Part I

INTRODUCTION
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Theoretical Context

On a hot day in July 1938, shortly after Japanese troops occupied the capital city of Nanjing, Chiang Kai-shek, then the national leader of China, arrived in Wuhan two months before the city fell into the hands of the enemy. As a part of his busy schedule, Chiang had arranged a personal meeting with Bie Tingfang, a local “bully” or “ruffian” from southwestern Henan who had neither political connections outside his native region nor an official position in the Nationalist government.1 Bie was surprised by Chiang’s invitation because such a meeting had never taken place before and certainly not in the time of national emergency. He therefore feared it was a trap set by the officials of Henan, who sought his arrest. But, encouraged by his friends, Bie cautiously entered Wuhan and was warmly received by Chiang. During the meeting, Chiang heaped honors upon his guest. He praised him for his courage in fighting bandits in his home region and his leadership in showing villagers how to improve their lives through economic development. Before the meeting ended, Chiang had offered Bie a medal of honor, proclaimed his home county (Neixiang) to be one of three model counties in China, and placed him in command of the entire militia in Nanyang District (southwestern Henan) – a force of nearly 200,000 men.2

Why would a national leader like Chiang Kai-shek court a politically obscure local figure like Bie Tingfang when the Japanese were at the

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1 In fact, local officials in Henan had dismissed Bie Tingfang as merely a “bully” or “ruffian.”

2 Neixiang xian wenshi ziliao weiyuan hui, Neixiang wenshi ziliao: Bie Tingfang shilu (Local History of Neixiang County: Special Edition on Bie Tingfang) (Neixiang: Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi, Neixiang xian weiyuan hui, 1985), 63–4; and Chen Shunde et al., Xianhua wanxi ji (Recollections of Southwestern Henan) (Taipei: Weiqin Chuban She, 1979), 16.
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door of the city? The answer lies in dramatic sociopolitical changes in the local society of Henan beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, before the Nationalist government took over the province, which thrust the state into a highly compromised relationship with the local elites. These changes are part of a profound social transformation in the country that originated with individual needs, motives, and actions to meet the challenges of the new century. In other words, these changes were but the tip of an iceberg of a much larger scale of social developments that brought China through its unique path to modernity. Because this transformation evolved from within the society itself, I deem it a genuine self-transformation.

To examine the changes in realms of state and society, scholars of Chinese history have relied on three general approaches, each with its own explanatory capabilities and limitations. The first approach focused on local elites, their personal background, upward mobility, and role in local society. This approach developed from the early notion of an existing “gentry” stratum in Chinese society. Influenced by Max Weber, Wolfram Eberhard first applied the notion of “gentry” to rural elites before the Song dynasty. Later, Hsiao Kung-chuan, Fei Hsiao-t’ung, Chang Chung-li, Ch’u T’ung-tsu, and Franz Michael used the same concept to describe the local elites in the late imperial period. For the Republican period, Susan Mann and Philip Kuhn raise some questions about the notion, but their research still finds it useful in view of the elites’ role in assisting the state in local taxation. Subsequently, Prasen-


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jit Duara’s work again demonstrates the local elites acted as brokers between the state and local society in various capacities during the Republican period. This approach has been very useful for understanding the changes in the elite stratum for the imperial period. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the elite stratum as a whole underwent profound change, as a result of which the old system for measuring status, power, and prestige in local communities gradually disappeared. It has become difficult to apply this approach to twentieth-century Chinese society without modification. Many historians, for example, have changed the original term social mobility to elite mobility.

A second approach was to scrutinize the political dynamics in social mobilization, and to focus, in particular, on the expansion of elite activism. Keith Schoppa has discovered increasing “political differentiation” to be the significant development among the local elites in the core areas of Zhejiang during the early twentieth century. Mary Rankin, William Rowe, and David Strand have further shown that elite activism in the country’s commercialized areas and large cities reached a high level of political sophistication in the nineteenth century, and even more so in the early twentieth century. Elites extended their organizational capacity and increased their extrabureaucratic activities, and special interest groups flourished within the cities. This approach is still an analytically powerful tool for identifying which developments in Chinese society contributed significantly to its modern transition. The rise of a highly organized form of elite activism was an integral component of the long-term trend of social mobilization. However, the previous research based on this approach has shown highly organized elite activism was generally restricted to commercialized or urban areas. It therefore conveys the impression that there

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was a widening gap between urban and rural, and core and peripheral elites.\(^{11}\)

The third approach was to fathom the impact of state making. Philip Kuhn has discerned a devolution of state power into the hands of local elites – a trend that started in the midst of China’s “local militarization” in the eighteenth century.\(^{12}\) The trend continued through the Self-Government movement of the early twentieth century, and was reversed by the state’s aggressive attempt to reassert power over local society during the Republican period.\(^{13}\) Duara has verified that the goal of state making was shared by Yuan Shikai, the warlords, and the Nationalist government. Judging their efforts to have failed, Duara introduces the concept of “state involution” to describe how their endeavors were jeopardized by the local elites.\(^{14}\) Perceiving a similar deficiency of state making in the fiscal domain, Susan Mann traces this trend back to 1853, the point at which the Qing government adopted the \textit{lijin} taxes. Mann further notes that the state fashioned many compromises with the local constituencies (namely, the local elites) between the late Qing and the Republican periods.\(^{15}\) Recently, the state-making model, which relies on a cyclical view of gentry society versus the general dominance of state power, has been questioned by several scholars. By recognizing a dual process of state making and unmaking in coastal areas and the northern hinterland, for instance, Pomeranz suggests going beyond the “simple cyclical scheme” of state making to follow social, economic, and political developments in all directions.\(^{16}\)

To provide a fresh look at the changes in state and society in China from 1900 to 1937, this study focuses on two regions of Henan, the south-west and the north. Henan is chosen as the locus of my research for two reasons. First, the issues related to state and society in Henan have not been thoroughly addressed. Previous research on this province has either

\(^{11}\) Esherick and Rankin, \textit{Chinese Local Elites}, 339.


\(^{14}\) Duara, \textit{Culture, Power, and the State}.


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centered on communist activities,17 bandits and secret societies,18 warlordism,19 or late Qing officials and village leaders.20 This book offers the first serious investigation of the societal transformation in local communities that led to the profound changes in the relationship between the state and society. Second, Henan's location in north-central China allows fruitful comparison with other studies of similar topics. Most previous studies of this nature have focused on southern or southeastern China, but few have concentrated on north-central China. The findings of this research are compared with those of other studies.

Within Henan, the southwest and the north become the target of this investigation because they differ a great deal socially, economically, and topographically. Contrasting the data from these two regions reveals different patterns of social and political developments within the same province. The research focuses on the period between 1900 and 1937 when the local power structure in Henan began to change at the turn of the century. It ends with the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 since the Sino-Japanese War significantly altered the patterns of social change in Henan.21

To create a holistic view of the issues related to state and society, I have adopted a synthesis that incorporates the strengths, but circumvents the limitations, of the above-mentioned approaches. Instead of separately examining changes in elite mobility, social mobilization, and state making, as previous research has done, this study treats all three research categories as interrelated aspects of the single self-generating phenomenon of Chinese social transformation, which originated within local society. It begins with the changes observed among individuals, especially local elites, defined broadly here as those who exercised dominance within a local arena through whatever means – a definition that includes not only those powerful community leaders, militia heads, and big

21 An analysis of developments since the invasion will be treated in a separate study.
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landlords but also minor elites such as tax brokers, medicine men, and literary persons. The advantage of using such a broad definition is that it reflects the reality of local society in early twentieth-century China, where the elite stratum had largely expanded to include people from a wide variety of backgrounds and capacities. It then scrutinizes the social and political developments in local society that stemmed from those changes. Finally, it probes the impact of those societal developments upon the relationship between state and society. Within this broader perspective, the reader is able not only to observe the linkage between all the changes in the aspects of individuals, society, and state/society relationship but also to grasp the significance of each change for the larger context of the self-transformation of Chinese society.

The examination starts with the way individuals met the challenges produced by society due to the endogenous and exogenous agents that were acting upon it. It scrutinizes how various members of society exploited the opportunities created by these societal changes in order to maintain, acquire, or enhance personal power, and how the power structure of local Chinese society was transformed by changes in the social environment, as well as by the ambitions, desires, and actions of these individuals. It, therefore, delineates a multidimensional picture of local elites for the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the research focuses on the transformation of the village communities, specifically their power structure, in order to analyze the context of the changes among local elites. From this perspective, it observes not only the upward mobility but also the downward mobility among the elites, against the background of competition for community leadership, a rivalry joined by various new social groups and individuals with diverse personal backgrounds. In this context, the causes for the changes in the elite stratum are shown.

From the perspective of social mobilization, significant institutional developments, a high level of organizational capacity, and political

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22 I generally accept Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin’s definition of local elites as “any individuals or families that exercised dominance within a local arena.” See Esherick and Rankin, Chinese Local Elites, 10.

23 Here the word power is defined in line with both Michel Foucault and Talcott Parsons as one’s capability of exercising dominance or obtaining personal goals. See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 93–6; and Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action (New York: Free Press, 1968), 263.
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sophistication not only characterized elite activism in the commercialized areas but in the far periphery as well. This investigation explores how the expansion of the sphere of elite activism in the early twentieth century was carried out through the traditional method of personal networking, and how Chinese society was moving toward a differentiated, “disembedded” (Giddens), and “complex” (Parsons) society in the early twentieth century – a development achieved by the combining of traditional and modern elements. It also emphasizes the linkage between the two regions under study, on the premise that social transformation was definitely not confined to the commercialized areas. Momentous developments also transpired in the local power structure of peripheral societies that, in essence, closely resembled those found in the commercialized areas. The change in the periphery also led to extensive political differentiation, although perhaps in different forms, similar to the elite activism often observed in the cities and commercialized areas. Another vital facet of social transformation was the increase of communication, travel, and personal contact in the society at large, which enhanced the sharing of ideas among different elite groups in separate areas, and therefore hastened the narrowing of the gap between them.

As Chinese society marched further into the twentieth century, the process of social transformation became increasingly intertwined with the political process of state making. Because state and society were under the pressures of mutual interpenetration, it has become increasingly difficult to separate research in the two aspects. For instance, one of the main queries of the state-making approach was whether a trend toward state making existed during the Republican period. But whether or not it did, the trend was not determined by the state alone but by developments in society, by the mutual engagement between the state and different social forces competing for the control of society. Therefore, in order to evaluate that trend, one has to first investigate the development of Chinese society, returning to the exact point at which changes in the local power structure began to occur. Based on this mutually transformative relationship between state and society, we are forced to

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observe state making from a broader perspective, the perspective of social transformation. This study first examines the deliberate efforts by various state authorities to create a strong centralized government according to their self-imposed vision of a “modern state,” then shows the success or failure of state making was not solely determined by the endeavors of the state makers but by the results of the transformation in the local power structure as well. Preconditioned by that result, centralization and decentralization became two distinctive patterns in one province. Thus did two patterns arise in the relationship between state and society in China. This multiplicity indicates the processes of social and political transformation in early twentieth-century China were multilinear rather than unilinear.25

Finally, this book offers an alternative to the existing models, which are based on the dichotomized view of social change in the Chinese rural community. One such paradigm is G. William Skinner’s “open/shut” model for peasant communities. Skinner interpreted the sequential closure and opening of the rural community, during the decline of one dynasty and the rise of the next, as a consequence of developments external to the community.26 From the perspective of social transformation, we see the seemingly simultaneous “opening” and “closing” of village communities in northern and southwestern Henan in the Republican period were caused by different social and political developments within the peasant communities: the extension of the political arena for the local elites in the north and the localization of elite dominance in the south-west. Furthermore, this societal self-transformation framework permits us to go beyond Joseph Esherick and Mary Rankin’s state penetration/elite mobilization paradigm to comprehend each phenomenon of state making and elite activism in the larger analytical scheme of the mutually transformative relationship between state and society.27 The study also enables us to comprehend the changes in peasant behavior from a broader perspective than Elizabeth Perry’s “predatory/protect-
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tive” theory, which is based on an understanding of their survival strategy. 28 Through this study, for example, we can see the changes in the twentieth-century “ecosystem,” the entire social environment, not as threats to the survival of the peasantry but as challenges. To further clarify my conceptualization of social transformation, I offer the following discussion.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term social transformation in my definition is similar to social change. But unlike the word change, transformation implies a process of combining old elements with the new to transform (in the true sense of the word, to create a new form) a society (Gesellschaft). 29 Social transformation is an accumulative process – that is, a process in which insignificant changes accumulate quantitatively until they become significant enough to generate qualitative changes in the entire society. The term social change fails to impart this richness of meaning. Again, social transformation is a much more useful term. It signifies the accumulation of new elements within the historical context of a society while the old elements continue to surface in a new form. I perceive social transformation as not merely an accumulation of changes, but an accumulation that results in the shaping of society into a more complex form of existence.

This ongoing accretion of changes in every aspect of society eventually leads to a higher level of social sophistication, from which individuals are more fully capable of dealing with their environment. Previous Western theories – especially Herbert Spencer’s model as well as modernization theory – have used different terminologies and approaches to describe the process, but most of them saw the result of that process was to transform society from simple to complex. For example, Spencer used structural differentiation to describe a gradual and accumulative process of social transformation from an “indefinite incoherent homogeneity,” characteristic of an informal, simple, and unspecialized society, to a “definite coherent heterogeneity,” typifying a formal, complex, and specialized society. 30 Emile Durkheim saw social change as an “evolutionary”

28 Perry, Rebels and Revolutionaries.
29 My understanding of the word transformation is generally in agreement with its original meaning as “a thorough and dramatic change in form, outward appearance, character, etc.” See Joyce M. Hawkins and Robert Allen, eds., Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 1533.
30 See Herbert Spencer, Herbert Spencer on Social Evolution: Selected Writings, J.D.Y. Peel,