

“Brave New World”: Contemporary Chinese Research on Republican Period Banditry

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Preface

In a piece written just over 10 years ago, the eminent Chinese historian Yu Zidao vented his frustration at modern Chinese historians' failure to address the “bandit problem” that had been such a hallmark of pre-1949 China. The occasion was the publication of the Chinese translation of Phil Billingsley's *Bandits in Republican China*.¹⁾ In his preface to that volume, Yu noted that the bandits that had proliferated during the Republican period years 1912-1949 were “a serious social problem illustrating the depth of China's social crisis”. Unfortunately, he lamented, Chinese historians since 1949 had “failed almost entirely to come to grips with the significance of that problem”, which had thus been reduced “almost to a vacuum”. While a number of popular or descriptive works had appeared, Chinese historians as a whole had yet to offer more than the odd passing reference to Republican period bandits, and it had fallen to overseas scholars to fill the gap.²⁾ In the absence of any homegrown attempt to offer a substantial analysis, or even to put together a satisfying descriptive volume, Yu recommended Phil Billingsley's book as the only

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comprehensive, reliable source for those seeking to understand this key area in Republican period history. He ended his Preface with an exhortation to Chinese scholars to end this embarrassing state of affairs by approaching bandits with the attention they deserved relative to their importance to China's modern social history. (Yu Zidao, 1992)³⁾ Later in this review the authors will consider the impact of Yu's appeal. First it is necessary to examine the reasons for the situation that aroused his concern.

Politics and Scholarship

The situation that Yu Zidao so deplored had not come about by chance. The 1960s, which saw the focus of European and North American historical studies shift from the "illustrious personalities" approach to a new focus on grass-roots movements, came some thirty years late to China. Until the end of the 10-year "Cultural Revolution" in 1976, politics was dominated by the aura of Mao Zedong, without whom the Chinese Revolution was held to have been unachievable. In historical studies this situation was reflected in a similar reliance on the "great man" approach. While Communist Party historiography had placed considerable emphasis on studies of peasant rebellions, the focus was upon the leaders rather than the rank and file, with the conclusion always imminent that the rebellion had failed because it had lacked the foresight only available to a vanguard party like the Communist Party. This approach also marked post-1949 historians' initial forays into the world of Republican period bandits.

Within a few years of the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, and continuing until the outbreak of the "Cultural Revolution" in 1966, Chinese historians set out to locate the village-based 20th century revolutionary movement in the context of China's long tradition of peasant rebellions (Harrison, 1970). With one exception, this involved a focus on the pre-1911 period, characterized by Marxist historiography as "feudal" or "semi-feudal". The exception was the rebellion led by the former

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Henan bandit chief Bai Lang from 1911 to 1914, often referred to as “Old China’s Last Peasant Rebellion”. Between 1955 and 1965, more than a dozen articles of varying quality appeared treating different aspects of the rebellion, ranging from the organization of the rebel army to the social makeup of its members and its links with the revolutionary movement of Sun Yatsen.⁴⁾ Also significant was an on-the-spot investigation of Bai Lang’s home village of Daliu, Henan, carried out in the late 1950s, which gathered information about the rebellion and the social conditions that had given birth to it from a variety of informants including both former rebels and surviving members of Bai’s family (Kaifeng shifan xueyuan lishixi, 1960).

Although a lot of information about bandits can be gleaned from the material on Bai Lang’s rebellion, it has to be said that the movement gained the attention of historians precisely because, through its scale and its links to the republicans, it developed into something “more” than banditry. It would be many years, for example, before Bai Lang’s successors in the annals of Henan bandit leaders, the “soldier-bandit” commanders Lao Yangren and Fan Zhongxiu, would acquire the same kind of attention. Presumably the reason was that, despite leading armies often equal in size to that of Bai Lang, they failed to make the political contacts that would have accorded them the status of “rebel”.⁵⁾

A characteristic of the articles on Bai Lang from the early 1960s on was the increasing frequency of quotations from Mao Zedong. This made for extremely tiresome reading, as the quotations would often run for a full paragraph or longer, and more and more frequently came to take the place of a conclusion. In 1966, finally, with the outbreak of the “Cultural Revolution”, independent academic work came virtually to a stop as most scholars elected to keep their heads low.⁶⁾ Some of them, however, had clearly been able to pursue their research in private, for in 1980 there appeared a volume that put all the preceding publications into the shade. This was the documentary collection *Bai Lang qiyi* (Du Qunhe [ed.], 1980). The book was composed of two sections, one reprinting official documents such as the cables that flew to and fro between field

commanders, the provincial authorities, and the central government, the other containing eyewitness accounts including seven by former participants in the rebellion. Although all but two of these accounts had been published before, their collection in one volume made an enormous contribution and soon caught the attention of foreign scholars working in the field including Elizabeth Perry and Phil Billingsley. Despite differences in outlook – Du characterized Bai Lang’s movement as a traditional peasant rebellion while both Perry and Billingsley tended to approach it from the perspective of Hobsbawm’s concept of “social banditry” – the book was a stimulus to research not only on Bai Lang but also on banditry.

The publication of Du Qunhe’s book evidently encouraged other Chinese scholars to test the water. While publications continued to appear probing further into the nature of Bai Lang’s rebellion (Huey Fang Wu, 1998: 1859-61, 1864-72), by the mid-1980s “bandit studies” had evidently acquired a modest niche of their own. Treatments appeared in rapid succession of Lao Yangren, of the May 1923 Lincheng Incident (the attack on a crack Shanghai-Beijing express which saw a number of foreigners taken captive by a confederation of local bandit gangs), and of the Shandong bandit chief-cum-Guomindang warlord (as well as one-time Japanese collaborator) Liu Guitang (Huey Fang Wu, 1998: 1860-61).

In the background to these new research departures was the changing political situation in China. With Mao Zedong dead and buried and a new line of “reform and opening” announced by his eventual successor Deng Xiaoping, scholars were less constrained than before by the clammy hand of Party censorship. As long as their research findings did not question the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party’s rule, they were more or less free to follow their own inclinations. There remained built-in limitations, however, such as a continuing tendency to focus on celebrated figures such as chiefs like Lao Yangren, Liu Guitang, and most notably Bai Lang; or on well-known episodes like the Lincheng Incident. Lurid semi-fictional accounts, inspired perhaps by the accelerating descent into lawlessness that China was once again experiencing, could be had at a dime a dozen in any street-corner bookstore, but, as Yu

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Zidao sighed in 1990, banditry as a phenomenon in itself had yet to come in for serious consideration by historians at this stage, the mid- to late 1980s.⁷⁾

By the early 1990s, once the crucial transition had been made from the study of “rebel leaders” to that of “bandit chiefs”, the scene for a dramatic change had been set. Reacting to the outside stimulus provided by Hobsbawm’s *Bandits*, available in China since the early 1980s (though not translated until 1998), and by the Chinese edition of Phil Billingsley’s *Bandits in Republican China*, studies by Chinese scholars followed thick and fast.

Two points stand out about the new work that began to appear in the early 1990s. The first was a switch in focus from individual cases, such as Bai Lang or the Lincheng Incident, to regional studies (particularly of the old “bandit kingdoms” of Henan and Northeast China), and to more general surveys that tried to establish a clearer theoretical basis for “bandit studies”. The second was a movement away from the categories that had constrained earlier scholars, such as the need to establish bandits’ anti-establishment credentials or their pro-peasant sympathies, to a willingness to seriously consider bandits who clearly did not fall into such categories, even those whose proclivities had obviously been more toward murder and mayhem than toward rebellion. Soldier-bandits, heterodox cults, salt and opium smugglers, all came at last to be considered worthy targets of scholastic attention (Huey Fang Wu, 1998: 1861-63, 1872-73).

By 1998, a survey of the scene, while not pretending to be comprehensive, nonetheless calculated that three full-length books, five collections of documentary materials, and some thirty articles on the subject of banditry in modern China had been published in the ten years since 1988. Popular, non-academic publications had become too numerous to be counted, as had works of literature using bandits as background. In the rest of their article, the authors provided a critical appraisal of the scholastic output on bandits, dividing the discussion into “definitions”, “classification”, “origins”, “gang organization”, “bandit psychology”, “political

nature”, “bandit culture”, and “related problems” (including opium, secret societies, warlords, vagrants, and revolution) (Wang Yuanzhong & Chi Zihua, 1998: 58-62).⁸⁾ As the flood of new works continued unabated through the final two years of the century, it became clear that in the new social conditions unleashed by “reform and opening”, the banditry that had characterized “Old China” had become a “hot topic” (*redian*).⁹⁾

Before examining in detail the flurry of bandit-related publications in the 1990s, it is first necessary to draw attention to a development that added an entirely new complexion to academic studies in China.

Until the late 1970s, Chinese scholars had worked more or less in a vacuum. Not only were numerous avenues of research closed to inquiry; the government’s “self-reliance” policy effectively cut them off from overseas contacts and even, in the hysteric atmosphere of the “Cultural Revolution”, placed them in danger of being labeled as “spies” if they admitted to such contacts. With Deng Xiaoping’s belated announcement that China needed not only to “seek truth through facts”, but also to have inputs of foreign ideas to survive, Chinese academic circles experienced a sea change. Scholars were allowed for the first time in thirty years to collaborate freely with overseas scholars, and even to study abroad themselves. Overseas scholars were enabled at last to pursue their research in China, and their monographs found their way into Chinese libraries, many of them appearing in Chinese translation.

“Bandit studies” have benefited from this new dispensation. While some scholars enlisted the support of overseas colleagues to locate otherwise elusive sources,¹⁰⁾ others have engaged in full-scale collaborative research projects which have not only exposed Chinese academic circles to fresh approaches but also provided Chinese scholars’ ideas with unprecedented overseas exposure.¹¹⁾ Even book reviews have sparked some Chinese academics’ curiosity (Xu Youwei, 1994), while Chinese translations of Western scholars’ works on Republican period bandits have been adopted as university set texts, a promise of still greater academic curiosity about the subject in the upcoming generation of scholars.¹²⁾

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In 1998, the publication on Taiwan of a Chinese translation of the third edition of the late Eric Hobsbawm’s seminal work, *Bandits* (with a cheekily brand-new subtitle, “From Robin Hood to the Shuihu Heroes”) introduced mainland scholars to a whole new way of looking at the ubiquitous underworld (Hobsbawm, 1998). Following the appearance of the substantially revised and expanded fourth edition of *Bandits* in 2000, a mainland translation appeared in 2001 (Hobsbawm, 2001). The subtitle of this mainland edition, “Alternatives to the Regulated Life”, also seemed to indicate the translator’s more realistic take on Hobsbawm’s formulation compared to the romantic tenor of that of the Taiwan edition. (Xu Youwei (2001) has recently conducted a critical comparison of the two translations.)

Equally significant for academic revitalization in China has been the thawing of relations with Taiwan. This has allowed scholars on each side of the Strait to read each other’s work and even to publish their findings in the other side’s journals.¹³⁾ The doors have also opened for Taiwan scholars to pursue their research in China and even, more recently, for mainland scholars to attend academic conferences on Taiwan.

Other indications that bandit studies had “come of age” in China were, on the one hand, the sudden availability of previously unimaginable sums in research funds, and, on the other, a cooperative attitude on the part of government organizations like the CPPCC that tightly regulate access to materials. Cai Shaoqing’s research, for example, described below, was made possible by a fifteen-month government-funded lecture tour of Europe and the United States in 1985-86, paid for by the State Foundation for Social Science (Guojia shehui kexue jijinhui). The trip allowed him to make contacts with numerous scholars, and to consult newspapers, first-hand accounts of captivity and large amounts of missionary materials, none of which were available in Chinese libraries (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 354). The editors of the documentary collection *Jindai Zhongguo tufei shilu*, also discussed below, were able to collect and publish such a vast amount of material from libraries all over China (and in the space of just two years), only because they managed to gain the

support and cooperation (financial and organizational) of CPPCC organs at every level from state down to county (*xian*) (Hubei wenshi ziliao [ed.], 1992: 3: 367).¹⁴⁾ Another significant development was the establishment in various universities of the first Departments of Modern Chinese Social History, which enabled scholars for the first time to turn their attention to salient aspects of the years immediately preceding 1949 (Wang Yuanzhong & Chi Zihua, 1998: 58).

Although this essay is concerned with mainland research, the absence of comprehensive treatments of bandits by Chinese scholars means that the name of the young Taiwan scholar Huey Fang Wu [Wu Huifang] deserves special mention. In addition to her monumental 1990 volume on banditry in north China during the early Republic (Huey Fang Wu, 1990), notable for its painstaking coverage of local gazetteer entries, her 1998 survey (Huey Fang Wu, 1998) was also the first attempt to list and characterize developments in mainland bandit research since 1949.

The 1990s: “Bandit Studies” Come of Age

Although there is no way of knowing to what extent it was responsible, Yu Zidao’s exhortation to Chinese scholars to “discover” the legacy of Republican period banditry appears to have hit a chord. Or perhaps it was merely, as Wen Yiduo had once said, that “their bodies faced the emperor’s palace, but their hearts were in the *jianghu*” (Wen Yiduo, 1948: 22). Within a year, not only the first full-length analytical treatment of the subject but also a mammoth collection of documents had been published, which between them took Chinese studies of banditry onto a new plane and in effect amounted to what might be termed a “declaration of independence”. Somewhat prior to this there had already appeared an important selection of documents on the May 1923 Lincheng Incident, and a highly original piece of interview-based fieldwork conducted in the old “bandit territory” of Northeast China. We will take them one by one, starting with the work that remains, eight years after its publication, the most important analytical work by a Chinese scholar on Republican

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period bandits to date: that of Cai Shaoqing.

Like Yu Zidao, Cai deplored the failure of Chinese scholars to pay close heed to Republican period bandits. A scholar of the previous generation whose original field had been secret societies, he confessed to having been inspired to write his book by his reading of Hobsbawm's *Bandits*, in particular by Hobsbawm's failure to make any significant mention of 20th century China (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 354). Seven years in the making, his book *Minguo shiqi de tufei* (Bandits in Republican China) — awkwardly enough, the same title as that under which the Chinese translation of Billingsley (1988) had already appeared, pays lip service to the “guiding principles of Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought”. However, it goes considerably beyond any other academic endeavour that those principles had previously inspired in China.

Unlike Billingsley, who had employed a nationwide introductory approach to bandits, Cai uses close examination of local archive material to employ a regional approach. After three introductory chapters discussing the definitions and types of bandits, the kinds of people who became bandits, and the internal aspects of bandit gangs, he then takes the country region by region, examining the different bandit traditions that developed in the Northeast, the Jiangsu-Shandong-Henan-Anhui border regions, the Hunan-Hubei-Jiangxi border regions, the Yunnan-Guizhou-Sichuan border regions, the Fujian-Zhejiang-Guangxi/Guangdong region, the Lake Tai/Grand Canal region, and, finally, the northwest border regions. The last chapter briefly takes up the subject of bandits and revolution, its two sections looking in turn at the “bourgeois revolution” and “New Democratic Revolution” periods (the topic is further discussed below).

Cao Baoming's *Tufei* (Bandits), a volume in the Folk Customs of the Northeast Series (Dongbei minsu congshu), opened up a quite new area for “bandit studies”. A member of the Jilin Branch of the Communist Party's Association for Popular Literature and Art (Zhonggong minjian wenyijia xiehui), Cao has written numerous books and articles on the bandit traditions of the Northeast (Cao Baoming, 1988, 1994, 1999). A

folklorist, his forte is gathering oral information, and for the volume in question he conducted more than thirty interviews with informants who included, as well as a pair of former bandit chiefs, several whose fathers or uncles had been bandits and others who had been or whose relatives had been held by bandits for ransom. *Tufei* is thus a compendium of information of a nature not usually available to historians, augmented by data from local gazetteers and reports compiled by the former Japanese rulers of "Manchuguo". One only wishes that Cao had been able to carry out his research twenty years earlier when more former bandits might have been living.

The Lincheng Incident, because of its scale and its international repercussions, was frequently referred to as "The Republic's Most Notorious Affair" (*Minguo diyi an*), and a documentary collection that appeared in 1990 was given the same title: *Minguo diyi an* (Wang Zuoxian et al [eds.], 1990). It was a 300-page volume, consisting of three parts: (1) a detailed summary of the affair and its aftermath; (2) a selection of documents including (a) the telegrams that flew between the central government and the local military authorities and (b) the correspondence between the captured foreigners' diplomatic representatives and their home countries; and (3) a selection of essays and eyewitness accounts. An appendix, finally, dealt with the involvement in the case of the Shanghai underworld boss Huang Jinrong.

If the Lincheng collection was constrained by its focus on one case, the same could hardly be said of another collection that appeared soon after, the *Jindai Zhongguo tufei shilu* (Real records of banditry in modern China) (Hubei wenshi ziliao [ed.], 1992). This was a truly magnificent undertaking, consisting of three volumes of essays and reminiscences (206 in all) with a total of almost 2000 pages containing something like a million and a half words. The volumes are divided geographically, the first covering the northeast, northwest, and part of the southwest, the second covering north and east China, and the third covering south-central China and the remainder of the southwest. Though the entries range from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries, the vast majority of

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them focus on the Republican period. So detailed and vivid are they that one can almost seem to sense the sounds and smells of a bandit army on the move. This collection, already reprinted once, will stand for many years as the primary source of factual information on Republican period banditry. It seems unlikely that it will ever be superseded, if only because of its sheer volume.

Before going on to look at what the 1990s produced in terms of research findings on Republican period banditry, this seems as good a place as any to consider a third documentary collection, *Yangpiao yu bangfei—waiguoren yanzhong de Minguo shehui* (Foreign tickets and kidnapers—Republican-period society through the eyes of foreigners) (Xu Youwei & Bei Sifei [eds.], 1998).

One of the most celebrated motifs of early 20th century China was the kidnapping of foreigners (mainly Westerners) for ransom by bandits. Usually known as “foreign tickets” (*yangpiao*), these people who had been fortunate or unfortunate enough to spend a portion of their lives with a fugitive bandit gang often sat down following their release to write out their memoirs, and a number (26 in all) of the most important of those memoirs have been brought together here in Chinese translation by Xu and Bei (a second volume containing the remainder of the memoirs is evidently in the pipeline).¹⁵⁾ The result is a harrowing human document, almost half a million words not only detailing what it was like— from a participant observer’s point of view— to live the life of a bandit in China, but also, for the first time ever, revealing the bandits as human beings—warts and all—rather than as caricatures. Such has been the impact of this sell-out collection since its publication three years ago that it has found its way onto college reading lists in various parts of the country.¹⁶⁾

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As the preceding summary has shown, research on Republican period banditry has progressed in fits and starts over the fifty-odd years since 1949. Virtually nothing appeared in the first thirty years except the work on Bai Lang, so that when Phil Billingsley began working on

bandits in the early 1970s, the paucity of materials from China was such that he was advised more than once to abandon the topic for something “safer” (Billingsley, 1980: 10; 1988: 11). Chinese libraries (and, to all intents and purposes, China itself) were still closed to foreign scholars. Chinese scholars, of course, laboured under even greater restraints, which was the main reason why Billingsley’s 1988 *Bandits in Republican China* found a translator almost immediately and why many Chinese scholars received it so positively. (Yu Zidao (1992); Wang Yuanzhong & Chi Zihua (1998): 57; Shao Yong (1998): 493.) Once the constraints on research had been lifted, however, and Chinese researchers received official blessing and funding to look objectively (more or less) at their country’s social history, work on bandits progressed in leaps and bounds. In the remainder of this article we will examine as far as possible what that research effort has turned up. Since many articles are published in hard-to-find local college journals, it has not always been possible to consult them, and often we have been able to do no more than list their details. Other, more accessible sources are often of a popular nature and, though meticulously detailed, are based on existing texts and thus contribute little to original research. These, while listed in the Bibliography, have not been discussed in the text.

Republican Period Banditry under the Microscope

Among the many problems that waylay researchers are those of deciding on a definition of what a bandit was, and having done so, of deciding who was or was not a bandit. This was not as easy as might be expected: the authorities liked to adorn everyone who took up arms against them with the label “bandit”, hoping thus to hamstring any political ambitions those forces might entertain. Again, reporting on bandits invariably represented the interests of those who had most to lose from a bandit attack, or whose job it was to either see them off or play them down, so it could hardly be expected to be objective. Bandits, who mostly came from the ranks of illiterate poor peasants, rarely left behind

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memoirs to balance out such prejudices (Wang Yuanzhong & Chi Zihua, 1998: 57). Until recently, the rarely questioned preconception of bandits was that they were a destructive force, profiting from wars and social breakdown, and always liable, thanks to their leaders' ambitions, to become the tools of the counter-revolutionary reaction. While some might take up arms on behalf of the people, attacking government offices, robbing the rich, and distributing their gains to the poor, the resentment they harboured was far more likely to push them in the direction of violence, kidnapping and robbery, aimed usually at those weaker than themselves (Shao Yong, 1998: 492).

In their approaches to this problem, mainland researchers have proposed various definitions. In the Preface to his path breaking *Minguo shiqi de tufei*, Cai Shaoqing, following Hobsbawm, describes bandits as “those whose activities go beyond the law and lack a clear political perspective, and who live primarily by robbery or extortion” (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 3). Others, while reaching basically the same conclusion, have relied more closely on stereotyped Chinese conceptualizations of bandits. Niu Jingzhong, for instance, holds that “bandits are an anti-social force whose methods are those of willful violence, rapine and murder; they offer no administrative programme or political objective, and are the enemies of all of society” (Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 66). Another researcher went further: “by bandits, we mean those groups of men who, in old China, habitually employed such violent and fearful methods as murder, arson, robbery, kidnapping, and extortion, looting other people's property in order to satisfy their own personal desires, and by so doing harmed society at large, wrecked production, and obstructed the progress of history” (Tan Shuqun, 1994, cited in Wang Yuanzhong & Chi Zihua, 1998: 58). What these definitions have in common is a tendency to view bandits from above rather than below, to approach them from the standpoint of “society” rather than that of the individuals concerned. On the other hand, since it was precisely this view of bandits that made earlier generations of scholars overlook them as deserving recipients of their attentions, perhaps we should be grateful for the small mercy that today's

researchers have at least taken bandits up in earnest even if they have not gone beyond traditional conceptualizations.

With regard to the classification of bandits, at least one Chinese researcher has shown more originality. Cai Shaoqing proposes the adoption of multiple yardsticks, including the nature of the terrain in which a particular gang operates, the fundamental direction of its activities, its organizational structure, its operational mobility, and its longevity (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 4-8). Future research will be greatly aided by such classification methods.

With regard to the influence of environmental factors, both the English term “bandits” and the Chinese equivalent *tufei* have traditionally been reserved for predatory activities taking place in the countryside rather than those in the cities. In a new departure, however, the young historian Ma Lie, taking his cue from the *Cihai* dictionary definition of *tufei*, has sought to include some varieties of urban crime under the same rubric. He suggests that, by the 1930s, the lopsided prosperity of the cities relative to the dilapidation of surrounding rural areas had led many rural bandit gangs to transfer or partially transfer their activities to the cities, thereby becoming integral factors in the local economic structure. Aware of the need to distinguish them from other urban criminals, however, Ma employs an analysis of numerous individual cases drawn from local newspaper reports to arrive at a working definition of “urban bandits” (*chengshi tufei*) as: “those who live by robbery or kidnapping, carried out in urban areas in an organized or planned way” (Ma Lie, 1998: 327).

A primary concern of researchers has been to pinpoint the reasons for Republican China’s decline into conditions of endemic banditry. Summarizing the findings of various scholars, we find the origins of banditry divided into seven broad categories: historical and geographical factors, economic factors, political and military factors, and finally, social and individual factors (Wang Yuanzhong & Chi Zihua, 1998: 57-61; Huey Fang Wu, 1998: 1873-83). Concerning the first two categories, some researchers have located bandit origins in the social upheavals and militarization

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accompanying the final years of the Qing era, and drawn attention to the bandits of western Hunan, the Tai Lake area, Henan and Guangxi as examples of this trend (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 133-34, 271, 281-83). Certain natural habitats, such as isolated mountains or waterlogged lake or delta regions, difficult for the forces of law and order to penetrate, provided an additional impetus toward predatory activity, as other scholars have noted (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 188, 235, 239, 288, 328; Zhang Hairu, 1990: 67; Zhang Zhihan & Wang Xuedian, 1983: 56; Wang Zhenyu, 1992: 53; Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 71).

At the back of everything, of course, lay the declining economic conditions of Republican China, rapid population increase coupled with the growing concentration of arable land forcing more and more peasants to gamble their lives on a desperate struggle to survive. As researchers have noted, this trend affected most of China, but was particularly noticeable in places like Sichuan and Henan (Zhao Qing, 1990a: 3; Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 235; Wang Zhenyu, 1992: 51-52). To these factors they have added the growing impoverization of soil in many areas, the effect of natural disasters like floods and drought, harsh exactions inflicted by landlords, local officials and warlords, and, as “outrage” followed “outrage”, the weight of reparations forced upon China by foreign governments to avenge their nationals (Zhang Zhihan & Wang Xuedian, 1983: 56; Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 124, 235; Zhang Jie, 1991: 57; Wang Zhenyu, 1992: 51-52; Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 69).

The growing politicization of China during the Republican period, coupled with the penetration by overseas interests such as Japan, was a further cause of banditry that has attracted the attention of scholars (Zhang Hairu, 1990: 65; Zhang Zhihan & Wang Xuedian, 1983: 57; Gao Lecai, 1992: 107; Ma Lie, 1995: 131). Alliances between, on the one hand, local warlords and power groups seeking to stake their independence from the government and, on the other, bandits seeking patrons to ensure survival not only politicized the bandits themselves but also made effective suppression attempts all but impossible. This too has proved a hot topic (Zhao Qing, 1990a: 3; 1990b: 110-11; Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 328;

Cai Shaoqing & Du Jingzhen, 1989: 53; Zhang Jie, 1991: 56). Other historians have drawn attention to the constant wars among rival warlords as a prime source of bandit recruits, either because unpaid soldiers deserted with their rifles or because the wars left such destruction in their wake (Cao Baoming, 1988: 24; Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 127, 160, 178, 282-83, 288-89, 330; Zhao Qing, 1990a: 2; Gao Lecai, 1992: 107; Cai Shaoqing & Du Jingzhen, 1989: 49; Zhang Hairu, 1990: 65). When warlords began calling up or inciting bandits instead of suppressing them, the stage was set for Republican China to become a bandits' paradise. (Cai Shaoqing [ed.] 1993:)

Finally, researchers have pointed to a number of social factors contributing to the spread of banditry. Incidents such as clan feuds and clashes between different ethnic groups, or between residents and new immigrants, could often lead to banditry as the losing side was forced off its land or obliged to take retribution beyond the law (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 190-91, 235, 288-90, 292; Zhao Qing, 1990a: 4; 1990b: 111). The rise of secret societies as protective – on occasion, predatory – associations for certain social groups, the spread of opium addiction, and even local temperament have all been charged with contributing to the “bandit miasma” that enveloped Republican period China (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 131-32, 203-4, 210, 238-39, 243-45, 254, 258-61; Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 70; Li Xianhua, 1995: 53; Li Yingquan, 1996: 53; Zhang Jie, 1991: 58).

Where banditry was caught up with the struggle for survival, as was the case in places like west Henan and the Northeast, it tended to be self-generating, and such places gained a reputation for being “tough” or “warlike”. The vast majority of young men did a turn at one time or another with the local bandit gang, and the women were their warmest backers (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 192; Cai Shaoqing & Du Jingzhen, 1989: 52; Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 71; Wang Zhenyu, 1992: 52). Researchers have also picked up on the numerous personal factors that could create bandits – revenge for a family killing, false accusations, righteous anger, family problems, and so on (Cai Shaoqing & Du Jingzhen, 1989: 52; Cao Baoming, 1988: 1-8; Ran Guanghai, 1995: 23-28). Most of the foregoing

factors overlapped with at least one of the others, of course. Cai Shaoqing and his student Du Jingzhen, seeking to devise a multi-faceted approach to the bandits that were particularly rife during the pre-1928 period, have developed the paradigm “society – politics – economics – temperament – activity” to illuminate the variety of factors that went into the making of most bandits (1989: 52).

Who were the bandits? This is a question that has engaged the interest of many researchers, and most of them have identified the usual categories – peasants forced by oppressive or uncaring officials to “climb Mount Liang”, unemployed vagrants, decommissioned soldiers or militia, local rowdies, and so on. A more novel approach is that adopted by Cai Shaoqing, who has analyzed the background of bandit chiefs and the special characteristics of their activities to arrive at a six-fold typology: “chivalrous bandits”, “revenge-oriented bandits”, “career-oriented (*shengguan facai*) bandits”, “army riffraff bandits”, “professional bandits”, and “local tyrant bandits” (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 24-38). Cai, following Perry and Billingsley, further classifies bandit gangs according to their numbers, dividing them into three types: small gangs, large gangs, and bandit armies. He suggests that the larger gangs tended to have stricter discipline, developing and modifying as the gang developed (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 54-63).

As numerous people since Hobsbawm have pointed out, bandits may have hailed from the peasantry, but once they had taken up arms they certainly did not represent the peasants. Chinese researchers have upheld this observation, noting that while bandit activities were outside the law, no matter how they rebelled against prevailing social structures their lack of a clear political programme prevented them from doing more than that. And yet, they note, when a gang reached a certain size it could come to play a political role despite itself. On the other hand, because it represented neither ruling class interests nor those of the oppressed classes, when it did demonstrate any political tendencies they were usually destined to be of the vacillating, opportunistic sort that pushed the leader to take his gang over to whichever side seemed likely to offer the best

protection (Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 69; Cai Shaoqing & Du Jingzhen, 1989: 51).

An important aspect of research on bandits has been to seek to penetrate the state of mind of the (mostly) men who became bandits, and the kind of culture that resulted when they joined forces. Cai Shaoqing and Du Jingzhen have examined the psychological transformation that took place when a law-abiding peasant driven beyond endurance decided to take to the "dangerous path" of banditry (1989: 52), while Cai's own book, following Billingsley (1988), has looked at the disciplinary rules, taboos, rituals, jargon and superstitions that emerged as protective measures within the subculture of banditry itself (Cai Shaoqing [ed.], 1993: 59-87. Also Niu Jingzhong, 1993: 70-71). In this way, Chinese researchers have begun to take the first, tentative steps to pin down bandits as people and to see their activities through bandits' own eyes. However, it has to be said that this is still an infant research area, and that a lot of work remains to be done.

Bandits, of course, did not and could not exist in a vacuum, and several scholars have drawn attention to related issues that can aid our understanding. Zhang Hairu, for example, has pointed out the intimate link between opium and banditry. Peasants forced to grow opium instead of food crops might be forced into banditry when the crop failed or the military took the proceeds. The profits to be had from the production and sale of opium also encouraged bandit activity, and often led to fierce clashes between bandits and government troops (1990: 65).

Both Zhao Qing and Zhang Jie have focused on the relationship among bandits, secret societies and warlords, Zhao seeing them as equally evil by-products of China's semi-colonial status, Zhang characterizing them as a kind of Holy Trinity that depended on and fed off one another (Zhao Qing, 1990a: 4; 1990b: 111; Zhang Jie, 1991: 58). Cai Shaoqing too has opined that, by the time of the Republican period, there was little to distinguish bandits from secret societies, the two having become parasitic upon one another despite the show of "local defence" that some of the societies put up (1993: 8-11). Cai and Du Jingzhen (1989)

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have also developed a close analysis of the “soldier bandit” (*bingfei*) phenomenon that emerged during the early 1920s.

The close relationship between bandits and unemployed vagrants (*liumin, youmin*) has been identified by one researcher as the crucial element in China’s descent to the level of “bandit world” (*tufei shijie*) during the Republican period. Unable to find work, Chi Zihua suggests, these former peasants or artisans had no choice but to seek survival in the ranks of bandit gangs. The waxing and waning of bandit numbers was intimately linked, he continues, to fluctuations in the number of unemployed due to seasonal or other natural factors (1996: 112; 2001: 123). Still another researcher has actually come right out and said that bandits themselves were merely a variety of vagrant, distinguishable from the other varieties simply by the fact that they lived by violence (Zhu Hanguo [ed.], 1996: 233).

Concerning bandits’ relationship with revolution, this has not been a point on which, for perhaps obvious reasons, most researchers have dwelled. Cai Shaoqing, following Billingsley (1988), makes a clear distinction between the approaches of “bourgeois” revolutionaries like Sun Yatsen and those of the communists. While the former sought to recruit and use bandits, he notes, the latter sought to transform them, thus eliminating the bandit problem at the same time (1993: 344-53). This is the shortest and least satisfactory section of his book, however; perhaps in voluntary deference to the sources of his funding, perhaps as a result of pressure from those sources, he does not attempt the detailed analysis of concrete events that characterizes the rest of his book.

Given the numerous unsavory episodes and compromises that took place during the years of the armed revolutionary movement, other scholars have, understandably, been equally shy of tackling this issue until recently. Among the better works are Gao Lecai’s (1992) analysis of bandit suppression in the Northeast during the late 1940s, and Tang Renguo’s (1998) brief account of the campaigns in Guangxi soon after Liberation. Neither, however, attempts to go beyond the suppression campaigns to analyze the overall relationship between bandits and the

CCP. Overall assessments of the early Jiangxi Period, when the communists were forced to rely largely on local bandits for both manpower and topographical knowledge, have rarely been attempted either, despite the existence of a great deal of information, and CCP-bandit relations in the “liberated” areas have similarly been ignored.

The most encouraging sign in this area has been the recent appearance of Shao Yong’s *Minguo lulin shi* (History of Republican Period Banditry) (Shao Yong, 2001). Shao’s book is unusual in that it takes its analysis of Republican-period banditry right up to the period surrounding the communists’ 1949 assumption of power. Most important, however, is its extended discussion of bandits’ relationship to the communist-led revolutionary movement, and this is what we will focus upon here. Going beyond any other source (though still not as far as one would wish), it lists the achievements and failures of the communists in their efforts to reform and eliminate the bandits that filled China’s countryside.

Shao first outlines the varied approaches to and interpretations of the “bandit problem” held by generations of communist leaders from Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai through to He Long, Li Weihan and, of course, Mao Zedong. He then goes on to deal with the “bandit strategies” developed during the Jiangxi Soviet period and the attempts by the communists to reform and utilize the many bandits thrown up in the Northeast by the September 18 1931 Incident. In its approach to the problem, one of the book’s great strengths is its wide range of sources. Apart from the usual documentary collections like *Xinghuo liaoyuan* and contemporary research on Chinese Communist Party leaders, it also makes full use of personal accounts by Red Army commanders and others directly involved (including Peng Dehuai, Xu Xiangqian, Chen Yi, He Changgong, and Wang Weizhou) (2001: 287-339, 349-360). Shao also sums up the state of contemporary scholarship concerning the post-1980s rehabilitation of Wang Zuo, a Jiangxi bandit chief allied to the communists whose execution had been engineered by leftist forces in 1930. (2001: 327-339).

The last chapters of the book take up in meticulous detail the great

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bandit suppression campaigns that went on for more than two years after the People's Republic was founded. Although these have been written about in numerous mass-oriented volumes adorned with lurid covers over the past ten years, this is the first time that a serious researcher has approached them. The major sources are, once again, the memoirs of PLA leaders directly involved, but the book is also notable for its utilization of locally published accounts that until now have not been readily available (2001: 429-89). One hopes that other researchers will follow Shao Yong's trailblazing effort in the future, but the appearance of anything truly revealing will have to await the emergence of a Communist Party more introspective and self-critical than it is right now.

Conclusions and Suggestions for the Future

Wang Yuanzhong and Chi Zihua, in their 1998 survey of the field, offer what they term a few “humble suggestions” for the future. While the ivory tower prejudices of earlier scholars have largely been smashed, they agree, most people have still to realize the real importance of research on bandits. Yet, they continue, bandits had such a profound and complex effect on Republican period politics, economics and society that to ignore them is to abandon all hope of genuinely reenacting the full social reality of those years. History is multi-faceted, and to view it from the point of view of “bandit studies” is to open up an entirely new angle on those years that acted as the crucible for today's China. The image of bandits and their role in history has been distorted by the sensational writing available on the street, and historians' task is thus to bring respectability to “bandit studies” by developing a clearer theoretical viewpoint than they have to date (the one they suggest, inevitably, is that of “Marxism-Leninism – Mao Zedong Thought – Deng Xiaoping Theory”). They also suggest some topics for future research, including “Population Increase and Banditry”, “Bandits and Rural Social Change”, “Bandits and the Japanese Invasion”, “Traditional and Modern Chinese Bandits”, and “Comparisons of Chinese and Overseas Bandits” (1998: 62). Yu Zidao too,

voicing identical concerns, proposed that future scholars consider such topics as “Bandits and China’s Rural Crisis”, “Bandits, Class Oppression and Natural Calamities”, “Bandit Gang Organization”, “Bandit Types and Operations”, and “Bandit Customs, Belief Systems and Disciplinary Rules” (1992: 9).

At the end of their essay, Wang and Chi go further, implying that the topic is not merely a historical one since China at the turn of the millennium once again has a “bandit problem” to contend with. History is a mirror in which we can find the reflection of many current problems, they suggest, and an appreciation of Republican period bandits can also help society to understand, hence to regulate and control the “train bandits” (*chefe*), “highwaymen” (*luba*) and other criminal activities reflecting contemporary China’s “black society”. Historians must stand at the crossroads of past and present, they argue, and loudly proclaim the topical nature of “bandit studies” (1998: 62).

Despite the insistence of Wang Yuanzhong and Chi Zihua on the topical nature of “bandit studies”, the last few years have seen a downturn in the number of researchers tackling the subject. This might be attributable to the reduced media focus on the “train bandits”, or could merely be the result of a numbed reading public suffering from overkill. Younger researchers may also have begun to feel that they have exhausted the avenues for original research. Then again, it may be that the dwindling of research funds following the cooling down of the national economy has made the subject of bandits appear less attractive. Although the immediate future of “bandit studies” in China is less than clear, nevertheless, the body of work that appeared in the closing decades of the 20th century can at least be said to have located Republican-period bandits in the canon of modern Chinese history.

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NOTES

1) See Bei Sifei (1992). An earlier translation, by the Beijing scholar Wang Xianzhi, had been published under the same title by Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe in 1991. As a result of its translating errors and also some infelicitous editing which saw huge chunks of the book either omitted or bowdlerized beyond recognition, it was soon superseded by the Xu Youwei et. al. translation.

2)

Other English-language works dealing substantially with Republican-period bandits include Perry (1980), (1983); Tiedemann (1982); and Friedman (1974; mainly on Bai Lang).

3) Though not published until 1992, this essay was written in August 1990. Yu Zidao is on the faculty of the History Department at Shanghai's Fudan University. His specialities are Republican period military affairs and Chinese Communist Party history.

4) There is no space here to list all these articles. See the survey by the Taiwan scholar Huey Fang Wu (1998), pp. 1858-59, and also the bibliographies to Billingsley (1988) and Perry (1983). The Kaifeng journal *Shixue yuekan* (Historical studies monthly) was particularly prolific in its coverage of Bai Lang.

5) Lao Yangren's movement is discussed in Perry (1983), and both movements are examined in depth in Billingsley (1988). For details of Chinese scholars' research, see Huey Fang Wu (1998): 1861.

6) A small number of items, by framing their findings within the era's strict interpretation of history, managed to see the light. See Huey Fang Wu (1994).

7) A Taiwan historian (Huey Fang Wu, 1998: 1858) considered the situation even worse there than on the mainland, where the Bai Lang research had at least seen the light of day.

8) This article covers the period 1840-1949, not merely the Republican period. It, too, notes the lack of interest shown by historians in bandits, “thanks to various problems”, until the early 1990s.

9) See Shao Yong (1998). The volume in which this item was included, Feng Lin [ed.] (1998), was itself an extraordinary piece of work that typified the atmosphere of “liberating thought” (*jiefang sixiang*) prevailing in China in the late

1990s. Casting caution to the winds, it declared on the very front cover that the last 100 years of Chinese history were not merely a history of revolution but a process of modernization. A confused and sometimes contradictory process like anywhere else, all the problems and contradictions thrown up by it (such as bandits) had played their part in the final result, and could not be ignored. It thus listed bandits, together with people like spies and anarchists, alongside the more standard fare of national figures among the “hot topics” (*redian*) of modern Chinese history, implying that all of them had equal claim to consideration. 10)

Cai Shaoqing [ed.] (1993): 355, for example, included in his Acknowledgements the names of the British scholar Charles A. Curwen, the American scholars Elizabeth J. Perry and Stephen C. Averill, and the Australian scholar John J. Fitzgerald.

- 11) As far as Republican period bandits are concerned, the most outstanding case appears to be the collaboration between the young Shanghai historian Xu Youwei and the British scholar (now resident in Japan) Phil Billingsley. At the time of writing, this has already resulted in the publication of one collection of translated documents (with one more forthcoming), and several articles, published in journals in Japan, the United States, Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as in China. Xu’s translation of Billingsley (1988) was the catalyst for this collaboration.
- 12) Bei Sifei (1992), for example, has been prescribed as required reading for Republican-period history courses in both Shanghai’s Fudan University and the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology.
- 13) The young Taipei scholar Huey Fang Wu has had her research published in the mainland journal *Jindaishi yanjiu* (Huey Fang Wu, 1994), while Xu Youwei’s collaborative article with Phil Billingsley [Bei Sifei] was carried in the Taipei journal *Jindai Zhongguo shi yanjiu tongxun*. See Xu Youwei & Bei Sifei (1999). The Northeast Chinese folklorist Cao Baoming, author of many books of reportage and field investigation focusing on the bandits of the former “Manchuria”, found his way into print on Taiwan when his *Dongbei mawei shi* (History of the Northeastern Mounted Bandits) was published in 1994 by the Taipei publishing

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house Qiling chubanshe. Huey Fang Wu's earlier work (1990), a revised version of her PhD thesis, has also become available on the mainland.

- 14) The Chinese People's Political and Consultative Conference (Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang hui) has a separate Historical Materials Committee (wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui) that overlooks and finances the collection and sorting of memoir material like that under discussion here.
- 15) The “foreign ticket” memoirs are at the center of another collaborative work by the same authors, Xu Youwei & Bei Sifei (2000). Billingsley and Xu (1998) focus specifically on the memoirs of the numerous missionaries who fell into bandit hands. For a general discussion, see Billingsley (1988): 172-77.
- 16) The editors of this volume have themselves assessed the significance of the foreign ticket memoirs as historical materials in articles published both in Taiwan and in China. See Xu Youwei & Bei Sifei (1999), (2000).

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“Brave New World”: Contemporary Chinese Research on Republican Period Banditry

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Because of the difficulty of ascertaining their real nature, the bandits that characterized Republican China (1912-1949) were virtually ignored by post-1949 mainland historians until comparatively recently. Not until the 1990s, when political controls relaxed and China again began to see stories of “highwaymen” and “train bandits” featured in the local and national press, were bandits taken up by historians as a serious research topic.

This article, by reviewing the major works of post-1949 scholarship, surveys the changing attitudes towards bandits of mainland historians from 1949 to 2001. It finds that “bandit studies” have indeed come of age in the two decades following the commencement of the “Reform & Opening” era, but that there remain certain inbuilt limitations. Chief among these limitations is the reluctance of historians to tackle the topic of relations between bandits and the Communist Party during its armed struggle phase.

The article also examines the reasons for historians’ change of heart toward the study of bandits, including the influence of contacts with foreign scholars made possible by the Reform and Opening era.