EDUCATORS AND POWER BROKERS: POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND VIOLENCE IN WANNIAN COUNTY, JIANGXI PROVINCE, 1926–1935

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This article examines the actions, politicization, and mobilization of Guomindang (GMD) revolutionary local elites of the late Qing generation, with attention to the changing roots of their power. It tackles the rapid demotion of local elites into “evil gentry,” how and why well-educated and respected individuals central to local education became enmeshed in violence, and how, in turn, this affected GMD assertion of control. This case study of upper-stratum elites in Wannian County in northeast Jiangxi between 1926 and 1935 challenges existing literature that centers only on the Communist revolution, the May Fourth generation of revolutionaries, local elites’ identification with traditional power holders, and the GMD’s local restoration of power. A focus on indigenous dynamics and GMD impact on local politics brings to light the importance of the diversity of local elites, the dynamic of power reconfiguration among them, and the fierce competition among elite groups over sources of power such as local schools.

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

In December 1927, China’s national government issued arrest warrants for Fang Zhiping (方之屏 1874–1943) and Wu Fengchun (吳逢春 1872–1947), members of the elite in Wannian (万年) County in northeastern Jiangxi Province. Fang was accused of killing two young Communist activists, Hu Wansheng (胡完生 1900–1927) and Huang Shibiao (黃士彪 1902–1927), and Wu was accused of forcibly overthrowing the county government following their murder in March 1927.1 Between October 1927 and May 1935, copious petitions from fellow elites and other Wannian residents
to the provincial government and the Nationalist Party (Guomindang; GMD) central government identified both men as members of the “evil gentry” (劣紳 lieshen). The allegations were investigated by governmental institutions at several administrative levels, and the case was belatedly settled by the Jiangxi High Court (高等法院 Gaodeng fayuan) and the Fuliang County Court (浮梁縣法院 Fuliang xian fayuan) in Jiangxi between 1931 and 1935. In the end, none of the protagonists was convicted, but the petitions provide precious insights into the nature and political positioning of the local elites during the tumultuous years of the late 1920s and early 1930s.2

What makes these violent events significant is the complex political and social dynamics they reveal and the way in which they intersected with the national political dimension. The motivations for the assassinations, the political and administrative upheaval that followed it, and the direction taken by the investigation are, in fact, to be found in the confrontation of different elements: local elite reformers of the late Qing generation (represented in this case by Fang and Wu) and their sources of power (their involvement in the management of local schools and the teaching profession); the challenges to their power generated by the new, emerging group of May Fourth intellectuals and reformers (Hu and Huang); and the attempt of the newest competitor, the GMD, to establish its leadership in the area. The main objective of this article is to understand the identities of these competing elite groups, their power bases, and the historical background that fueled their competition for power over Wannian. This article also reevaluates the nature and aspirations of the late Qing elites, rescuing them from the generally accepted characterization as conservative and antireformist or, to use a label applied to them by May Fourth elites and GMD leaders, as the “evil gentry.” The article concludes that ultimately it was generational tension and elite rivalry over access to local resources rather than political competition and GMD disputes that hindered the Nationalists’ state-building effort in Wannian for years to come.

The turmoil that plagued Jiangxi between 1926 and 1935 should be seen as part of the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists following the split within the GMD (hereafter, the Split) that flared up in March and April 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek abrogated the Nationalists’ alliance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established with the First United Front and began a purge of Communists in Shanghai. From the point of view of Wannian, the arrival of the Northern Expedition (1926–1928) further complicated an already unsettled political environment marked by internal conflicts among the late Qing and May Fourth local elites and by their difficult relations with local warlord armies. The fall of the local warlords created a power vacuum that had momentous consequences for the emergence of local Nationalist leaders and for their consolidation of power.

The consequences of the Northern Expedition and of the Split on national politics are well known,3 but less is known about their local dimension, especially with regard to

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2 All archival materials in this article are contained in two juan (files) consulted in microfilm form, “Jiangxi sheng lieshen tongji an, 1927–1935” [Cases of arrest warrants for evil gentry in Jiangxi Province, 1927–1935], juan 1 and juan 2, microfilm 117 (hereafter abbreviated JSLTA), Archives of the National Government, Academia Historica, Taipei. The collection has since been digitized.

the GMD’s relationship with local elites after the Revolutionary Army’s victory over the local warlords and the GMD’s effort to establish political control in the region. This is a topic that has not attracted the attention of historians, who have focused mostly on the GMD-CCP conflict. Historians have also tended to bundle up local elites in black-and-white descriptions of good (Communist) or evil (Nationalist) elites, without taking into account the local elites’ internal heterogeneity and contradictions. This article puts the diversity of local elites center stage in order to explain the political changes and violence that came to characterize this period.

Remarkably, Jiangxi’s local elites have attracted little attention from historians despite their significant role in the Northern Expedition and the hatching of the Communist rural revolution in the 1920s—well before the establishment of the First Chinese Soviet Republic in November 1931. The tendency to focus on the GMD-CCP confrontation has also led to a lack of attention to the revolutionary experience of the late Qing generation of local elites. These elites were actually crucial to the formation of political movements in Republican China, for communities’ participation in the revolutionary process, and for the establishment of the Nationalist state. Their political positioning stemmed from specific local circumstances, and we must turn to the local to understand their relationship with the GMD.

By focusing on local elites’ participation in the disastrous chain of events that engulfed Wannian between 1926 and 1935, this article advances three linked arguments.

First, changes in the roots of elite power, the diverse composition and networks of the elites, and the feuds and clan rivalry among them that predated the Split dictated the direction of the violence and hindered the GMD’s efforts to gain political control of the region. 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 end of

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4 Keith R. Schoppa’s influential work on Shen Dengyi and the Nationalist Revolution in Zhejiang Province presents an exception to this trend by focusing 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 on “the dominant political paradigms.” Keith R. Schoppa, Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 4, 251.


the Qing dynasty created the conditions for the late Qing local elites’ frontline involve-
ment in political change and fast-tracked the use of local schools as power bases in the
1920s. However, this was also a time of generational turnover, and the late Qing elites
were challenged by the new breed of revolutionaries of the May Fourth generation.

Second, this article highlights the importance of local elites’ competition over ac-
cess to and control of local schools, which became tools for political mobilization during
the Northern Expedition in Wannian. The divisions within the GMD pushed local power
holders to extreme positions that were replicated in the local schools.

Third, though the Nationalist government attempted to quarantine disruptive ele-
ments within the ranks of the local GMD, the process of gaining political control over the
newly conquered Wannian area proved too slow. The central government’s inability to
deal swiftly with internecine conflicts allowed divisions among local elites to fester and
hindered the party’s reach for years. In other words, the GMD’s revolutionary fabric was
torn apart, and this created the space for violence to flourish. The GMD never recovered
from this dynamic.

These dimensions of the case study are worked out through three substantive sec-
tions. The first main section investigates the makeup of the local elites, questions the
problematic definition of “evil gentry,” and links elite networks to the school system.
It shows that, before the Split, local schools became hubs for power consolidation and
ultimately were used by both generations to shift the balance of power in Wannian. The
second section outlines the effects of the Northern Expedition in Jiangxi Province and
the political fault lines that emerged from it. It then assesses the scale of the local elites’
political mobilization, spurred by the Northern Expedition, by looking at the underground
political work that opened the door to mass mobilization. The third section examines 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. It then turns to the failures
of reconciliation attempts prompted by the local gentry and the Nationalist government.

What occurred in Wannian reveals the role of local elites in central politics and how
those politics were experienced locally, giving evidence of the scale of disruption of local
political and administrative life and its long-lasting consequences. As such, this case study
provides fundamental insights into the mechanism of power and shows how the social
and political positioning of local elites affected the broader direction of the Nationalist
movement and the Nationalists’ reinstatement of power.

LOCAL ELITES IN WANNIAN COUNTY

The Late Qing Elites and the “Evil Gentry”

Providing a definition for “local elites” is at best a hazardous task; time, context, and
geography all make “local elites” a slippery term. Joseph Esherick and Mary Backus
Rankin’s definition is particularly useful: it pointedly employed the plural form and
included “any individuals or families that exercised dominance within a local area.”

7 More broadly, Wen-hsin Yeh noted the correlation between Zhejiang progressive elites and
the development of tertiary education. Wen-hsin Yeh, The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in
wherein “local” was understood to mean “county (縣 xian) level or lower.”

In Jiangxi, Stephen C. Averill differentiated between local elites’ upper stratum of “Qing examination degree-holders” and a less-educated lower stratum; the latter was often identified disparagingly by Republican “government officials and higher-level elites” with the “local bullies and evil gentry” (土豪劣紳 tuhao lieshen). This description, however, does not fit the composition of the Wannian elite. In this county, the “evil gentry” label was attached to progressive, upper-stratum elites by fellow elites and community members, suggesting that the boundaries between upper and lower gentry were in fact porous. Furthermore, it appears that in Wannian the term was used to discredit political adversaries, regardless of their social position—as was the case for Wu’s and Fang’s supporters. The Wannian case, therefore, hints at the impossibility of finding a one-size-fits-all definition for the ideological characterization and composition of local elites without consideration of the diversity of local social and political dynamics.

Wannian offers a unique vantage point for evaluation of the local elites’ role. Unlike in counties in the border areas and in the south of Jiangxi Province (赣南 Gannan) that experienced Communist activism that culminated in direct CCP control under the First Chinese Soviet Republic from 1931 on, in Wannian the local elite dynamics were affected by local Communist mobilization without the experience of direct administration by the soviet government. The narrative of elites’ relationship with the GMD, therefore, was not driven exclusively by Communism. Also, Wannian is the only county in Jiangxi where protests about the “evil gentry” mounted by local elite groups and the wider population continued for a period of eight years. Unlike other cases documented in Jiangsu Province, the tensions among the local elites of Wannian continued well into the 1930s, and the GMD was able to rein them in only in 1935. This persistent unruliness raises questions about the effectiveness of the central party in bringing order to the rank and file.

Intraelite conflict was already present in Wannian before 1927, but it was the arrival of the Northern Expedition that triggered a full collision. After the killing of Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao in March 1927, elite clashes were framed as political competition (Communists versus Nationalists, Left GMD versus Right GMD). Why Wu or Fang might have associated with one side or the other is not clear from their biographies. Nonetheless, archival documents refer specifically to the protagonists as belonging to the “Left” (Wu and his associates) and “Right” (Fang and his associates). The backgrounds

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


10 This is very late considering that in Jiangsu Province 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,” China Quarterly 108 (December 1986): 688, 697–99.

of these two groups differed significantly from those of other local elites in other areas generally identified with the “evil gentry” label. They, in fact, were not landlords; their local prominence stemmed from their involvement in local education.

Wu Fengchun’s and Fang Zhiping’s biographies demonstrate the intimate and increasingly strong relationship between elite 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 (城廂; the county seat of Wannian County until 1959) in Jiangxi Province, where he moved during his youth. His family were landowners.12 He set up the Wu clan’s Shoumei (壽梅) Private Primary School in Chengxiang in 1908, and he later established 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 (饒) 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 grain and military funds imposed upon the county.13 He was considered successful on both accounts.14 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; a meeting, facilitated by a cash gift, spared looting and violence.15

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 1926.16

Wu managed Shoumei with his brother’s help. The school’s achievements were celebrated in a commemorative panegyric compiled in 1923 for the 10th anniversary of its foundation. As might be expected, this document portrays a progressive environment and an enlightened headmaster. The school did become known for its modern approach to education. The evolution of teaching at Shoumei reflected the progressive élan that

12 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 compliant with the 1820 stipulation that, in Benjamin Elman’s words, “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 then returned to Wannian after graduation. Wannian xian difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui [Wannian County Local Gazetteer Editorial Committee], ed., Wannian xianzhi [Wannian County gazetteer] (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 2000) (hereafter abbreviated WX2000), 864; Benjamin A. Elman, Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 234. For a list of civil examinations and degrees, see the flowchart in Elman, Civil Examinations, 102, fig. 3.1.

13 Between 1918 and 1926, Jiangxi Province was ruled by a string of military governors who were mostly under the influence of Wu Peifu and Sun Chuanfang, Beiyang warlords of the Zhili clique, who in 1925–1926 fought the National Revolutionary Army’s advance to Jiangxi. Liu Shoulin, Wan Renyuan, Wang Yuwen, and Kong Qingtai, eds., Mingguo zhiguan nianbiao [Chronological tables of Republican period officials] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chuban, 1995), 264–68; He Youliang, Jiangxi tongshi [Jiangxi general history], vol. 11 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2008), 26–29.


16 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 50.
characterized educational reforms in Republican China and the expansion of local education. In 1912 it opened as a higher primary school; its designation changed to “citizens’ school” in 1915; through 1922 the school developed diverse programs, including courses for girls, night courses for the poor, vocational courses, and, after 1921, agricultural studies.

The school enrolled about 300 students, who came from neighboring counties as well as from Wannian. Students took part in physical activities and in student government bodies; the school also established cleaning routines performed by students and carried out inoculation programs. Wu contributed financially to the support of poor students, and fees varied according to the students’ circumstances. Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao were educated at this school, and when they organized the first underground CCP cell in Wannian, the main pool of recruits came from the school. Shoumei paid a high price for this involvement. Along with Wu’s house, its buildings were burned down shortly after Hu and Huang were killed.

Fang Zhiping was from Shigu Village just north of Chenying (陳營; Wannian’s county seat since 1959). He came from an educated family of landowners; his father was a xiucai (秀才; licentiate). Fang was extremely talented and highly educated, and by 1922 he was involved in education. Unlike Wu, whose school was very much a family enterprise, Fang worked with others to raise funds and establish Yaoxi (姚西) Private Middle School in 1922; he also served as headmaster there. Fang’s coterie shared political views and supported the Nationalist Revolution. The main figure and driving force behind the project was Sun Yimou (孫詒謀; 1878–1936), who before 1918 was involved in a lawsuit against Wu Fengchun—a detail that shows that the animosity between the two men preceded 1927. The school’s location in Sun’s ancestral clan hall


18 “Wannian Shoumei xuexiao shi zhou jinian lu” [Commemorative book for the 10th anniversary of Shoumei School in Wannian County], ca. 1923, attached to “Chengwei yishen Wu Fengchun… qingqiu chexiao tongji” [Petition requesting the lifting of the arrest order for fellow gentry member Wu Fengchun…], 13 April 1931, JSLTA, 393.

19 WX2000, 864.


22 WX1982, 672.

23 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 64.

24 Chenying was about 15 km away from Chengxiang.

25 Fang passed the examination for xiucai at 16 and then attended an academy in Rao Prefecture. He was promoted to linsheng (salaried xiucai) and selected for the civil service examination in the provincial capital (bagong). Fang must have been quite promising, since a bagong was a “special examination student” who had earned the degree of “tribute student” and was en route to the degree of “provincial graduate.” Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 59; Elman, Civil Examinations, 102, fig. 3.1, 105.

26 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 53, 57–60.

27 Sun Yimou was the son of a financially comfortable cobbler from Chengxiang. At 18 he passed the examination for xiucai and was selected for the examination in the provincial capital. He worked as a teacher and from 1903 as headmaster of the First County Government Higher Primary School for 10 years. In 1918 he moved to Guangzhou, where he served in Sun Yat-sen’s Guangzhou government, along
in Chengxiang corroborates the idea that he was the leading figure.\textsuperscript{28} Fang’s standing was buttressed by a younger family member, Fang Zhixiang (方芝祥 1887–1927).\textsuperscript{29} Fang Zhixiang was extremely bright and attained the degree of provincial graduate (举人 \textit{juren}).\textsuperscript{30} At 19 years of age, he was admitted to Jiangxi Higher College; two years later he entered Nanjing Higher Normal College.\textsuperscript{31} In 1910 he traveled to Japan to study economics at Waseda University in Tokyo at his family’s expense. Like many other students at the time, Fang Zhixiang joined the Revolutionary Alliance, and he 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 provincial branch of the GMD, and in March 1926 he returned to Wannian and used Yaoxi to covertly recruit GMD members for the Wannian branch.\textsuperscript{32} Fang Zhixiang’s career ended abruptly; in March 1927 he was appointed magistrate of Pingxiang (萍乡) County, in southeast Jiangxi, where he was killed by the Communists.\textsuperscript{33}

There is scant information about Yaoxi, but its reputation was good. 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 10 teachers, and in total about 300 pupils, including girls, graduated from it.\textsuperscript{34} Sun Yimou was the headmaster for a short period, but this responsibility rotated among the main contributors. Fang Zhiping’s spell as headmaster and teacher at Yaoxi stemmed from the connection between Sun and Fang Zhixiang. Furthermore, that connection explains how the Fang clan, which was from Chenying, gained influence in the county seat, so much influence that 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.\textsuperscript{35} But the decline continued, and in 1934 the school was shut down. In 1939 it reopened as a county junior middle school established by the provincial government.\textsuperscript{36}

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with Fang Zhiping’s relative, Fang Zhixiang. He followed the Northern Expedition to Jiangxi and was among the GMD’s founders in Wannian. Fang and Liu, \textit{Wannian gujin renwu}, 57.
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29 He was probably Fang Zhiping’s paternal cousin (堂弟). Fang and Liu, \textit{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, JSLTA, 244.
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30 WX1982, 700.
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31 This was likely the Liang Jiang Teachers’ College. Xiaoping Cong, \textit{Teachers’ Schools and the Making of Modern Chinese Nation-State, 1897–1937} (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 48, table 2.1.
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34 Wang, “Jiefang qian,” 105.
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In Wannian, therefore, the late Qing elites asserted their influence at the local level via traditional and modern channels of mobility and benefitted from the education they received locally, in the provincial capital, and abroad. Arguably, the degrees they attained were “much less rare or special” than they would have been earlier in the Qing period because by their time a high percentage of people paid for degrees and corruption was rife.37 Even so, degrees remained a mark of status, and their subsequent educational progression suggested 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, mostly by working in education. Crucially, they were not inward looking and had experienced life outside the county boundaries. They brought prized skills, underpinned by ideas of modern governance, to the advancement of the Nationalist Revolution and the Northern Expedition. When the time came, they all supported the Northern Expedition and contributed to the founding of the GMD in their county. Their revolutionary credentials were impeccable.

The May Fourth Generation

The two activists Fang Zhiping was accused of murdering, 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. Hu attended that school but then moved to Chengxiang and enrolled at Shoumei. After graduation, he studied at Boyang Zhiyang Normal School, and in the spring of 1920 he was admitted to Jiangxi First Provincial Industrial School in Nanchang, from which he graduated in the autumn of 1926.38 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 and graduated in the autumn of 1923.39

Both Hu and Huang studied between 1918 and 1926 in Nanchang, where the student movement took shape after the May Fourth incident, and they were involved in the patriotic and socialist student organizations that emerged soon afterward. When news of the May Fourth incident reached Nanchang, students from Jiangxi Provincial Professional School of Agriculture proclaimed a student strike and called a general meeting; 19 schools with about 6,000 students responded to the call, and on May 9, 1919, they elected the self-governed Nanchang Students’ Alliance (南昌學生聯合會 Nanchang xuesheng

38 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 82; WX2000, 861.
Huang Shibiao was one of the students elected to the Alliance. The streets brimmed with student activists; they marched shouting patriotic slogans and presented a petition to the military governor, who did not delay 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. Anti-Japanese feelings intensified after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, and the May Fourth students implemented a boycott of Japanese goods. In Wannian County too, on May 17, a thousand students and workers of Chengxiang marched and went on strike.

The upsurge did not wane quickly. 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 1, 1921; likewise, a string of student publications emerged, such as New Jiangxi (新江西 Xin Jiangxi), first published in May 1921, whose forthright opposition to imperialism and warlords’ oppression fueled students’ activism. Mass organizations were also taking shape, such as the China Socialist Youth Corps (中國社會主義青年團 Zhongguo shehuizhuyi qingniantuan) established in October 1923. Even though student protests flared up during the May Thirtieth incident and extended down to the county level, mobilization only reached fever pitch when the National Revolutionary Army approached the city in mid-September 1926: the GMD in Nanchang circulated propaganda materials in support of the Northern Expedition that were passed around by the students.

Thus, Hu and Huang were immersed in student mobilization and were well connected to radical intellectuals such as the Communist revolutionary Fang Zhimin (方志敏 1899–1935), who was no relation to the Fang clan of Fang Zhiping. 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 joined the Socialist Youth Corps in 1924. Huang joined the Jiangxi Reconstruction Society, which counted the Communist Fang Zhimin among its founding members, and the Socialist Youth Corps. After graduating, Wu Fengchun offered Huang a teaching position at Shoumei, where he

41 WX2000, 861.
42 Chen Guangyuan (dates unknown).
43 Xu Shuyung, “‘Wusi’ qijian de Nanchang xuesheng yundong,” 4–5.
44 WX2000, 6.
45 Sheel, Peasant Society, 149–51; 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 Gongqingtuan Nanchang shi weiyuanwei, Nanchang qingnian yundong huiyilu, 41–42.
47 Between 1919 and 1921, Fang Zhimin attended Jiangxi First Provincial Industrial School. He became the most famous Communist revolutionary who was native to Jiangxi. Fang Zhimin led Communist activities that resulted in the creation of the Jiangxi Northeast Soviet in 1930. Later on, this area was incorporated into the Fujian-Zhejiang-Jiangxi Soviet Area (MinZheGan sheng suqu). Sheel, Peasant Society, 147–49; Chen Ronghua and He Youliang, Zhongyang suqu shilüe [Brief history of the Central Soviet Area] (Shanghai: Shanghai shenhui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1992), 131–32.
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. In the autumn of 1924 he opened a library where he circulated progressive literature.48

The generational gap between the May Fourth generation and the late Qing generation was exemplified by the former’s adoption of an approach to political change that was underpinned by mass mobilization. The ideas for change pursued by the local May Fourth generation were molded while studying in Nanchang and found an outlet first in progressive and patriotic associations attached to modern schools and later 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’ networks offered the greatest rewards in terms of influence, but it was also at the root of the conflict that spiraled into outright violence when the province and the county were engulfed in the Northern Expedition: although already the loci of intraelite rivalry, the schools became actual battlegrounds as the local elites openly competed for hegemony.

**THE ARRIVAL OF THE NORTHERN EXPEDITION: POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND MOBILIZATION**

Jiangxi was 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 newly established Wuhan government in Hubei Province. The occupation of Jiangxi “would radically change the course of the Northern Expedition and would prove critical to Chiang’s rise to power.”49 Chiang’s campaign to seize Jiangxi was not easy, and it lasted from early September well into November 1926; in contrast, Wuchang was secured on October 10; in December the Nationalist government’s apparatus began taking shape at Wuhan.50 The capture of Jiangxi Province opened the way to areas of the lower Yangzi.51 When the National Revolutionary Army 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.52 Many local elites—including the people discussed so far—that long supported the Northern 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
Across 13 counties in northeast Jiangxi, the Communist presence typically became visible during the First United Front and extended considerably after the National Revolutionary Army arrived. In fact, the official establishment of CCP cells took place mostly in late 1926. In Wannian, the first Communists to join the CCP in the spring of 1926 were Huang Shibiao and Hu Wansheng, who established the cell in December, although they already had been active for a few years. When they returned to Chengxiang, Huang in 1924 and Hu in 1926, they found a fertile environment. They began recruiting and mobilizing activists, and their work intensified with the arrival of the Northern Expedition; in the autumn of 1926 they were chosen to attend the Peasant Movement Institute (Nongjiangsuo) in Nanchang, and in November the first county-level Peasant Association was established in Wannian.

Likewise, GMD-led mobilization was extremely effective; by 1926 in parts of Jiangxi the GMD movement had attracted “considerable sympathy…centering around the middle schools and universities,” and pro-GMD teachers encouraged students’ mobilization and their enlistment in the National Revolutionary Army during Chiang’s military campaign. In northeast Jiangxi, preparatory party organization took place between October and November 1926. 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 despatched by the GMD Executive Committee to Nanchang to set up the Jiangxi branch and act as secretary. In 1926 they sent him back to Wannian, where a branch was eventually founded in November 1926; by then he had recruited six members, which soon expanded to fifty. In January 1927 the local GMD branch held its first representatives’ conference at Yaoxi and elected an executive committee, the membership of which coincided with the school’s sponsors. Hence, although sources record the establishment of the GMD branch as occurring in late 1926, supporters had already had a decade of political activism before that date. Crucially, the Northern Expedition created the conditions for expansion of the power base of both the CCP and the GMD.

The magnitude of mass mobilization is shown by the spike in the formation of peasant associations in 1926–1927, the bulk of which were initially developed within the United Front. These associations were not under the CCP’s exclusive control and were subject to “lineage connections and patronage ties.” According to historian Chen Dejun (陈德军), after the warlord Sun Chuanfang’s defeat, recruitment to peasant associations

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54 Chen, Xiangcun shehui, 38, table 1.
55 Jordan, Northern Expedition, 202–3.
56 Chen, Xiangcun shehui, 37–40, table 1.
57 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 50.
in the northeast of Jiangxi rose from 6,276 in October to 50,000 members in November 1926 and the Jiangxi Provincial Peasant Association reached 82,617 members by May 1927. Chen maintains that this increase was a direct result of the National Revolutionary Army securing and liberating areas of the province, and although he cautions us about the accuracy of the data, historians agree that there was considerable growth.

These mass organizations were connected to both the GMD and the CCP, and because their branches were present at the county level they became the locus at which the local power struggle between Fang and Wu played out, drawing the late Qing local elites into collective action and violence and leading to the killing of Hu Wansheng and Huang Shibiao.

**POLITICAL UNREST AND VIOLENCE**

*The Killing*

The tragic killing of Hu and Huang should be seen as part of the struggle between the late Qing elite groups. This killing, in fact, removed the Fang clan’s political competition and opened the door for fulfillment of its quest for local power. The main accusation against Fang Zhiping concerned the murder of Hu and Huang. 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 March 1927. The legality of the arrest (or abduction) and execution (or murder), in fact, depended on the date the crimes took place. If the death of the Communists took place in March, then it could be claimed that, in mobilizing the local peasant association, Hu and Huang did no more than legitimately follow the Wuhan government’s directives issued on March 10, 1927, that entrusted them with the organization of local self-government. But if the event took place after the April 2 insurrection in Nanchang and Chiang’s coup in Shanghai, then local GMD

60 Chen, Xiangcun shehui, 58.
61 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 83.
62 Chen, Xiangcun shehui, 58. See, for instance, He Youliang, Jiangxi tongshi, 118–19.
63 Local gazetteers claimed that Fang Zhiping and his allies seized them on March 25 or March 27, biographical sketches record March 26 and March 27, and governmental records place their abduction a month later on April 23. WX1982, 674; WX2000, 863; “Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengzhun gaodeng fayuan…yi an” [On the case of the Jiangxi provincial government asking permission of the High Court], 11 July 1929, JSLTA, 291.
65 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 a replica of what was already happening elsewhere. Van de Ven, War and Nationalism, 118–19.
members could claim that they did no more than implement a legitimate restoration of power that was unfolding at the national level. A source sympathetic to the young Communists recounted the events as follows:

On March 27, 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 members Xu Jiachen [徐嘉琛 dates unknown], Fang Zhiping, and Sun Yimou [孫詒謀; brother of the aforementioned Sun Yimou 孫翼謀], with 30 members of the Society for Greater Jiangxi, 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 [喜子崗], near Chenying, and tortured them…. That same night, Fang Zhiping and his reactionary faction struck vicious blows on them.68

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

This accusation was supported by accounts that detailed Fang Zhiping’s practice of extorting money from the local population. Fang could count on the support of the local Society for Greater Jiangxi (洪江會 Hong Jiang 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.69

Although Wu Fengchun was generally described as a man of intellect, petitions by the Jiangxi provincial government and Fang Zhiping painted a very different picture of him. These petitions claimed that by December 1926 Wu had about 20,000 yuan available to recruit bandits (匪類 feilei) and to buy 50 guns and Hauser pistols (駁壳 boke).70 Wu was also accused of directing a preemptive 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 Zhiping was elected. He claimed that Wu ordered his armed associates to enter Chengxiang on April 9, when they captured GMD and Peasant Association members,

66 Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 57.
68 WX1982, 674.
69 “Chengwei 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, JSLTA, 578–79.
destroyed public buildings, and killed people.\footnote{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 Zhiping and magistrate Pan Tao, members of the GMD local section, and members of various mass organizations. As a result, 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 \textit{bu guzhe chi zhi kuadang fenzi}) were left behind. Wu Fengchun, “the bandit chieftain” (匪首 \textit{fei shou}), moved around in a grand sedan chair, and, shortly after he seized power, the properties of Fang’s family and associates were attacked, destroyed, and looted, and money was extorted from businessmen and students at Yaoxi.} 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 Zhiping and magistrate Pan Tao, members of the GMD local section, and members of various mass organizations. As a result, 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 \textit{bu guzhe chi zhi kuadang fenzi}) were left behind. Wu Fengchun, “the bandit chieftain” (匪首 \textit{fei shou}), moved around in a grand sedan chair, and, shortly after he seized power, the properties of Fang’s family and associates were attacked, destroyed, and looted, and money was extorted from businessmen and students at Yaoxi.\footnote{This version was confirmed by the refugees from Gantou (岡頭) Village who sided with Fang Zhiping. 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 committing arson. 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 Communist leader Fang Zhimin for Fang Zhixiang’s elimination.} This version was confirmed by the refugees from Gantou (岡頭) Village who sided with Fang Zhiping. 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 committing arson.\footnote{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 Communist leader Fang Zhimin for Fang Zhixiang’s elimination.} 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 Communist leader Fang Zhimin for Fang Zhixiang’s elimination.\footnote{At this stage, the provincial government was controlled by the Right GMD. Nonetheless, it did not favor 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.}

\textbf{Reconciliation Attempts}

The local community tried to bring the two sides together, but the attempt did not yield lasting results. In February 1928 they drafted a peace pledge (和平公約 \textit{heping gongyue}) that laid down the terms for a joint agreement. It carried the signatures of members of the Wannian County Peace Conference (万年縣和平會議員紳 Wannian xian heping huiyi yuanshen),\footnote{Roles and occupations of the signees are unknown, except for the chair of the Wannian Chamber of Commerce and the Self-Defense Corps’ deputy company commander.} brought together by the county magistrate, and of representatives for both sides. The agreement also indicated 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. By then, Wu had retired from the local political scene and lived in Boyang County, where he continued to be involved in education. However, Fang Zhiping remained in Wannian, and in July 1927 the provincial GMD headquarters put him in charge of the reorganization of the local GMD, a post he held until the end of 1928. After his retirement from political life, Fang returned to his village and taught at several schools in the area of Chenying. The GMD was directed briefly by a moderate open to compromise who was among Yaoxi’s founders, but he was soon elbowed out. From 1929 to 1937 it returned to the direct control of the Fang clan. That both Wu and Fang accepted the joint agreement and continued to work in local education casts further doubt on their characterization as “evil gentry.”

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 Nationalist government in the 1930s. The early 1930s was a period of intense pressure from the Communists, and the Nationalist government called upon the participation of local elites to restore its authority. As a result, Wu Fengchun’s arrest warrant, in which Wu was referred to as “gentry” (邑紳 yishen), was lifted between April and July 1931. Despite doubts surrounding Fang Zhiping’s involvement in the murder case, his warrant was also lifted. 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 GMD curricula, which signaled Wu’s support for the GMD. This alone might have triggered old resentments, but it was Wu’s return to active political life in October 1933, as a 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 was charged with fundraising. Fang Zuding, now Wannian GMD

78 Peng, “Wu Shoumei xiansheng shilüe,” 70; Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 64.
79 Sun Yimou, on the other hand, was transferred by the GMD to Jiujiang County at the beginning of 1928. Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 58–60.
80 First under Fang Zuomou (1903–1935) and then under Fang Zuding. WX2000, 117; Fang and Liu, Wannian gujin renwu, 55, 65.
81 The request came from the commander of the 15th Pacification and Defense Corps in Wannian County District Nine, the representatives of three villages on the Bandit Suppression Committee, and community members.
84 “Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengqing zhunyu quxiao Wu Fengchun tongji an chengbao bei an” [Administrative Yuan reports on the case of the Jiangxi provincial government requesting permission from the national government for terminating Wu Fengchun’s arrest warrant and putting it on record], 11 February 1935, JSLTA, 595–96.
secretary, reopened the case to bring Wu down and boycott the Nationalist government’s attempt to restore its control of the county. As such, the intersection of local rivalries with GMD politics continued to create divisions among Wannian’s local elites.

**Fang Zuding Strikes Back**

In order to prove that Wu was indeed a member of the “evil gentry” and had damaged the GMD,85 Fang Zuding sent two petitions to the national government; one of them accused Wu Fengchun of corruption and embezzlement and consequently of unfitness 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 for any contribution. This generosity at other’s 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, 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 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.86

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 by 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, [they] wrote a letter with the purpose of inviting [Wu] and sent representatives to Boyang to urge [him] to act as a member of 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

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86 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. “Chengwei zhuming lieshen tongji yaofan Wu Fengchun…” [Petition about the arrest order for the famous evil gentry and criminal Wu Fengchun…], 21 December 1933, JSLTA, 526.
those who used to follow him kept their distance from him, and those who opposed him hated him and thereupon spread lies and fabricated evidence as they wished.87

Wu challenged Fang’s accusations in a petition to the national government. He stated that he regarded Fang Zuding’s false accusations as a breach of the 1928 peace agreement and stressed that he had lived elsewhere ever since that agreement. He had returned at the committee’s invitation, he said, and he pointed out that when the local population was in dire straits he had personally contributed money toward the relief effort. Wu’s pleas to the authorities evinced a commitment to ending acrimony 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 he asked for his accusers’ suspension and to have the case remitted to court to establish whether they had fabricated evidence and, if so, for them to be brought to justice.88

Yet again there was political deadlock in Wannian. The case was reexamined by the Fuliang County Court, which reached separate verdicts on Wu Fengchun and Fang Zhiping between late 1934 and early 1935.89 The court confirmed that there was no proof of Wu Fengchun’s misbehavior and therefore returned a verdict of not guilty.90 The verdict on Fang Zhiping and his faction, 10 individuals in all, was more detailed. The documentation includes the supplementary civil action for compensation brought to the Fuliang Court in 1935 by Hu Wansheng’s mother as plaintiff, with Fang Zhiping’s faction as defendants, which was rejected. The court endorsed the Jiangxi High Court’s previous findings that Huang and Hu were killed on April 29, 1927; it also confirmed that magistrate Pan Tao had ordered the commander of the Self-Defense Troops (自衛軍班長 Ziwèijùn bānzhang) to arrest them because they wanted to confiscate the troops’ arms and take over 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 Communist leader 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, the plaintiff’s testimony contradicted this account.91 She 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’s clan,… and it was given

87 “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, JSLTA, 538–39.
88 “Chengwei tianzao Wannian xian dangbu ganshi,” JSLTA, 563, 574–76.
89 “Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengqing,” JSLTA, 601; “Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengwei juqing zhuangxing quxia 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, JSLTA, 622.
91 Ju Jiangxi sheng zhengfu chengwei,” JSLTA, 616–23
as evidence at this court that the county magistrate knew [about it] and [that] soon afterward [he] too went to Chenying. They captured my son without [him] having attended any meeting. My son’s killing was witnessed by many people, but [they] dare not testify.92

In an anticlimactic 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. The lack of clarity about Fang’s involvement is meaningful; on a human level it deprived the young Communists’ families of closure and on a political level it exposed the institutions’ inability to put the case to rest.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that in order to understand the local elites’ complex relationships with the GMD we must turn our attention to the makeup of the local elites and their power bases. The analysis of Wannian County has shed light on their internal heterogeneity, on their political pragmatism, and on the transition from political mobilization to violence in the concluding phase of the Northern Expedition. In particular, this article challenges the description of local elites as “evil gentry” in studies of the period centered on GMD-CCP political competition. It has shown that the juxtapositions between the “evil gentry” (or the despotic or feudal gentry) and the “virtuous gentry” that we find in contemporary sources do not capture the changing nature of the local elites, their networks, or their sources of power. While historians of the CCP have provided an all-around analysis of the local elites who sympathized with or partook in the Communist political project, they have overlooked the diverse nature of the local elites supporting the GMD. The latter are often painted with the same brush as the “evil gentry” and associated with the landowners. But 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 conform satisfactorily with Wu Fengchun’s and Fang Zhiping’s cultured and revolutionary backgrounds.

Education and the management of schools were key ingredients in the rise to power of these individuals, who found themselves in search of a secure position in the wake of the abolition of the examination system. The prestige bestowed by opening and running Shoumei School preceded Wu Fengchun’s election to the provincial assembly; access to the county seat by Fang Zhiping and his clan took place only after his involvement with Yaoxi School. Local schools acted as channels of mobility that enabled elites to expand their power networks and complete the transition from educators to power brokers that resulted in the consolidation of their position in rural society. These local elites were less conservative than they are often depicted to be: 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 in education more broadly. Also, by the 1920s, schools were places where status, power, and political mobilization intersected, and elites were responsive to the changing political context. As different positions emerged in the GMD and as the political vacuum widened, local elites’ political choices and actions were informed by their preoccupation with local competition and access to resources, rather than by ideology. In this regard, the Nationalist government, despite genuine attempts to do so, was incapable of bringing closure to the all-consuming clash within the local community and the local GMD.

Although this article examines only one county in one province, this case has wider relevance for at least three reasons. First, 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 recognize the groundbreaking 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 the 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 relationships with the local elites help us to revise the way in which we identify the limits of the Nationalist government’s reinstatement of power at the local level. Specifically, placing these attempts to restate power firmly within the context of existing local rivalries illuminates the motivations and actions of those who jockeyed for power, and it ultimately sheds new light on the operations of political power at multiple levels in this crucial period in Chinese history.

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