularly when poverty precluded even the luxury of acquiring a wife, banditry provided a means of restoring one's masculine self-respect.[2]

The operations of a gang were often temporary, governed by the passing of the seasons, and its membership consequently fluid. Many recruits joined only for the peak period following the autumn harvest, others at year-end to avoid an ever-demanding tax- collector or to put off repaying a debt. In bad years the gang's numbers would be swelled by the starving, people who would sometimes eventually drop away, sometimes not, according to the efficacy of relief measures. In areas where banditry was endemic—the "no-control" border regions, remote mountain ranges, swamps, river deltas, and so on—a gang often took on a permanent character, becoming a refuge for the hard-pressed and

a constant reminder to the powers-that-be of the limits to their authority. There were many such areas: the mountains of west Henan, the Henan-Shandong-Jiangsu-Anhui border region, the wastes of north Manchuria, the Pearl River delta of Guangdong, the malaria-infested border between Yunnan and Burma—in fact, any place where the power of the state to enforce its rules was sufficiently weakened.

A study of banditry, while naturally revealing new facts about a little-known phenomenon, also throws light on broader issues. The ill-defined nature of the word "bandit" itself tended to disguise a wealth of activities. So-called outbreaks of banditry in south Henan and north Hubei after 1911, for instance, turn out on closer examination to be a series of locally planned political uprisings belying the long-held notion that the Chinese people found their political consciousness only after 1937. "Red Spear bandits" of the 1920s and after originally constituted spontaneous local defense against the effects of accelerating militarization in the countryside. In both cases, an investigation of "banditry" has actually revealed the awakening of a rudimentary peasant self-consciousness. While there were undoubtedly bandits who fitted the traditional stereotype of men intent on arson and rapine, there were others, too, many of whom could not, by any objective standard, be called bandits at all.

As Zhu De, Mao Zedong's military alter ego in the prewar communist movement, said to Agnes Smedley, "banditry is a class question" (Smedley, 1956: 136). For the framers of the law, for the police, and for all those with even a modicum of power which they were jealous to preserve, the word "banditry" subsumed all kinds of "crime," ranging from petty thieving to social revolution. For the rural despot as well as for the emperor or president, the deliberate blurring of social realities allowed the word "bandit" to be used as a means of defaming one's political rivals. Careful scrutiny, however, can reveal a wealth of socio-political data of interest to the study not only of popular insurrection but also of local politics.

In the early twentieth century, while China as a whole rejoiced under such ambiguous epithets as "the world's number-one

bandit country," Henan province, in particular that part of it south of the Yellow River, provided a microcosm of the troubles afflicting the whole country. Abuses of power by local warlords, enforced cultivation of opium, severe if temporary economic crises and natural disasters, a swelling soldiery, and an increasingly powerless official bureaucracy, all contributed to making Henan province, in the traditional cliche, "an area where banditry was always rampant."

Bandits operated outside the *law,* but not in conscious opposition to the system. This traditional banditry may be summed up as the occupation of armed robbery, using real or implied violence, normally carried out in groups numbering upwards of a score. Its scale of operations was limited (though always outside its base area, of which more will be said later), and the often-ambivalent attitudes of the bandits themselves were governed both by this last factor and by the invariably rural background. Banditry was also *local,* because it depended for survival and sustenance upon the goodwill or at least the blind eye of the people of its own base area. It was *reactive,* because few risked their lives entering the "university of the greenwoods" without solid reason. It was *offensive,* for the farming routine was alien to the outlaw's life, and robbery provided the sole means for survival independent of the fields. It depended on *violence* (or the threat of it), a blind, avenging violence that was aimed at specific objects of peasant resentment rather than at any "class enemy." And it was *rural,* because the conditions under which it flourished, those in which formal administration was difficult to enforce, existed only in the countryside.

The traditional bandit was a prerevolutionary figure, but only in the sense that his kind of activities predated the era when would-be revolutionaries' eyes turned automatically to the capture of *state* power rather than local autonomy. Without a doubt, the Chinese discovery of Marx sounded the death knell for the traditional rural bandit, but this in itself should not constitute a value-judgment on banditry. As we have seen, "banditry" could encompass positive activities of infinite variety, and it is significant that the activities of anarchists, syndicalists, and other

opponents of totalitarianism following the two great revolutions of this century have been referred to by the same term as that used to describe those of the revanchist old guard: "banditry." As I said above, the true bandit operated outside the law but not in opposition to the system; by classifying its enemies as bandits, the new state could thus effectively reduce the seriousness of their activities.

The tragedy of the bandit in a modern revolution was that of the peasant in microcosm. Peasant rebellions were initially *reactions* to perceived local manifestations of a crisis affecting all of society. Banditry, as the natural response of those first and most affected, was the carrier of this discontent, and the vanguard of many a rural rebellion. The bandit, like the rebellious peasant, was trying to *restore order* in many cases to a world gone mad, not to create a new and untried people's paradise. Unfortunately, there was no road back, and herein lay the tragedy.

In two senses the bandit was, literally, a world away from the revolutionary militant. Whereas the development of a revolutionary force assumes an accepted need for it to be coherently organized, bandits come together to buttress their very existence, and any rational, long-term organization must be grafted on by social revolutionaries and others who would seek to use them. Perhaps more important, revolutionaries begin from the awareness of the need for an alternative, better society, and organize toward that end, while bandits see more guarantees in the world they know, and organize in accordance with its values. For bandits, therefore, it was usually less strenuous to join the reaction and become suppression troops, putting down those, particularly the revolutionaries, who threatened the system they had now come to represent. Like any other renegades, moreover, they carried out their new tasks with a bloodthirsty vigour.

Mao Zedong, along with other guerrilla leaders like Peng Pai in Guangdong and Liu Zhidan in Shaanxi, incorporated into his strategic repertoire such traditional bandit techniques as the siting of bases along remote provincial boundaries and dynamic hit-and-run tactics. Many were learned from his reading of the classic *Shuihu zhuan,* reinforced by observation of things around

him. All of these modern guerrilla leaders—such were their roots in rural society—believed that the recruitment of traditional groups like bandits and secret societies was possible and indeed necessary. With correct training and proper leadership, their members would be thrown into the heart of the political struggle and become a revolutionary force. Looking back on his success in this sphere of action, Mao was to refer to himself as the last of the great peasant rebel leaders.

In the last analysis, however, the effect of the rural environment upon the bandit, like that of the agricultural cycle upon the peasant farmer, was to inure him to making stopgap decisions rather than long-term estimates. It is here that the distinction must be sought between the sociopolitical strategy of the guerrilla and the life-preserving instinct of the traditional bandit. In practice, therefore, very few bandits managed to outlive the Red Army's politicization process (He Long was a notable exception). Those not eliminated during "rectification" purges were often thrown into the front line of the fighting, where they would absorb the enemy's bullets on behalf of the regular troops at their backs.[3]

Back in the villages, however, it was often a different matter. Even in Henan, one of the most revolutionary provinces since 1949, the memory of a "bandit" like Bai Lang, the "White Wolf," remains fresh even now, long outliving that of his enemies. I am tempted to guess that similar figures (who were of course a minority among "bandits" as a whole) retain their folk-myth charisma in villages all over China today, particularly in areas, like Henan, with a tradition of discontent predating 1949. The reason is that they were *important,* sprung from the very loins of the peasants themselves, even if few peasants dared to emulate them. They symbolized the striving for justice against the oppressor, however that oppressor presents himself. As long as there is a dream, there will be women and men, albeit a minority of them, who will seek to enact it. And as long as there is perceived inequality, there will be those who will place their faith in such heroes. For heroes are the stuff of dreams, and dreams a powerful engine of change.

> We have an old Chinese saying, "Big fish eat little fish, little fish eat shrimps, shrimps eat mud!" That's true here, my friend. . . . The peasants are the shrimps, the little fish are the bandits, the big fish are the officials [Snow, 1972: 49].
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> When the forces of law and order heard the word "t'ufei" (bandit) they jumped like a mouse who had heard the cat meow [Geming zhoubao 1/9/29, quoted in Bianco, 1972: 275n].

In the superficially chaotic years of the Chinese Republic, dominated by lurid tales of bandit atrocities and warlord conflicts, a certain order nevertheless existed in the political and social hinterland below the county seat. As the capture and ransom of foreigners came to be almost commonplace in parts of China, Western observers began to build The Bandit into a figure of awe. The *North China Herald* (16/6/23: 719), in a leader entitled "The Peasant and his Master," even acclaimed the bandit as the supreme ruler of China. Yet, except for places like Manchuria, where the Red Beards *(honghuzi)* had long provided the most reliable source of local stability (Watanabe, 1964), and Guangdong, where armed community defense was traditional (Hsieh, 1972), this was an exaggeration reflecting, above all, the paranoia of the foreign community in a world seen slipping away from them quicker than they could comprehend. The common expression *"guanfei fenzhi,"* while intended to be ironical, in fact often summed up a power-sharing situation whereby the nominal authority of the official was balanced against the control of local bandits, the balance varying according to local conditions.

Many kinds of fish swam in the sea of the Chinese people. For centuries, in peace and in war, the walled towns and cities of the interior formed islands in this now-simmering, now-seething sea. Bridging the gap between town and country was a carefully stacked administrative structure which formalized the marriage of political and economic power in China. Represented by the county magistrate and the local gentry figure respectively, there arose two parallel, interdependent power hierarchies that generally meshed but sometimes exposed fundamental contradictions. One served the needs of political administration, the other those of economics and commerce.

As the local stock of the official hierarchy reached rock-bottom in the closing years of the Qing dynasty (Kaifeng, 1960: 18), the unofficial version, backed by an economic framework that had sprung up around marketing areas to serve local needs, began to take over many of the former's bureaucratic functions. The waning prestige of the traditional degree-holding gentry, however, opened up a vacuum into which flowed other men of local power and influence. Some were themselves the scions of the traditional elite; others were political bosses, often regarded as bandit chiefs. Such "bandit chiefs" could often be a force for stability rather than disruption. Many became recognized as "warlords," and were able to exercise their control with at least the semblance of legitimacy. Others managed to do so on the basis of the respect paid to them as *haohan* or good guys.

Sustaining one's influence, however, required satisfying local needs: maintaining trade and commerce and keeping all sectors of the local populace in relative tranquility. In subsequent pages I examine the power the bandit gang could wield in this local community, the interests it could come to represent, and the way it either came to terms with or superseded the local elite. (Because of space, the role of bandits on the national stage will not be considered.) In doing so, my purpose is not to suggest that the bandit's assumption of political authority was an everyday phenomenon, but merely that the possibility of such an assumption demands a reevaluation of the traditional view of bandits in the twentieth century.

Throughout history the Chinese rural elite sought to remove the sting of bandit leaders and other upstarts by acknowledging their informal control over prescribed areas. Except in times of advanced insurgency, when there first emerged a visible alternative to the vertical model of social relations, this was very effective. In such times peasants often saw the potential realization of their ideals in the elevation of their heroes to high social status. In practice, therefore, bandit control sometimes offered better security than that provided by the "authorities."

Although the bandit was basically looking out for number one, rural class differences were generally stark enough to remove any

doubt as to where the best profits were to be had even if it was usually easier to acquire them from the less-protected. To the extent they exploited the rich for their income, bandits came to be regarded by many, in the absence of more constructive heroes, as representing the interests of the peasants. (Many bandits, of course, were generally hated.) On those special occasions when insurgency overwhelmed the villages, the bandit gang would have to learn to adapt itself to it, or else decide to join the opposition. (The choice, of course, was that of the chief, whose authority was usually total.) The gang's assumption of the trappings of power in the form of its control over the local countryside made it just another target for the peasants' leveling anger. In noninsurgent periods, however, the gang provided the model for rejection of the status quo, defining the limits of what was possible under given circumstances. This, at least, may be taken to be the peasant's subjective definition of the situation. It is also likely that they were well aware of the relationship that ultimately prevailed between them and the bandits, preferring to accept the gang as a lesser evil, to be swept away, perhaps, at some future date along with the other representatives of authority (see Thaxton, 1977).

From the materials available to this study, it would seem that the majority of bandits, contrary to what has previously been assumed, had at least a rudimentary idea of what the issues involved in inequality were, but were so constrained by local ties and the "patron-client" outlook (Scott, 1972) that (1) it was impossible to conceive of generalized class warfare as opposed to overthrowing only the local tyrants, and (2) it more often than not appeared easier to join the tyrants than to beat them.

THE COUNTY MAGISTRATE

The county or district magistrate, of course, was the lowest official government functionary (major sources for this section are Watt, 1972; Faure, 1973; Ch'ü, 1962). The county or *xian,* of which there were usually around a hundred per province, generally consisted of a walled city surrounded by some five to six

hundred square miles of countryside, and formed the base of the government pyramid. In Confucian terms, the magistrate was the "official close to the people," who reputedly called him their "father and mother official" and received in return the dubious appellation, "children people." In practice, he seems to have played no role in the peasants' everyday lives that could not have been easily dispensed with.

His traditional function combined social responsibility with social control. Responsibilities included collecting taxes, judging legal matters, and organizing schools and public examinations. At the same time he was the government's chief informer, allowing it, in principle at least, to react to local changes, reduce tax in bad years, increase defense when threatened, and so on. Security-conscious officials acknowledged the magistrate as the most important link in the administration, and when the nationalist government revived the traditional *baojia* surveillance system in the 1930s, therefore, it stressed that "the villages of the chou and hsien are like the leaves and branches of a tree; if the leaves and branches are damaged, the root and trunk have nothing to shelter them." Consequently, "to defend cities is not as good as to defend villages" (Wright, 1955: 527).

Yet administrative requirements, particularly the Law of Avoidance, under which an imperial official could not hold office in his native province nor in a neighboring one within a distance of five hundred *li,* effectively undermined relations between the magistrate and his "children." At the same time, a comprehensive network of largely unpaid and notoriously corrupt clerks, secretaries, and runners made approaching the *yamen* or county office akin to "entering the tiger's mouth." Ho Ping-ti (1959: 222; see also Muramatsu, 1966: 589ff.) has described the "rural triple alliance" between gentry, usurers, and magistrate's underlings as being as old as private property.

Of course, a resourceful local official could be very effective. A Yunnan magistrate faced with the imminent arrival of a detachment of irregular troops (former bandits, that is) forged a letter from the provincial authorities stating that a large bandit-suppression force had been despatched and would arrive shortly.

The colonel in charge of the irregulars, shown the letter, promptly decamped for the next county, where he no doubt expected to find a less conscientious magistrate (Chow, 1966: 184).

A few examples exist, too, of magistrates personally leading troops against bandits (Nagano, 1924: 93-94), but, by and large, the magistrate's concerns were limited to the county seat and/or the defense of elite property. In materials on rural China one is invariably struck by the apparent absence in the villages of the official elite. The effect this absence had on the magistrate's relationship with the local gentry will be discussed later. Here it is interesting to note its theoretical confirmation in the work of Skinner (1964-1965) on marketing hierarchies.

Skinner suggests that the administrative elite tends to disappear from the picture as one moves down the hierarchy from the "central marketing town" (CMT)—usually the county seat. In the CMT the bureaucracy is the primary force, consulting with gentry leaders on affairs of the county, and so on. By the next level, the "intermediate marketing town," the administrative elite is absent. This is the turf of the local gentry, where they direct the important affairs of the intermediate marketing area and provide the necessary contact between the elite and the town merchants.

Peasants, however, are also for the most part absent here. Their world terminates at the next stage down, the "standard marketing town" (SMT), also the lowest level of gentry contact, contact between petty traders, and dealings between the peasants and the elite. While few villages possessed landed, literate, *and* leisured families, every standard marketing area had its quota, and from the SMT they exerted their social control over the area. Thus, the need for the magistrate to enter the local picture was removed, and the overwhelming impression is that he took full advantage of this letout. While the ideal magistrate tended to his "children" with a mixture of concern and imperiousness, like any traditional father, his real-life counterpart most often took a pragmatic approach.

In the wake of the mid-nineteenth-century rebellions, increasing militarization had set in at both popular and elite levels, upsetting the balance between official and unofficial control, and

persisting well into the next century. The Merchants' Corps *(Shangtuan)* set up in Xianyang, Shaanxi, in 1914 to resist Bai Lang's rebel army (Shuntian shibao, 28/5/14: 4), and the multiclass armed resistance to the billeting of warlord troops in Lushi, Henan, in 1923-1924 (Ren, 1924: 551-553), seem to have been typical examples. It is clear that the magistrate, though officially charged with local defense, was not always meeting expectations.

From 1911 to 1916, magistrates continued, on the whole, to carry out their functions as effectively as their frequent replacement allowed. After the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916, however, more and more were either bought off by warlord governors or replaced by their own appointees. The collection of tax revenues became their main duty, and, thanks to the political insecurity of most of their warlord patrons, getting rich quick was often their primary motivation. In Henan, following the 1912 installation of some sixty magistrates with reputations for corruption equalling that of their sponsoring military-governor Zhang Zhenfang (a cousin of Yuan Shikai), officials who ignored or even patronized bandits in their territory multiplied (Shanghai shibao 30/3/14, quoted in Dong, 1960: 26).

By 1913, complained a prominent Beijing daily paper, the nation had forgotten how to deal with bandits. As in the late Ming period, when bureaucratic laxity allowed huge rebel armies to roam about at will and eventually take the capital itself, now too officials were appropriating vast revenues to raise men in the name of suppression, then taking the easy way out by enrolling the bandits as soldiers (Shuntian shibao, 13/11/13: 2). Magistrate Lian of Yongning, Henan, possibly one of Zhang Zhenfang's appointees, was typical. According to the *Minli bao* (18/6/13: 10; see also Nagano, 1924: 89), Lian, feared by rich and poor alike as the "Living King of Hell," took bribes, delayed lawsuits, and bent the law to his own needs. Even while bandits led by one Du Yuanzhang operated openly in certain villages under his jurisdiction, Lian, "as if modelled from clay or carved from wood," took no action. After Du was caught by local gentry-led levies, Magistrate Lian temporized and was immediately suspected of

receiving bribes from the bandit chief. Incensed local gentry petitioned the provincial governor requesting an inquiry, but no response was recorded. Ten years later the *North China Herald* (9/6/23: 658) raised the issue again:

> The universal complaint of the common people is that the robber bands are immune from attack because of a plain business arrangement with the nearest official, who shares in the spoils. It is also firmly believed by the common people that arms and ammunition are furnished the bandits by the officials themselves, at prices [from] which the latter make an enormous profit.

Yet, as Bai Lang's violent revenge on the Yuxian magistrate in June 1913 showed (Zhengfu gongbao, 30/1/14), it was more than mere politics that prompted the magistrate to maintain good relations with local bandits.

When necessary, the local authorities could also choose to regularize "their" bandits by acknowledging their part in the status quo. A major Shandong chief named Li Sanmao, for instance, decided to marry a girl taken for ransom but not redeemed by her family. To celebrate he threw a party, a three-day affair to which he invited not only all the minor bandit chiefs within the area he controlled, but also the local magistrate, the military commander, gentry, and influential merchants (Notake, 1923: 13-14).

Understating local unrest was another misdemeanor of which local officials were frequently accused. This was understandable, for to admit the existence of a disturbance was to assume the burden of settling it, and many an official career had been shattered by failure to do so satisfactorily. Bai Lang's men, operating across the Henan-Hubei border in 1912-1913, scored repeated victories over suppression troops, largely because of official reluctance to admit the bandits' true numbers (Minli bao, 6/5/13: 8). Subsequently, in the 1920s, a Beijing newspaper took missionaries to task for not revealing the truth about bandit-rich Henan, which in the absence of accurate official reports seemed to outsiders to be quite peaceful and bandit-free (U.S. State Department, 1910-1929: 6219).

Since officials were primarily concerned to keep a lid on things, the object of a country-cleansing *(qingxiang)* campaign was not so much the physical extermination of the bandits themselves as the removal of the problem—in other words, to rectify the situation rather than arrest the criminal. The following episode, from Anhui province, provides a perfect illustration of official pragmatism. An ex-bandit army officer, ordered to suppress the remnants of his old band, soon captured the new chief's wife, whom he held against the band's surrender. Her husband, however, contacted the authorities, suggesting instead that the bandit-officer himself be killed, the woman released, and he and his men taken into the provincial army with good pay, new uniforms, and food. Since it was a relatively painless way of restoring peace and quiet, the plan was agreed to and executed within the hour (Hedges, 1923: 610).

Energetic suppression methods were rare, and arbitration aimed at the absorption of the bandits almost the rule in so-called bandit provinces. By far the easiest strategy, and one which also obviated fears of retaliation, was to hand the affair over to former bandits themselves, who would use persuasion rather than force, employing their expert knowledge of what was needed (Yano, 1936: I, 178). Such negotiations were usually extremely amicable, and were encapsulated in the apt phrase "simultaneous suppression and pacification" *(jiaofu jianshi)*. Thereby, while bandits adapted to pressure from the official authorities, the latter protected their skins and restored harmony by "rectifying" the situation. In a word, "officials begin by concealing bandits; continue by conniving at them; and their mutual cooperation soon becomes second nature" (Wang, 1963: 85).

Relations between magistrate and bandits were thus a far cry from the theoretical ideal. While conscientious Confucians were by no means rare, neither were they the rule. Republican-period officials inherited a traditional reluctance to deal conclusively with local unrest. Although the most important duty of the magistrate was to maintain order, his responsibilities were vaguely defined, and increasing insecurity often led him to evade them altogether. The growing need for soldiers after 1916 gave him ample opportunity.

THE MILITARY

Good iron is not made into nails;
Good men do not become soldiers.

Broadly speaking, two levels of military mobilization defended the elite's interests in the countryside during the 1920s: the regular army *(lujun)* and the provincial protection armies *(shengfang jun; jingbei dui.)* The former, which came under the Central Army Board and was independent of local control, was headquartered in the main city of the area for which it was responsible, with further garrisons in surrounding minor cities. Its chief role seems to have been to protect communications rather than human lives. The provincial troops, responsible to the Ministry of the Interior, came officially under the jurisdiction of the civil governor; in practice, since expenses were locally provided, it was the magistrate who took command. (The principal sources for this section are He, 1925; Nagano, 1924, 1932; Tachibana, 1923; Wen, 1930.)[4]

The regular army, nominally trained and commanded by career officers, was usually an outside force and acted as such. The provincial troops, on the other hand, being locally recruited, maintained their strong local ties. As far as propertied people were concerned, the distinction seems to have been quite clear. Whereas the former were *feared* for their depredations, the latter were *mistrusted* because of their relations with local bandits; indeed, since the latter often constituted merely a parallel mode of mobilization to bandits, it was sometimes quite difficult to distinguish the two. On the other hand, these provincial troops, precisely because of their local ties, rarely committed outright atrocities. Their intended purpose was to keep a district pacified; dealings with bandits reflected both the self-preservation instinct and the need to eke out their meager pay. The regular army, however, had no such ties; its soldiers were equally ill-paid, and they consequently maintained themselves by living off the countryside. Atrocities in the name of "bandit suppression" were commonplace. Whether the troops were regular or provincial,

nonetheless, some degree of live-and-let-live reciprocity with local bandits was always present.

PROVINCIAL TROOPS

The relationship between bandits and the local military garrison was highly symbiotic, for what turned one man into a bandit, under different circumstances made a soldier of another, and the same man could often be bandit one day and soldier the next. The Shaanxi "swordsman" *(daoke),* for example, owned his own Mauser pistol and ammunition, and so could be bandit or soldier according to taste and the local military situation (Teichman, 1921: 74). One good reason for tolerating bandits was that they provided a constant source of cost-free reserves. The Twelfth Henan Division was thus created in May 1930 with the express design of absorbing the numerous bandits in the Zhengyang area, thousands of whom flocked into the city from all over south and southwest Henan to join (Zhengyang xianzhi, 1936: 3/51a).

Since bandits and local troops were so close, each tended to support the other. With the loot acquired from the people whom the troops were supposed to protect, the bandits were able to buy from the soldiers guns and ammunition to carry on, plus the freedom to operate. In return the soldiers both made up for their lack of pay and attained a certain security through demonstrating the continuing need to maintain bandit-suppression forces. In local slang this was the "double-convenience" *(liangbian),* describing any arrangement by which bandits and soldiers reached agreement to avoid hostilities.

The connection could be made in a number of ways. For example, the bandits might pass word to the soldiers that part of their loot was buried in a certain place. The soldiers, after expending considerable ammunition into the air, would then dig up the money and bury their remaining arms and ammunition in its place, later reporting them as "lost in battle" (Franck, 1923: 338; China's Millions, February 1924: 23). An enterprising chief who aimed at more than a mere stake in the local power balance,

like Bai Lang for example, could take advantage of this veniality. Bai's men would leave a trail of loot for "pursuing" soldiers to find, then double back and pick them off while they were absorbed in gathering up the spoils (Qiao, 1956: 133; compare Teng, 1964: 180).

The facts of the traditional bandit-soldier relationship were fully known to the authorities. It was probably no more than a public-relations exercise when, in January 1914, the Henan provincial government ordered magistrates to take a census of all publicly and privately owned weapons in their districts after finding that the majority of guns captured from bandits were official issue (China's Millions, February 1923: 21). The problem assumed more seriousness, however, when it was found to be impossible to employ Henan troops in a joint anti-Bai Lang campaign mounted by the authorities of Henan-Hubei-Anhui in the spring of that year. To put it bluntly, they were looking down the barrels of their own weapons. Though people ironically labeled local bandit-suppression commanders the "transportation commanders," military governor Zhang Zhenfang, dreaming opium dreams in far-off Kaifeng, came in for most of the blame. A delegation sent to Beijing by enraged local gentry complained that every one of the fifty battalions under Zhang's direct command maintained intimate relations with the bandits (Shuntian shibao, 2/3/14: 3; Tao, 1957-1958: II, 39; North China Herald 7/3/14: 656-657).[5]

The balance of forces determined the precise nature of the bandit-soldier relationship. Where bandits had the edge over the soldiers, the latter might buy their cooperation. Of the one dollar per ton of coal paid to the military for protection against bandits by the owners of a certain mine, one-half, it is said, went to the bandits themselves (Powell, 1923: 916). Where the scales were weighted the other way, racketeering soldiers could demand "protection money" from the bandits in return for giving them a free hand, a device to which the "victims" readily agreed.

According to a magistrate's complaint, lodged with the Luoyang authorities in mid-1912, one area in west Henan was

threatened with devastation on a scale akin to that preceding the fall of the Ming dynasty, with "nothing that chewed" left alive. In the city of Lushan the local army commander was lining his own pockets by colluding with bandits. While the affair had begun quietly enough, with local chief Qin Jiaohong and several other minor leaders paying three hundred taels a month to operate unhindered, gangs were soon attracted from miles around by the prospect of rich pickings. Lacking the local rapport which had provided the cement for the original set-up, these newcomers instead resorted to digging up graves and destroying crops. The commander, still busy with his personal finances, did nothing; when regular troops arrived he joined the bandits to fight them (Minli bao, 2/5/12: 8). By July 1912, because of its inability or disinclination to catch bandits, the Lushan garrison had become derisively known as an "Army of Women" (Shuntian shibao, 4/7/12: 4), though the title was highly inappropriate, as there had been several prominent female bandit chiefs in that part of Henan.

There was good reason for the local troops to avoid serious clashes with the bandits. The officers' high salaries, and the mens' very livelihood, depended on giving the impression of a fight without actually making contact. Were they to defeat the bandits they would become redundant, and so, at the first sight of bandits, Henan troops would fire blank shots to give warning of their approach, whereupon the bandits would depart. A soldier eyewitness confessed that since the troops sent against Bai Lang were all his fellow provincials, despite several apparent clashes there had been no real fighting at all (Shuntian shibao, 23/6/14: 3; Tao, 1957-1958: II, 42).

This relationship was further strengthened after Red Spear, Big Sword, and similar village "antibandit" organizations began to multiply in Henan and other northern provinces in the 1920s. Because the successful eradication of banditry would put the soldiers themselves out of a job, the latter would often stand by and watch while bandits and villagers fought. A village militia in Shandong's Anqiu county, for example, trapped in a local temple

a small bandit gang that had taken and killed several hostages. In response to the militia head's summons, local troops arrived promptly, but advised against attacking the temple. The militia instead settled down to a siege, but, as soon as their concentration slackened, the bandits made off. The soldiers, meanwhile, instead of attacking, fired a few volleys into the sky and jogged along behind while the dumbfounded militia gave chase. It later transpired that the troops had been receiving a regular share of the bandits' ransom proceeds (Nagano, 1924: 95; 1932: 239).

"Live and let live" was the rule of thumb, at least in this part of China. Bandits and local "defense" garrisons played more or less complementary roles in the local military structure. As long as that structure was not tampered with, they could exist side by side.

REGULAR TROOPS

Regular government troops were usually a more direct nuisance. The so-called clean-up campaign was a favorite way of keeping a permanently stationed force fed and supplied, and often depended on the cooperation of local bandits. From their headquarters in the city, the troops would set off for a selected "bandit-infested" area, but long before they arrived the bandits (if they had ever existed) would depart, often after leaving behind enough money to discourage pursuit. The luckless villagers suffered under the soldiers' vicious dictatorship for as long as was deemed suitable, after which the "bandits" were announced suppressed and the troops returned to their camp. To allay suspicion, sacks filled with innocent heads (if there were too many the ears sufficed!) were taken along. The men shared the bandits' surplus loot, the officers were rewarded for a successful campaign, and the local people were returned to the routine mercies of the bandits until the soldiers were again felt to require sustenance.

The systematic nature of bandit rule, since a regular payment usually kept them happy, often made local people, propertied and otherwise, feel more secure with them than with the regular

soldiers. The fear the latter inspired even in the rich is documented in the following episode, which took place during negotiations for the release of prisoners after the Lincheng Incident.

Two weeks after the derailing of the crack Pukou-Tianjin Blue Express in May 1923, the local gentry of the area, close to the Shandong-Anhui border, sent three representatives to discuss terms with the bandits in the hope of speeding up negotiations over their induction into the provincial army. So anxious were these delegates to settle matters quickly that they submitted to being led on a wild goose chase from mountain village to mountain village in the hot summer sun. When talks finally began the reason for their haste was revealed. In just two weeks the soldiers billeted on the countryside had reduced the area to such straits that it would soon be unable to support an expanded provincial army. In their own interests and those of the area as a whole, the bandits were urged to come to terms without delay (Nagano, 1924: 42-44; Tachibana, 1923: 73-74).

Bandits rarely needed to stand and fight, for these regular troops were just as venial as their local counterparts. After Chenliu, Henan, was taken by bandits late one night in October 1926, for instance, punitive troops, though their Kaifeng headquarters was only fifteen miles away, did not set out until the following morning. Completing the journey in two easy stages broken by a lunch stop, they reached the city at 3 p.m., precisely two hours after the bandits' departure, and resumed looting the city. One reluctant member of the departed gang, a missionary hostage, was told that they had sent a large bribe to the troops' commander (Hankow Herald, 29/10/26, cited in U.S. State Department, 1910-1929: 7963; North China Herald, 12/2/27: 257). Here, as at the sack of Zhoujiakou on the Hubei border a month earlier, "there can be no reasonable doubt that the city . . . was virtually, if not actually, sold to the bandits by the military" (North China Herald, 19/2/27: 300).

Even where a genuine suppression campaign was set in motion, the object was in most cases not to eliminate the bandits but to drive them over the border into the next county or province,

where they became someone else's responsibility. The longer the end was delayed, moreover, the richer the bandits became, and the greater the profits for the soldiers from the final round-up. For this reason bandits were often permitted long and fruitful forages, like the famous chief Lao Yangren's spectacular and unopposed circuit of Henan in late 1923.

By flitting in and out of the hills they knew so well, bandits were usually a match for those sent against them, and it was normally sheer weight of numbers or destruction of their links with the peasants which told against them. Fortunately, as in the controversy over who was to take credit for applying the coup de grace to the injured Bai Lang (see Dongfang zazhi XI/4, 25; Shuntian shibao, 12/8/14:4, 14/8/14:2, 19/8/14:4; also Zhengfu gongbao 813, 10/8/14, and 816, 13/8/14; Feng, 1944: I, 209), the soldiers often vied among themselves for rewards. Alternatively, they sought to evade responsibility altogether, one unit commonly standing by while a rival unit received a sound drubbing. False victory telegrams were the normal way of covering up such inefficiency. During the course of the anti-Bai Lang campaign, for example, more than a million bandits were reported killed; Bai himself and many of his subchiefs lost their lives on numerous occasions (Tao, 1957-1958: II, 40).

While the people suffered, then, bandits and soldiers reaped the benefits of mutual understanding; as in the magistrate's case, it was often better to leave well enough alone. Energetic measures could be activated, however, either by diplomatic pressure caused by the violation of some foreigner's treaty rights or by a change of civil/military command. The first sign of a concerted antibandit drive was therefore the summoning of extra troops from outside the province. Lao Yangren found himself a brigadier after taking a dozen or so foreign captives, while the Lincheng Incident, partly the result of an attempt by new provincial authorities to assert their control, showed what could result from attempts to wield a new broom (see Chen, 1923: I, 30ff.).

THE LOCAL GENTRY

Live in the city during minor disturbances;
Live in the country during a major uprising.

The power of the local gentry was of a different order than that of the magistrate. (Principal sources for this section were Ch'ü, 1962; Faure, 1973; Watt, 1972; Kuhn, 1970; Wakeman and Grant, 1975; Wakeman, 1966; and Yang, 1965.) While the latter wielded authority by virtue of his official investment, the gentry member's power was transmitted through his membership in the local elite and consequent status as *potential* administrator. As the official network was spread very thin, its smooth functioning demanded gentry cooperation in collecting taxes, supervising public works, expounding government propaganda, and so on.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century there were about 1.5 million gentry members, constituting with their families some 2.14% of the population. After the abolition of the traditional examination system in 1906, landholding rather than academic achievement became the direct source of local power, though prestige developed over generations remained important. While the gentry did not officially participate in the exercise of government, they traditionally enjoyed many of the accrued advantages of the local official. Through this combination of political and economic power, gentry families could pile on pressure to defuse unrest, by means of threats to increase rent, dispossess tenants, and so forth. Unofficial ties to nongentry landlords helped ensure their economic impact. Landlord or rich-peasant leadership of such groups as crop-watching associations, even though the membership was composed mostly of lower-middle and poor peasants, made such organizations into yet another arm of elite power, to be used when necessary against rivals.

Since the sixteenth century the gentry had traditionally taken steps to defend themselves when threatened, usually by organizing a local militia. Their principal sources of recruits were, first, their own tenants, and, second, local rowdies expected to cause trouble if the chance arose. Consequently, such mobilization was mistrusted by the authorities. However, with a severely weakened central government unable to assert its control over remoter areas following their devastation by the Taiping and Nian rebellions (or, more precisely, by the bloody repression that accompanied them), growing insecurity in rural north China forced gentry to double up as local administrators, a role previously considered less than dignified. In the early twentieth century, official prestige was integrated with gentry power by the institution of the Self-Governing Area *(zizhiqu),* responsible for such customary duties as public works, education, tax collection and local registration. While the district magistrate had ultimate control, candidates for Area Head were nominated by a ballot restricted by property and literacy qualifications. Thus, the traditional degree-holding elite retained their dominance in the rural community by relocating themselves within the official hierarchy. Moreover, by educating their sons in the new ways these families could ensure a smooth transition when it became unavoidable.

What did change, however, was the gentry's approach to the retention of power. They now consorted with rich merchants, powerful landlords, and local political bosses (many of them also from gentry families). Into the ranks of the powerful came men who had risen through business or banditry or smuggling, their influence more likely to stem from wealth, physical force, or political connections than from education. Such organizations as the Future-Safeguarding Society (Shouwang she) in Henan and the Ancestral Virtue (Zongde hou) in Shaanxi, ostensibly intended to protect the community, were really designed to ensure the survival of gentry property interests. As a result, these militant defenders of privilege continued to be referred to in Chinese

accounts by such traditional epithets as "evil gentry" and "corrupt gentry" even after 1911.

THE MILITIA

The militia, the principal instrument of local defense against outside attack, represented the combined interests of prominent local families, and suffered only nominal supervision by the magistrate, despite its official role of auxiliary to the military. Since the gentry had most to lose from the incursions of the "unruly," this was only natural. Moreover, while the government never acted unless it saw itself threatened, it was effectively shielded from local security problems by its network of career-conscious officials. A gentry-led militia was thus able to rule the immediate countryside (Tian, 1926: Watanabe, 1964: 63; Muramatsu, 1966: 595 ff.).

The decline of official power after the mid-nineteenth century thus confirmed the position of the traditional rural elite, many of whom became no more than small-scale militarists hardly distinguishable from their bandit rivals. This transition, however, as Mark Selden (1971: 12) puts it in his account of the Shaanxi Ancestral Virtue organization, could be a "two-edged sword": peasant wrath, traditionally directed against authority as symbolized by the magistrate, now fell upon the heads of these gentry.

Nevertheless, the gentry *were* able to organize militia for their own defense, and the reason lay both in the existence of "patron-client bonds" (see Scott, 1972) and in the strong tradition of local affiliation that often overwhelmed rural class differences. As the activities of the many self-defense societies that sprang up after the 1920s showed, a group was not inclined to defend other villages or districts unless specifically mobilized to do so. When the pressure was off, the villagers lost interest. Furthermore, desperation born of poverty made cheap recruits readily available (Bianco, 1972: 214; Hsiao, 1960: 424); as the threat to gentry interests was usually itself rooted in poverty, an offer that

improved upon the rewards to be expected from banditry, minus the danger, was often enough to tip the balance.

Since militia were specifically designed to protect hearth and home, the combination of respect for gentry status with the tradition of "person, life, and property" made peasant mobilization in defense of gentry interests easy. Even local bandit gangs, when left alone, often had more in common with the local bosses than with neighboring gangs. Local ties and property thus provided the cement that held the militia together. From the former they derived a tendency to degenerate into cliques; from the latter evolved a paradoxical social role which, though the rank and file often comprised the poorest members of the village, frequently led to their defending the village (that is, defending village *property*) even against forces promising revenge for the inequities they suffered. In theory the militia constituted an auxiliary force for the defense of the status quo. Like the troops it was supposed to back up, it was officially responsible to the magistrate, or to the local military commander acting on his behalf. In practice, though, the gentry were often able to exercise independent control, and to initiate local suppression campaigns without awaiting approval. The bloody repression in Henan in 1911-1912 was an example.

THE FUTURE-SAFEGUARDING SOCIETY[6]

> In the last year of the Xuantong reign mutinies began to occur in every province, and the overall situation in the Empire became dire. On the provincial boundaries bandits began to swarm unchecked; yet no particular provision was made to prepare for the impending emergency. Thereupon, all preparations for introducing the "New Policy" were suspended and funds quickly diverted into creating the "Future-Safeguarding Society" [Linxian zhi IV, minzheng 3/4, quoted in Shimamoto, 1974: 53].

The 1911 revolution in Henan had been extremely complex and extremely bloody. The weakness of urban forces (students and

intellectuals) and the allegiance of the military to the Henanese Yuan Shikai, coupled with Yuan's personal presence in the province since 1908, thrust the burden of revolutionary activities upon bandit gangs and secret societies.

Not that this was anything new for them. Since the unveiling of the government's New Policy (Xin zhengce) in 1901-1902, an attempt to contain political threats by revitalizing national politics and formalizing rural local control, there had been a series of rural outbreaks. "Local self-government" boards, created under gentry management to formalize elite control in the villages and hamlets, were ordered to institute new taxes to replenish the government's coffers. Since the taxes were levied upon those least able to buy immunity, the effect was to exacerbate rather than to ease rural tension, and in parts of Henan the peasants were reduced to desperate poverty. Missionaries arriving in 1905 consequently found the province in a state of "insurrection" (Augustana Mission, 1915: 10), and it was in this year of widespread resistance to both foreign economic encroachment and official corruption that many of the bandit leaders later to forge alliances with Tongmeng Hui agents first came to prominence. Until 1911 they maintained often-undisputed sway over much of south and southwest Henan. Future-Safeguarding was the local gentry's response to this threat (Nozawa, 1972: 138-139).

Set up in 1910, the society's ostensible duties were to "guide and assist in the affairs of the community" (Xu Rongyang xian zhi, 1924: VII/6b). In practice this involved a rural surveillance system almost identical to that of the *baojia,* the old imperial spy system defunct since the end of the nineteenth century. "Village heads" appointed by society officials to oversee mutual responsibility named "squad leaders" whose job was to organize the entire village into "squads" of ten families each. Vagrants and people with criminal records were carefully scrutinized and taken off to the yamen for interrogation.

By late 1911 educational funds were being channeled into the organization in Linxian to enable it to raise men and buy arms to suppress bandits. From this one may guess with reasonable

confidence that local gentry were already openly diverting their wealth and energy from application of the New Policy to the defense of their own private interests. When in the following year large arms shipments were ordered from the military, official acquiescence also became obvious. Village gentry, though they had been aloof from the baojia, were selected as society officials, thus formalizing their assumption of local responsibility. Funds were provided either from the local treasury or through compulsory house-to-house collections (Shuntian shibao, 3/3/11; 9/3/12; 1/11/12).

The gentry-raised levies could now take the offensive, and the rural elite exulted. It had emerged, despite a revolution inaugurating a republic dedicated to the welfare of its common people, to maintain the social status-quo-ante in the villages by actually taking sides with the same republic. Subsequently, these gentry vowed and took cruel revenge upon those who, during the "revolution," had put them in fear for their lives and property.

In the name of "weeding out the roots of future-banditry," country-cleansing programs were unleashed upon the helpless peasants of southern Henan. According to the report of the army commander of Lushan, the number of arrests was "incalculable":

> Those accused of light offenses were given a fair trial before impartial gentry and set free after signing a pledge; more serious cases were brought immediately before an attendant magistrate for interrogation and execution on the spot.

Branding as a "bandit" by Future-Safeguarding thus meant immediate death. During the two weeks or so following November 25, 1912, some one thousand peasants were reportedly killed in Lushan alone (Shuntian shibao, 11/12/12). Any weapons found were handed over to the society for "protection against bandits" (Zhengfu gongbao, quoted in Shimamoto, 1974: 53).

Not all gentry necessarily found cause to take part in this counterrevolution. Nevertheless, those who did, as Barrington Moore (1973: 221) has pointed out, were likely to be the most powerful and the most influential. For the peasants, moreover, it made little difference who was doing it.

The orgy of bloodshed did not go unnoticed. Toward the end of 1912 a Beijing newspaper complained that Future-Safeguarding had fallen under the sway of "evil gentry"; the provincial governor, reflecting the fear that all established authorities feel toward independent power centers, then stepped in to assert official control. Over the next eighteen months the society was successively reorganized and eventually absorbed into the overall defense system of southern Henan in 1914 (Shuntian shibao, 8/11/12; Zhengfu gongbao 236, 23/12/12; Nozawa, 1972: 139; Shuntian shibao, 3/5/13, 27/5/14 give the sequence of changes).

Despite the titular change, Future-Safeguarding continued to be a locally based organization for the defense of gentry interests. The continuing power of the gentry was perhaps best demonstrated two years later in their treatment of officials of the National Land Measurement Office. Lest their calculations result in a more equitable distribution of local holdings, these officials were packed off to Beijing without ceremony (Peking Daily News, 26/5/16, quoted in Friedman, 1974: 164). The society still maintained its original name in 1920, allegedly fighting off bandits in Xiping district (Xiping xianzhi, 1934: "Yiyong zhi," 3), and also as late as 1924, when it was referred to as an antiwarlord grouping (Ren, 1924: 552).

Future-Safeguarding's frequent clashes with more popular groups underlined its political position. Apart from being influential in checking the growth of Bai Lang's power, for example, it also helped pick off stragglers when the band returned to Henan from Gansu in June 1914. The story of Future Safeguarding is a crucial one, demonstrating the capacity of local gentry, using their entrenched social position, to dominate the countryside militarily. It also shows the reluctance of the legitimate authorities to share their power, and exposes the gulf that, despite the patron-client ideal, ultimately yawned between the classes in rural Chinese society.

The gentry, unlike the magistrate, had their roots in their home area. When they mobilized, therefore, they did so in defense of their own lives and property, not of some abstract notion of the

state. For this reason they were obliged to face up to the fact of banditry, a constant reminder of the violent reaction that would be unleashed should their power begin to slip. The magistrate, on the other hand, was interested primarily in somehow maintaining peace and quiet, preferably through ensuring a stable balance of power. Naturally, in the long run the magistrate's interests paralleled those of the gentry, whose fortunes equally depended upon maintaining the status quo. In the event of a bandit suppression campaign, the gentry forces were obvious allies. Yet the alliance was a shaky one. In many cases official suppression was not attempted, magistrates merely closing the gates of their city when bandits were reported. Gentry families in outlying areas were obliged to prepare their own defense, and it was left to them to either fight it out or come to terms.

As the Republican period went by, cooperation between the gentry-led militia and the ever-increasing numbers of regular troops was sorely affected by the crushing burden of official exactions and military requisitions. This burden fell heaviest upon those with most property—local gentry, landlords, and rich peasants—and it became increasingly difficult in these times to draw a line between gentry-led militia and the once potentially radical Red Spear (that is before membership was closed to those without property) and other self-defense groups. In the process of this transition, groups like Future-Safeguarding that had formerly cooperated with the establishment to suppress bandits and uphold the status quo, now allied with bandits and others in the name of local defense against warlord rule.

BANDIT POWER

> A Yunnanese saying: "The Chinese own the plains, the tribesmen own the mountains, the bandits own the road" [Snow, 1972: 58].

A combination of difficult terrain—whether complex riverine areas, swamps, or dense mountains—and political instability could be lethal for the forces of "order." In the remote "bandit

country" of south and southwest Henan, local gangs, inheritors of the locality's rebellious tradition, replaced the government's appointed military figures, became popular champions, provided protection against corrupt and vengeful gentry, and defied all the incursions of outside authority. Wang Tiancong, later to become a popular guerrilla leader and a commander in the army that opposed Yuan Shikai's imperial designs in 1916, was a prominent example. Wang "gathered together many 'country heroes'" and, "using Songshan's natural advantages," demonstrated his superiority by repeatedly repulsing the government's suppression campaigns. On one such campaign the local military commander Xie Baosheng, one of the few conscientious soldiers in this part of China at the time (immediately before the 1911 insurrection), suddenly saw on a nearby mountaintop the figure of Wang outlined against the sky:

> Oy! Xie Baosheng! Our paths have crossed many a time. The only reason I've spared your life up to now is that I'm waiting to see if you've the heart to become a good official or not! If you don't believe me, just watch!

So saying, Wang sent a single bullet through the top of the commander's peaked cap. Xie, it is said, ran for his life, and never relaxed until he had put several miles between himself and Wang Tiancong (Minli bao, 10/7/11).

Even the "notorious" Sun Yuzhang, though certainly no popular hero, because of the corrupt and inefficient rule of Zhang Zhenfang was requested by local people to protect them against the exactions of the new gentry-controlled local boards in 1913. Other prominent chiefs in this area were powerful enough to establish their own arsenals and to issue "safe conduct" permits through the mountains (Central China Post, 12/11/13, quoted in U.S. State Department, 1910-1929, 2035; Minli bao, 26/10/12: 8; Shuntian shibao, 13/3/14: 10). Bandit power climaxed in south Henan, however, with the rebellion of Bai Lang between 1911 and 1914. Officials confessed that

> a certain number of towns and villages are obeying his law.... The people are glad to be protected by the White Wolf against the

> regular troops who, submitting to no authority or discipline, lay waste to the country [L'Asie Francaise, February 1914, quoted in Friedman, 1974: 122; see also North China Herald, 8/8/14: 417].

As warlord control consolidated itself in China in the succeeding decade, southern and western Henan remained by and large the bandits' domain. Despite Wu Peifu's nominal authority in the province, in 1922 bandits were able to burst into his headquarters in Luoyang, warn the four-thousand-strong garrison against resistance, and kill a well-known merchant for refusing to pay tribute. Wu, though himself surrounded by crack troops, admitted his inability to guarantee personal safety to missionaries beyond the city walls (Franck, 1923: 343; China Weekly Review, 18/11/22: 426; China's Millions, November 1926: 171).

The most interesting, since best-documented, example, however, comes from northwest Fujian, where a missionary, Harry Caldwell, found that bandit chiefs actually held court, tried cases, and dispensed justice:

> One chief I visited held regular courts in order that the people, who could get no semblance of justice in the regular courts, because they could not engage the necessary influential scholars to play lawyer for them, could get fair play. In all such instances where I had occasion to investigate, I learned of no case where the bandit acted counter to the merits of the testimony given. Notwithstanding the terrible suffering caused by the presence of so many bandits abroad, one often heard the people expressing a preference for the bandit courts to the regular tribunals. Never once did I hear a suggestion of bribery entering into a decision by a bandit judge [Caldwell, 1925: 192-193].

Bandits in this part of the world thus constituted a level of control independent of that exercised by the "authorities." When times were peaceful, "arrangements" assured a stable balance of force, but the standard bandit/armed guerrilla tactic of avoiding head-on clashes provided no guarantee of stability to the people living under their control. These Fujian bandits, for example, could do nothing to prevent newly arrived northern troops from burning the homes of two families charged with sheltering them; on the other hand, since they had forced their presence upon the

families, they appraised the damage and fully reimbursed the victims without equivocation (Caldwell, 1925: 193-194).

Such episodes, compared to the uncaring attitude of the "official" side, made bandit control in many areas both accepted and respected. When it became necessary to reassert it, though, there were no half measures. The theft of a $30,000 tribute from the townspeople provoked this same chief-cum-judge to send down a raiding party that burned more than three hundred homes and slaughtered hundreds of people. A placard called it an object lesson to any community daring to defy a bandit chief (Caldwell, 1925: 209). Nevertheless, since this was what the average Chinese rural community had come to expect from its rulers anyway, they did at least benefit from the degree of justice they received. None was surprised that the chief should seek his retribution in such a violent manner (though it is more than likely that another seed was sown for the levelling revolution that would sweep away all the representatives of authority).

This kind of autonomy and local familiarity made ransoming (*jiapiao:* "stealing the ticket") the most lucrative and practical way of making a bandit living, as well as imposing a sort of unofficial wealth tax on local property. It was an old and tried practice, with three obvious advantages over wholesale looting. First, the risks were smaller, since the practice was, on the whole, accepted by the victims. Second, whereas loot was difficult to dispose of, a captive's family could usually be relied upon to redeem him (I say "him" intentionally, for in a patriarchal society like China a female captive lost her value if kept overnight, and, though it was not unknown for a woman to be held for ransom, among bandits as a whole it was generally regarded as a tactical mistake).[7] Finally, captives, being mobile, were more convenient when the gang was forced to go on the run. After 1920 or so, when someone hit on the brilliant idea of taking foreign "tickets" *(yangpiao)* instead of Chinese *(benpiao),* ransoming became the symbol of "bandit-ridden China."

THE RACKET

Unquestionably, banditry was a hard and dangerous profession. Since most bandits were ultimately out to enrich

themselves, the prospect of getting themselves killed before they could spend their "riches" (relative, of course, since rural China did not produce millionaires with great frequency) was hardly appealing. According to the writer and anthropologist Elie Reclus (1891: 272-274, quoted in McIntosh, 1969: 1), the origins of the state and its police force lay in a combination among brigands to substitute the collection of tolls for outright robbery, thus eliminating competition among themselves. In just this way, Chinese bandits sought to acquire for themselves a niche in the local power set-up, and were often welcomed by a less-than-vigorous local constabulary. The precondition, of course, was the inability of the "legitimate" authorities to enforce their power.

In particular, where banditry was permanent or semipermanent, a gang might draw more benefit from joining the system than from fighting it. The combination of established rural markets described by Skinner (1964-1965) and the complex communications network covering China, simultaneously promoted banditry and served to provide the means of its integration into the system. The transformation of bandit gangs into armed protection groups, like the routinization of the Mafia in Al Capone's Chicago, was the most obvious example of the congruence of the "overworld" and the "underworld" in China. While their bandit origins virtually assured immunity to attack from that quarter, they could also provide armed insurance against 'official' incursions—unauthorized military requisitions, toll fees, and the like. Many a gang made a living from tributes exacted from local merchants, companies, factories, and so on as a guarantee of nonbelligerence.

From this point it is an easy transition to "organized crime," or the racket, sometimes known as the "private government of crime." The criminologist Mary McIntosh (1969: 1) has put it in a nutshell: "If the state has a monopoly of the legitimate means of force, the racket strives for a monopoly of the illegitimate means." In such conditions, while there is no conscious threat posed to the state, the state can, in fact, be weakened as the racket subverts its underlings, disrupts communications, and, as we have seen, provides an alternative, preferable model of social control. Consequently, such terms as "bandit kingdom" and "brigands'

world," so often and so scornfully bandied about by the foreign and native press in China, often contained more than a grain of truth. The state, of course, would have been the last to admit it—hence the derogatory label "bandits"—but was nonetheless careful not to let the situation get out of hand.

The essential element in racketeering, as McIntosh (1969: 5) again points out, is that the victims do not usually take steps to prevent it by cooperating with the state. This was one of the advantages of ransoming: "Since it is in the programme of every wealthy Chinese to be kidnapped sooner or later, there is always a certain sum of money laid aside to be used for ransom" (Lilius, 1930: 135). Since racketeering flourishes most easily in areas where the state is unable to enforce its set of rules, there is naturally more future in conforming to that of one's immediate masters—the "mini-state" of the "bandit world."

In Fujian, for instance, the China Import and Export Lumber Company of Shanghai paid "enormous sums yearly" not only to persuade local bandits not to molest their forest workers, but also for protection against "nonlocals"—bandits, that is (Mackay, 1927: 188, 192). It was Manchuria, however, where insecure frontier or outback conditions helped create perhaps the most comprehensive protection system in China, that provided the most vivid illustration. An American tobacco merchant's memoirs provide a case in point. He hired "the worst robber [he] could find" to protect his property, conduct bank transactions, and guard the business in the owners' absence. This robber would stand all-night vigil outside the house, shouting that he was a robber guarding a friend, and no one was to come near. His "organization" even provided a small flag to be displayed on the company's carts to permit unmolested travel (Thomas, 1928: 172-176; see also Kuchiki, 1966: 133-134).

In such areas, where the distinction between "troubled" and "peaceable" times was as elusive as the bandits themselves, men acting as armed guards could even become local potentates, independent of both the authorities and bandit gangs, but equally respected and tolerated by both. Bai Lang, before the political events of 1911 changed his mind, was mildly resented by local chiefs because he refused to "climb Mt. Liang"—take the bandit

road; yet he remained respected and was able regularly to conduct commercial convoys unscathed through one of the oldest "bandit kingdoms" in north China (Kaifeng, 1960: 20; see also Zhongguo renmin, 1961: VI, 518-529; Mackay, 1927: 253; Mancall and Jidkoff, 1972).

Thus a distinction has emerged between "banditry" on the one hand, in which the business of robbery itself tended to be a continual rather than continuous process, and "racketeering," which was a continuous process. Naturally, banditry under the optimum conditions described above could and often did turn into racketeering. The Manchurian gang that captured an American doctor named Harvey Howard in 1925, for instance, not only kept a number of hostages, which it ransomed off at intervals, but also indulged in another racket: collecting, with the connivance of local soldiers, a regular opium tribute from the local farmers (Howard, 1926: 98-100).

The "racket" could be multilayered. A warlord who controlled his territory at the expense of the central government, which lacked the power to oust him, was no different in essence from the bandit chief who, in turn, operated in a remote corner of the warlord's turf, again at the sufferance of the unwilling patron. In one sense the three were identical. Each existed by extracting from a more or less unwilling populace the means for its own subsistence in the form of taxes. The degree to which it was able to do this successfully depended on the amount of control it could exercise in a given area. At the point where one level lost the ability to enforce its rules, there was another always ready to take its place.

The point about bandits in areas like west and south Henan, Manchuria, and so on was that the nature and extent of their operations indicated a situation in which the power of the central authorities, political and economic, had been largely replaced by an upstart newcomer that, in embryo at least, represented a potential new state. By exploiting this quality, the communists in later years were to turn the threat into reality.

Bandit power, like any other kind harsh by definition, could yet be relatively impartial and consistent compared to that of the establishment, which, in its most naked manifestations, was

intended not only to cow the population but also to support a tottering civil and military structure at the people's expense. Bandit rule, reluctantly acknowledged as was that of central authority, at least sprang from and therefore answered to local considerations, as did gentry control. It too could be expected to react most violently to local issues. However despotic they were, local people felt more secure at the hands of locally-produced masters than in serving foreign ones. Until outside forces intervened, the balance of power between these two, bandits and gentry, was a crucial indicator of the distribution of local control.

FISH IN THE WATER: BANDITS AND THE COMMON PEOPLE

> Brigands live by love and fear. When they inspire only love, it is a weakness. When they inspire only fear, they are hated and have no supporters [Kemal, 1961: 56].

Bandits derived sustenance from their close relationship with the people, and usually died when this relationship was broken. Thus, the fate of a bandit lay in the hands of the people who protected him. When he lost this protection he was as good as dead anyway, but sometimes, if he had been particularly brutal, the people would lead the soldiers to him. They did not expect him to be kind, for masters were not like that, and in any case power absolved the holder from such responsibilities in a society where most were helpless. But they did expect him to be fair. This was the bandit's justification and the source of his acceptance. Those who were both became local champions and, like Bai Lang, were remembered for generations (Kaifeng, 1960). Others, like Sun Yuzhang, whom we met above, were feared and respected enough to be called upon to defend local people against repression, and shrewd enough not to refuse. But men like this have not come down in legend; they were respected for their rejection of straight society, but not loved for any outstanding deeds.

No bandit gang that alienated itself from the peasants lasted very long. While Hobsbawm (1972: 58ff.) has suggested that

through the sheer scale of his ferocity the most villainous chief could secure a place in legend, and cites the bandits of northeast Brazil as evidence, in China at least only those who clearly established themselves on the side of the people seem to have been able to do so. An investigation carried out in south Henan in the late 1950s, for example, revealed the depth of sympathy for Bai Lang despite his bandit label. Even then, almost half a century later, songs and tales of his bravery continued to circulate in the local villages (Kaifeng, 1960: 21).

Such remarks, nevertheless, must be qualified. Just as a rabbit never eats the grass where she likes to sleep, so the bandit was careful not to operate on home ground. A bandit gang was a local product, and at home differed from so-called self-defense organizations like the militia only in its class allegiance, if at all. When it moved beyond its local boundaries, however, it became an enemy, whatever its origins. Many "antibandit' activities said to demonstrate peasant solidarity in the 1920s were thus no more than intergroup or intervillage struggles.[8]

In his home area the bandit identified his world, providing a model for heroism and youthful rebellion; outside its confines, spatial and emotional, he was as a dead man, an outlaw to be hunted down and killed even as the bandit outsiders protected their own. "Over in Kirin," claimed an informant of Agnes Smedley, "when bandits are beheaded, the relatives of men they have killed sometimes cut out their hearts and eat them" (1944: 40). This relationship was more than just local solidarity. The bandit's activities were calculated to ensure a continuing base and refuge, without which he could not exist. A bandit acquaintance of Smedley, again, told her that one of his uncles had belonged to a bandit gang in the nearby mountains, "about [whose] name was woven a subtle web of mystery and of unexpressed approval." This uncle would descend at night and depart at dawn, leaving behind money and loot (1934: 50-51). Harvey Howard (1926: 113-114, 194), too, was startled to find that his captors were welcome wherever they stayed, and when not made welcome would move on without demur. On the other side of the river, though, the bandit was not so tied. Along the Sungari in northern Manchuria, in particular, "the common people consider that the bandits of

their own side are a nuisance, but part of the natural social order and usually amenable to diplomacy and reasonable arrangement, while the bandits from the other side of the river they loathe and dread" (Lattimore, 1932: 233). What the villagers felt was basically respect built on fear—the mix that kept them subdued, whoever the master—tempered with local affinity that identified the bandit as "one of us." With the above remarks in mind, therefore, one must be circumspect about reports of local inhabitants taking up arms against "bandits," for the two roles, bandit and victim, were usually interchangeable.

The four-province trek of Bai Lang in 1914 furnishes ample contrast to support the above arguments. In March 1914, before he led his band west, popular sympathy was "unlimited" in south Henan, where some districts supplied all his needs, others simply enjoyed his protection, and "all agreed him to be the future successor to the Ming emperors." Because he always attacked the rich families and fought the hated government troops, the poor gave him a ready welcome and provided him with "ears and eyes" (Shuntian shibao, 1/3/14: 11; Da ziyoubao 18/1/14, quoted in Dong, 1958: 36). General Feng Yuxiang, hot on his trail at one point, complained that he received nothing but false information from country people concerning Bai Lang's whereabouts (Feng, 1944: 206), and even suppression commander Duan Qirui admitted in an interview "the support which [Bai Lang] is receiving from the people of the very provinces he is laying waste. The White Wolf is furthermore supported by the people with provisions" (Shanghai Times 9/4/14, quoted in Friedman, 1974: 128).

When Bai Lang abandoned his familiar haunts, however, the nature and extent of his support changed, disappearing in proportion to the band's increasing violence, in turn mirroring the widening gulf between it and its original base. President Yuan Shikai had good cause to rejoice as he did, recognizing a fatal mistake. It seems highly unlikely that Bai himself was unaware of the implications of his move, since several of his most important subchiefs advised against it and some ultimately seem to have refused to follow him. No doubt his head had been turned by the attentions of revolutionary mobilizers anxious to exploit all

sources of opposition to Yuan Shikai, but the result was the loss of a great revolutionary chance.

The reasons for the transformation of the band are not hard to find. The British consul Teichman (1921: 23) would note three years later on a journey that followed the route of Bai Lang's westward march, "The four words 'Pai Lang Chao Liang' (White Wolf is recruiting) passed secretly up and down the Han valley, and recruits from all quarters flocked to join the band."

While Bai appealed to the popular legend of Liu Bang, the farmer-turned-first-Han-emperor (Belov, 1960: 17, quoted in Friedman, 1974: 156), most of his recruits were not peasants but marginal men, nontillers, members of preexisting bandit gangs and secret societies who would have joined any large popular army in transit. Others, more transient recruits, were the poor, starving from three consecutive famine years. Thus there is no record of the success of a scheme to persuade Shaanxi peasants to tear up the railway tracks to hamper pursuing troops. Indeed, claimed the press, when the band recrossed the province a month later, stragglers were set upon by local peasants and killed (Shuntian shibao, 2/4/14: 3, 28/5/14: 4).

For all that Muslims constituted a considerable minority in his home country of Baofeng, largely Mohammedan Gansu created further problems, which Bai Lang found insoluble. As Friedman (1974: 162) has pointed out, his Shaanxi recruits may even have sought to settle scores with the Muslims, who had laid waste much of their province in the nineteenth-century rebellion. The localism of Bai's own men thus came up against that of the Gansu peasants, fostered by centuries of Han domination and naturally encouraged by the local elite. Consequently, and especially after killing a popular Muslim general in May 1914, Bai Lang's men received a series of drubbings from guerrillas organized by local gentry and officials (Wu, n.d.: 19; Shuntian shibao, 26/5/14: 9; Huang, 1960: 26-27). Support, of a motley and less-than-savory hue, came instead from the traditional quarters: disbanded troops of the reactionary Muslim general Ma Enliang; New Religionists seeking to exploit the band to foment a Mohammedan uprising; and the predominantly Han Elder Brother Society (Times, 2/5/14; Shuntian shibao, 15/6/14, 27/7/14; on the New Reli-

gion, see Wright, 1967: 107ff.). Even the post-1949 investigation, moreover, confirmed that Bai Lang's support did not extend to the ordinary Gansu peasant (Kaifeng, 1960: 22), and when he returned to Henan the irregulars remained behind as simple bandits.

Yet Bai Lang was an exception, his gang swollen by poverty and overmilitarization in north China and his ambitions fired by the attentions of power-conscious revolutionaries. Most gangs were held back either by the limits of their popularity or by an unwritten territorial agreement with neighboring gangs. Within these limits they could provide a good measure of stability for rich and for poor. Payment of the appropriate dues assured the former a degree of security against other gangs (as well as against their own gang, of course), while the poor could shelter under the bandit umbrella against the ever-threatening soldiers.

Banditry, for lack of sufficient investigation, has usually been unquestioningly regarded as preying upon the unresisting poor, an interpretation accepted by so eminent a scholar as Tawney (1964: 73-74): "There is a case, no doubt, for the bandit, though it is seldom stated. . . . Unfortunately, it is easier to shear sheep than wolves, and, though popular sympathy is sometimes with him, the majority of his victims are worse off than himself." While it is commonsensical enough to choose one's victims from those least able to resist, the evidence demands qualification of this interpretation. It ignores the need felt by local people for protection against those predators euphemistically referred to as "protection troops," even at the cost of a portion of their income; it ignores the fact that most victims of "banditry" suffered more at the hands of pursuing soldiers than from the bandits themselves; and, most important of all, it ignores banditry's close local ties. That the bandit did not rob the rich *in order* to feed the poor is immaterial. The poor expected no more, for did not the bandit deserve some reward for making the difficult decision to break out of the village routine—a break which most dared entertain only in their dreams? One may scoff, or smile ruefully, at reports that Bai Lang's fighters threw "cash and notes . . . out to the poor" (North China Herald, 31/3/14: 845), suggesting that the sum formed but a miniscule proportion of the total proceeds. But the fact remains

that to an impoverished north China peasantry such a "pittance" amounted to undreamt-of riches.

When Wang Tiancong's band set out to attack Luoyang in October 1911, local people saw them off with tea and wheat cakes (Zhongguo renmin, 1961: V, 365). This relationship was vital, and a case study from another province gives a sample of what happened when it broke down. After successfully living off the rich peasant and rural gentry of a district in Anhui for some time, a gang was suddenly caught:

> The explanation was quite simple. . . . During their early patrol, the guerrillas' efforts had been confined to the looting of more or less wealthy families. . . . Then, for reasons unknown, the bandits failed to discriminate and began raids on ordinary peasants and tenant villagers, often burning the houses of their victims. . . . The peasants kept tabs on the location of the bandits and informed the local authorities [Fried, 1956: 229].

"Politics," however, was "politics," whether of the bandit or the legitimate variety, and, like anyone else, the peasant as a rule sensibly steered clear of it. Fujian was not the only place where "encouragement" was sometimes necessary. Even the young men of west Henan, for example, did a kind of obligatory "active service" with the bands, which kept up a permanent pressure on the prosperous plains towns at the foot of the mountains. In Manchuria, a captive noted the impressed look that greeted a bandit who had swapped his old donkey for a peasant's fresh one: "Hao! When a hunghutze wants a thing he takes it. That is as it should be" (Pawley, 1935: 229).

In a violent society, violence ensured a bandit respect, based on love and fear. That it usually took a more positive form than the subtle, sustained violence practiced by those who held legitimate power, simply served to underwrite its avenging quality. It was a rejection of "peasant quietism," itself a backlash of attempts at social control like those of today's Middle America. A song, describing the relative qualities of west Henan leaders of 1911, gives a collective picture of what a bandit chief was expected to be:

> Old Ninth Guan is benevolent and kind;
> Old Zhang Bing is not far behind;

Pale-faced and scholarly is Zhang Zhigong,
As is his teacher Zhai Yunsheng.
While doubting and suspicious is Wang Tiancong,
In with both feet leaps Han Yukun,
And a devilish killer is Tao Furong.
[Zhongguo renmin, 1961: V, 361]

Hobsbawm's oversimplified conception of a "social bandit," then, needs qualification just as much as does the opposite conception, that the bandit preyed only on the poor. Like it or not, a social bandit in one place was, under normal conditions, a mortal enemy in another, liable to be provoked into unreasonable violence even when seeking to avoid it. Chinese bandits do not seem to have made themselves remembered by violence alone, as have those of the Brazilian northeast.

The importance of alienating social agitators from the people, however limited their vision, was not lost on those jealous to preserve their own power. If sporadic terror had been the hallmark of certain short-lived bandits, *total* terror was the prerogative of government. The Clean-Up Campaign was the standard instrument, equally effective against the appeal of the communists as against local protectors. After informers among his own followers had led former bandit troops to kill the already mortally wounded Bai Lang, the corpse was decapitated and the now-decomposing head hung on the walls of Kaifeng to remind would-be successors of the dangers of the bandit life. Subsequently, though the law demanded verification of a bandit suspect before he could be executed, kill-and-burn instead became the order of the day: "The order to the troops is to exterminate the robbers' relatives, confiscate their farms, and burn down their homes to prevent uncaught brigands from returning to their homes and at the same time to serve as an object lesson to others" (Central China Post as cited in the Shanghai Times 17/8/15, quoted in Friedman, 1974: 164).

In short, a bandit's days were generally numbered by the arrival of a strong outside force, which would promptly set about making the lives of the people so unbearable that they would catch him themselves. Not even "national" governments were above such methods when their monopoly seemed in jeopardy, a lesson learned by both the Jiangxi and Eyuwan Soviets, where govern-

ment planes deliberately bombed villages merely suspected of being Red. A high-level military officer confessed openly in the Guomindang's *Anti-Red Suppression Monthly* in February 1931,

> If the Government cannot find a better way of solving the Red bandit problem than it is using today, it will be obliged to isolate all those regions and kill the last person with poison gas. Every man, woman, and child from ten to sixty is either a spy for the Reds or is a member of the Red Army [quoted in Smedley, 1956: 291; see also Dagong bao 1/11/31, cited in Clubb, 1968: 49].

The bandit-judge of Fujian thus confronted an army officer with the following ringing condemnation:

> General Wang, you people have within the past few months executed more than 3000 people. In all of your cutting off of heads you have not caught ten bandits. In this it is impossible that a bandit chief be mistaken [Caldwell, 1925: 177].

"Love and fear," from the Taurus mountains of Turkey to the bandit kingdoms of China, were the twin keys to a successful career in banditry. Neither could supplant the other totally. While there were plenty of chiefs ready to rely upon the latter to cow the peasants into submission, these did not last long, betrayed either by the people whose favors they flouted or by their own followers, who foresaw a violent end even closer than that likely to befall a bandit under the best of circumstances.

On the other hand, a man who attained a Robin Hood reputation, who was called upon as Bai Lang was to right wrongs and avenge the poor—in other words, a "people's bandit" (a contradiction in terms, of course)—was just as vulnerable. The man who simply asserted his independence from and contrast with "the rest" was usually ready to succumb to the wiles of the local establishment, for his kind of banditry was above all a kind of masculine self-assertion, and what better status symbol in a patriarchal world than official appointment? But the people's bandit, the rebel and subversive, was different. He was best out of the way, for his existence, even in the unlikely event of his joining

the authorities, was a permanent threat to them and an inspiration to the people. His real valor would be swollen by the growth of mythical stories about his strength and exploits, so that those detailed to catch him dragged their feet in fear. His survival of repeated "victory" announcements made his eventual capture and death, like that of Che Guevara, seem unreal. Yet caught he always was, though rarely by direct means.

Suppression agencies knew that the people would not willingly surrender one of their own any more than they would protect one who rejected their favor. Nor would outlaws voluntarily place themselves upon their enemies' mercy, with their best prospect the executioner's sword. Instead, conditions in the villages were made so unbearable that the peasants questioned the sense of further protection when it threatened their own lives and those of their children too. The added constant presence of suppression troops in the villages eliminated them as a refuge and source of food for the bandit, who was thus forced to take to the mountains permanently. After this there were plenty of men, usually fellow bandits, ready to commit murder in return for a handsome reward. "I can look after my enemies," said the Sicilian bandit Salvatore Giuliano, "but God protect me from my friends" (Maxwell, 1956: ix).

CONCLUSION

Most villages—or at least groups of villages—had a gang. Its sense of identity was strong. In the same way, a village's own internal cohesion often isolated it from and put it at loggerheads with other communities. The gangs were the vanguard of this village solidarity.

Inevitably, one village gained at least temporary superiority over the others; yet this preeminence, drawing the loyalty of the poor and sometimes the acquiescence of the rich in the gang's own locality, also gave it political punch. For the areas where banditry was able to flourish—provincial border regions, remote mountains, river deltas, and the like—were precisely those where the formal patterns of administration were already ineffective. Local

officials had a natural interest in reconciling themselves to this reality.

To request suppression troops from outside was to invite more trouble than the bandits themselves caused. Therefore, in the interests of a quiet life, these officials often suggested terms whereby the gang found itself representing legal authority as a local defense detachment or as a militia under gentry leadership. The effect was to legitimize its previous informal activities, keeping robbery at a level below that which would attract attention in the capital, but sufficient to make maintenance of the new suppression force justifiable. Other gangs either submitted to their new masters or were forcibly repressed until a new one (or a combination) arose strong enough to challenge the balance of power, when the process began all over again. In the interim, "crime" meshed with "law enforcement" in such a way as to make the two all but indistinguishable. (Indeed, in the Confucian tradition, with its stress on harmony, law enforcers were classed together with lawbreakers as social outcasts. See Chen, 1975: 124.)

Bandits could thus often lay a claim to a significant role in the local power set-up, reinforcing this claim by force, if necessary. Suppression troops rarely risked their lives without a fair chance of easy victory. If locally recruited, they were naturally on good terms with the bandits (sometimes they actually *were* the bandits, depending on conditions), and hardly willing to suppress them, since their own livelihood demanded the existence of a "bandit problem." External troops faced the additional difficulty of being strangers in a land where "stranger" equalled "enemy," and their motivation suffered accordingly.

While local gentry often organized militia to fight the bandit threat to their lives and property, they were chiefly concerned with the danger to their homes, and only in the case of a major disturbance joined forces to defend the status quo. Hence bandits presented a viable alternative to official control, and in their capacity as local protectors sometimes developed strong popular ties that had to be destroyed before the legitimate authorities could reassert themselves. Frequently they did not bother, and

took the bandits to their own, for they were often the most effective of peacekeepers.

Finally, some general conclusions on the relationship between bandits and the people may be made. In the first place, it should be said, the nature of the relationship was explicit. In areas where bandit rule was effective, the bandits were the *rulers* and the people their *subjects,* whether rich or poor. The fact that bandit rule was often more discriminating than that of the outside authorities may be put down to the operation of local affinity. People prefer to be sat upon by their own kind than by outsiders, a fact that Third World "liberation" movements have demonstrated abundantly. With a local individual, you at least know how she or he is thinking, whereas the outsider is unpredictable. To be governed is natural; to be governed by foreigners, however, is intolerable; therefore, throw out the foreigners and replace them with local substitutes (of whom there is never a shortage of willing volunteers). At the same time, the home-grown ruler is aware of the factors that can contribute to or detract from the extent of his authority; outsiders have to rely upon brute force or minority cooptation.

Second, the results of the 1950s investigation in Henan revealed some basic truths regarding attitudes toward the White Wolf, Bai Lang. Old habits die hard, and people were "glad to accept his protection," ready even to recognize him as the new emperor if the occasion arose. It is clear, moreover, that bandit rule was usually accepted as the lesser of two evils. In Fujian, bandit courts were "preferred" to the regular ones. For the bandits themselves, the resort to legal process went only so far. When there seemed to be a threat to their hegemony, the offenders were put down by force.

One should not be surprised at such attitudes. In a male-dominated society gripped by recurrent poverty and sporadic violence, and permeated by the dulling effect of the agrarian cycle, there is no reason why a libertarian attitude toward the wielding of power should have emerged spontaneously, whether on the part of the power holders or of the people themselves. Why else has every modern revolution, even when it has removed the

threat of starvation, resulted in an authoritarian structure even more efficient and ruthless than that which it overthrew?

The bandit rulers aped the autocratic structure of the Chinese family to reinforce their internal ties and to legitimize their local sway.[9] People regarded them first and foremost as rulers, to whom a debt of gratitude might be owed for the relative protection they provided, but who still demanded tribute and other ritual obeisances in return, and who took harsh revenge when these were not forthcoming.

Be this as it may, though, we do not have to accept the usual denunciations of bandits as "common robbers," for we have seen that it was possible for a very special kind of relationship to pertain between bandits and the people under them. This relationship enforced itself upon both sides. Whereas the state, being supreme, can ride roughshod over minority dissent if it so desires, bandits controlled at best only the local, illegitimate means of power. Hence, while the people themselves were forced to acknowledge their local "protectors" as champions, the latter too were forced to live up to this demand by the threat posed by the legitimate authorities. Those who did not do so soon disappeared, though it is usually these who have become infamous representatives of banditry in the China literature, rather than the genuine protectors. (Such powerful leaders as Bai Lang, of course, were an exception.) Just as "good news is no news" for the press today, so parts of China that suffered their bandit rulers in relative peace did not attract newspaper headlines. The popular image of the bandit has been colored by one-sided reporting both in the press and in the history books, so that he has become accepted as a bloodthirsty character. He was not, at least not always and no more than others with power they wish to preserve. While agreeing that there is no smoke without a fire, at the same time we should not lose sight of the forest by looking only at the trees.

NOTES

1. This is not to suggest that the phenomenon of soldiers turning bandits was a new one, nor even that the word *bingfei* itself was new. Both, of course, were as old as the

military was, and both derived from the same factors, whether in the fourteenth or in the twentieth century: lack of pay, disbandment or flight following a defeat, and so on.

2. This is an aspect of banditry I am currently trying to think through more clearly. I will leave further comments to a future date.

3. This is true, of course, of any organized force that has ever tried to use irregulars. The Soviet Red Army in 1918-1921 allowed its partisan allies under the "Anarchist General" Nestor Makhno to bear the brunt of the fighting against Tsarist armies, while politically suspect soldiers of World War II were formed into separate battalions and sent into the front line, and even forced to wear black clothing when fighting in snow. The British Army during World War II, I am told, was prevented from sacrificing regiments of "unsoldierly" soldiers in a suicide attack on Burma only by the sudden end to hostilities in August 1945. (These points are taken, respectively, from P. Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement, 1918-1921,* Detroit 1974; a history of World War II whose author and title I have unfortunately forgotten; and the recollections of my father, who was one of those "unsoldierly" soldiers.)

4. The generalized picture of the military's local role given in this section is the one which came through to me as a result of my reading in local bandit affairs. It is not intended to be an analysis of the military system under the warlords, merely an idea of how the army appeared in practice through peasants' eyes.

5. The same disparaging label was later pinned by the communists upon Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), whose troops behaved in much the same way. I am indebted to Dr. Charles Curwen for this information.

6. The expression "Future-Safeguarding" is my personal translation preference. While the term in its original Mencian sense meant merely "mutual aid and protection," the present translation conveys the true flavor of what the Henan gentry had in mind, I think.

7. It has since been brought to my attention by Joseph W. Esherick that a large number of kidnapping cases in the Ming-Qing archives in Beijing feature women captives. Of these, about one-third were held for ransom (the remainder being intended for sale), suggesting that a woman's value did not fall so fast after all. I am grateful for this information, which indicates the need for a reappraisal of the usual view that bandits preferred not to kidnap women.

8. It is worth pointing out that the majority of Chinese peasant rebellions foundered on this same rock of local particularism. The Nian (1852-1868), for instance, could sustain their policy of gaining support from the starving through providing relief grain, only by acquiring food from elsewhere. This meant raids on other areas, which they thereby antagonized, and which either sought neutrality or fought with the government against the rebels (Chiang, 1954: 41, 90).

9. There was more to it than just this, of course. The band came to form a sort of substitute family for those not possessing or unable to live with their own. Moreover, since the family was the dominant fact of life for most Chinese, it was only natural that a bandit gang should also take on that structure.

APPENDIX

I am only too aware that the image of banditry presented in this paper probably veers rather too much toward the positive. The main reason is the subject matter at hand: I have

sought to show that bandits could *at times* present a viable alternative to the official hierarchy, instead of being mere marauders. This does not deny the fact that at other times—perhaps more often than not—bandits were indeed mere marauders.

I certainly do not accept the notion of bandits as "lovable" figures. As wielders of power, and ultimately as *men,* they were always a reminder of the violence lurking behind all imposed authority. I welcome the reaction against the overromanticized image presented by certain writers. On the other hand, I do think that in the generally reactionary political and academic atmosphere of today, there is a danger of the pendulum swinging too far. The evidence one way or the other—that is, for the bandit as cut-throat or as hero—is too scanty and too compromised by such factors as local allegiance, political motives, and so on to allow any hard conclusions.

There are positive and negative sides to banditry, just as there are to all representatives of power. If the people hated the bandits, it should not be forgotten that they equally hated the army, the magistrate, the gentry, the landlord, and everyone else who was not like them. The point to stress is not whether all bandits were good or bad, but that peasants saw very clearly whether a particular individual was enemy or friend, and adjusted their attitudes accordingly.

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