

# Revolutions as Organizational Change

## The Communist Party and Peasant Communities in South China, 1926–1934

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Hong Kong University Press  
The University of Hong Kong  
Pokfulam Road  
Hong Kong  
[www.hkupress.org](http://www.hkupress.org)

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ISBN 978-988-8208-39-5 (*Hardback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by CTPS Digiprints Limited in Hong Kong, China

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# Introduction

Peasant revolutions in the twentieth century played a major role in shaping the course of world history. Peasants, identified by Marx as a human species facing extinction in the face of rapid industrialization, in fact became one of the primary forces of social change in this century. As Barrington Moore observes, “No longer is it possible to take seriously the view that the peasant is an ‘object of history,’ a dying class over whom progress is about to roll.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, various kinds of peasant movements and, particularly, peasant revolutions have transformed the world.

The great Chinese revolution of the twentieth century has been seen as a classic peasant-based revolution. Moreover, it also represents the archetypical revolution that was “made” by revolutionaries. Traditional interpretations tend to emphasize the key role of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) mobilization of the peasant population. As Robert Marks points out, studies of the origins of the Chinese revolution focus almost entirely on Communist organization and mobilization tactics: “nearly all interpretations place its origins anywhere but in the rural society” because these studies place “explaining the Chinese Communist success at the forefront.”<sup>2</sup>

However, this perspective overlooks the critical role of peasant communities in the making of revolutions. As Timothy Wickham-Crowley argues in his highly acclaimed study of peasant revolutions in Latin America, “The success of revolutionaries in mobilizing the peasantry depends primarily on the preexisting nature of peasant culture and social structure, and only secondly on the actions of the revolutionary themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

My research, by employing a macrohistorical comparative strategy, examines how the pre-existing social structures of peasant communities facilitated or impeded the CCP mobilization. Through a study of two important peasant revolutions in southern China, I propose a new organizational approach to examine how the different ways

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1. See Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 504–5.
  2. Robert Marks, *Rural Revolution in South China: Peasants and the Making of History in Haifeng County* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. xi.
  3. Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Exploring Revolutions: Essays on Latin American Insurgency and Revolutionary Theory* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991), p. 15.

that rural communities organized in response to environmental challenges contributed to agrarian revolutions. Historically, peasant communities in many parts of the world were regulated by powerful cooperative institutions. The purpose of these communal organizations was to organize and coordinate collective actions to confront environmental challenges. I argue that agrarian revolutions can be caused by peasants' attempts to restructure unjust and illegitimate communal organizational orders and establish new rules for community cooperation. In contrast, legitimate communal organizational orders can powerfully constrain the mobilization by outside revolutionary agents such as the CCP.

The established view of the Chinese case as a classic revolution "made" by revolutionaries assumes that the CCP practicing the same mobilization tactics would achieve the same effects anywhere. Instead, this study, which takes the new perspective of peasant rebellions as attempted efforts at communal organizational change, shows that the pre-existing social structures of peasant communities can either facilitate or impede attempts at mobilization by outside revolutionary organizations. As Elizabeth Perry points out in her study of peasant rebellions in northern China, by focusing on the mediation of social structure in rural communities, we can dispense "with any notion of a uniform peasant mentality capable of explaining rural rebellion."<sup>4</sup> This research, by explaining different outcomes of CCP mobilization in southern China, can shed new light on the Chinese Communist revolution in the twentieth century that effectively changed world history.

## **A Puzzle by Two Peasant Revolutions**

I started this research project when I was preparing a PhD dissertation that used a CCP-centered perspective to analyze the Communist revolution in Jiangxi Province in the early 1930s. I intended to examine the interactions between the Communists and peasants in what was considered a classic CCP-mobilized agrarian revolution. However, while I was digging through the historical materials at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University, I discovered an entirely different picture of peasant revolutionary behaviors in Jiangxi—behaviors that were conservative even under heavy-handed mobilization by the CCP. This pushed me to broaden my research to an earlier peasant revolution in neighboring Hunan Province during the mid-1920s. There, I found that peasants engaged in a radical political and socioeconomic restructuring of their communities in the absence of direct outside mobilization.

I was then confronted with a puzzle presented by these two important peasant revolutions in southern China. Socioeconomic conditions in the two provinces, such as the class composition of rural populations, land holding and distribution,

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4. Elizabeth Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845–1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), p. 250.

type of economic system, and degree of commercialization, were strikingly similar. Puzzlingly, although outside mobilization from the Communist Party was largely absent in Hunan, peasant revolutionary behaviors were radical and violent. In the Jiangxi case, however, despite intense mobilization by the CCP, peasant behaviors remained conservative.

As Ronald Waterbury observes, in exploring the causes of peasant revolutions, it is as important to understand why some peasants are not revolutionary as it is to understand why some are revolutionary. It is important to understand why some “fought and died for change,” while others “remained passive or joined the fight to defend the *status quo*.” According to him, by analyzing “the reactionary, or at best neutral,” role of some peasants “in comparison with the fervent revolutionary role” of other peasants, “we might be able to better understand the conditions under which peasants will or will not make the revolution.”<sup>5</sup>

The two revolutions also present a puzzle because classic theories of agrarian revolutions cannot explain their different patterns. To understand the dynamics of agrarian revolution, interest in the study of peasant revolutions proliferated after the Second World War. Particularly, heavy American involvement in the revolutions in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s caused a major surge of interest in agrarian revolutions among American social scientists, who laid the theoretical foundations of the field. Major works include Eric Wolf’s *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969), Joel S. Migdal’s *Peasants, Politics, and Revolution* (1974), Jeffrey M. Paige’s *Agrarian Revolutions* (1975), James C. Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1977), Samuel L. Popkin’s *The Rational Peasant* (1978), and Theda Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). These seminal works examine agrarian revolutions from diverse perspectives, greatly advancing our understanding of the causes and dynamics of peasant revolutions and their relationship to changes in the world.

The moral economy approach, as represented by Scott, Wolf, and Migdal, argues that intruding capitalist market forces destroyed the old subsistence ethic of traditional communities and caused peasant rebellions. However, the economic systems of Hunan and Jiangxi were similarly commercialized, and both had significant market elements long before the intrusion of imperialistic capitalism.

Rational choice theory, represented primarily by the work of Popkin, argues that outside revolutionary organizations need to offer peasants concrete and selective benefits to induce them into the revolutionary process. However, even though the CCP practiced intense mobilization in Jiangxi and indeed offered many selective benefits to peasants, they remained passive and conservative. In contrast, even though the CCP was barely involved in the Hunan revolution at local levels and could not

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5. Ronald Waterbury, “Non-revolutionary Peasants: Oaxaca Compared to Morelos in the Mexican Revolution,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1975), p. 411.

have delivered any concrete and selective benefits, peasants nonetheless waged a great revolution in the countryside.

Structural theories also have an important place in the study of revolutions. One tradition of the structural approach focuses on the power structures within peasant communities. This tradition, represented by the work of Skocpol, argues that rebellion is only possible when peasants enjoy some tactical power and political autonomy. However, this view cannot explain the conservative behavior of Jiangxi peasants, as the CCP and its Red Army enjoyed political-military hegemony in the region and peasants could have easily risen up against the landed upper class.

Another tradition of the structural approach, represented by Jeffrey Paige and Arthur L. Stinchcombe, focuses on the structure of economic relationships between cultivators and noncultivators. Different agricultural systems embody different structures of economic relationships, and only some systems have tendencies for radical peasant political action. The tenancy system, which involves a zero-sum economic relationship between tenants and rentiers, generates structural dynamics for agrarian revolution. However, the tenancy system predominated in both Jiangxi and Hunan, and the percentages of tenants and owner-tenants in their peasant populations were almost identical. The theory thus cannot explain why peasants in the two provinces demonstrated different revolutionary behaviors.

## **An Organizational Approach**

To explain this puzzle, I employ an organizational approach that examines how the pre-existing social structures of rural communities facilitate or impede peasants' revolutionary tendencies. Specifically, I analyze the role of village cooperative institutions designed to confront environmental challenges by means of collective action. Different sources of cooperation—voluntary cooperation by peasants of roughly equal resources and imposed cooperation by lords or external power—led to variations in communal organizational principles along four dimensions: organizational ideology, decision making and the sources of elites, control mechanisms, and interest redistribution. I explore how these different communal organizational principles influenced peasants' perceptions of the legitimacy of their communal orders and shaped their revolutionary tendencies. I argue that peasants can cause agrarian revolutions in order to restructure illegitimate communal organizational orders and establish new rules for community cooperation. In essence, we can see some agrarian revolutions as attempts at organizational change.

In Jiangxi, the community response to the environmental imperatives of a "frontier society" in a resource-poor region resulted in a distinctive, corporate lineage-centered communal organizational system. In Hunan, the community response to the social environment of peasant rebellions and state breakdown in the mid-nineteenth



century led to the militarization of the communal organizational context through a widespread militia system. These alternative organizational models critically defined communal social structures and effectively mediated intraclass relationships and peasant class consciousness. As a result, communal social structures in Hunan and Jiangxi possessed very different legitimacy among peasants and led to their contrasting revolutionary behaviors.

## Macrocausal Comparative-Historical Research

This study of two peasant revolutions in southern China is an example of what Skocpol calls “*macro-analytic comparative-historical social science*,” which looks at historical trajectories in order to study social change.<sup>6</sup> As she and Margaret Somers point out, macroanalytic comparative history has a profound impact on the social sciences. This tradition of social scientific inquiry “uses comparative history primarily for the purpose of making causal inferences about macro-level structures and processes.”<sup>7</sup> The macrosocial topics covered by this study tradition include revolutions, religious evolution, political development, economic modernization, patterns of collective violence, and the rise and fall of empires.<sup>8</sup> Influential works in this tradition include Barrington Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), Charles Tilly’s *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (1975), and Theda Skocpol’s *States and Social Revolutions*.

According to Skocpol and Somers, macrocausal comparative-historical research seeks to develop “new causal generalization to replace invalidated ones,” and the strategy is to compare two or more cases by specifying “configurations favorable and unfavorable” to the particular outcomes researchers are trying to explain.<sup>9</sup> As they point out, macrocausal comparative-historical research strategy “is, indeed, a kind of multivariate analysis to which scholars turn in order to validate causal statements about macrophenomena for which, inherently, there are too many variables and not enough cases.”<sup>10</sup> Normally, macrocausal comparative-historical research proceeds by selecting historical cases to “set up approximations to controlled comparisons.”<sup>11</sup> As Skocpol and Somers put it, macroanalytic comparative history “has the considerable virtue of being the only way to attempt to validate (and invalidate) causal

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6. Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 304.

7. Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, “The Use of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 1980), p. 181.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

hypotheses about macro-phenomena of which there are intrinsically only limited numbers of cases.”<sup>12</sup>

According to James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, comparative-historical research investigates “big questions”—substantively important and large-scale outcomes—that take the form of puzzles about specific cases.<sup>13</sup> In addressing these puzzles, scholars are primarily concerned with causal analysis, the examination of processes over time, and the use of systematic and contextual comparison.

Mahoney also points out that comparative-historical research is “defined in part by the analysis of sequences of events that occur within cases.”<sup>14</sup> This process analysis “facilitates causal inference when only a small number of cases are selected.”<sup>15</sup> Specifically, process analysis allows “researchers to examine the specific mechanisms through which an independent variable exerts an effect on a dependent variable.”<sup>16</sup> Under this approach, “the analyst starts with an observed association and then explores whether the association reflects causation by looking for mechanisms that link cause and effect in particular cases.”<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, a particular strength of comparative-historical research is its ability to identify and clarify the causal mechanisms that are crucial for theory building. In Mahoney’s terms, “If analysts can point to specific linking mechanisms that connect cause and effect, they are in a much better position to assert that the relationship is causal.”<sup>18</sup> The causal mechanisms identified by comparative-historical research allow a theoretically informed discussion of the generative processes that produce the association between the purported cause and effect.

This comparative study of two peasant revolutions in southern China embodies the key tenets of macrocausal comparative-historical research, which looks at historical trajectories in order to understand social change. First, it tackles the so-called macrosocial topics that concern social changes. Revolutions are inherently “big questions” and constitute the focal points of the research of leading scholars in the macrocausal comparative-historical tradition, including Moore, Tilly, and Skocpol. Second, this study uses comparative history to make causal inferences and seeks to develop new causal generalization about peasant revolutions. To accomplish these goals, it specifies configurations favorable and unfavorable to the particular outcomes of radical peasant behaviors in Hunan and conservative peasant behaviors in Jiangxi.

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12. Ibid., p. 193.

13. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 3–38.

14. James Mahoney, “Comparative-Historical Methodology,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 30 (2004), p. 88.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 89.

In this case, the study focuses on the favorable and unfavorable impacts of alternative communal organizational forms in these two cases on the emergence of peasant revolutions.

Consistent with Mahoney's analysis of the key traits of comparative-historical research, this study of two peasant revolutions in southern China seeks to identify the causal mechanisms that are indispensable for theory building. Specifically, it analyzes how the internal organizational principles of agrarian communities affect peasants' perceptions of the legitimacy of their communal social orders. The study examines how different origins of village cooperative institutions, such as large-scale population migrations and peasant rebellions, led to variations of communal organizational principles. This study argues that these institutional variations generate the causal mechanisms that led to different peasant behaviors in the revolutions in Hunan and Jiangxi. Specifically, this study argues that communal organizational principles influenced peasants' perceptions of the legitimacy of communal social orders and shaped their revolutionary tendencies.

Through detailed process analysis in later chapters, this comparative-historical research of two peasant revolutions relies on the above causal mechanisms to offer a theoretically informed discussion of the generative process that causally links communal organizational orders to peasant revolutionary behaviors. The result is that this study is able to build a new theoretical approach to the study of agrarian revolutions. As Skocpol and Somers argue, macrocausal comparative-historical research seeks to develop new causal generalizations in order to advance our understanding of social changes.

## Cases and Sources

The two peasant revolutions under study represent two important cases for advancing our understanding of agrarian revolutions. The Chinese revolution was a classic case of rural-based revolution, and these two particular cases were important components of that process. The Hunan revolution was the center of the so-called First Revolutionary Civil War from 1925 to 1927 when the Nationalists and the Communists formed a coalition to wage a nationalistic war against warlords then controlling China. The Jiangxi revolution was the center of the so-called Second Revolutionary Civil War from 1927 to 1935 when the Nationalists and the Communists battled each other for control of China. On one level, explaining the puzzle of the two revolutions will provide new insights into the great Chinese revolution of the twentieth century. On another level, its findings will advance an alternative approach to the comparative study of agrarian revolutions.

The study of these two revolutions is now greatly facilitated by newly available research materials. With the limited liberalization of China during the 1980s, many

CCP documents were declassified. In fact, the CCP in the last decade actively compiled and published several important multivolume collections of documents related to the two revolutions. One of them is *Hunan lishi ziliao* (Historical materials of Hunan), published between 1979 and 1981 by Hunan People's Publishing House. It contains many primary records of the Hunan revolution including internal CCP documents, newspaper reports of the time, and materials of peasant associations. An important multivolume publication on the Jiangxi era is *Zhongyang geming genjudi shiliao xuanbian* (Selected historical materials on the Central Revolutionary Base Area), published in 1982 by Jiangxi People's Publishing House. This collection contains many important primary materials, such as CCP internal reports, letters, and policy guidelines. Another important collection is *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji* (Selected documents of the Chinese Communist Party), published by the CCP Central Party School Press starting in 1989. This collection contains many previously classified CCP central documents. Of particular importance for this study are volumes 2 through 5, concerning the revolutions in Hunan and Jiangxi. These new sources provide fresh insight into the socioeconomic conditions and revolutionary processes in Hunan and Jiangxi. I make extensive use of these new sources in this book.

## Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 of the book presents the two peasant revolutions under study as a puzzle. I first build four criteria for measuring the intensity of peasant revolutions: the sources of revolutionary dynamics, the scope of peasant participation, the control of local-level revolutionary organizations, and revolutionary outcomes. I then briefly discuss the origins and backgrounds of the Hunan and Jiangxi peasant revolutions and systematically compare them using the four criteria to show that they present an interesting puzzle whose solution will extend our knowledge of agrarian revolutions.

Chapter 2 makes use of historical and empirical materials from the two revolutions to demonstrate the limitations of existing theories of peasant revolutions in explaining the puzzle. These include the Marxist class exploitation thesis, moral economy theory, rational choice theory, and various kinds of structural theories. The general theoretical strengths and weaknesses of each approach are discussed.

Chapter 3 advances an alternative organizational approach to the study of agrarian revolutions. It first discusses the role of formal organizations in agrarian communities. It then presents a comparative history of peasant communities with powerful cooperative organizations in different parts of the world, including Europe, Russia, and Japan. The next section examines how the different origins of community cooperative institutions—imposed cooperation by lords or external authority and voluntary cooperation by peasants of roughly equal resources—resulted in distinctively

different communal organizational principles along four dimensions: organizational ideology, decision making and the source of elites, control mechanisms, and interest redistribution. The last section of the chapter hypothesizes about the relationship between communal organizational principles and peasants' rebellious tendencies.

Chapter 4 examines the organizational orders of Jiangxi rural communities. Community response to the environmental imperatives of a "frontier society" in a resource-poor region resulted in a distinctive, corporate lineage-centered communal organizational context. I analyze the institutions, functions, and internal structures of Jiangxi lineage organizations. Drawing on research by anthropologists and social historians, I discuss how strong corporate lineage institutions critically defined and mediated interclass relationships.

Chapter 5 examines the organizational orders of Hunan rural communities. Community response to the social environment of peasant rebellions and state breakdown in the mid-nineteenth century led to the militarization of the communal organizational context through a widespread militia system. I describe the roles, functions, and structures of Hunan community militia organizations. The chapter also examines how community militia organizations in the late nineteenth century transformed themselves into an instrument of class rule by the landed elites and assumed a wide range of powers in the economic and political affairs of communities.

Chapter 6 draws on the findings of the previous two chapters to explain the different peasant revolutionary patterns in Hunan and Jiangxi and the way these patterns were shaped by communal social structures. The rural organizational orders in Hunan and Jiangxi enjoyed different legitimacy among peasants. Differences in ideology, sources of elites and decision-making rules, control mechanisms, and interest redistribution resulted in different perceptions of the justice and fairness of communal social structures. I argue that agrarian revolutions can be caused by peasants' attempts to restructure unjust communal organizational orders and establish new rules for community cooperation. This is what happened in Hunan. In communities with legitimate organizational orders, as in Jiangxi, it is difficult for agrarian revolutions to emerge, even with strong mobilization from outside revolutionary organizations.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I elaborate an organizational theory of agrarian revolution and draw some broader theoretical implications for the study of peasant revolutions. These implications are fully consistent with the findings of recent comparative studies on revolutions. In general, these studies emphasize the role of nonmaterial factors in the making of revolutions. In particular, they suggest that declining legitimacy of the present political order is crucial in determining peasants' tendencies toward revolution. Moreover, they tend to emphasize the constraining roles of pre-existing social structures of peasant communities and the way they affect the success or failure of outside revolutionary organizations.

The chapter also reassesses the established interpretations of the Chinese revolution, which tend to emphasize the central importance of the CCP mobilization of the peasant population. These interpretations overlook the importance of pre-existing social structures of peasant communities and the way they facilitated or impeded the CCP mobilization efforts. The chapter argues that studies of the Chinese revolution must pay due attention to the role of pre-existing rural social structures to explain the varying outcomes of the CCP revolutionary strategies.

# 1

## Contrasting Patterns of Two Agrarian Revolutions

The Chinese revolution of the twentieth century seems to be a representative case of the so-called Eastern type of revolution, which starts in the rural areas and is led by revolutionary organizations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many studies have attributed the eventual success of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to its unique ability to mobilize the peasant population. As Kathleen Hartford and Steven M. Goldstein put it, this is the “organizational weapon” perspective of the Chinese Communist revolution.<sup>2</sup> Chalmers Johnson argues that the CCP successfully championed anti-Japanese nationalism during the 1937–45 period and forged strong bonds with peasants alienated by the brutality of Japanese occupation.<sup>3</sup> Mark Selden, by contrast, suggests that progressive socioeconomic reforms allowed the CCP to mobilize the peasants in its base areas.<sup>4</sup> While the two studies emphasize different strategies that underlined the Communist success in rural areas, both view the CCP’s mobilization as the main driver of peasant revolutions in twentieth-century China.

However, this perspective, which explains the CCP’s success in North China, cannot resolve a puzzle presented by two important peasant revolutions in South China between 1926 and 1934. In Hunan, although the CCP’s mobilization was largely absent, peasants staged a radical agrarian revolution. In Jiangxi, despite intense mobilization by the Communist Party, peasants demonstrated conservative tendencies and even opposed the party’s radical land reform policies. This puzzle therefore challenges the “organizational weapons” perspective that sees the CCP’s mobilization as the underlying cause of peasant revolutions in twentieth-century China.

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1. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
  2. Kathleen Hartford and Steven M. Goldstein, “Introduction: Perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution,” in Kathleen Hartford and Steven M. Goldstein, eds., *Single Sparks: China’s Rural Revolution* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), p. 9.
  3. Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937–1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).
  4. Mark Selden, *Yenan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

This chapter compares and contrasts peasant revolutions in Hunan and Jiangxi to demonstrate the limitations of established interpretations of the Chinese revolution. I argue that there are substantial differences in intensity among peasant revolutions. Peasant behaviors in some agrarian revolutions were more radical and violent than in other cases. We can measure and evaluate the intensity of peasant revolutions by following four criteria:

*The scope of peasant participation.* This can be measured by peasants' voluntary participation in various kinds of revolutionary organizations such as peasant associations and revolutionary armies. A revolution that attracts the spontaneous participation of a large proportion of a peasant society indicates stronger peasant revolutionary motives than one that involves only a small proportion of society.

*Sources of revolutionary dynamics.* This measures whether a revolution emerges largely by itself from peasant communities or is created by external mobilization. An agrarian revolution that derives its dynamics internally while outside organizations play only a facilitative role indicates strong peasant incentives to wage a transformation of their own society. A revolution entirely mobilized by outside political forces reveals lukewarm peasant incentives to pursue socioeconomic and political changes.

*Local revolutionary leadership.* This measures whether rural lower classes in a revolution have incentives to assume leadership in local revolutionary organs. Outside revolutionary organizations usually control high-level leadership positions in revolutions. Lower-level leadership, however, is crucial because it effectively determines the local direction of the revolutionary process. If rural upper classes control the local leadership, a revolution is unlikely to fundamentally restructure the existing socioeconomic and political order.

*Revolutionary outcomes.* This measures whether a peasant revolution can fundamentally transform rural social, political, and economic structures. We should see whether a peasant revolution has comprehensive and radical political, social, and economic programs. Since the land problem always occupies a central place in peasants' lives, a key measure is whether peasants seek to restructure the land relationship through a land revolution.

Judged by these four criteria, the revolutions in Hunan and Jiangxi present us with a puzzle. Although CCP involvement in the Hunan peasant revolution was weak, peasants' revolutionary behaviors were radical. In Jiangxi, however, even under intense mobilization by the CCP, peasants remained passive and conservative. In fact, they even opposed the CCP's land reform policies. Given that these two provinces were very similar in many important social and economic aspects, explaining this puzzle would significantly advance our understanding of the causes of peasant revolutions.



## The Peasant Revolution in Hunan, 1926–1927

### *The Emergence of a Peasant Movement*

China was in a constant state of crisis after the 1911 revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty. The Republic that replaced the monarchy lacked institutions to effectively control the country. After the death of Yuan Shikai, the most powerful military strongman at the time, in 1916, China descended into a chaotic era of warlord politics. Warlords, supported by various foreign powers, constantly waged wars against each other. Each controlled anywhere from part of a province to several provinces.<sup>5</sup>

From 1920 to 1926 Hunan was ruled by the warlord Zhao Hengti. Like other warlords at the time, he constantly fought warlords from other provinces and his competitors within Hunan. The wars were ruinous for Hunan and created a chronic fiscal crisis for the military government, which in turn intensified its exploitation of the Hunan peasant economy. For example, the military government levied taxes seven to eight years ahead of the current year.<sup>6</sup> The government also forced the purchase of military and government bonds in rural areas. Hunan peasants bore the brunt of this exploitative rule.

In this context, the Hunan peasant movement began to emerge. The first organized peasant movement appeared in the Yuebei area of Hengshan County in 1923. Although the CCP was involved in the process, an internal party report claimed that peasants themselves played major roles in creating and expanding the Yuebei Peasant and Worker's Association.<sup>7</sup> According to this internal report, the organization began with only several hundred families. Within a month, by the time of the report in August 1923, around 6,000 families were registered with the organization, which had a total number of around 40,000.

According to a report by Deng Zhongxia, then head of the CCP in Hunan, membership in the Yuebei Peasant and Worker's Association was restricted to hired rural laborers, tenants, and small self-cultivators.<sup>8</sup> Its social and economic programs were relatively modest. One involved distribution of rice to poor peasants. Another prohibited rice exportation to other provinces in order to keep the price low in the

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5. For this warlord era in modern Chinese history, see Tang Suyan, "The Hunan-Hubei War and Its Consequences," in Southwest Association of Warlord Studies, ed., *Research on the History of Southwestern Warlords* (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1985).

6. Meng Yuan, 1924, "The Deep Suffering Hunan," *Hunan lishi ziliao* (HLZ), Vol. 1 (1979), pp. 86–88.

7. Xiao Yun, 1923, "A Letter to Comrade Deng Zhongxia Concerning the Organization of the Hengshan Peasant Association and Peasant Movement," *HLZ*, Vol. 1 (1979). This report was submitted by Xiao Yun, who was one of the CCP members involved in the Yuebei peasant movement, to Deng Zhongxia, the CCP party secretary of Hunan.

8. Deng Zhongxia, 1924, "Another Discussion on the Peasant Movement in Hengshan," *HLZ*, Vol. 1 (1979), p. 111.

region. The association's propaganda deliberately focused on nationalism rather than on socialism so that the military government would have no excuse to suppress the organization.

However, the Hunan military government did not tolerate even these moderate programs of the Yuebei Peasant and Worker's Association. According to Deng Zhongxia's report, in November 1923 Zhao Hengti dispatched a battalion to the region, which killed sixty-seven peasants, arrested more than seventy others, and burned hundreds of peasants' houses.<sup>9</sup> The Yuebei peasant movement was ruthlessly put down by warlord armies.

However, sporadic peasant movements kept emerging in Hunan. In 1925 Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong) personally organized several peasant associations in his hometown of Shaoshan in Xiangtan County. The programs of these peasant associations concerned rent reduction and control of rice prices. At the same time, Wang Xianzong, a CCP member, organized peasant movements in Zhuzhou County with programs similar to those of peasant associations in Shaoshan.<sup>10</sup> These peasant movements were also quickly suppressed by Zhao Hengti. Mao fled to the neighboring province of Guangdong while Wang Xianzong was arrested and murdered by the warlord's army.

After these events the peasant movement in Hunan went underground. In early 1926, the CCP and left-wing members of the Kuomintang (KMT, also known as the Nationalist Party) secretly organized peasant associations in twelve counties in Hunan.<sup>11</sup> But secret operations soon ended in March 1926 when Zhao Hengti was driven from Hunan by widespread social opposition and an attack by his former subordinate and a progressive officer, Tang Shengzhi. When Tang assumed the governorship of Hunan, he openly sympathized with peasants and workers' movements. So favored, peasant associations quickly expanded to another fifteen counties by the end of April. Nine of these twenty-seven counties also established county-level peasant associations.<sup>12</sup>

### *A Peasant Movement Transformed into a Revolution, 1926–1927*

After July 1926 the peasant movement in Hunan entered a new stage. In May of that year, the progressive military man Tang Shengzhi came under attack from warlord Wu Peifu, who then controlled one of the largest warlord armies in China. Wu occupied territory in Central China along the Yangtze River, including neighboring Hubei

9. Ibid.

10. For these later efforts to organize the peasants of Hunan, see Chen Zhiling, *A New History of the First Revolutionary Civil War* (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1981), pp. 205–22.

11. See Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Hunan Province, "Selected Historical Materials on the Peasant Movement of Hunan during the First Revolutionary Civil War," *HLZ*, Vol. 1 (1980), p. 1.

12. For this political period, see Chen Zhiling, 1981, pp. 223–25.

Province to the north of Hunan. He attacked Hunan because the revolutionary coalition of the CCP and KMT had already built a power base in Guangdong Province to the south of Hunan and had been actively preparing for a northern expedition to eliminate the warlords and to unify China again. Wu feared that under the rule of Tang Shengzhi, Hunan could be used as a springboard for the Guangdong revolutionary coalition. Thus, he launched a pre-emptive strike against Tang Shengzhi's forces.

Tang, forced to retreat into southern Hunan, requested military support from the revolutionary coalition in Guangdong and agreed to be under the command of the coalition. With this sudden change in the political situation, the Guangdong revolutionary coalition decided to launch its long-planned Northern Expedition immediately. Tang's army was incorporated as the Eighth Army of the National Revolutionary Army, and Tang was named its commander. In July 1926 the National Revolutionary Army launched offensives against Wu Peifu's forces in Hunan. Wu's army was quickly defeated and the CCP-KMT coalition took the Hunan capital Changsha that month.

The new Hunan government under the control of the CCP-KMT coalition created a vast political space for Hunan peasants who had long desired social and economic changes. The new CCP-KMT provincial government sponsored the creation of the Hunan Provincial Peasant Association to coordinate and guide peasant movements at the lower levels. The peasant movement spread like wildfire across Hunan.

In July 1926 peasant associations in Hunan had a membership of about 200,000. By November, this figure had jumped to 1,350,000. By January 1927, peasant associations had been established in fifty-seven of the seventy-seven counties of Hunan, and they together claimed a membership of about 2 million.<sup>13</sup> Table 1.1 illustrates the explosive expansion of the Hunan peasant movement.

Although the social and economic programs of the early peasant associations from 1923 to 1925 were fairly limited, the Hunan peasant movement after July 1926 entered a qualitatively new stage. The movement transformed into a great peasant revolution that swept the countryside.

Mao Tse-tung's "An Investigation Report on the Peasant Movements in Hunan" is regarded as the most authoritative empirical study of this revolution. Mao did field

**Table 1.1**  
Membership of peasant associations in Hunan

Time	Membership
July 1926	200,000
November 1926	1,350,000
January 1927	2,000,000

*Source:* Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Hunan Province, 1980, p. 66.

13. For these data on the rapidly expanding membership of Hunan peasant associations, see Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Hunan Province, 1980, p. 66.

research in the rural areas of Hunan for thirty-one days from January 4 to February 3, 1927. His report vividly describes a great revolution that destroyed the traditional social and political structures.

*With the fall of the landlord class, all power belonged to peasant associations.* Mao found that organized peasants had eliminated feudal privileges that had existed for many centuries. According to Mao, the Hunan peasant revolution “truly achieved that all power belongs to peasant associations.” In villages, even family disputes had to be handled by peasant associations. As Mao observed, “Peasant associations truly rule with an iron hand” in the countryside. The local gentry and landlords “have been totally deprived of their right to have their say and no one dares to mutter the word no.”<sup>14</sup>

*The landlord class was politically suppressed.* As Mao wrote, “After peasants are organized, they first smash the political prestige and power of the landlord class.” Peasants began by publicly parading the landlords and bad gentry in tall paper hats. A heavier punishment was imprisonment in county jails. “The local bad gentry are sent to county jail to be locked up and county magistrates are asked to sentence them. . . . Formally it was the gentry who sent the peasants to jail, now it is the other way around.”

Another punishment for the rural upper classes was banishment. “Peasants do not just want to banish the local bullies and bad gentry who were notorious for their crimes, but to arrest and kill them. Afraid of being arrested and killed, they run away. In the counties where the peasant movement is well developed almost all prominent local bullies and gentry have fled, and consequently are as good as banished.”

The severest punishment was to shoot the most notorious landlords and bad gentry. In many counties, peasants organized “special courts for local bullies and bad gentry and shot the most notorious ones after trial.” Mao said that these executions were “very effective in eradicating the remaining evils of feudalism.”<sup>15</sup>

*Peasants waged a wide range of economic struggles against the landlord class.* Peasant associations in Hunan imposed bans on exporting grain from the area, on forcing up grain prices, on hoarding and speculation, and on increasing rents and rent deposits, as well as propaganda for reducing rents.<sup>16</sup>

On the surface these programs were fairly moderate. However, as we will see later in this chapter, these moderate economic programs were the result of conservative policies from outside revolutionary organizations. The CCP-KMT alliance prohibited a land revolution. As we will also see, peasants’ economic demands began to radicalize

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14. These quotes are from Mao’s “An Investigation Report on the Peasant Movements in Hunan,” in *Mao Tse-tung ji* (Collected works of Mao Tse-tung), Vol. 1 (1972). For this part, see pages 209–10.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 226–69.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

after Mao wrote his report in February 1927. In many counties, peasant associations broke the policy barrier and began to spontaneously organize land redistribution.

*The old rural governmental structures were overthrown.* As Mao described, power at the *du* level (the administrative level below counties) used to be completely controlled by the landlord class. Each *du* had its own landlord militia and independent taxing and judicial powers. According to Mao, during the revolution “the power and prestige of the landlord class have been largely overthrown, and such organs of rural administration have naturally collapsed.” The chiefs of *du* referred all local matters to peasant associations and put people off with the remark, “It’s none of my business.” As Mao claimed, “The phrase ‘down and out’ certainly describes the fate of the old organs of rural administration in places over which the revolution has swept.”

As for county-level administration, Mao found that “the magistrates in the counties I visited consulted peasant associations on everything. . . . If the peasant associations demand the arrest of a local bully in the morning, the magistrate dares not delay till noon.” He also found that in some counties everything was discussed by a joint council of magistrates and revolutionary mass organizations, such as peasant associations and workers’ unions.<sup>17</sup>

*Old feudal institutions and norms were destroyed.* Mao also reported how the old feudal institutions and norms were destroyed by the revolution. These included increasing women’s power, liberalizing sexual relationships, and banning gambling and even sumptuous feasts. Women in many places were encouraged to form their own women’s associations. Triangular love relationships among the young proliferated and were tolerated by the rest of the community. Mao found that whereas old administrative organs could not effectively ban gambling, gambling totally disappeared in places where peasant associations ruled.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Hunan Peasant Movement as Radical Rural Revolution*

Judging by Mao’s report, Hunan peasants waged a sweeping rural revolution that significantly transformed the old rural social and political structures. The revolutionary behaviors of Hunan peasants were radical as measured by the four criteria discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

*The scope of peasant participation.* One criterion for measuring peasant participation is the proportion of the peasant population involved in a revolution. By this standard, the involvement of Hunan peasants in the revolutionary process was impressive. As mentioned previously, by January 1927 membership in peasant associations had reached 2 million. Historians suggest that the real number of peasants involved in the revolution could be around 10 million. The reason was that, as Mao recorded

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17. *Ibid.*, pp. 231–34.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 231–43.

in his report, usually only the head of a family formally signed up as a member of a peasant association.<sup>19</sup> According to a 1917 census by the Hunan provincial government, the Hunan population at the time was 31,088,024.<sup>20</sup> Using this figure, almost one-third of Hunan's population could have been involved in one way or another in the revolutionary process.

According to Mao, in some middle-plain counties such as Xiangtan, Xiangxiang, and Hengshan, almost everyone was mobilized by peasant associations. In other middle-plain counties such as Yiyang and Huarong, most peasants were organized. Although many counties in hilly western Hunan were underorganized, the middle-plain counties were the population and agricultural center of the province.

*Sources of revolutionary dynamics.* A peasant revolution is radical if its dynamics are derived mainly from the peasant communities themselves while outside political forces only facilitate the process. This was exactly what happened in Hunan.

Although outside revolutionary organizations facilitated the emergence of the Hunan peasant movement by creating a large political space, they were not directly responsible for the vast expansion of the peasant movement after 1926. Within the newly opened political space, the peasants themselves took the initiative to greatly expand the revolution. The CCP-KMT coalition at this time lacked the organizational infrastructures to penetrate into the vast countryside. The CCP itself was very young and small at the time, and its doctrine still lacked a strategic emphasis on the countryside and peasant movements.

Many newly declassified CCP documents show the apprehension of CCP leaders over the lack of party control over the peasant revolution. For example, a central party directive in June 1927 on the strategies of peasant revolution stated:

The most dangerous problem with the peasant associations is the absence of party leadership and guidance. . . . Party organizations at all levels lack good knowledge of the situation of struggles in their areas and the composition of peasant associations.<sup>21</sup>

A letter from the CCP center to the Hunan Provincial Party Committee revealed that up to June 1926, the CCP had sent to Hunan only thirty cadres professionally trained at the Institute of Peasant Movement directed by Mao Tse-tung in Guangdong.<sup>22</sup> This was clearly insufficient to effectively lead the huge peasant revolution in Hunan.

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19. For this practice of only the head of a family registering with peasant associations, see *ibid.*, p. 209. For historians' suggestion that up to 10 million peasants could have been involved in the revolution, see Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Hunan Province, "Selected Historical Materials," p. 66.

20. For this Hunan population data in 1917, see Hunan Provincial Government, "Statistics on Land, Population, and Taxes of All the Counties of Hunan," *HLZ*, Vol. 1 (1979), p. 82.

21. See CCP Party Center, 1927b, "No. 5 Central Party Directive: Strategies for the Peasant Movement," *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji* (ZZWX), Vol. 3, p. 161.

22. Quoted from CCP Party Center, 1926, "A Letter of Response from the Party Center to the Hunan District," *ZZWX*, Vol. 2, p. 364.

Those outside organizers who participated in peasant mobilization were usually poorly trained. They were primarily local progressive intellectuals and not professional revolutionaries. As one report on the peasant movement in Guiyang County in 1926 revealed:

Over half are students coming back from Changsha and Hengzhou during the summer break, the rest are elementary school teachers. These organizers, except a general understanding of the importance of peasant movement, know absolutely nothing about the propaganda techniques, organizational procedures, recent political strategies, and the slogans of peasant associations.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, not only did the peasant movement lack leadership by outside political forces, the existing leadership was also incompetent. In another directive on July 20, 1927, the CCP center complained:

Although in many places there are hundreds of thousands of peasants participating in the peasant revolution, in most cases there are only a few comrades involved with them. . . . Although there exist party organizations in some places, they either cannot infiltrate the masses (they all stop at the district level and not down to the *xiang* level), or they merely exist in name but cannot function.<sup>24</sup> (Note: in Hunan *xiang* was the administrative level between districts and villages.)

The dynamics of the Hunan peasant revolution thus came mainly from peasants themselves. Outside political organizations played only a facilitative role by opening a large political space for the peasant movement to emerge and helped coordinate the movement at the provincial and county levels. They were also useful in giving the peasant revolution a national perspective by directing peasant struggles toward larger goals. However, peasants themselves were directly responsible for the great revolution in the countryside and the sweeping changes to the old rural orders.

*Local revolutionary leadership.* Whether lower classes have the political consciousness to lead their own revolutions is crucial because each revolution is composed of countless local struggles that decide the outcome of the revolution. Fundamental changes can occur only when the lower level revolutionary process is radical. This was what happened in Hunan. According to Mao:

In the countryside only one force has always put up the bitterest fight: the poor peasants. Throughout both the period of underground organization and that of open organization, the poor peasants have fought militantly. They are the deadliest enemies of the local bullies and bad gentry and attack their strongholds without the slightest hesitation.<sup>25</sup>

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23. He Han, 1926, "A Report on the Peasant Movement in Guiyang County," *HLZ*, Vol. 1 (1980), p. 128.

24. Quoted from CCP Party Center, 1927c, "No. 9 Central Party Directive: A General Strategy for the Current Peasant Movement," *ZZWX*, Vol. 3, p. 221.

25. Mao, 1927, p. 218.

Most importantly, this leading role by poor peasants was also reflected in their conscious efforts to control local revolutionary organizations. As Mao reported, “Being the most revolutionary, poor peasants have won the leadership in peasant associations. Almost all the posts of chairman and committee members in the peasant associations at the lowest level (the *xiang* level) were held by poor peasants.”

*Revolutionary outcomes.* Whether a peasant revolution can fundamentally restructure the old rural political and economic orders is an important measure of its intensity. With regard to the political order in rural Hunan, Mao’s report and many other accounts depicted fundamental transformations. Peasant associations, in fact, established a political hegemony while the powers of the landed class and the old rural governmental structures were completely smashed.

In the economic struggles, however, officially defined radical programs and activities did not appear. In many places it was largely confined to rent reduction. Does this imply that Hunan peasants were conservative in their revolutionary struggles? The answer is a clear no.

The absence of more radical economic changes resulted from the conservative policies of outside revolutionary organizations. Both the KMT and the CCP were very conservative in their economic programs. The KMT officers were mostly drawn from lower- and mid-level landlord families, and many of the high-level KMT officers used to be warlords who joined the revolutionary camp because of personal calculations. Therefore, the KMT could not initiate or support truly revolutionary land policies. The CCP, politically very weak at the time compared with the KMT, adopted a policy of moderation of its policies in order to maintain a “united front.”

As a result, until the end of 1926 both parties’ economic programs were very conservative. The resolution by the CCP on peasant movements in September 1926 merely limited rents to no more than 50% of production.<sup>26</sup> The resolution by the KMT on peasant movements in October 1926 required a 25% rent reduction.<sup>27</sup> Neither resolution mentioned the land issue.

In early 1927, however, both parties were forced to take more radical positions on the land issue by the extremely rapid development of the Hunan peasant movement. The First Congress of Hunan Peasant Representatives in December 1926 demanded that the new government immediately implement a policy of “cultivator owns his land.” Faced with this pressure, a KMT resolution in March 1927 stated that the party “deeply understands that the most important demand of peasants is land. Without land, peasants will not support the revolution to its success. Thus the KMT

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26. See “Nongmin yundong jueyi’an” (A resolution on peasant movement), in People’s Publishing House, 1953, *Materials on the Peasant Movements during the First Revolutionary Civil War*, p. 36.

27. For this KMT resolution, see *ibid.*, p. 46.



is determined to support peasants' struggle for land until the problem is completely resolved.<sup>28</sup>

However, this new KMT position was extremely vague, lacking specific policies and timetables to guide the peasants' land struggle. The KMT and CCP still tried to avoid a land revolution. For example, a CCP central directive in June 1927 stated, "It is not time yet to propose the slogan of 'Redistributing Lands.' Party organizations at all levels must explain to peasant association leaders the danger of land redistribution."<sup>29</sup>

These conservative economic programs sponsored by outside revolutionary organizations seriously hampered the Hunan peasants' land struggle. Although the KMT and CCP lacked organizational infrastructure in rural areas, the larger policy parameters they set still effectively defined the limits of peasants' action. Although the conservative policies of the KMT and CCP constrained peasants' economic struggles, not all Hunan peasants refrained from restructuring the land relationship. After March 1927 in many places Hunan peasants, under the leadership of lower-level peasant associations, took the initiative to settle the land problem by confiscating and redistributing the property of the landlord class. They took the land revolution into their own hands even though higher-level revolutionary organizations were actively against a land revolution.<sup>30</sup>

These spontaneous actions were best recorded in the CCP's internal documents. CCP leaders were alarmed because these actions threatened its alliance with the KMT. The Party Center asked its organizations at every level to stop the peasants' spontaneous land revolution. As a central party directive of June 1, 1927, stated, "We must remember: our party's peasant policy is to resolutely stop excess actions against small landlords and revolutionary military men."<sup>31</sup> Hunan peasants in some places had already confiscated the property of small landlords, which, unlike that of big landlords, was formally protected by the KMT and CCP. Peasants even confiscated the land of KMT officers. As a worried CCP report stated, "Peasants solving the land problem in an unorganized way have already caused countless excess actions. These

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28. For this more radical KMT position, see *ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

29. CCP Party Center, 1927b, pp. 157–58.

30. Zhi Xun, 1928, "A Recollection on the Hunan Peasant Revolution," *HLZ*, Vol. 2 (1981), p. 159; Yang Qinwei, "The Party's Land Policies during the First Revolutionary Civil War," *Xinjiang daxue xuebao*, No. 2 (1985), pp. 59–60; Zhao Xiaomin, *An Economic History of China's Revolutionary Base Areas* (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1983).

31. This central party directive was "Zhonggong ba-qi huiyi gao quanti dangyuan shu" (A call to all party members from the CCP August 7th conference), collected in People's Publishing House, 1953, p. 61. After the July 1927 breakup of the CCP and KMT alliance, the CCP held an emergency meeting on August 7 to discuss new directions for the party's political and military struggles. In the above document, the moderate land policies of the party were denounced as a main reason for the party's failure to mobilize the peasants.

excess actions must be corrected.”<sup>32</sup> On May 25, 1927, a CCP resolution demanded that land confiscated from KMT officers’ families be returned immediately.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, although the land policies of the KMT and CCP were conservative and opposed to a land revolution, Hunan peasants in many places took the land revolution into their own hands and broke the policy limits set by the KMT and CCP. The revolutionary actions of Hunan peasants clearly exceeded the policies of outside revolutionary organizations.

In sum, by any criteria, the Hunan peasant revolution was a radical rural revolution. Hunan peasants seized the favorable political space created by outside political forces to generate a great social transformation. The tremendous scope of involvement and the radical social and political changes underlined this great rural revolution. The lower classes not only were the main force of the revolution but also actively led the revolutionary process at local levels. The actions of Hunan peasants (e.g., in the land revolution) often far exceeded what the CCP and KMT could allow.

### **The Peasant Revolution in Jiangxi, 1929–1934**

The Jiangxi revolution was the center of the so-called Second Revolutionary Civil War, from the collapse of the CCP-KMT alliance in August 1927 until 1937 when the two parties formed a united national front in the face of the Japanese invasion. While the Jiangxi revolution lasted about five years, from 1929 to 1934, spatially it was restricted to the border region of southwestern Jiangxi and part of western Fujian. Since Jiangxi was then the center of the CCP-led revolutions and later the seat of the party’s central organs, the Jiangxi region was officially called the Central Revolutionary Base Area.

#### *Historical Background of the Jiangxi Revolution*

The origin of the Jiangxi revolution was related to the Hunan peasant revolution. The radical and violent revolutionary actions of Hunan peasants frightened KMT leaders who wanted a nationalistic, not a social, revolution. Many military coups by KMT forces took place between April and July 1927. The April 12 coup by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) in Shanghai killed thousands of CCP members and union workers under CCP leadership. The May 21 coup by KMT officer Xu Kexiang in the Hunan capital, Changsha, and the July 15 coup by the KMT in Wuhan also resulted in thousands of Communists being arrested and killed. In response to the KMT actions, the CCP organized a major military uprising of troops under its influence in Nanchang,

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32. See *ibid.*, p. 61.

33. CCP Party Center, 1927a, “Attitudes toward the Workers’ and Peasants’ Movement in Hunan,” ZZWX, Vol. 3, p. 136.

the capital of Jiangxi, on August 1, 1927. This marks the beginning of the decade-long civil war between the KMT and the CCP.

The CCP also organized rural uprisings in Hunan, Hubei, and Jiangxi Provinces to combat the KMT, which controlled the cities. In this context, rural revolutions emerged in southwestern Jiangxi and western Fujian. From October 1927 to January 1928, the CCP organized a series of rural uprisings in the southwestern Jiangxi counties of Jian, Wanan, Yongfeng, Ganxian, Yudu, Xunwu, and Xingguo. At about the same time, in western Fujian rural uprisings were organized in the counties of Pinghe, Longyan, Yongding, and Shanghang. These uprisings were all miniscule in scale and uncoordinated with each other. The result was a few tiny and semisecret revolutionary base areas in the two regions.<sup>34</sup> These base areas proved conducive environments for the later great expansion of the Jiangxi revolution. They provided some necessary party infrastructure and cadres that could later serve as links between local peasant communities and Mao's Red Army, which entered the region in early 1929.

### *The Arrival of Mao's Red Army and the Chinese Soviet Republic*

The arrival of Mao Tse-tung and his Red Fourth Army in early 1929 created a new era of rural revolution in Jiangxi. Mao's Red Fourth Army originated with the Autumn Harvest Uprising that he organized in Hunan in September 1927. After his ragtag peasant forces were quickly defeated by KMT troops, Mao led his forces in retreat to the southern border region of Hunan and Jiangxi and established a base area on Jinggang Mountain. In April 1928, the remaining Communist forces from the Nanchang Uprising of August 1, 1927, came to Jinggang Mountain and merged with Mao's peasant army. Together they formed the Red Fourth Army. Zhu De, a professional officer, became its commander and Mao Tse-tung its party representative. The best history of the period is recorded by Chen Yi's detailed report to the CCP center on September 1, 1929. Chen Yi was then the No. 3 leader after Mao and Zhu in the Red Fourth Army.<sup>35</sup> According to Chen Yi, it became apparent that the Jinggang Mountain base area was untenable for two reasons: the increasingly well-coordinated suppression campaigns by reactionary forces and the increasing logistical problems. The poor mountain areas of the base could not adequately support 10,000 troops. Food and clothing were scarce. By the end of 1928, Hunan reactionary forces were planning a new suppression campaign with twenty-four regiments. Facing these military and logistical threats, in January 1929 Mao and his comrades decided to abandon the Jinggang Mountain base area and redeploy the Red Fourth Army to the border region of southwestern Jiangxi and western Fujian.

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34. See Dai Xiangqing, *History of the Central Revolutionary Base Area* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1986), pp. 1–2.

35. Chen Yi, 1929, "Chen Yi's Report on the History and Situation of Zhu-Mao Forces," ZZWX, Vol. 5.

Mao's decision to move his Red Fourth Army to this region was due to his belief that it could provide his forces with an opportunity for military dominance. This was considered possible because of the unique political situation in China at the time. Although the Northern Expedition eliminated some warlords, many regions of China were still under the rule of various warlords, and the KMT central government could effectively control only a few coastal provinces around Shanghai. However, for historical reasons, the warlords' military strength in each province was uneven. Jiangxi and Fujian warlords' armies were very weak compared with the reactionary forces in other provinces and the ruling powers of these provinces were seriously divided. Mao Tse-tung calculated that the CCP could thrive in southwestern Jiangxi and western Fujian and made it his new base area.

Mao's letter to the Party Center on April 5, 1929, explained his reasoning:

We feel that among southern provinces Guangdong and Hunan both have strong landlord military forces. But it is quite another situation in Jiangxi, Zhejiang, and Fujian. These three provinces have the weakest military forces. Zhejiang has only a small provincial defense force belonging to Jiang Bocheng. Fujian has only fifteen regiments. But we have already defeated Guo Fengming's brigade, and the forces belonging to Chen Guohui and Lu Xingbang are all bandit forces with little fighting capability. . . . In Jiangxi, there are sixteen regiments belonging to Zhu Peide and Xiong Shihui respectively. Although stronger than Fujian forces, they are still much weaker than Hunan forces. And most of these forces have fought with us, and we have defeated all but Li Wenbin's brigade.<sup>36</sup>

Mao confidently concluded, "After we defeated Liu and Guo's brigades, we can say there are no more enemies left in southern Jiangxi and western Fujian."<sup>37</sup>

The weak antirevolutionary military forces in Jiangxi and Fujian were also deeply divided internally. Fujian was under the control of five small warlords fighting with each other. Thus, in July 1929 a resolution by the CCP Western Fujian Party Congress concluded that the collapse of Fujian's ruling class was inevitable because their internal fighting created the ideal conditions for a revolution.<sup>38</sup>

In Jiangxi the internal power struggle within the antirevolutionary camp was even greater. The military commander of Jiangxi was Zhu Peide, an outside warlord originally from Yunnan Province. Jiangxi historically did not have its own provincial military, and Zhu's rule as an outsider created many conflicts with the local elites. Also in Jiangxi was the Hunan army that had come to suppress the Red Army.

In his report to the CCP Party Center in April 1930, Zhang Huaiwan explained that conflicts between the Yunnan army and local forces and conflicts between the

36. See Mao, 1929, "A Letter from the Front Committee of the Red Fourth Army to the Party Center," *ZZWX*, Vol. 5, p. 676.

37. *Ibid.*

38. See the CCP Western Fujian Party Committee, 1929, "The Political Resolution of the First Congress of CCP Western Fujian," *ZZWX*, Vol. 5, pp. 701–2.

Yunnan army and the Hunan army were so frequent that there were many instances of open warfare among them. Zhang concluded that the Jiangxi regime was the most complicated in the country and was on the verge of total collapse.<sup>39</sup>

Besides the weak antirevolutionary forces in Jiangxi and Fujian, the central government under the KMT's control was involved in wars with other warlords at the national level. In 1929, the KMT and warlords from Guangxi Province waged a major war. In 1930 there was another war between the KMT and a coalition of the warlords Yan Xishan and Feng Yuxiang. The latter was considered the biggest warlord war in modern Chinese history, with millions of troops involved.<sup>40</sup> Thus, at least from 1929 to 1930, the formative years of the Jiangxi base area, the KMT itself was unable to organize serious military campaigns against the Red Army in southern Jiangxi and had to rely on weak provincial warlord forces to undertake poorly coordinated suppression campaigns.

The arrival of Mao's Red Army in the region created a new environment for local revolutions. In August 1930, Mao's forces merged with another Red Army unit coming to the region, and together they established the Red First Front Army with Mao as the general commissar and Zhu De the commander. The Red First Front Army now had about 40,000 soldiers and successfully defeated three suppression campaigns by KMT forces from the end of 1930 to September 1931. Mao's forces controlled a base area in southwestern Jiangxi and western Fujian that included twenty-one counties and a population of 2.5 million. In November 1931, Mao established the Chinese Soviet Republic. Mao was the chairman of its provisional government, and its capital was located at Ruijin County.

### *A Conservative Peasant Revolution in Jiangxi*

Many studies of the Jiangxi period argue that the region under the Soviet Republic experienced a highly radical rural revolution. Ilpyong J. Kim's *The Politics of Chinese Communism: Kiangsi under the Soviets* is the representative work with this interpretation. Kim argues that the CCP operated an effective political mobilization in the Jiangxi base area and aroused the class consciousness and a sense of participation on the part of peasants, who vigorously undertook a radical revolution.<sup>41</sup>

However, new sources show that peasants in southern Jiangxi profoundly frustrated the CCP. Although the CCP policies during the era, especially its land policies, were radical, the response from Jiangxi peasants was conservative and even uncooperative. The following analyses reveal the problems facing the CCP and the Red Army.

39. Zhang Huaiwan, 1930, "An Inspection Report by Zhang Huaiwan about Southwestern Jiangxi," *Zhongyang geming genjudi shiliao xuanbian* (ZGGSX), Vol. 1, pp. 184–86.

40. For wars between the KMT and provincial warlords during this period, see Chen Zhiling, 1981.

41. See Ilpyong J. Kim, *The Politics of Chinese Communism: Kiangsi under the Soviets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 126, 201–5.

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