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Educators and Power-brokers: Political Mobilization and Violence in Wannian County
(Jiangxi province) 1926-1935

Abstract

This article examines the actions, politicization and mobilization of the Guomindang's revolutionary local elites who belonged to the late Qing generation, with specific attention to their make-up and the changing roots of their power. The article tackles the rapid demotion of local community members into the ranks of 'evil gentry' and the consequences for the Guomindang's reinstatement of power at the local level. It seeks to answer how and why well-educated and respected individuals, who were central to the functioning of local education, became enmeshed in violence; and how in turn, this reflected on the Guomindang's more general difficulty of securing its control. The analysis uses the case-study of the upper-stratum elites in Wannian County in the northeast of Jiangxi between 1926 and 1935, and argues that their characterization as 'evil gentry' must be reconsidered in light of the late Qing generation's power-reconfiguration whereby access to and control of education rather than ideology was pivotal.

Keywords: local elites, evil gentry, Guomindang, education, political mobilization, Jiangxi

In late March 1927 two young Communist leaders Hu Wansheng (胡完生 1900-1927) and Huang Shibiao (黃士彪 1902-1927) from Wannian (万年) County in the northeast of Jiangxi were kidnapped from the county government seat in Chengxiang (城廂) following their attempt to overthrow the county government. They were tortured and killed in a temple

near Chenying (陳營), a town not far from the county seat.¹ This episode and the political unrest that ensued in the county may be understood in the context of the competition between the Nationalists and the Communists during the Northern Expedition (1926-1928), and in conjunction with the heightened disagreement between the Left and Right Nationalist Party (or Guomindang, hereafter GMD). After all, the victims belonged to the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, CCP) and the instigators to the GMD. However, this article will demonstrate that deep-seated conflicts within Wannian's local elites, triggered by the late Qing generation,² have a direct bearing on this story. Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao's killing was the consequence of the power-reconfiguration among local elites which preceded the Northern Expedition (hereafter, the Expedition) and grew out of the development of schools as power bases, and was further complicated by the generational divide between the late Qing and the May Fourth generations to which the young Communists belonged.

This event was recorded officially in the 'evil gentry' (劣紳 lieshen) case in July 1927 when the Jiangxi Provincial Government issued arrest warrants for Mr Fang Zhiping (方之屏 1874-1943) and Mr Wu Fengchun (吳逢春 1872-1947) from Wannian. Fang was associated with the Right GMD and Wu, mentor to the young Communists leaders, was associated with the Left GMD.³ Fang was accused of killing Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao, and Wu was

¹ Chenying was ca. 15 km away from Chengxiang (see Figure 1) and in 1959 was chosen as the new county seat.

² In this article I associate the 'late Qing generation' with individuals of Wannian's local elites borne around 1870s-1890s, who were typically Qing degree-holders, were involved in local education, and supported the GMD.

³ So Wai-chor suggests that terms such as the GMD Left and the Right between 1924 and 1927 are fraught with different meanings and hence "ambiguous". The protagonists'

accused of overthrowing the county government following their murder. Wu Fengchun's power was based upon the running of a local school called *Shoumei* (壽梅), which the young Communists had attended, whilst Fang Zhiping's came from family relations with an influential GMD member and involvement in a competing school, *Yaoxi* (姚西). Between 1927 and 1935 petitions to the provincial and central governments hailed both men as 'evil gentry'. In the end, neither protagonist was prosecuted, but this murder and the subsequent trials provide the historian with a rare paper trail of the local power dynamics in Wannian. In particular, the petitions provide precious insights into the nature and political positioning of the local elites during these tumultuous years.⁴

Between 1926 and 1935 Jiangxi province plunged into turmoil. The conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists was so extensive and severe that it can be described as a civil war. A complex set of interrelated circumstances dictated the direction of Chinese politics during this period. The Expedition triggered a change of balance in an already unsettled environment where local power-holders had lived under the shadow of warlord armies and found ways to accommodate them. The split within the Nationalist Party (hereafter, the Split) flared up in March and April 1927 around Chiang Kai-shek's actions in

biographies do not shed light on why Wu and Fang were associated with either side except for their positioning when the GMD Split took place. Nonetheless, archival documents refer specifically to the protagonists as belonging to the 'Left' and 'Right'. So Wai-chor, *The Kuomintang Left in the National Revolution, 1924-1931* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 3-4.

⁴ All archival materials used for this article are contained in two *juan* consulted in microfilm form: "Cases of Arrest Warrants for the Evil Gentry in Jiangxi Province" (1) and (2) (Jiangxi sheng lieshen tongji an) 1927-1935, Microfilm 117, Archives of the National Government, Academia Historica, Taipei. The collection has since been digitised: the current repository nos. are 001000006409A and 001000006410A, respectively.

Shanghai, but the buildup and effects were felt in the surrounding six-month period. This created a power vacuum that had momentous consequences on the emergence and consolidation of local Nationalist leaders.

Wannian offers a unique vantage point for evaluating local elites' role. Unlike border-counties and the south of the province (赣南 Gannan) that experienced Communist activism which culminated in direct CCP control under the First Chinese Soviet Republic from 1931 onwards, local elites' dynamics were affected by Communism but not dictated by it. This makes it an ideal place for testing a narrative of elites' relationship with the GMD that was not driven exclusively by Communism. Also, Wannian is the only county in Jiangxi where protests about the 'evil gentry' continued for a period of eight years; as such, the voice of the protagonists can be traced through an uninterrupted record of original archival primary sources filed and dealt with by the National Government at the time.

Figure 1. Wannian County⁵

This article examines the actions, politicization and mobilization of the GMD's revolutionary local elites who belonged to the late Qing generation, with specific attention to their make-up and the changing roots of their power. In this way, it challenges existing literature that centres only on the Communist revolution and May Fourth generation of revolutionaries, the local elites' identification with traditional power-holders, and the GMD's

⁵ All illustrations are based on photocopied images and maps contained in "Jiangxi Wannian Shoumei xuexiao shi zhou jinian lu" [Commemorating book for the tenth anniversary of Shoumei School in Wannian county], ca. 1923, attached to "Cheng wei yishen Wu Fengchun...qingqiu chexiao tongji" [Petition requesting the lifting of the arrest order for the fellow gentry member Wu Fengchun], 13 April 1931.

restoration of power locally. Instead, it shows that a focus on local politics and the GMD highlights the importance of diversity and power-reconfiguration among the local elites, competition over access to power through local schools, and opposition to GMD's attempts to regaining control based on elite-conflicts. The article tackles the rapid demotion of local community members into the ranks of 'evil gentry' and the consequences for the GMD's reinstatement of power at the local level. It seeks to answer how and why well-educated and respected individuals, who were central to the functioning of local education, became enmeshed in violence; and how in turn, this reflected on the GMD's more general difficulty of securing its control. The analysis uses the case-study of the upper-stratum elites in Wannian, and argues that their characterization as 'evil gentry' must be reconsidered in light of the late Qing generation's power-reconfiguration whereby access to and control of education rather than ideology was pivotal.

The significance of education and the schools' networks in Wannian's political mobilization dovetails with the transformation of the local education system and the professionalization of teaching following the abolition of the civil service examination system in 1905, which left thousands of licentiates and higher degree holders without clear career paths. The setting up of normal schools and colleges eased them into the teaching profession, as they were given preference in the application process or selected specifically by the new school system introduced between 1902 and 1905.⁶ Hence, additional career options were presented to those who had qualified and held offices or were waiting for appointment; depending on the strength of their personal connections, they became headmasters, school administrators, or worked in the educational administration.⁷ This was a

⁶ Xiaoping Cong, *Teachers' Schools and the Making of Modern Chinese Nation-state, 1897-1937*, (Toronto: UBC, 2007), 38-39, 44.

⁷ Cong, *Teachers' Schools*, 61-63.

quiet revolution, but one that placed men who had previously aspired to administrative appointments in the field of education. Although many of them were genuinely passionate about education, for others it was not a career choice, but the only option that provided a position of power similar to that which the possession of an imperial degree had once guaranteed. As both private and public local education became the domain of aspiring and demobilized officials, local elites developed schools as power bases. This was a key development in the mass politics and politicized environment of the 1920s.

The intake of a younger generation, with the support of the local elites, consolidated the centrality of school networks at county level and below in spreading revolutionary ideas.⁸ More crucially, local elites benefitted from the new school system during the late Qing period. Education became a site of elite competition, initially between new and old learning, and afterwards within the new learning, until the appearance of the Nationalists and Communists added yet another layer of partition.⁹ Over time, the propagation of schools in rural areas widened the access to education of students and teachers of peasant origins, a trend that grew during the late 1920s and 1930s. Hence, the path of education was not limited to the elites'

⁸ Stephen C. Averill, "Party, Society, and Local Elite in the Jiangxi Communist Movement," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46:2 (May 1987): 285-286; see also Yeh's analysis of the role of Zhejiang middle counties' milieu and local education in shaping Shi Cuntong's early journey towards Communism. Wen-hsin Yeh, *Provincial Passages: Culture, Space, and the Origins of Chinese Communism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁹ Stephen C. Averill, "The Cultural Politics of Local Education in Early Twentieth-Century China," *Twentieth-Century China*, 32:2 (2007): 14-16, doi: 10.1179/tcc.2007.32.2.4. On education, teaching curricula and student life during the Republican period see also Robert C. Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

offspring, as many leapt at the opportunity to pursue education in normal schools that did not charge tuition fees. Upon returning to rural areas graduates taught mostly in primary schools and by the 1930s their radicalization was driven, notwithstanding their “class background” and political leanings, by a strong sense of alienation associated with harsh living conditions and inadequate salary.¹⁰ All these aspects demonstrate the fluid environment within which educational reforms took place, but more importantly that the state’s implementation of the reforms entailed mediation and changes by the local elites.¹¹

The consequences of the Expedition and the Split on national politics are well known,¹² but less is known about the local dimension of the Nationalist Party and its relationship with local elites. Historians have analyzed the disarray within the GMD mainly through the lens of the Communist revolution, but rarely as a topic in its own right.¹³ Time

¹⁰ Chang Liu, “Prometheus of the Revolution: Rural Teachers in Republican China,” *Modern China*, 35: 6 (November 2009): 577-579, 584-585.

¹¹ See Elizabeth R. VanderVen, *A School in Every Village: Educational Reform in a Northeast China County, 1904-31*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012).

¹² See Martin C. Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China, 1923-1928* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984); John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: SUP, 1996); and Michael G. Murdock, who challenged the “faction-centered paradigm” of “GMD/CCP/Soviet competition” in *Disarming the Allies of Imperialism: The State, Agitation, and Manipulation during China’s Nationalist Revolution, 1922-1929* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 9, chap 1.

¹³ Schoppa’s influential work on Sheng Dengyi and the Nationalist Revolution in Zhejiang province paved the way for a very different approach to the elites’ participation in the revolutionary process. It focused on “the nature of social identity, the roles of social networks, the import of place, and, in historical explanation, the centrality of process”, rather than “the

and again local elites have been bundled up in black-and-white descriptions of good (Communist) or evil (Nationalist) elites, without taking into account the local elites' internal heterogeneity and contradictions.¹⁴ Remarkably, Jiangxi's local elites have attracted little attention from historians even though they played a significant role in the Expedition, the hatching of rural revolution and the consolidation of the GMD.¹⁵ In addition, the literature has devoted much attention to the revolutionary input of the May Fourth generation,¹⁶ to the neglect of attention to the revolutionary experience of the previous generation. Yet, the late Qing generation of local elites was crucial for the formation of political movements in Republican China, for communities' participation in the revolutionary process, and for the dominant political paradigms and approaches of structures, institutions, and ideology." Keith R. Schoppa, *Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 4, 251.

¹⁴ Valuable exceptions are Geisert's analysis of GMD party members drawn from socially radical local elites who were involved in anti-elite campaigns targeting "local bullies and evil gentry" in Jiangsu; and McCord's critique of the customary association between militia leaders and local elites in Hunan, along with identifications within the Communist, Chinese and Western historiographies of "militia leadership" with "local bullies and evil gentry." Bradley K. Geisert, *Radicalism and its Demise: The Chinese Nationalist Party, Factionalism, and Local Elites in Jiangsu Province, 1924-1931* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001) 185-187; Edward A. McCord, "Local Bullies and Armed Forces Entrepreneurs: Militia Leadership in Republican China," *Twentieth-Century China*, 34:2: 2009, 7.

¹⁵ Averill, "Party, Society, and Local Elite," 287.

¹⁶ Kamal Sheel, *Peasant Society and Marxist Intellectuals in China: Fang Zhimin and the Origin of a Revolutionary Movement in the Xinjiang Region* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), chap. 6.

establishment of the Nationalist state. Their political positioning stemmed from specific local circumstances and to the local we must turn to understand their relationship with the GMD.

The local elites' participation in the disastrous chain of events that engulfed Wannian between 1926 and 1935 is used here to develop three linked arguments. First, changes in the roots of elite power, composition and networks that pre-dated the Split dictated the direction of the violence. Specifically, the map of local power-relations, guided by pre-existing feuds and clan division rivalry,¹⁷ was complicated by the diversity of power-holders and competitors on the ground. Attention to this diversity thereby challenges prevailing academic explanations of the GMD's difficulties in regaining control after 1927 which identify local power-holders with traditional landowners.¹⁸ By the 1920s power and status were projected through education rather than wealth: the shift from institutional and economic power to cultural power at the turn of the Qing dynasty created the conditions for the late Qing local elites' frontline involvement in political change and fast-tracked the use of local schools as

¹⁷ Averill posed that the “animosities and ambitions of rival elite powerholders”, with local schools matching elite factionalisms, rather than “class struggle or subethnic prejudice”, largely explains “conflict and violence”. Averill, “Party, Society, and Local Elite,” 281-282, 283.

¹⁸ William Wei explained the divergent interests of the GMD and Jiangxi “rural elite” (or “feudal gentry”). He acknowledged changes in the rural elites' fabric from the late Qing to the 1930s, but did not elaborate on politicized local elites who in the 1920s actively supported the GMD. William Wei, *Counterrevolution in China: The Nationalists in Jiangxi during the Soviet Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), see chaps. 4 and 5, and 16-19.

power bases in the 1920s.¹⁹ Although terms such as ‘feud’ and ‘clan’ conjure up a closed and inward-looking society in which local elites protected their home turf, instead we find a web of ‘globalized’ networks: the late Qing local elites travelled and experienced the world outside their province, and even beyond national boundaries. They brought prized skills, underpinned by ideas of modern governance, to the appointment of the Nationalist Revolution and the Expedition. However, the 1920s were also a time of generational turnover. The late Qing generation were challenged by the new breed of revolutionaries of the May Fourth generation. Ironically, the latter’s exposure to modern education, supported by the previous generation, thrust them into a political activism that unhinged the local balance of power.

Second, changing trends in politics cannot be separated from local elites’ competition over access to and control of local resources. Political mobilization during the Expedition in Wannian was affected by the reconfiguration of local elite power. This point is important because it demonstrates that local elites cannot be easily boxed up under political labels. The divisions within the GMD pushed local power-holders to extreme positions that were replicated in local schools. Thus, the consequences of the GMD’s implosion extended much further than envisaged by historical analyses framed around competition between Communists and Nationalists. The Split sent aftershocks within the GMD and led to the marginalization and eventual demise of progressive members of the local elites. However, this did not occur because the Nationalists explicitly chose to endorse a less progressive side. In reality, the radicalization of local politics did not leave much choice.

¹⁹ More broadly, Yeh noted the correlation between Zhejiang progressive elites and the development of tertiary education. Wen-hsin Yeh, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919–1937*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), chap. 3.

Third, the Nationalist Government did attempt to quarantine disruptive 'Rightist' elements within the ranks of the local GMD, but the reinstatement of power took place too slowly. Local disputes were not put to rest, and even then unsatisfactorily, until 1935. The central government's inability to deal swiftly with internecine conflicts allowed divisions among local elites to fester and hindered its reach for years. The GMD's attempt to establish its authority alienated traditional power-holders, while the internal struggle disenfranchised party members at both ends of the political spectrum who had supported the Nationalist Revolution. In other words, the GMD's revolutionary fabric was torn apart, and this created the space for violence to flourish. The Nationalist party never recovered from this. The central government's later attempts to break through elite-conflicts through state-building and administrative rationalization were constantly undermined by deep-rooted divisions.

These dimensions of the case-study are worked out through three substantive sections. The first section investigates the make-up of the local elites along with the problematic definition of 'evil gentry'. It then matches elite-networks with the school system and demonstrates how before the Split local schools became power-hubs that were used for power-consolidation and ultimately by both generations to shift the balance of power in Wannian. The second section outlines the effects of the Expedition in Jiangxi province and the political fault-lines that emerged from it; it assesses the scale of the local elites' political mobilization, spurred by the Expedition, by looking at the underground political work that opened the gate to mass mobilization. It then analyzes the consequences of the Split vis-à-vis reconfigurations of power and the local violence that culminated in the killing of two young Communist leaders. The third section turns to the failures of reconciliation attempts prompted by the local gentry and the Nationalist Government's intervention; the latter rekindled political conflict that led to the reopening of the court case in 1934-1935 which in the end did not bring closure to the community.

What occurred in Wannian reveals how central politics were experienced locally and the local elites' role. It also evidences the scale of disruption to political and administrative life, and its long-lasting consequences. As such, this case-study is fundamental for understanding the mechanism of power and how the social and political positioning of local elites affected the broader direction of the Nationalist movement and the Nationalists' reinstatement of power.

<A> Local Elites in Wannian County

 The 'Evil Gentry'

Providing a definition for 'local elites' is at best a hazardous task, with time, context, and geography all making this term slippery. Esherick and Rankin's definition is particularly useful: it pointedly employs the plural form and includes "any individuals or families that exercised dominance within a local area" whereby *local* indicates "county (*xian*) level or lower."²⁰ In Jiangxi, Averill differentiated between local elites' upper stratum with "Qing examination degree-holders" and lower stratum (less educated), with the latter often identified with the "local bullies and evil gentry" (土豪劣紳 *tuhao lieshen*).²¹ On the contrary, in Wannian the 'evil gentry' label encompassed progressive upper-stratum elites suggesting that the boundaries between these strata were in fact porous. Furthermore, not

²⁰ They also stressed local elites' heterogeneity and their growing political and cultural ascendancy following the development of the modern state. Joseph Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 10, 11.

²¹ Averill, "Party, Society, and Local Elite," 281.

only were they well-respected members of the community but the term was used by both sides to accuse each other. Unlike in cases documented for Jiangsu province, in Wannian tensions among the local elites continued well into the 1930s and there was not much “docility” in the GMD’s local ranks until 1935.²² This raises questions not only about the effectiveness of the central party in bringing order to the rank and file, but also about the impossibility of finding a one-size-fits-all definition for the ideological characterization and composition of the local elites. Any such definition would inevitably fail to provide an accurate explanation for local dynamics, and would be detached from the complexities of the territory.

Hence, the question remains; how do we understand and profile the ‘evil gentry’ and what can their life in Wannian tell us? Sources frame the dispute as part of the competition between Nationalists and Communists, but this explanation is at best only partial. For many years education in Wannian was firmly in the hands of the local elites based in the county seat Chengxiang, who belonged to the late Qing generation. Elites had always been involved in running local schools either directly or more broadly as benefactors, but with the Republic and the subsequent polarization of politics, local elites turned schools into power bases and ultimately places where competition over local resources intersected with politics and mobilization.

 The Late Qing Generation

²² This is very late considering that in Jiangsu, the central party’s “rectification” between late 1929 and August 1930 cut short elites’ “social radicalism” in local GMD branches and transformed them into “a more docile and quiescent body.” Bradley K. Geisert, “From Conflict to Quiescence: The Kuomintang, Party Factionalism and Local Elites in Jiangsu, 1927–31,” *The China Quarterly*, 108 (December 1986): 688, 697-699.

Wu Fengchun and Fang Zhiping's biographies demonstrate the intimate and increasing relationship between the elites' involvement in local education on the one hand, and status and politics on the other. Wu Fengchun, also known as Wu Fengyu (吳豐玉) and Wu Shoumei (吳壽梅), came from a village close to Chengxiang, where he moved during his youth. His family were landowners.²³ In 1908 he set up the Wu clan *Shoumei* Private Primary School in Chengxiang, and afterwards the *Shoumei* Agricultural Middle School. Wu was also an active member of the administration. He was elected in 1912 to the Jiangxi Provincial Assembly (江西省會 Jiangxi shenghui) for two terms, representing seven counties in the Rao prefecture. During the warlord period he interceded with warlords Wu Peifu (吳佩孚 1874-1939) and Sun Chuanfang (孫傳芳 1885-1935) to reduce the collection of granary and military funds imposed upon the county.²⁴ He was considered successful on both

²³ Wu's candidature for *xiucai* (licentiate) in Rao prefecture, when he was 18, was opposed because of his grandfather's employment in the county *yamen*. This was in line with the 1820 stipulation that "sons and grandsons of *yamen* clerks could no longer stand for civil appointments." A decade later Wu attended the Provincial Advanced Normal College in Nanchang and after graduation returned to Wannian. Wannian *xian difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui* [Wannian county local gazetteer's editorial committee], ed., *Wannian xianzhi* [Wannian county gazetteer] (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 2000), 864; Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 234. For a list of civil examinations and degrees see flow-chart, Fig. 3.1, 102.

²⁴ Between 1918-1926, Jiangxi province was ruled by a string of military governors mostly under the influence of Beiyang warlords of the Zhili Clique, Wu Peifu and Sun Chuanfang, who in 1925-26 fought the National Revolutionary Army's advance to Jiangxi. Li Shoulin et

accounts.²⁵ Moreover, when Sun Chuanfang's troops, 5,000 to 6,000 men, entered Chengxiang at some point in 1925 and created havoc, the local gentry and business circles turned to Wu and asked him to negotiate on their behalf; the meeting, facilitated by a cash gift, spared looting and violence.²⁶ Clearly, Wu was more than a simple headmaster; he moved with ease in higher circles and his negotiation skills were sought after by the local gentry (紳士 *shenshi*). Wu joined the GMD secretly in March 1926.²⁷

Figure 2. Headmaster Wu Fengchun

Wu managed *Shoumei* with his brother's help. The school's achievements were celebrated in a commemorative panegyric compiled in 1923 for the tenth anniversary of its foundation. As might be expected, it portrays a progressive environment and enlightened headmaster. The school did become known for its modern approach to education. The evolution of teaching at *Shoumei* reflected the progressive élan which characterized educational reforms in Republican China and the expansion of local education (Figure 3). In 1912, it opened as a higher primary school; its designation changed to a citizens' school in 1915; and up to 1922,

al., eds., *Minguo zhiguan nianbiao* [Chronological Tables of Republican Period Officials] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chuban, 1995), 264-268; He Youliang, *Jiangxi tongshi* [Jiangxi General History] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2008, vol.11), 26-29.

²⁵ Fang Jinping and Liu Siyuan, eds., *Wannian gujin renwu* [Wannian ancient and modern personalities] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2000), 63; Peng Xiangjiu, "Wu Shoumei xiansheng shilüe" [Mr Wu Shoumei's biographical sketch], *Wannian xian wenshi ziliao*, no. 3 (1991): 63-65.

²⁶ Peng, "Wu Shoumei xiansheng shilüe," 69.

²⁷ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 50.

the school developed diverse programs, including courses for girls, night courses for the poor, vocational courses and from 1921 agricultural studies.²⁸ We have little insight into schools' architecture at county level during this period and the layout below fills the gap. It also shows a school complex in expansion, with the latest addition of the farming practice ground (3.6) and plan for an additional building (3.5).

Figure 3. *Shoumei* layout

Students took part in physical activities and had governing bodies; the school also established cleaning routines performed by students and carried inoculation programmes. Wu contributed financially to supporting poor students, and fees varied according to the students' circumstances.²⁹ The school enrolled around three hundred students,³⁰ who also came from neighbouring counties.³¹ Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao were educated in this environment, and when they organized the first underground CCP cell in Wannian, the main pool of recruits came from the school.³² *Shoumei* paid a high price for this involvement. Along with Wu's house, it was burned down shortly after Hu and Huang were killed.³³

²⁸ “Jiangxi Wannian Shoumei xuexiao,” ca. 1923, 393.

²⁹ “Jiangxi Wannian Shoumei xuexiao,” ca. 1923, 415-419; *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 865.

³⁰ *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 864.

³¹ “Jiangxi Wannian Shoumei xuexiao,” ca. 1923, 464.

³² Wannian xian difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, [Wannian county local gazetteer's editorial committee], ed., *Wannian xianzhi* [Wannian county gazetter] (n.p.: Wannian xian yinshu, 1982, internal circulation), 672.

³³ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 64.

Figure 4. County seat Chengxiang

Fang Zhiping was from Shigu (石鼓) village just north of Chenying. He came from an educated family of landowners; his father was a *xiucaï*. Fang was extremely talented and highly educated, and by 1922 was involved in education.³⁴ Unlike Wu's school, which was very much a family enterprise, Fang pulled together with others to raise funds and establish *Yaoxi* Private Middle School, where he also served as headmaster. This coterie shared political views and supported the Nationalist Revolution.³⁵ The main figure and driving force behind the project was Sun Yimou (孙詒謀 1878-1936), who before 1918 was involved in a lawsuit against Wu Fengchun – a detail showing that the animosity between the two men preceded 1927;³⁶ the school's location in Sun's clan ancestral hall in Chengxiang

³⁴ Fang passed the exam for *xiucaï* at 16 and then attended an academy in Rao prefecture. He was promoted to *linsheng* (salaried *xiucaï*) and selected for the civil service examination in the provincial capital (*bagong*). Fang must have been quite promising since *bagong* was a “Special Exam Student” who had earned the degree of “Tribute Student” and was en route for the degree of provincial graduate. *Wannian gujin renwu*, 59; Elman, *Civil Examinations*, 105, Fig. 3.1, 102.

³⁵ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 59-60, 53.

³⁶ He was the son of a financially comfortable cobbler from Chengxiang. At 18 he passed the examination of *xiucaï* and shortly after was selected for the exam in the provincial capital. He worked as a teacher and from 1903 as headmaster of the First County Government Higher Primary School (Figure 4.9) for ten years. In 1918 he moved to Guangzhou where he served in Sun Yat-sen's Guangzhou Government, along with Fang Zhiping's relative, Fang Zhixiang. He followed the Expedition to Jiangxi and was among the GMD's founders in Wannian. *Wannian gujin renwu*, 57.

corroborates he was the leading figure.³⁷ Fang's standing was buttressed by a younger family member, Fang Zhixiang (方芝祥 1887-1927).³⁸ Fang Zhixiang was extremely bright and attained the degree of provincial graduate (举人 *juren*).³⁹ At 19 he was admitted to Jiangxi Higher College and two years later entered Nanjing Higher Normal College.⁴⁰ In 1910 he travelled to Japan to study Economics at Waseda University in Tokyo at his family's expense. Like many other students at the time, Fang joined the Revolutionary Alliance and returned to China in 1913. In 1918 he was employed as a secretary in Sun Yat-sen's Guangzhou Government and joined the newly established GMD. In 1924 he was sent to Nanchang to secretly organize the GMD and in March 1926 returned to Wannian and used *Yaoxi* to covertly recruit GMD members for the Wannian branch.⁴¹ Fang's career ended abruptly; in March 1927 he was appointed magistrate of Pingxiang (萍鄉) County, in southeast Jiangxi, where he was killed by the Communists.⁴²

³⁷ Wang Jinquan, "Jiefang qian de Wannian chujun zhongxue" [Wannian county junior middle schools before the liberation], *Wannian xian wenshi ziliao*, no. 2 (1987): 105.

³⁸ Probably Fang Zhiping's paternal cousin (*tangdi*), *Wannian gujin renwu*, 59; "Fang Zhiping deng kongsu feishou Wu Fengchun ... yi an" [On the case of Fang Zhiping and others accusing the rebel leader Wu Fengchun], 25 November, 1927, 244.

³⁹ *Wannian xianzhi* (1982), 700.

⁴⁰ This was very likely the Liang Jiang Teachers' College. Cong, *Teachers' Schools*, Table 2.1, 48.

⁴¹ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 50.

⁴² *Wannian xianzhi* (1980), 700; *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 861; Yi Shengwen, Xiao Xianfu, and Xiao Desheng, "Minguo shiqi de Pingxiang xian zhengfu ji qi geji zizhi zuzhi" [County

There is scant information about *Yaoxi*, but its reputation was very good. It was founded by Sun Yimou in 1922 and closed down in 1934.⁴³ The school was private and several members of the elite supported its founding and maintenance. For a while, the establishment was successful and well-regarded; it employed a staff of about ten teachers, and in total 300 pupils, including girls, graduated from it.⁴⁴ Sun Yimou was the headmaster for a short period, but this responsibility rotated among the main contributors. Fang Zhiping's recruitment at *Yaoxi* resulted from the connection between Sun and Fang Zhixiang. Furthermore, Sun's influence explains how the Fang clan, which was influential in Chenying, was able to gain access to power in the county seat. Between 1926 and 1927, the school was the base for the local GMD's activities. The open conflict in March-April 1927 hit the school hard as many of its supporters were forced to leave the county. In 1930 the school's financial problems were extremely serious and additional money was raised to keep *Yaoxi* running.⁴⁵ But the decline continued and eventually the school was shut down. In 1939 it was reopened as a county junior middle school established by the provincial government.⁴⁶

The protagonists of this story who belonged to the older generation asserted their influence at local level via traditional and modern channels of mobility during the late Qing period and benefitted from education locally, in the provincial capital, and abroad. Arguably, the degrees they attained were "much less rare or special" as by then a high percentage of

government and self-government organizations in Pingxiang county during the Republican period], *Pingxiang wenshi ziliao*, no. 11 (1990): 39, and *Wannian gujin renwu*, 51.

⁴³ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 58.

⁴⁴ Wang Jinquan, "Jiefang qian," 105.

⁴⁵ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 53-54.

⁴⁶ Wang Jinquan, "Jiefang qian," 105.

people paid for degrees and corruption was rife.⁴⁷ Even so, degrees were still a mark of status and their subsequent educational progression suggests that these were talented men. They were chiefly the offspring of landowners' families who rose through the ranks of the local elites and beyond by occupying public office but mostly by working in education. Crucially, they were not inward-looking, and had experienced life outside county boundaries. When the time came, they all supported the Expedition and contributed to the founding of the GMD in their county. Their revolutionary credentials are impeccable.

 The May Fourth Generation

Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao belonged to the May Fourth generation of student activists who sought to bring revolutionary change to their home county. Hu came from a village south of Chengxiang and his family was considered part of the establishment. His father had gained the title of *xiucai* and taught in a local old-style private school. He attended this school but then moved to Chengxiang and enrolled at *Shoumei*. After graduation he studied at Boyang Zhiyang Normal School and in spring 1920 was admitted to Jiangxi First Provincial Industrial School in Nanchang from which he graduated in autumn 1926.⁴⁸ Huang was from a village north of Chengxiang and came from a middle peasant family. Educated at an old-style school, he too enrolled at *Shoumei* and later graduated from Boyang Zhiyang Normal where he was in close contact with Hu. He continued his education at Nanchang First Normal School in 1918 from which he graduated in autumn 1923.⁴⁹

Both Hu and Huang studied in Nanchang between 1918 and 1926 where the student movement took shape after the May Fourth Incident and they were involved in patriotic and

⁴⁷ Elman, *Civil Examinations*, 106, 246, 247. Sheel, *Peasant Society*, 73-74.

⁴⁸ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 82; *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 861.

⁴⁹ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 85; *Wannian xianzhi* (1980), 672; *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 861.

socialist student organizations that emerged soon after. When news of the Incident reached Nanchang, students from Jiangxi Provincial Professional School of Agriculture proclaimed a student strike and called a general meeting. Nineteen schools with around 6,000 students responded to the call and on May 9th they elected the self-governed Nanchang Students' Alliance (南昌學生聯合會 Nanchang xuesheng lianhehui);⁵⁰ Huang Shibiao was one of the elected.⁵¹ The streets brimmed with student activities; they marched shouting patriotic slogans and presented a petition to the military governor,⁵² who did not waste time in shutting down schools and banning students from the streets. Nonetheless, student lecturing teams continued to operate, and so did the student inspection corps dispatched to ferret out shops selling Japanese goods.⁵³ In Wannian too, on May 17th one thousand students and workers marched in Chengxiang, and went on strike.⁵⁴

The upsurge did not wane. Nanchang students set up patriotic organizations and discussion forums in the schools, such as the Jiangxi Reconstruction Society (江西改造社 Jiangxi gaizao she) on January 1st 1921; likewise, a string of student publications emerged, such as *New Jiangxi* first published in May 1921, whose forthright opposition to anti-

⁵⁰ Xu Shuyung, ““Wu Si” qijian de Nanchang xuesheng yundong” [Nanchang students' movement at the time of the May Fourth Incident], in Gongqingtuan Nanchang shi weiyuanwei, [The Communist Youth League Nanchang committee], ed., *Nanchang qingnian yundong huiyilu* [Recollections of the youth movement in Nanchang] (Nanchang: Jiangxi sheng chuban, 1981), 3.

⁵¹ *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 861.

⁵² Chen Guangyuan (dates unknown).

⁵³ Xu Shuyung, ““Wu Si” qijian de Nanchang xuesheng yundong,” 4-5.

⁵⁴ *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 6.

imperialism and warlords' oppression fueled students' activism.⁵⁵ Mass organizations were also taking shape, for instance the China Socialist Youth Corps (中國社會主義青年團 Zhongguo shehuizhuyi qingniantuan) in October 1923. Even though student protests flared up during the May Thirtieth Incident, and extended down to county level, mobilization reached fever pitch when the National Revolutionary Army (NRA) approached the city in mid-September 1926: the GMD in Nanchang circulated propaganda materials in support of the Expedition which were passed around by the students.⁵⁶

Thus, Hu and Huang were immersed in student mobilization and were well connected to radical intellectuals such as Fang Zhimin (方志敏, 1899-1935).⁵⁷ Hu not only attended the same school, but also joined first the Jiangxi Research Association of Marxist Theory (馬克思學說研究會 Makesi xueshuo yanjiuhui) and then the Socialist Youth Corps in 1924.

⁵⁵ Sheel, *Peasant Society*, 149-151; Fang Zhichun, "Jiangxituan zuzhi jianli qianhou de Nanchang xuesheng yundong" [The Nanchang student movement at the time of the organization and foundation of the Jiangxi Socialist Youth Corps], in *Nanchang qingnian yundong*, 41-42.

⁵⁶ Fang Zhichun, "Jiangxituan zuzhi jianli qianhou de Nanchang xuesheng yundong," 44-46.

⁵⁷ Between 1919-1921 Fang Zhimin, no relation to the Fang clan, attended Jiangxi First Provincial Industrial School. He became the most famous communist revolutionary native to Jiangxi and active in the northeast of the province. Fang led Communist activities which resulted in the creation of the Jiangxi northeast soviet government in 1930. Later on, this area was incorporated into the Fujian-Zhejiang-Jiangxi soviet area (MinZheGan sheng suqu). Sheel, *Peasant Society*, 147-149; Chen Ronghua and He Youliang, *Zhongyang suqu shilüe* [Brief history of the Central Soviet Area] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1992), 131-132.

Huang joined the Jiangxi Reconstruction Society, that counted Fang Zhimin among its founding members, and the Socialist Youth Corps. After graduating, Wu Fengchun offered Huang a teaching position at *Shoumei*, where he organized activities among teachers such as reading *New Youth* and *New Jiangxi*. With Wu's support, Huang also set up a night school for students from extremely poor backgrounds, aptly located at the temple of the God of Literature (Figure 4.7). In autumn 1924 he opened a library where he circulated progressive literature.⁵⁸

The generational gap with the late Qing generation was exemplified by an approach to political change that was underpinned by mass mobilization. Their ideas for change were molded while studying in Nanchang and found an outlet first in progressive and patriotic associations attached to modern schools and later on in the CCP. As well as belonging to the middle and upper-stratum elite, the late Qing and May Fourth generations of revolutionaries had in common access to and involvement in education, freedom of movement, and political consciousness. Their involvement in the local schools' network offered the greatest rewards in terms of influence, but was also at the root of the conflict which spiraled into outright violence when the province and the county were engulfed in the Expedition: although already the *loci* of intra-elite rivalry, the schools became actual battlegrounds, as local elites now openly competed for hegemony.

<A> Political Mobilization and Violence

 The Expedition

Jiangxi acted as a key territorial base from which Chiang Kai-shek, Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Expedition, planned his strategy of conquest in competition with the

⁵⁸ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 82, 85; *Wannian xianzhi* (1980), 672.

newly-established Wuhan Government. The occupation of Jiangxi “would radically change the course of the Expedition and would prove critical to Chiang’s rise to power.”⁵⁹ Chiang’s campaign to seize Jiangxi was not easy and lasted from early September well into November 1926; by contrast Wuchang was secured on October 10th and in December the National Government’s apparatus began taking shape at Wuhan.⁶⁰ The province’s capture opened up the way to the areas of the lower Yangzi.⁶¹ When the NRA arrived in Chengxiang in October 1926, it received a jubilant reception from the population. A welcoming banner outside the south gate greeted the army and the population lined up, offered drinks and set off firecrackers to celebrate the event.⁶² Many local elites had long supported the Expedition and were now in a position to openly express their political leanings and mobilize communities for their own benefit.

The conquest of Jiangxi sped up processes of political positioning and recruitment for both the GMD and the CCP, whose mobilization work had until then rested on shaky grounds. Across thirteen counties in the northeast, the Communist presence usually became visible during the First United Front and extended considerably when the NRA arrived. In fact, the

⁵⁹ Hans J. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China 1925-1945* (London: Routledge, 2003), 107.

⁶⁰ van de Ven, *War and Nationalism*, 106-107. On the military campaign in Jiangxi see also Donald A. Jordan, *The Northern Expedition: China’s National Revolution of 1926-1928*, (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), chap. 10.

⁶¹ Li Xin, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi* [A History of Republican China] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996, vol. 5), 48-50, 64-67.

⁶² *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 157.

official establishment of CCP cells took place mostly in late 1926.⁶³ In Wannian, the first Communists joining the party in spring 1926 were Huang Shibiao and Hu Wansheng, who established the cell in December, although they had been active for a few years already. When they returned to Chengxiang they found a fertile environment. They began recruiting and mobilizing activists and their work intensified with the arrival of the Expedition; in autumn they were chosen to attend the Peasant Movement Institute (農講所 Nongjiangsuo) in Nanchang and in November 1926 the first county level Peasant Association was established in Wannian.⁶⁴

Likewise, GMD-led mobilization was extremely effective; by 1926 in part of Jiangxi the GMD movement attracted “considerable sympathy... centering around the middle schools and universities”, and “pro-KMT teachers” encouraged students’ mobilization and their enlistment in the NRA during Chiang’s military campaign.⁶⁵ In the northeast, preparatory party organization took place between October and November 1926.⁶⁶ However, the dates of formal activity do not show when individuals first secretly joined the GMD or the CCP. For instance, Fang Zhixiang had joined first the Revolutionary Alliance and then the GMD. In March 1924 he was dispatched by the GMD Executive Committee to Nanchang to set up the

⁶³ Chen Dejun, *Xiangcun shehui zhong de deming: yi Gandongbei genjudi wei yanjiu zhongxin (1924-1934)* [Revolution in rural society: the case-study of the Northeast Jiangxi base area] (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe, 2004), 35 and Table 1, 37-40. By contrast, see Perry’s analysis of the early Communist movement in the industrial areas in Pingxiang County on the border with Hunan, Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China’s Revolutionary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁶⁴ Chen, *Xiangcun shehui*, Table 1, 38.

⁶⁵ Jordan, *Northern Expedition*, 202-203.

⁶⁶ Chen, *Xiangcun shehui*, Table 1 pp. 37-40.

Jiangxi branch and act as secretary. In 1926 they sent him back to Wannian, where a branch was eventually founded in November 1926;⁶⁷ by then he had recruited six members, which soon expanded to fifty. In January 1927 the party held its first representatives' conference at *Yaoxi* and elected an Executive Committee, whose members coincided with the school's sponsors.⁶⁸ Hence, although sources record the GMD as established in late 1926, individuals had a decade of political activism. Crucially, the Expedition created the conditions to expand the power base for both parties.

The magnitude of mass mobilization is shown by the spike in the formation of peasant associations in 1926-27 with the bulk initially developed within the United Front remit. They were not under the CCP's exclusive control and were subject to "lineage connections and patronage ties."⁶⁹ According to historian Chen Dujun (陈德军), after Sun Chuanfang's defeat recruitment to peasant associations in the northeast of Jiangxi rose from 6,276 in October to 50,000 in November 1926, while the Jiangxi Provincial Peasant Association reached 82,617 by May 1927.⁷⁰ Wannian Peasant Association by February-March 1927 counted 3,700 members.⁷¹ Chen Dejun maintains that this increase was a direct result of the NRA securing and liberating areas of the province, and although he cautions us about the accuracy of data, different sources agree on considerable growth.⁷²

⁶⁷ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 50.

⁶⁸ *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 116-117.

⁶⁹ Stephen C. Averill, *Revolution in the Highlands: China's Jinggangshan Base Area* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 130.

⁷⁰ Chen, *Xiangcun shehui*, 58.

⁷¹ *Wannian gujin renwu*, 83.

⁷² Chen, *Xiangcun shehui*, 58.

These mass organizations were connected to both the GMD and CCP, and because their branches mirrored the administrative structure they were in a position to react quickly to political changes and influence the local balance of power. The situation was muddled in Wannian. This is apparent in Fang Zhiping and his associates' attempts to restore control over the local Peasant Association after it was set up by Hu and Huang with Wu Fengchun's patronage. Ultimately, this intricate web of relationships made political divisions even fiercer and more far-reaching, drawing local elites into collective action and violence.

 The Killing

The tragic killing of Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao began the removal of competing sites of power, and created the condition for the Fang clan to put roots in the county seat. The main accusation against Fang Zhiping concerned their murder. There are several versions of what happened on the day they disappeared from Chengxiang. Indeed, sources do not even agree on dates, but the most likely scenario is that they were abducted in late March 1927.⁷³ This divergence reflects that the legality of the arrest (or abduction) and execution (or murder) depended on the date it took place. If the apprehension and later death of the Communists took place in March, then it could be claimed that Hu and Huang did no more than legitimately follow the Wuhan Government's directives issued on March 10th

⁷³ Local gazetteers claimed that Fang Zhiping and his allies seized them on March 25th or 27th; biographical sketches record March 26th and 27th; and governmental records place their abduction a month later on April 23rd. *Wannian xianzhi* (1982), 674; *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), p. 863; "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu cheng zhun gaodeng fayuan...yi an" [On the case of the Jiangxi Provincial Government asking permission to the High Court], 11 July 1929, 291.

1927 that entrusted Peasant Associations with the organization of local self-government.⁷⁴ But if the event took place after the 2 April Insurrection in Nanchang and Chiang's coup in Shanghai,⁷⁵ then local GMD members could claim that they did no more than implement a legitimate restoration of power that was unfolding at national level. This is how a source sympathetic to the young Communists, recounts the events:

[O]n March 27th 1927 following the directive of the Provincial Peasants Association [...] Huang Shibiao and Hu Wansheng together with five members of the [local] Peasant Association reached the county government office. They asked magistrate Pan Tao [潘燾 dates unknown] to hand over the guns to them. The magistrate promised to do so that same afternoon, instead he made a secret plan to mobilize the troops [at his orders]. At eleven o'clock in the morning, GMD

⁷⁴ See points 1 and 5 of the ten-point program; the Comintern were behind this radicalization of policies that fostered factionalism in the GMD. *Attached Documents of the General Report of the Second Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang* (n.p.: March, 1929), cited in Tien-wei Wu, "A Review of the Wuhan Debacle: The Kuomintang-Communist Split of 1927," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 29:1 (Nov., 1969): 129-130, Bruce Elleman, *Moscow and the Emergence of Communist Power in China, 1925-30* (London: Routledge, 2009), 35-36; on the Comintern's role, see also Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution, 1919-1927*, (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000).

⁷⁵ The insurrection in Nanchang saw the Communists and the Left GMD gain the upper hand just as violent clashes took place in cities across China. The fatal Shanghai coup was very much a replica of what was already happening elsewhere. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism*, 118-119.

members Xu Jiachen, Fang Zhiping, and Sun Yimou⁷⁶ [孫翼謀] with thirty members of the Society for Greater Jiangxi⁷⁷ [...] burst into the government office. They brought Huang and Hu to the local GMD section and tied them up. At one o'clock in the afternoon, they secretly took them to the temple at Xizigang, near Chenying, and tortured them [...] That same night, Fang Zhiping and his reactionary faction...struck vicious blows on them [.]

There follows a gruesome description of how the bodies were cut to pieces, covered with kerosene, and burnt.⁷⁸

This accusation was supported by accounts that detailed Fang Zhiping's practice of extorting money from the local population. According to the verbatim copy of the Jiangxi Provincial Government's order of arrest issued on 8 July 1927 and attached to Wu Fengchun's petition to the National Government, Fang Zhiping could count on the support of the local Society for Greater Jiangxi (洪江會 HongJiang hui). These men were armed and, apart from being involved in the abduction of Hu and Huang, provided military support to Fang Zhiping in the ongoing conflict with Wu Fengchun's side.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Sun Yimou's younger brother. *Wannian gujin renwu*, 57.

⁷⁷ A secret society established to overthrow the Qing dynasty. It provided significant support to the 1911 Revolution. Li Songlin, ed., *Zhongguo Guomindang shi da cidian* [Dictionary of the History of the Guomindang] (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 1993), 6.

⁷⁸ *Wannian xianzhi* (1982), 674.

⁷⁹“Cheng wei tianzao Wannian xian dangbu ganshi Fang Zuding deng niekong...yi an” [Petition on the case of Wannian county's party executive committee member Fang Zuding who fabricated accusations], 26 February 1934, 578-579.

Although Wu Fengchun appeared to be a man of intellect, petitions by the Jiangxi Provincial Government and Fang Zhiping painted a very different picture. These claimed that by December 1926 Wu had about twenty thousand *yuan*⁸⁰ for recruiting bandits (匪類 *feilei*) and buying fifty guns and Hauser pistols (駁壳 *boke*). Wu was also accused of directing a pre-emptive strike at members of the Right GMD. In February 1927, he interfered with the local elections for the GMD Executive Committee to prevent those who were against him – namely Fang Zhiping – from taking power. Even so, Fang was elected and claimed that Wu ordered his armed associates to enter Chengxiang on April 9th, when they captured GMD and Peasant Association members, destroyed public buildings and killed people.⁸¹ This was more than an isolated attack. The county seat was under siege for a month. The county government collapsed, and people who escaped congregated near Chenying and asked the provincial government for help. Among them were Fang and magistrate Pan Tao, members of the GMD local section, and members of various mass organizations. As a result, the administrative work came to a halt. It appears that only GMD members who had accepted Wu's bribes remained in the city. By May, only those who had “shamelessly supported both political parties” (不顧着恥之跨黨分子 *bu guzhe chi zhi kuadang fenzi*) were left behind. Wu Fengchun, “the bandit chieftain” (匪首 *fei shou*) moved around in a grand sedan chair and shortly after he seized power, Fang's family and his associates' property were attacked,

⁸⁰ In 1929, this sum amounted to \$8,200. John Lossing Buck, *Land Utilization in China* (Shanghai: North China Daily News, 1937; reprinted by Taipei: Southern Materials Center, Inc., 1986), 474.

⁸¹ Among his associates were Hu Wangsheng's and Huang Shibiao's fathers, the latter allegedly hid Wu Fengchun in his house when Wu's fortune changed. “Fang Zhiping deng kongsu,” 25 November, 1927, 231, 243-244.

destroyed and looted, and money was extorted from businessmen and students at *Yaoxi*.⁸² This version was confirmed by the refugees from Gantou village (岡頭村) who sided with Fang. According to them, Wu stayed in power at least until July 1927. During that month he terrified the local population with his private army by killing, plundering, and arson.⁸³ Even more disturbing for the Fang clan were the circumstances of Fang Zhixiang's death in Pingxiang in March of that year: Fang Zhiping claimed that Wu Fengchun had offered 5,000 *yuan* to Fang Zhimin for Fang Zhixiang's elimination.⁸⁴

At this stage, the provincial government was controlled by the Right GMD.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, it did not favour Fang Zhiping and his associates. The arrest warrant for Fang Zhiping was upheld and the case continued to be examined. In the meantime, both Fang and Wu left Chengxiang and found refuge elsewhere. County administrative life was greatly disrupted, and, while legal proceedings continued, local elites came together to find a solution.

<A> Reconciliation Attempts and Residual Political Conflict

 Reconciliation

The local community tried bringing the two sides together, but the attempt did not yield lasting results. In February 1928 they drafted a peace pledge (和平公約 *heping*

⁸² “Fang Zhiping deng kongsu,” 25 November 1927, 244-247.

⁸³ “Chengkong Wu Fengchun...qingqiu chahe lingchi jiaoban” [Petition accusing Wu Fengchun...and requesting to check the situation and eradicate the problem], 17 October 1927, 223.

⁸⁴ “Fang Zhiping deng kongsu,” 25 November 1927, 244.

⁸⁵ Li Xin ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi*, 564-571; Stuart R Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings: 1912-1949*, (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1995, vol. 3), 22.

gongyue) which laid down the terms for a joint agreement. It carried the signatures of the Wannian County Peace Conference (万年縣和平會議員紳 Wannian xian heping huiyi yuanshen),⁸⁶ brought together by the county magistrate, and representatives for both sides. The agreement also indicated the exact terms for compensation: each party's legal representatives would receive 2,500 *yuan* raised at the local level to compensate the families of the murdered Communists and individuals whose properties had been damaged.⁸⁷ By then, Wu had retired from the local political scene and lived in Boyang County where he continued to be involved in education.⁸⁸ However, Fang remained in Wannian, and in July 1927 the provincial party headquarters charged him with the GMD's reorganization, a post he held until the end of 1928.⁸⁹ After his retirement from political life, Fang returned to his village and taught at several schools in the area of Chenying, and the GMD was directed briefly by a moderate open to compromise, who was among *Yaoxi* founders, but he was soon elbowed out. From 1929 to 1937 it returned to the direct control of the Fang clan.⁹⁰

It is because of Fang Zhiping's nephew, Fang Zuding (方祖鼎 1899-1949), that the agreement collapsed and the case was raised again with the National Government in the 1930s. This was a period of intense pressure from the Communists, and the Nationalist Government called upon the participation of local elites to restore its authority. It led to the

⁸⁶ Roles and occupations of the signees are unknown, bar the chair of Wannian Chamber of Commerce and the Self-defence Corps' deputy company commander.

⁸⁷ "Cheng wei tianzao Wannian xian dangbu ganshi," 26 February 1934, 580-583.

⁸⁸ Peng, "Wu Shoumei xiansheng shilüe," 70; *Wannian gujin renwu*, 64.

⁸⁹ Sun Yimou, on the other hand, was transferred by the GMD to Jiujiang County at the beginning of 1928. *Wannian gujin renwu*, 58-60.

⁹⁰ First with Fang Zuomou (1903-1935) and then with Fang Zuding. *Wannian xianzhi* (2000), 117; *Wannian gujin renwu*, 55, 65.

lifting of Wu Fengchun's arrest warrant⁹¹ between April and July 1931 where Wu was referred to as 'gentry' (邑紳 *yishen*). Despite doubts surrounding Fang Zhiping's involvement in the murder case, his warrant was also lifted.⁹² The immediate result was that by 1932 Wu had returned to Chengxiang and opened a People's School (民眾學校 *minzhong xuexiao*) in a village. This type of school was entrusted to the central government and adhered to anti-communist and GMD curricula, which signaled Wu's support for the GMD.⁹³ This alone might have triggered old resentments, but it was Wu's return to active political life in October 1933, in the guise of member of the Committee for clearing and rehabilitating the countryside (清鄉善後委員會 *Qingxiang shanhou weiyuanhui*), that caused Fang Zuding to spring into action. Both Wu Fengchun and Fang Zhiping had joined the Committee and Wu

⁹¹ The request came from the Commander of the 15th Pacification and Defence Corps in Wannian County district no. nine, the representatives for three villages of the Bandits' Suppression Committee, and community members.

⁹² "Cheng wei yishen Wu Fengchun," 13 April 1931, 311-317, the petition was signed also by peasants, businessmen and students; "Wei yishen Wu Fengchun...sheling chexiao tongji an..." [On the amnesty order and lifting of the arrest warrant for fellow gentry member Wu Fengchun], 20 April 1931, 483-486; "Chexiao Wu Fengchun tongji an..." [On lifting Wu Fengchun's arrest warrant], 11 July 1931, 488-491.

⁹³ Xu Hui, "Wu Shoumei zai Xujia ban minzhong xuexiao" [Wu Shoumei's management of the People's School in Xujia], *Wannian wenshi ziliao*, no. 2 (1987): 111. On the Nationalist Government's set up of the People's Schools and teaching curricula, see Federica Ferlanti, "The New Life Movement in Jiangxi Province, 1934-1938," *Modern Asian Studies*, 2010, 44:5 (2010): 978-980.

was charged with fundraising.⁹⁴ Fang Zuding, now Wannian GMD secretary, re-opened the case to bring Wu down and boycott the Nationalist Government's attempt to restore control of the county.

 Fang Zuding Strikes Back

In order to prove that Wu was indeed a member of the 'evil gentry' and had damaged the GMD,⁹⁵ Fang sent two petitions to the National Government; one of them accused Wu Fengchun of corruption and embezzlement, and consequently considered him unfit for collecting public funds on the Committee's behalf:

Over the past years local financial expenses have been very high. Everyone in the county went everywhere campaigning for money donations. Wu Fengchun's family did not give one penny and what they were supposed to pay is [still] outstanding. Over the years they have never paid up any contribution. This generosity at others' expense is nothing but a plot in order to obtain the revocation of the arrest warrant, and it is simply a strategy. Actually [he] uses the charity donations to cover up his evil deeds. Since he is wealthy then he can do whatever evil [he wants] and this is the worst case of encouraging evil and creating chaos. If we let him stay in the position [of Committee member] people

⁹⁴ "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengqing zhunyu quxiao Wu Fengchun tongji an chengbao bei'an" [[The Administrative Yuan] reports on the case of the Jiangxi Provincial Government requesting permission for terminating Wu Fengchun's arrest warrant to [the National Government] and request to put [it] on record], 11 February 1935, 595-596.

⁹⁵ "Cheng wei guofu tongji yaofan Wu Fengchun..." [Petition on the National Government's arrest warrant of criminal Wu Fengchun], 1 November 1933, 497-503.

will not listen to him. This is what Fang Zuding and others are concerned about. Our hearts feel the danger and we cannot keep quiet. This is why we feel duty-bound to [humbly] petition.⁹⁶

The response was immediate. Wu's supporters came out *en masse* with a petition signed by 269 individuals and supported by 16,000 people from Wannian. The document stressed that his nomination came from the people, and that he was trustworthy:

County magistrate He and Commander Li, stationed in the county, obeyed the committee head's order of choosing [members of] the able and virtuous gentry [賢良士紳 *xianliang shishen*] to conduct the clearing and rehabilitation of the countryside. Everywhere [they] asked the population, and simple people among the young, women and children all recommended a specific person called Wu. In fact, because the two [Li and He] did not look down upon bumpkins [rustic people], [they] wrote a letter with the purpose of inviting [Wu] and sent representatives to Boyang to urge [him] to act as member in the standing committee of the Committee for clearing and rehabilitating the countryside. The population without exception rejoiced because they thought they would have security, but soon after [he] assumed office those who used to follow him kept the

⁹⁶ This petition was signed by the local establishment, including the GMD secretary (Fang Zuding himself), GMD members, Committee members, heads of the local administrative districts, teachers, and others, "Cheng wei zhuming lieshen tongji yaofan Wu Fengchun..." [Petition about the order of arrest of the famous evil gentry and criminal Wu Fengchun], 21 December 1933, 526.

distance from him, and those who opposed him hated him and thereupon spread lies and fabricated evidence as they wished.⁹⁷

Wu challenged the accusations in a petition to the National Government. He regarded Fang Zuding's false accusations as in breach of the 1928 peace agreement, and stressed that he had lived elsewhere ever since. He returned at the Committee's invitation and pointed out that when the local population was in dire straits he had personally contributed money towards the relief effort. Wu's pleas to the authorities showed his commitment to ending acrimonies once and for all: he requested that the county government grant his resignation from the Committee while he "quietly awaited" (靜候 jinghou) questioning, but asked for his accusers' suspension and that the case be remitted to Court to establish whether they had fabricated evidence, and if so, to be brought to justice.⁹⁸

Yet again there was political deadlock in Wannian. The case was now reexamined by Fuliang County Court (浮梁縣法院 Fuliang xian fayuan), which reached separate verdicts on Wu Fengchun and Fang Zhiping between late 1934 and early 1935.⁹⁹ The Court confirmed that there was no proof of Wu Fengchun's misbehaviour and therefore returned a verdict of

⁹⁷ "Wei Wu Fengchun jieshen citui minwang..." [Petition about Wu Fengchun [who] leads an upright life, resigned from office and is a role model for the people...], 17 February 1934, 538-539.

⁹⁸ "Cheng wei tianzao Wannian xian dangbu ganshi," 26 February 1934, 574-576, 563.

⁹⁹ "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengqing," 11 February 1935, 601; and "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengwei juqing zhuanqing quxiao Fang Zhiping tongji an chengqing bei'an" [On the basis of the material presented by the Jiangxi Provincial Government [the Administrative Yuan] requests [the National Government] to put on record the termination of Fang Zhiping's arrest warrant], 30 April 1935, 622.

not guilty.¹⁰⁰ The verdict on Fang Zhiping and his faction, in total ten individuals, was more detailed. The documentation includes the supplementary civil action for compensation brought to the Fuliang Court by Hu Wansheng's mother, the plaintiff, and Fang Zhiping's faction as defendants in 1935 which was rejected. The Court endorsed the Jiangxi High Court's (高等法院 Gaodeng fayuan) previous findings that Huang and Hu were killed on April 29th 1927; it also confirmed that magistrate Pan Tao had ordered the commander of the Self-defence Troops (自衛軍班長 Ziweijun banzhang) to arrest them because they wanted to confiscate the troops' arms and take over within the local GMD. Following their arrest, the two had been brought to Chenying and executed. Magistrate Pan said that only later had he informed the local GMD section. As a consequence, Pan's action was lawful and exempted Fang Zhiping. Conveniently, the commander could not be questioned because he was dead. This version was also supported by the current Wannian county magistrate who explained in a formal report that Huang and Hu had followed Fang Zhimin's orders to conduct propaganda activities in the county seat and seize weapons at the county government. It can be inferred from this report that Pan was not present at the execution; however, this bore no resemblance to the plaintiff's testimony. She had testified that Pan went to Chenying with the others and added:

My son was brought to Chenying and killed by the county government; my son received the order to confiscate the rifles of Mr Fang clan [...], and it was given evidence at this court that the county magistrate knew [about it] and [that] soon afterwards [he] too went to Chenying. They captured my son without [him]

¹⁰⁰ "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengqing," 11 February 1935, 599-601. The section below is based on "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengwei," 30 April 1935, 616-623.

having attended any meeting. My son's killing was witnessed by many people, but [they] dare not testify.¹⁰¹

In an anti-climactic judgment, the Court could not establish whether Fang Zhiping and his faction had taken part in the abduction of the two Communists. It therefore returned a verdict of not guilty because it was impossible to prove that Fang had conspired to kill them.

<A> Conclusion

This article has proposed that in order to understand the local elites' complex relationship with the GMD, a topic seldom touched upon by historians, we must turn our attention to the make-up of the local elites and how they acted on the ground. The analysis of Wannian County has shed light on their internal heterogeneity, and their political pragmatism, as well as on the transition from political mobilization to violence in the concluding phase of the Northern Expedition. In particular, the article challenges the description of local elites as 'evil gentry' in studies of the period centred on GMD/CCP political competition. It has shown that juxtapositions between the 'evil gentry' (or the despotic or feudal gentry) and the 'virtuous gentry' do not capture the changing nature of the local elites, their networks and their sources of power. The analysis of the evidence surrounding the descent into chaos in Wannian, instigated by individuals belonging to the late Qing generation, casts doubt on the applicability of the 'evil gentry' label to these elites. Certainly, the category of the 'evil gentry', conventionally associated with 'local bullies' and landowners, does not sit satisfactorily with Wu Fengchun and Fang Zhiping's cultured and revolutionary backgrounds.

At the same time, it is evident that education and the management of schools was a key ingredient in the rise to power of these individuals, who found themselves in search of a

¹⁰¹ "Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengwei," 30 April 1935, 619.

secure position in the wake of the abolition of the exam system. The prestige bestowed by opening and running *Shoumei* preceded Wu Fengchun's election to the provincial assembly; whilst access to the county seat by Fang Zhiping and his clan took place only after his involvement in *Yaoxi*. Local schools acted as channel of mobility that enabled them to expand their power-network and complete the transition from educators to power-brokers which resulted in the consolidation of their position in rural society. These local elites were less conservative than they are often depicted: they were well-educated and active in an increasingly connected geographical space, they were revolutionaries, and their source of power was chiefly associated with their work in modern local schools and more broadly in education. At the same time, by the 1920s schools were places where status, power and political mobilization intersected, and they were responsive to the changing political context. As different positions emerged in the GMD and the political vacuum widened, local elites' political choices and actions were informed by their preoccupation with local competition and access to resources rather than ideology. In this regard, the Nationalist Government, despite genuine attempts, was incapable of bringing closure to the all-consuming clash within the local community and within the local GMD.

Although the article examines one county in one province, this case has wider relevance for at least three reasons. Firstly, the changes brought about by educational reforms in local education across China suggest that local elites, and in particular the late Qing generation, were powerful agents of political transformation in the 1920s. If we focus only on the May Fourth generation, we fail to realize the ground-breaking work of the previous revolutionary generation. Next, attention to the heterogeneity of the local elites opens up possibilities for a more nuanced analysis of the characteristics of power-brokers at local level, and therefore enables us to start to ascertain how these dynamics fed directly into national events and politics. Finally, the turmoil in the GMD and its complex relationship with the

local elites helps us to revise how we identify the limits of the Nationalist Government's reinstatement of power at the local level. Specifically, placing these attempts to reinstate power firmly within the context of existing local rivalries illuminates the motivations and actions of those who jockeyed for power, and ultimately sheds new light on the operations of political power at multiple levels in this crucial period in Chinese history.

Figures & Captions

Figure 1. Wannian County

Figure 2. Headmaster Wu Fengchun

Figure 3. *Shoumei* layout

1. *Shoumei* Citizens' School
2. *Shoumei* Girls' School
3. *Shoumei* Agricultural Middle School (see Figure 4.2)
4. *Shoumei* Higher Primary School
5. Space allocated for additional building work
6. *Shoumei* farming practice ground

Figure 4. County seat Chengxiang

1. *Shoumei* Girls' School and Citizens' School
2. *Shoumei* Agricultural Middle School and Higher Primary School
3. *Shoumei* Agricultural School farming practice ground
4. Temple God of war
5. County government office
6. Police station
7. Temple God of literature
8. West city charity granary Citizens' School

9. County Higher Primary school
10. *Rao* clan *Ganxiao* Citizens' School
11. Jesus Church
12. Catholic Church
13. School of Commerce attached to the Chamber of Commerce
14. *Shoumei* no. 2 Citizens' school attached to the temple of Confucius
15. Post office