

Introduction

When one drives into the Jinggang Mountains (also known as the Jinggangshan), it is impossible to escape the celebration of revolutionary history and the role of Mao Zedong. As one is told repeatedly, you are entering the “cradle of the revolution.” Maoping, once the mountain lair of Yuan Wencai, the bandit leader who would join forces with Mao, is now a thriving town of about 4,500. There are now several memorial halls recalling the heroic deeds of the Red Army. Re-enactors, sent by work units for patriotic education, place wreaths before pictures of revolutionary heroes. Although some visitors seem to be having too much fun to be absorbing the lessons of the revolutionary past, perhaps most come away with an even more unquestioning acceptance of the official historiography that places Mao and his Jinggangshan redoubt at the center of a revolutionary history that has, after many twists and turns, given birth to a wealthy and powerful contemporary China, a country very different from the poor, war-torn, and exploited China a century ago.

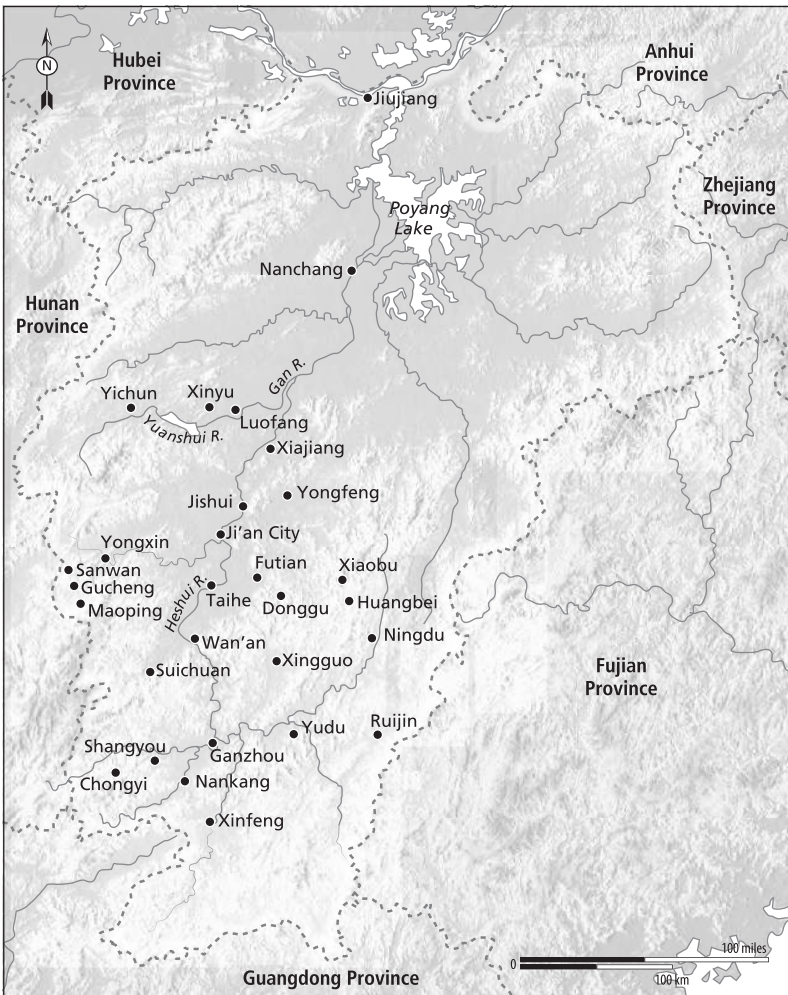
But if you were to get into a car and drive about 100 miles to the east of the Jinggang Mountains, you would arrive at the sleepy little town of Donggu. Donggu is on the eastern edge of Ji'an county, which is anchored by Ji'an, the largest city in western Jiangxi province, along the Gan river about 150 miles southwest of the provincial capital, Nanchang. If you look hard, you can find a small memorial museum dedicated to the heroes who created the Donggu Revolutionary Base Area. The Donggu Revolutionary Base Area tells a very different story of the Chinese revolution from that portrayed in the official historiography. It is a story that has been largely suppressed and forgotten, one that is very much at odds with the historical narrative that puts Mao at the center. The Donggu Revolutionary Base Area was, in important ways, more successful than the Jinggangshan Base Area; indeed, at one point, the leaders of the Donggu Base Area literally saved Mao and his ragtag Red Fourth Army from destruction, something Mao acknowledged at the time.



Map 0.1 China, ca. 1920

Donggu tells the story of how the revolution moved from the cities to the countryside and how the peasants were mobilized on behalf of the revolution. It is a story about local social history and the role that local educated youth played in translating Marxism–Leninism into rural concerns. It is a story about the erosion and destruction of the traditional clan system as new, class-conscious leaders began to identify clan leaders – sometimes even leaders of their own clans – as “local bullies and evil gentry” (*tuhao lieshen*). Ultimately it is a story about the destruction of local revolutionaries and local communities as first Mao turned his forces loose on those who had developed the Donggu Revolutionary Base Area, and then the invading Guomindang (GMD) destroyed what was left of local society. This is not the story of hard struggle, sacrifice, idealism, and ultimate victory – the party narrative of the Jinggangshan – but rather a story of idealism, violence, and total

defeat. This part of the revolution was destroyed by the part that ultimately won and created the myth that survives today. Out of the destruction of Donggu we find the origins of a reshaped Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that ultimately won the revolution. It was far more violent, more hierarchical, and more militarized than its earlier urban self, the version of the party that had been forced to abandon the cities by the GMD's purge of the Communists.



Map 0.2 Jiangxi province

The story of Donggu and, beyond that, of the Central Soviet Base Area that grew in rural Jiangxi is not easy to fit into broader narratives of revolutionary history, whether Chinese or foreign. One popular way of looking at revolution is to conceive of it as pent-up demand. For whatever reason, the dam bursts and people rise up demanding a new order.¹ This is indeed the popular image in the telling of the Chinese revolution. When R.H. Tawney wrote his 1932 classic study, *Land and Labor in China*, he detailed the harsh realities of life in rural China. “[I]t is difficult to resist the conclusion,” he wrote, “that a large proportion of Chinese peasants are constantly on the brink of actual destitution.”² Well aware of the nascent Communist movement in Jiangxi and elsewhere, Tawney declares with seeming prescience, “The revolution of 1911 was a bourgeois affair. The revolution of the peasants has still to come. If their rulers continue to exploit them, or to permit them to be exploited, as remorselessly as hitherto, it is likely to be unpleasant. It will not, perhaps, be undeserved.”³

For a later generation, Maurice Meisner more or less took that narrative for granted. As he put it in his widely used textbook, *Mao’s China and After*,⁴

While imperialism undermined the foundations of the imperial bureaucratic state with which the gentry was so closely intertwined, gentry–landlord proprietors found it more profitable to continue to exploit peasants in the traditional parasitic fashion – and the fashion became increasingly parasitic as traditional opportunities for bureaucratically obtained wealth . . . declined along with the disintegration of the old political order . . . The peasants who were the victims of that exploitation eventually were to have the opportunity to repay gentry–landlord ruthlessness in kind, although in a different way – in the ruthlessness of an agrarian social revolution that, in the end, was to eliminate the gentry as a social class in the mid-twentieth century.

¹ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 34–36. Of course the building up of tensions can be a very complex process, and the “bursting” of the dam can likewise take place over time. See Charles Tilly’s classic study, *The Vendée* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

² R.H. Tawney, *Land and Labor in China* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1932), p. 72.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴ Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1999), pp. 6, 7.

This narrative is enormously satisfying. In it the revolution becomes a morality play, one in which the poor and exploited rise up, however violently, and overthrow their oppressors. But the reality is much more complicated. Indeed, it is difficult to fit the history of the Chinese revolution into the literature on social movements simply because most of that literature takes for granted that political organizers work to expand a movement from the ground up. Usually such movements fail. Sometimes they lead to major social violence before being put down, and sometimes they lead to revolution. But the social-movement literature assumes that uprisings, regardless of the leadership that guides them, are essentially from the bottom up.⁵

The story of Donggu and later of the Central Soviet also fits uneasily into our general understandings of revolutions, in part because Communist leaders in Shanghai were forced to retreat to rural Jiangxi, displacing Mao and his colleagues. Even though Mao crushed the leaders of the Donggu Revolutionary Base Area, he was then pushed aside by the higher-ranking leaders from Shanghai. That contest between Mao and the Shanghai leadership is widely known, but its telling covers up the earlier history of Mao defeating local revolutionaries. It also covers up the Shanghai leadership's inheritance of the brutal suppression of rural society pioneered by Mao. That revolutionary movements have divisions and leadership disputes is not news, but the violence that stemmed from these disputes was often used against not only the civilian population, but also members of the CCP itself. To a large extent, the Communist failure in Jiangxi was the result of such self-destruction. There were other reasons as well, as will be discussed below, but this intra-party violence was a major reason for the Communist failure.

The Argument

The basic argument of this book is threefold. First, following the split with the GMD in April 1927, the CCP lost much of the organizational coherence that it had developed in the years since its founding in 1921.⁶

⁵ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, revised and updated 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶ Hans J. van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: The Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920–1927* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).



Figure 0.1 Re-enactors at the Jinggangshan

With Chiang Kai-shek's violent purge of the Communists, the CCP splintered in several directions. First, there was the Center in Shanghai, which, as a branch of the Comintern, was working closely with the Soviet Union. Even during the few short years covered in this volume, the Shanghai organization had three main leaders – Qu Qiubi, Li Lisan, and Bo Gu – each of whom followed a very different policy. Second, there were various provincial party committees vying for support from the Center while also trying to develop – and control – county-level party organizations and “special” committees, so named because they were intended to be short-term. Finally, there were party organizations scattered in many townships and villages. Such organizations were often weak, had little sense of doctrine, and often had no idea about how to organize peasants. They were also weakly controlled, if controlled at all, by higher-level organizations. Nearly all these truly grass-roots party organizations were developed by local educated youth – people who had left their villages for education either in county seats or farther afield in cities and then returned home to organize the peasants. Donggu was one such place.

It was such local organizations built by educated youth, not by Mao, that introduced Marxism to the countryside. The task of these

grassroots organizations was to carry out insurrections (*baodong*) in an effort to ignite a nationwide conflagration that would allow the Communist Party to come to power quickly. This model was imported from the Russian experience. The revolution there had started in February 1917 with the overthrow of the tsar and it had continued in November 1917 with the Bolshevik victory. So local insurrections were supposed to culminate quickly in national victory. Some local party organizations carried out insurrections willingly, but many more did so reluctantly, under the prodding of higher-level party organizations. In the year following the split with the GMD, such local party organizations carried out some 100 insurrections in Jiangxi alone. Nearly all failed. One of the only local movements that survived and developed was that in Donggu. That is one reason it is of interest. But all these local organizations to some extent eroded the social institutions, what Presenjit Duara calls the “local nexus of power,”⁷ particularly the clan system, that had long maintained order in rural China. In Donggu, the nascent Communist organization was able to erode the local sociopolitical order from which it had emerged to become the dominant force.

It should be noted that in order to be an educated youth during this period, one had to have come from a family of above average wealth. One of the truths of the Communist revolution that has been obscured over time is that revolutionary movements did not break out in the really poor, desperate parts of the country or among the poorest of the poor. Rather, violence erupted in somewhat wealthier places and was led by people of some social standing. At least some landlords were sympathetic toward revolution and sometimes they actually led uprisings. The story of Zeng Tianyu, told in Chapter 1 below, is a striking example. Moreover, peasants distinguished between landlords and “evil” landlords and directed their violence at the latter. The “evil” landlords were not necessarily the largest landlords, for the largest could afford to treat their tenants at least reasonably well. Frequently it was the smaller landlords who created greater tensions with the peasants because their positions in society were more precarious. Thus the image of an overwhelming local peasant demand for social justice, as suggested by Tawney, Meisner, and many others, is

⁷ Presenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

exaggerated. The reality is that local issues and political ideology were the decisive factors in the rise of the revolutionary movement.

This Communist movement was indigenous. It was created by locals, albeit locals who had acquired knowledge and ideology while outside their communities, and it attacked local institutions – clans, nearby communities, religious organizations – in an effort to build a broader social and political movement. In most places, these indigenous movements did not last long. Uprisings were poorly planned and quickly put down. However, the social conditions and physical isolation of Donggu allowed this movement to develop more successfully and over a longer period than any other such movement in Jiangxi, with the possible exception of Fang Zhimin’s movement in northeast Jiangxi.⁸

The second argument in this book is that the penetration of local society by Mao and his Red Army was only possible because of what locals had already accomplished. Without this indigenous movement, it is doubtful that Mao’s movement, built primarily around Hunanese, would have been able to penetrate Jiangxi society. But with the Donggu rebels providing an entrée, Mao’s organization was able to penetrate deep into local society, albeit at an extremely high cost in lives.

In Donggu, Mao and his army turned on the local Communists, killed them, and took over the movement the locals had created and led. In doing so, Mao and his followers promoted a land revolution in an effort to destroy the local elite – the people who had originally built the Donggu Revolutionary Base Area. The irony is that not long after Mao had decimated the Donggu revolutionaries, he was pushed aside by the Shanghai revolutionaries who had fled Shanghai as the GMD cracked down in 1931. Because these Shanghai leaders, led by Bo Gu, ranked higher in the party hierarchy than Mao, they were able to take control of the movement. They did not have to attack Mao or his group violently (though violence did occur); Leninist discipline was sufficient. However, we will see below several instances in which Mao evaded higher-level party control. Party structure mattered, and when confronted by party authority directly, Mao had no choice but to yield. Tremendous violence then ensued, prompted in part by the Comintern,

⁸ Kamal Sheel, *Peasant Society and Marxist Intellectuals in China: Fang Zhimin and the Origin of a Revolutionary Movement in the Xinjiang Region* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

in part by Mao's own precedent, and in part by the tenuous existence that the party held in rural Jiangxi. Violence, it turned out, was a useful way to seize control over a movement and to extract funds from society.

Donggu and the Central Soviet were not the only areas wracked by such intra-party violence. As we will see in the final chapter, the Hubei–Henan–Anhui (Eyuwan) Base Area north of the Yangtze was similarly beset by violence, as Zhang Guotao, sent by the Party Center, moved against the local party organizations, much in the same way as outsiders had taken over the indigenous movements in Donggu. Later on, there were similar efforts in Shaanxi as Communist armies from the Eyuwan Base Area fled the GMD extermination campaigns and pushed aside indigenous Communist leaders in the northwestern Shaanxi outpost.⁹

The third argument is built on the first two, namely that Mao's development of a party army, the relative openness of local society to Mao's external forces because of local Communist leaders' development of the Donggu Revolutionary Base Area, and the subsequent crushing of that local Communist movement produced a party very different from that which had existed following Chiang Kai-shek's violent purge of the Communist Party. After the split with the GMD in April 1927, the CCP was in dire straits, not only in terms of a loss of membership but more importantly in terms of party structure. Local party cadres often operated on their own, sometimes with the support of higher-level organizations, sometimes against higher-level instructions, and often simply ignoring higher-level organs. After all, higher-level organizations were often ignorant of local conditions and had few, if any, resources to support lower-level organizations; and higher- and lower-level organizations were often in contention with one another. Moreover, party organizations at the provincial and county levels were often broken up by the GMD, leaving the lower levels to contend on their own. So shattered was the party organization by the GMD's suppression and the dispersion of party activists to the countryside that it is difficult to call the CCP after April 1927 a Leninist party. It retained the idea of hierarchy and party discipline, without which Bo Gu and others could not have sidelined Mao. But the CCP

⁹ Joseph Esherick, *Accidental Holyland: The Origins of China's Shaan–Gan–Ning Border Region* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, forthcoming).

often found it difficult to realize anything resembling unified action; there were simply too many contending interests.

It was only slowly that the CCP was reconstituted, and in this process it emerged as a very different party than it had been in 1927 and before. Even after Chiang's purge in April, the CCP was extremely skeptical of military force, not only because it had been victimized by military force but primarily because it saw military force as something different from and antagonistic to mass insurrection. Military force could be used to supplement "the masses," but the masses had to be primary. Mao, however, was developing his movement around precisely such a military force, frequently drawing rebukes from the Party Center, and beginning to build a very different party, one that was far more militarized than anything party leaders had conceived of in 1927. Being a military organization had two effects. First, it invited attacks from outside forces, which took a tremendous toll on the civilian population, and second, it meant that the party army was strong enough to suppress local Communist movements, which it did with a vengeance.

There are many social movements in which factional infighting leads to the purge of one group or another, but movements in which outside elements come in and destroy the original movement are extremely rare.¹⁰ It seems, however, that Donggu paved the way for Mao's penetration of the countryside and, in doing so, prepared the way for its own demise. What Donggu did was make Marxism and the idea of revolution legible for its own rural community, doing so in part by developing a peasant association and a military force and thus providing a new center of power in the community.¹¹ The fact that a local Communist force had weakened if not destroyed local institutions made it possible for an outside Communist movement to take over. In the end, Mao's revolution did not win over peasants and build itself from the bottom up; instead, it was imposed both from the outside and from the top down.

¹⁰ An exception is Al-Shabaab. See Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

¹¹ James Scott argues that modernizing states adopt measures to make society more "legible." Here I am suggesting that educated youth in rural China made Marxism–Leninism, which had no intrinsic relationship to local society, more comprehensible to the locals, thus paving the way for Mao's movement to take over. See James Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).