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The Transformation of Peasant Associations: Multiple Endeavors Towards Rural Modernity

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The Transformation of Peasant Associations: Multiple Endeavors Towards Rural Modernity

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Hekang Yang

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“Revolution…Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporters; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question incapacity to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defense.”

-Thucydides

“Over and over again, the firebrand revolutionary freedom fighter is the first to destroy the rights and even the lives of the next generation of rebels. But recognizing this isn't cause for despair. All life is warfare, and it's the continuing fight against the status quo that revitalizes society, stimulates new values and gives man renewed hope of eventual progress. The struggle itself is the victory.”

-Saul Alinsky
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This study of peasant associations in Zhuji County of Zhejiang Province examines rural mobilizations and rural youth’s internalization of modernity in early twentieth century China. Under the capricious political patterns, the functions of the peasant association changed dramatically. It was an agricultural promotion agency answering to the early Republican state and later became a tool of revolutionaries to foment revolutions against the government in the countryside. The peasant association included various stakeholders, such as the state, local elites, youth, and other ordinary rural people, so that it can be used as a vehicle to understand the stakeholders’ involvement with rural modernity with respect to agricultural promotion, nation-building, and mass mobilizations. My research answers three questions: Why did the peasant association undergo such transformation within a decade in the 1920s? Who transformed it and how did they do so? What is its significance in terms of Chinese modernity?

William T. Rowe, by categorizing socioeconomic factors and political-social thoughts in terms of Habermas’s public sphere, poses a question: did late imperial China have a civil society?¹ It is unequivocal to say early Republican Chinese were advocating a prototyped society based upon Western Europe. At that time, various “isms,” such as nationalism, socialism, and later on Bolshevism, became popular as the corollary of the progress of modernization and the country’s discrepant social infrastructure compared to the West. Modernization presented an identity crisis for the Chinese people, many of whom denied their traditions and grabbed Western ideological frameworks to rethink history and to salvage their rural population.

Chinese modernity has multiple layers in the Republican era. In the historiography of modern China, modernity refers to inventing social infrastructure for nation-building.

including agricultural promotion, civic education, gender movements, and hygiene.\(^2\) On the other hand, Harry Harootunian conceives of cultural modernity as a “contest” of what should be considered as significant experience from the past and of alienating history from experience.\(^3\) Authorities and revolutionaries both canonized the memory in their historical narratives. They re-categorized the “most painful aspects of yesterday’s society” for their intended public audiences. For instance, iconoclasts in the late imperial era demonized the Qing court, who were considered barbarian Manchurians enslaving Han Chinese for three hundred years. Later on, radical Marxist believers delegitimized the early Republican and Nationalist governments, which were portrayed as imperial capitalists’ perpetrators. Because of these narratives’ profound impact on contemporary China and their lack of comprehensive examinations on historical facts, the goal of history, in Pierre Nora’s view, becomes “[to] annihilate what has in reality take(n) place.”\(^4\)

My discussion of rural modernity furthers the idea of public good in civil society. I define modernity as societal progress - to eliminate the dependence on family, lineage, and religious protections and supplant them by social contracts (e.g., constitutional principles),


\(^3\) “The Contest of Cultural Modernity,” according to Harootunian, is the division of information and experience which originally derives from Walter Benjamin’s thoughts. Harootunian thinks that modernity forces history to be separated from memory and become historiography and historical information. Meanwhile, memory becomes the true and authentic experience. Harry Harootunian. Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 210-211.

\(^4\) In his studies of memory and history, Nora argues that the gulf between history and memory is deepened in modern times with “the growing belief in a right, a capacity, and even a duty to change.” Under the dominance of modern historiography, historical memory is divided into three forms: archive-memory, duty-memory, and distance-memory. In the context of modern France, memory is materialized by state machines (French Social Security archives) to serve the nation-building purposes (ethnic groups and social minorities) which created a discontinuity/distance between the past and the present. Pierre Nora. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire." Representations, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24, 9, 13.
individualism (e.g., self-determination and self-responsibilities), and nationhood (e.g.,
citizenship identity). Building upon the previous historiography of modernity, I maintain that
the social infrastructure restricts the scale of societal change, and the contest of cultural
modernity determines the direction of societal changes. The unstable political pattern in this
era did not preclude reformation but justified the urgency of societal changes. Briefly taking
the formation of peasant associations as a case, the emergence of printing enterprises
engendered the circulation of enlightened opinions in regional newspapers like *Yueduo Daily*
and *Zhuji Minbao*. The rural population, via migration to urban centers for education and
apprenticeships, absorbed cosmopolitan lifestyles and transported their self-criticisms of the
countryside. Peasant associations were eventually founded by local elites who built a modern
but poorly administered agency to revitalize the rural society via agricultural production.
Radical youth, on other hand, criticized the rural establishment and called for an absolute
class revolution overturning the old regime and liberating the rural dwellers, which
dramatically changed the direction and goal of peasant associations.

I argue that the peasant association was not a peasant-led body but a product of rural
modernity directed by local elites and radical youth in their hometowns. The limits of the
historically rooted traditional mobilizations and the state and local elites’ desire to revitalize
the countryside through agricultural promotion created peasant associations. Local elites’
significant efforts were unmotivated in reality. Based in elementary schools, rural youth
transformed peasant associations into an intermediary between tradition, agricultural
promotion, and politics. Young revolutionaries utilized peasant associations to conduct rent
reduction campaigns and agitate class struggle and revolts in the countryside. The
transformation of peasant associations indicated rural residents’ quest for modernity to
empower the self and the nation.
This study is organized as follows. In the first section below, I locate rural youth in rural mobilizations and identify my primary sources. The second section, on historiography, engages discussions with various topics including nation-building, modern education, rural mobilization, and hometown identity and their connotations for peasant associations. My third section analyzes the popular basis of traditional mobilizations, including temple fair, flower society, and village battles. Traditional mobilizations effectively served the common good in small circles, but harmed the societal welfare as a whole from the enlightened intellectuals’ perspectives. Thus, the drawbacks of the traditional mobilizations justified the establishment of peasant associations in rural society. The following section examines local elites’ peasant associations for agricultural promotions via their constitutions, daily operations, and responses to natural contingencies. Their peasant associations struggled with poor funding, passive membership, and the lack of public support. The fifth section delineates the landscape of rural education and uses a case study of Yaqian Village to demonstrate that mass education and rural youth transformed peasant associations into a rent reduction agency. Rural youth’s initiative for personal and national empowerment had significant impacts on Chinese revolutions. The sixth section emphasizes the second generation of rural youth practicing rural movements in Zhejiang Province. Peasant associations were increasingly radicalized and under the control of revolutionaries’ political calculations. The political contentions and distinct approaches between two groups of revolutionaries eventually catalyzed Zhuji County’s peasant uprising in April 1930. In the last section, I pay special attention to ordinary people’s worldviews of rural campaigns and evaluate the outcomes of peasant associations in the countryside.

I. Identifying Rural Youth and Primary Sources
Rural youth was a transitional social group from peasants to Republican citizens who endured rural living and aspired to modern life. I began my interest in this group of people by reading more than eighty ordinary people’s trial confessions for their uprising in April 1930 in Zhuji County held in the Zhuji Municipal Archive. Most statements were simple records of their names, ages, residences, crimes committed, and sentences, with the exception of ten forms indicating their revolutionary motives and expectations for individual and national prospects. These “criminals” used words such as “family bankruptcy,” “living skills,” “salvage our nation through national defense,” “Three Principles of the People,” and “imperial powers in China.”\(^5\) They usually had several years’ education and ended up farming at home or meandering in towns without permanent occupations. I was uncertain how to categorize them, whether as petty intellectuals, peasants, lumpen intellectuals, or Menocchio\(^6\). I assume that such an “un-identifiable” trait reflects the blurring of peasants and the educated in rural China, thanks to the increasing number of rural elementary schools, the growth of literacy and printing enterprises, and their mutual bonds in rural society.\(^7\)

Historians and anthropologists have explained rural youths’ ambivalence in twentieth-century China. Wakeman argues, unlike situation for higher-status intellectuals, “the conceit of the petty intellectual” and “the blocked ambition of their relatively low status” fired rural youths’ “powerful dreams of accomplishment” and their inclination to “revolutionary

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\(^5\) These phrases of governmental propaganda indicated educated rural dwellers’ comprehension of their national identity. ZJS DAG: M1-1-725.


\(^7\) Rawski estimated that the literacy rate of male Chinese was about 30%. The average literacy rate of Chinese was about 20% in late nineteenth century. Evelyn S. Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979). Regarding Republican China, Lee argued that, “the nation as an imagined community in China was made possible not only by elite intellectuals like Liang Qichao, who proclaimed new concepts and values, but, more important, by the popular press.” Leo Ou-fan Lee, “The Cultural Construction of Modernity in Urban Shanghai: Some Preliminary Explorations.” In *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and beyond*, edited by Wen-Hsin Yeh, 31-61. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
organization or military training.”

Meanwhile, Yunxiang Yan asserts that rural youth’s conflict with their village “results mainly from the gap between ideals and reality, and between those who accepted the existing social inequalities and those who do not.”

Education and mass media enabled them to sense the inequalities and their audacity for dreaming and acting. If education is a privilege and power, then modernity is a process of eliminating the monopoly of literacy and connecting elites and non-elites together via newspapers and urban migration.

Because scholars studied rural youth’s outbound journeys to urban society, my study contributes to explaining their return to hometowns and their engagement with rural affairs. In this study, I examine how the rural population internalized modernity, especially the youth’s emotions and movements in their hometown regions, through the lens of the peasant association.

As Keith Schoppa demonstrated in Chinese Elites and Political Changes, Chinese modernity is geographically spread from urban treaty ports to peripheral regions. In the past century, China was constituted by the rural population at large. Though the three decades’ (since the late 1970s) development rapidly urbanized people, most Chinese came from scattered villages across the country. In village classrooms, teachers, those who attended

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9 A complete quote: “urban life styles have long been considered superior and more modern than their counterparts in the rural areas. Such a perception is shared by villagers of all age groups. The only difference is that older villagers have accepted the existing social inequalities between urbanites and themselves and regard the attempt of rural youth to imitate urban life styles as unrealistic and counter-productive. In contrast, rural youth are not willing to accept such inequitable realities and they want to claim their rights to enjoy better lives. The conflict between youth culture and the mainstream culture in Xiajia village, therefore, results mainly from the gap between ideals and reality, and between those who accepted the existing social inequalities and those who do not...The father, however, was not particularly worried about his sons’ untraditional ideas, because, as he put it, ‘They will become smarter and more realistic when they taste the bitterness of life.’” Yunxiang Yan, “Rural Youth and Youth Culture in North China,” Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, no. 23 (1990), 82-83.


normal or secondary schools at urban or regional centers, indoctrinated students with the idea of being Chinese citizens and inspired their aspiration to understand the outside world.\textsuperscript{12}

Elementary schools stimulated the public sphere by gathering thoughts and promoting networking. Elementary teachers in rural society were expected to undertake moral and educational duties to foster the future generations of the village, the region, and the nation. They drove the traditional society into an uncertain stage, which was and still is re-adjusting its internal power dynamics and overarching identity under the urban influences. Moreover, because these educated youth were configured by tradition and descendants of rural families,\textsuperscript{13} peasants and educated rural youth, two social groups from the same root, were inextricably connected together and should be examined as a whole.

\textit{Rural Mobilizations in Republican Newspapers, Memoirs, and Archives}

This study largely uses \textit{Yueduo Daily} and \textit{Zhuji Minbao Five Years Anniversary Collections} to analyze the traditional mobilizations, nationalism, and peasant associations in Zhuji County from 1919 to 1925. In contrast to \textit{Hangzhou Guomindang News, Zhijiang Daily}, and \textit{Ningbo Guomindang News’} fragmentary collections, the consecutive issues of \textit{Yueduo Daily} during 1919-1924 covered comprehensive local news and enabled me to trace specific events in an orderly fashion. \textit{Yueduo} was not fully utilized by past historians in regional studies of Zhejiang.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Zhuji Minbao Five Years Anniversary Collections} was used previously in the scholarship of Keith Schoppa and James H. Cole.


\textsuperscript{13} For example, \textit{baixiongdi} (Sworn brotherhood) was a common practice among native countrymen, classmates, and workers in Republican China. Such custom still exists among youth in China today. See Michael Strickland, “Aid and Affect in the Friendships of Young Chinese Men,” \textit{Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute} 16, no. 1 (March 2010).

\textsuperscript{14} Historians such as James H. Cole, Keith Schoppa, Mary Ranking, and Wen-hsin Yeh.
"Yueduo and Zhuji Minbao represented the cultural enlightenment of regional intellectuals who aspired to reform the rural stagnation and strengthen the national power. Yueduo was first published in 1912 (right after the overthrow of the old regime) and named by Lu Xun, who was the honorary chief editor. Yue is a traditional name of Shaoxing area; Duo is an antique musical instrument proclaiming decrees and ordinance. This vintage title revealed local intellectuals’ ambition for independent opinions and their embedded classical tastes. In 1919, a group of normal school and university graduates, who were the May Fourth Movement’s veterans,15 founded Zhuji Minbao, a seemingly more progressive periodical proclaiming to be the people’s newspaper. Zhuji Minbao Five Years Anniversary Collections were highly selective and summarized five years’ contents in seven hundred pages. Its editors viewed this collection as a historical source for future generations as they endeavored to document Zhuji County’s social and cultural landscapes. It consisted of four components: articles addressing Western education, science, and humanities; breaking news and statistics in the past five years (1919-1924); major events and celebrity biographies in the past sixty years (1859-1919); and folklore in Zhuji County. Finally, both Yueduo and Zhuji Minbao rejected the historical continuities and popular support of traditional mobilizations. Their condemnations reflected the disputes between the enlightened elites and the traditional power dynamics.

Memoirs and published archives are the other major primary sources for an examination of revolutionaries’ peasant associations. For political reasons, the Communist Party history sometimes exaggerated or omitted historical events. But oftentimes Party

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15 The May Fourth Movement was a national student movement in 1919 protesting the Chinese government’s unequal treatment in the Paris Peace Conference. Chief editors include Sun Xuanqing (孙选青 1887-1971), a graduate of Beijing Advanced Normal (later on Beijing Normal University); Cai Guanluo (蔡冠洛 1890-1955), Tokyo Imperial University; Zhang Weiyong (张微颖 1895-?), Beijing Advanced Normal; Zhao Binghuan (赵并欢 1895-1982), Zhejiang Provincial First Normal; Yang Zemin (杨泽民 1895-1948), Zhejiang Provincial First Normal.
history was the only available source to extract stories from old cadres’ memories. Allison Rottmann’s dissertation documented the publication of memoirs between the 1980s and the 1990s. First, the publication of regional party history responded to the changed high politics after the Cultural Revolution and sought to bolster the ideological legitimacy of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform. Second, the decentralization of writing local party history promoted a trend of regionalism that highlighted the regional “chauvinism” and the local identity in the People’s Republic. Gregor Benton, who used Party memoirs for his study on the Red Army, noted that:

In the 1980s, provincial and local presses became more active in memoir publishing. History, which had once served only the state, began to serve the interests of smaller, regional groupings too. Party leaders in the provinces and counties encouraged their history committees to publish bulletins and books containing articles, documents, chronologies, and memoirs...Local historians became avid accomplices in the campaign to promote their local Party’s contribution to the revolution, not just to “seek truth from facts,” but also please their patrons, to gratify local pride, and not least to raise their own profile in Party history circles by discovering a regional tradition.

The Party history I used for this study was the product of this political trend towards regionalism. Party historians in Zhuji were proud of their revolutionary traditions and underscored the superiority of native C.P. forerunners (a designation that also refers to Chinese Communists) and the peasant revolt in 1930. In Zhejiang Province, history committees produced historical collections of early Communist leaders by calling retired cadres and martyrs’ surviving relatives to engage in memory productions. Through affirming the righteousness of peasant revolutions, the Party could legitimize their governance at the present.

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18 This IncludesYu Xiusong, Xuan Zhonghua, Wang Shouhua, and Xuan Xiafu.
It is an intricate procedure to identify and select useful primary sources from the abundant and embellished Party history. Benton encouraged historians to ask questions such as “What are the author’s antecedents, character, and environment…Precise and stringent controls of text and context are the main ways of verifying evidence, supplemented, of course, by feel, faith, doubt, common sense, and educated guesswork.” In addition to selecting party memoirs, I also utilized published archives: *Zhejiang Revolutionary History Collections* and Zhuji Municipal Archives. Following the decentralization trend of Party history, *Zhejiang Revolutionary History Collections*, unlike the highly theoretical and propagandistic documents in the Central Committee, contained local work reports and activity materials from the 1920s. The initial purpose of these collections was crafting Party history. These collections recorded Communists’ problems in rural society and their strategies in rural mobilizations. Wang Qisheng, an award-winning historian in mainland China, noted:

> These documents were highly confidential and not planned to be published or even saved. Among them, many derived from the hands of poorly educated grass-roots party cadres. Their writing styles and contents are mostly forthright without embellishments. Some sentences are grammatically problematic. Writing typos are not rare. Because of that, they are more vivid and fresh.

These series of published Party archives can be found in some libraries in the U.S. or via the Internet. Moreover, Zhuji Municipal Archives collected Republican governmental decrees, statistical surveys, and trial documents of peasant revolt criminals, which helped me to interpret the social landscapes of Zhuji County and to give the first-hand materials on grass-roots revolutionaries.

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20 Qisheng Wang, *Ge Ming Yu Fan Ge Ming: She Hui Wen Hua Shi Ye Xia De Minguo Zheng Zhi* (Revolution and Counter-revolution). (Beijing: She Hui Ke Xue Wen Xian Chu Ban She, 2010),123-124.

21 I am very grateful for the anonymous person that shared several volumes in Baidu Cloud and the consistent support of Mrs. Janine Lortz, the interlibrary loan librarian at Saint John’s University.
II. Historiographical context:

This paper engages in discussions with peasant associations, nation-building, modern education, rural mobilization, and hometown identity. Two monographs published in Chinese examine peasant associations’ developments between 1890 and 1949. Li Yongfang defines the peasant associations as the agricultural reforming organizations in the late Qing government, the governmental advisories during the Beiyang militarist rulings, the subordinate organizations to local governing in the Nanjing government, and the executive organizations of the political regime in Communist-based areas.\(^{22}\) Wei Wenchun’s study emphasizes the Nationalists’ peasant associations, contending that they were complementary organizations to assist the government’s land tax reduction (Erwu jianzu) and mediate the tensions between peasants and landlords.\(^{23}\) Deploying statistical and archival materials, these two monographs illustrate peasant associations’ political agendas, but their approaches are limited to the rivalries of the Communists and the Nationalists. The historiography is wanting with regard to the extent of peasant associations’ transformation at the grassroots society and their significance in Chinese modernity.

My study corrects this lacuna by juxtaposing three forms of traditional mobilizations with peasant associations and by examining rural youth’s initiatives and the conflicts between revolutionaries and peasants. I also disagree with the dichotomist analysis of the Communists and the Nationalists and instead decide to universalize their characteristics as revolutionaries. For instance, they were iconoclasts to the old regime who shared similar rural movement

\(^{22}\) Yongfang Li, Jin Dai Zhongguo Nong Hui Yan Jiu (The Study of the Peasant Association in Modern China). (Beijing: She Hui Ke Xue Wen Xian Chu Ban She, 2008), 590-597.

\(^{23}\) Wenxiang Wei, Guo Min Dang, Nong Min Yu Nong Hui: Jin Dai Zhongguo Nong Hui Zu Zhi Yan Jiu, 1924-1949 (Nationalist, Peasants and Peasant associations: The Study of Peasant Associations’ Organization in Modern China, 1924-1949). (Beijing: Zhongguo She Hui Ke Xue Chu Ban She, 2009), 318-319.
agendas and adopted the Bolshevik Party model. Furthermore, I interpret the significance of peasant associations within the scope of Chinese modernity, using my definition of societal progress. Rural dwellers increasingly challenged the legitimacy of traditional powers and showed their determination for a better life. Finally, this study substantially integrates regional Republican newspapers, Zhuji Municipal Archives, published archives, memoirs, and literature which previous scholarship did not fully cover.

Studies of peasant associations in English are lacking, except for a book chapter from Roy Hofheinz Jr.’s *The Broken Wave*. Hofheinz contends that Communists neither achieved their rural revolution in the 1920s nor developed proper political foundations. In Guangdong Province, Hofheinz argues, the failures of peasant associations resulted from unrealistic goals, lack of good communication, and uncommitted grass-roots cadres. *The Broken Wave* challenges the Party’s narrative history by disclosing revolutionaries’ struggles with rural penetration, which also will be illuminated in this paper. However, my study does not intend to explain early Communists’ failures or detach them from the rural population. Instead, I elaborate on grass-roots revolutionaries’ tactics and dilemmas in rural campaigns. I interpret revolutionaries as a component of the rural modernity and their relationships with peasants as fluid and interconnected,

Beyond the revolution, historians focused on early twentieth century China’s nation-building. Prasenjit Duara’s *Culture, Power, and The State* addresses the predicament of state penetrations in rural North China, where the “cultural nexus of power,” including lineage and religious leaders, governed the local society. Duara argues that “state involution,” the intensive bureaucratization and soaring taxation, eradicated the local cultural leadership and

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undermined the local authorities’ rulings themselves.26 Contrasting the ineffective bureaucracy and governance, Gregory Ruf’s *Cadres and Kin* asserts that villagers reinforced their collaboration to survive from the heavy taxations, inflations, and uprisings during the Republic era.27 Ruf demonstrates rural society’s potential for resolving the state involution. My study further elaborates on the historical continuity of traditional organizations and rural dwellers’ initiatives to overcome contingencies and endeavors towards rural modernity.

Recent scholarship by Kate Merkel-Hess on Chinese rural modernity and reconstruction movements in the 1930s examines the elite intellectuals’ efforts to revitalize the rural society and to strengthen the nationhood. Merkel-Hess points out the multiple layers of modernity such as the industrialization and cosmopolitan lifestyles. She defines modernity as “a process of social change that could restore a sovereignty that had been lost: the village had to be reconstituted and resurrected in order to strengthen it against the economic and administrative incursions of colonialists.”28 Merkel-Hess approaches her studies by examining elite reformers’ efforts and focusing their education campaigns for the rural population instead of the “rural people’s experience with reform.”29

Analogous to Merkel-Hess, I define modernity as a societal progress and also study rural education’s impact on rural modernization. My paper adds rural youth’s interpretation of modernity in terms of self-determination and the expanding boundary of public good. Moreover, my study examines the experience of rural elites, youth, and ordinary peasants’ involvements with agricultural promotion and class struggle. I analyze the conjunction of

mass education and peasant associations in Yaqian Village as well as articulate non-elites’ experience and opinions toward rural modernity.

Because one’s hometown is a crucial space and identity stimulating the local elites and rural youth to dedicate themselves to rural modernity, I borrow the concept of Heimat (hometown) in German history to underscore how local identity could be used for nationhood. In The Nation as A Local Metaphor, Alon Confino explores “the negotiations between local memory and national memory and how the multitude of local memories in Germany constructed a local-national memory.”30 Regarding the Heimat movement, Confino argues that Heimat idea transformed into a national narrative and image in imperial Germany that was interchangeable between the locality, the region, and the nation.31 Heimat studies indicate that hometown identity, under local elites’ efforts, could help the local residents to articulate a sense of nationhood and devote their efforts to revitalize their hometowns as well as strengthen the nation as a whole. In the context of modern China, rural elites and youth indoctrinated or reinforced their hometown identity through elementary education, which not

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31 Confino, The Nation as a Local Metaphor, 98. The definition of Heimat is, of course, diverse and malleable. Confino defines the “Heimat idea as representing interchangeably the locality, the region, and the nation through an interlocking network of symbols and representations in which the nation appeared local and the locality national.” See Alon Confino, “Part I. The Local Life of Nationhood: Germany as Heimat, 1871-1990.” In Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History, ed. Alon Confino. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 26. In the post Second World War era, some of the cultural and aesthetic meanings of Heimat were nostalgic and driven by “anti-Americanism.” For example, Edgar Reitz feels that “The word is always linked to strong feelings, mostly remembrances and longing. Heimat always evokes in me the feeling of something lost or very far away, something which one cannot easily find or find again. In this respect, it is also a German romantic word and a romantic feeling with a particular romantic dialectic. Heimat is such that if one would go closer and closer to it, one would discover that at the moment of arrival it is gone, it has dissolved into nothingness. It seems to me that one has a more precise idea of Heimat the further one is away from it. This for me is Heimat, it's fiction, and one can arrive there only in poetry, and I include film in poetry.” Reitz’s dissatisfaction towards America can also be found in interviews. See Franz A. Birgel and Edgar Reitz, "You Can Go Home Again: An Interview with Edgar Reitz." Film Quarterly 39, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 2-10.
only helped phrase the national identity but also gave rural dwellers the impulse to support rural modernity.

_Guxiang_, the Chinese term for old hometown, entails rich implications, but does not receive enough attention in historiography. In literary studies, Dewei Wang’s _Fictional Realism_ analyzed writings from Mao Dun, Lao She, and Shen Congwen, arguing that native soil literature (_xiangtu wenxue_) was literally and rhetorically rootless. Writers, who delineated a sense of imaginary nostalgia without a geographically verified place, were discovering and erasing the image of hometown.\(^{32}\) My study, however, uses two different authors, Yu Dafu and Natsume Soseki, who satirize and evince disgust with rural hometowns rather than engage in nostalgia. These authors display the tensions of modernity between urban cosmopolitan life and country stagnation and foreshadow the impulse to change the countryside. Yeh’s _Provincial Passages_, regarding country iconoclasts in the May Fourth Movement, argues their motives were “a consequence of the dialectical interaction between the quickening pace of modernization and the petrifying weight of traditionalism.”\(^{33}\) Instead of critically examining the Western culture, rural youth were infuriated by the backward hometowns and desired a metropolitan lifestyle. Via reading and publishing networks, these radical youth in Zhejiang Province acquired national fame and connections with metropolitan intellectuals.\(^{34}\)

Education also plays a crucial role in rural modernity. Robert Culp’s _Articulating Citizenship_ asserts that secondary education including schools and textbooks in the Lower Yangzi River region reinforced a coherent conception of Republican citizenship.\(^{35}\) In my

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\(^{34}\) Yeh, _Provincial Passages_, 193.

study, elementary school is a crucial public sphere allowing youth to disseminate and inspire rural dwellers’ desires for modern culture and material life.

As a result, a generation of Chinese citizens was cultivated under the influence of modern educators, and such influence was amplified in revolutions and wars. Regarding the Nationalists’ and Communists’ youth mobilizations in Shanghai, Kristin Mulready-Stone’s dissertation argues that youth groups organized by political parties failed to maintain urban youth’s active involvements with political ideologies. Urban youth’s participation in wartime military services was driven by their patriotism and the threats from Japanese invasions.\(^{36}\) Meanwhile, Allison Rottmann’s dissertation analyzes Shanghai youth’s quotidian reasons to join the New Fourth Army in the Second World War, arguing that “As expected in a time of foreign invasion, many recruits were politically and patriotically inspired by the issues of their time, but wartime conditions such as unemployment or personal circumstances like family ties to someone in the army could just as easily push a person out of a city.”\(^{37}\) The two studies above argue that even for educated urban youth, ideology was hardly an attractive motive compared to patriotic and personal reasons. I endorse this point, which explains the complexities of human nature. However, my study also argues that the struggles of revolutions also created a staunch group of radical youth who devoted their life to the ideology itself.

Moreover, in the historiography of modern Japan, Sayaka Chatani’s *Nation-Empire* examines how the state focused on rural youth and how rural youth responded and internalized state power through the lens of village youth associations, *seinendan*, in the Japanese empire. Chatani argues that *seinendan* enabled rural youth to leverage their social

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\(^{36}\) Kristin Mulready-Stone, *Organizing Shanghai’s Youth: Communist, Nationalist, and Collaborationist Strategies, 1920-1942*. (PhD diss., Yale University, 2009), 11.

relationships and to employ the ideology of Japanese nationalism to challenge the dominance of urban youth, educated youth, and the older generation. Although, as *Nation-Empire* also argues, rural youth’s expectation for personal fulfillment was deprived by the militarist state’s increasing control and jingoist wartime policies,38 *seinendan* successfully indoctrinated youth with Japanese nationalism in rural society and satisfied rural youth’s imagination for social mobility and modern life. Chatani’s studies suggest that the interests of rural population and the state could be mutually inclusive and satisfied through *seinendan*.

Though China and Japan shared distinct historical contexts, I attempt, by using Chatani’s argument, to suggest that, through the transformation of the peasant association, Chinese rural youth also actively leveraged their personal goals and aspirations to rural modernity participating rural organizations. In my analysis, I contrast the ideas of Communism between Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche and contend that peasant associations satisfy revolutionaries’ political agendas as well as peasants’ material desires, though they did not get what they wanted in most cases.

Overall, I have not restricted my study of peasant associations to peasant revolts or the Communists’ rivalry with the Nationalists. The above historical scholarship helps me to locate this study of the process of rural modernity and nation-building in grass-roots society, including agricultural promotion, mass education, and mass mobilizations. The drastic transformation of peasant associations and its significance for rural modernity in early twentieth century China have been largely overlooked in current historiography.

**III. At the Limits of Traditional Mobilizations: Calling for Peasant Associations**

After the Taiping Rebellion in 1864, Zhuji County gradually recovered from the domestic tumults and terrors caused by local revolts and outlanders. Zhuji nonetheless was a sleepy and agrarian backwater in East Zhejiang Province, with a population of 503,225 in 1930. Socioeconomically speaking, Zhuji County was subordinated to the regional commercial center, Shaoxing, and was more well-off than remote peripheries such as Sheng, Yiwu, and Pujiang. Local historians and literati in gazetteers boasted of their fellow folks’ valiant and obstinate characters and their special attachment to education, the so-called gengdu chuanjia. Besides that, rural residents frequently suffered from droughts and floods and always struggled for survival. Living in a pre-industrialized society like Zhuji County, people had to rely on traditional mutual support to overcome living hardships and preserve their cultural identity.

Prior to the peasant associations, local society had two forms of mutual assistance programs. The first type including the autonomous and charitable groups exclusively managed by local elites. The other form was the grass-rooted mobilizations such as the ritual celebration, “Temple Fair”; the popular but illegal fundraising event, “Flower Society”; and the “Village Battle” for agricultural resources. In order to understand the creation of peasant associations, we must first learn the practice of traditional mobilizations which interacted with lineage, ritual, and village dynamics.

Using the regional newspaper, Yueduo Daily, as one of my major primary sources, I intend to analyze the social implications of these three mobilizations, to elaborate their historical continuity and popular basis, and to foreshadow the invention of peasant

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40 The population statistics is from “kaocha zhuji xian zizhi qingkuang baogao” ZISDAG: M1-1-777.
associations. Briefly speaking, temple fair and flower society mediated rural dwellers’ famine anxiety and satisfied their spiritual and social networking desires. Village battle was a complex of village politics which demonstrated the violent tendency of rural mobilizations and the traditional conflict-resolution before the perfection of a modern government and its intervention in village affairs.

Meanwhile, I use the concept of cultural modernity to interpret *Yueduo Daily’s* negative comments toward traditional mobilizations. *Yueduo Daily* was one of the earliest regional voices to question the existence of traditional dynamics and criticize their defects for encumbering the progress of rural modernity. The newspaper distanced itself from the rural public and adopted a “rational-critical” perspective based on the ideas of nationhood and nationalism, two consensuses among intellectuals at that time. *Yueduo Daily* demonstrated the increasing consciousness of social enlightenment among local elites and their sense of urgency to invent a modern agricultural agency that served the broad societal interests and to eliminate the traditional and hereditarily backward mobilizations.

*Temple Fairs*

Temple fairs were historically rooted agricultural carnivals with popular support in Zhuji County. Taking Fengqiao Township as an example, after autumn harvests the majority of peasants and urbanites on occasion would tour and participate in various events such as worshipping Buddhas, shopping, greeting, and watching village operas. 42 Historically, Fengqiao Township’s temple fairs could be traced back to at least the late Ming Dynasty around the sixteenth century. 43 These lavish events were sponsored by the local prominent

42 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), October 23, 1919, sec. 4.
43 Fengqiao was famous for its temple fair. The late Ming dynasty literati, Zhang Dai (张岱) also wrote of this event in Taoan Mengyi (陶庵梦忆).
lineages, with their vanity, rivalry, and generosity, who also invited famous actors and actresses for performances that usually lasted a week.44

While this rural festival served religious and social networking purposes, *Yueduo Daily* chastised its profligate spending and advocated the prohibition of temple fairs because “it is a hard time for people’s survival. Yet local gentries promoted these events rather than prohibited them.”45 Regarding temple fairs which prayed to gods to relieving droughts and insect outbreaks,46 *Yueduo Daily* satirized peasants’ ignorance:

Since the early June, the weather was dry… villagers prayed to longwang (龍王), sizhou (泗洲), and zhenwu (真武), and performed operas for rains…When the sky suddenly became hazy and rain irrigated the arid rice lands, peasants were extremely happy and praised Buddha’s epiphany. After several days’ raining, the flood crashed the rich lands. Peasants could not stop cursing the damn Buddha.47

*Yueduo Daily*’s critiques of temple fairs reflected the implicit tensions between modern intellectuals and the rural majority. On the one hand, like everywhere in contemporary China, local elites proposed rural modernization to revitalize the rural economy and strengthen the nation. They disdained the extravagant scale of the agrarian celebration and rural dwellers’ superstitious beliefs in divine powers. Yet, temple fairs played major roles in curing peasants’ psychological anxiety about the natural uncertainties and stimulating the social and commercial exchanges. In fact, the quotidian practice of temple fairs was modest and utilitarian-oriented. Peasants would suspend the celebrations because of bad weather or bad harvests and curse their gods if the divinity did not “fulfill” its promise.48

Temple fairs’ overarching functions buttressed their long-term existence in the countryside. Yet, the increasing consciousness of societal progress framed by the industrialization and

44 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), October 23, 1919, sec. 4.
45 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), October 24, 1919, sec. 4.
46 Peasants practiced Saihui when they struggled with insect outbreaks. *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), August 14, 1921, sec. 4. Peasants had temple fairs in lunar mid-October. *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), December 13, 1920, sec. 4.
47 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), August 25, 1921, sec. 4.
48 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), September 12, 1921, sec. 4.
cultural enlightenment ultimately intensified the conflicts between the traditional mobilization and the progressive elites on the other side.

Therefore, temple fairs were vested with a new implication of nationalism by local enlightened educators after the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and left a phenomenal impact on modern China. Vera Schwarcz argues that this movement reinforced student bodies’ nationalistic consciousness, radicalized their patriotism, and eventually motivated their quest for the cultural enlightenment.49 In Zhuji County, a remote place away from urban centers, students and teachers actively engaged in boycotts, demonstrations, and public speeches. They used temple fairs as a vehicle to disseminate their patriotism. In November 1920, a group of students disseminated a nationalistic speech for salvaging Chinese sovereignty and simultaneously burned down Japanese imports in front of the public during a temple fair. The masses were extremely touched and “swore to never buy Japanese goods again.”50 Bonfires and rants easily stirred up popular sentiments. Therefore, the public could be motivated by the very emotional atmosphere instead of political ideologies or nationalism.51 Nonetheless, local educators’ manipulation of temple fairs also proved the malleability of this traditional mobilization.

Flower Society

Flower society was originally a self-aid agency under the control of invisible social powers. Yueduo Daily illustrated flower society’s operation:

50 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November ?, 1919, sec. 4.
In Yunjing village, the current Taoist Temple abbot directed the “Blood Lake Scripture Fair” (血湖經會) twice. Each time, the members had to pay 1 dollar, 1 dou early rice, 3 dou sweet rice, 3 dou beans, and some minor charges. The abbot got more than thirty members in total. It was agreed to pay it back in the seventh day of this lunar month. Village women were invited to stay six nights in the mountain temple, but heard that the accountant plundered this huge sum of money.\(^{52}\)

Flower society, like the pre-modern credit union, met villagers’ credit demands. However, the operation of flower society was highly unstable and fragile in the absence of modern social infrastructure such as legal enforcement and banking system. Village women were probably familiar with the Taoist abbot, so they would exchange grains for ritual blessings and monetary interests. The Abbot, on the other hand, because of his social status and temple property, was able to arrange the flower society smoothly, though this plan was finally aborted because of poor administration. The foundation of flower society was based on the invisible “cultural nexus of powers” such as mutual trust, religious faith, and village networking in contrast to the modern concept of social contract in the industrialization world.

As a result, flower society was degraded as gamblers’ speculation during famines.

Here is a typical story of flower society’s exploitation by swindlers in *Yueduo Daily*:

Flooding was a big problem in Zhuji this year. Many vagrants ran the flower society for a living. In Lipu village, the flower society ran three times per day. Men and women mingled together and wasted working times...Recently seventeen policemen attempted to intervene in this fair. Yet villagers in the fair, whose members were much more than the police force, did not escape, but beat the police. Three policemen were severely injured.\(^{53}\)

Despite its high risk and legal prohibitions, the flower society was highly popular.\(^{54}\) To some extent, it was fueled by peasants’ wildest dreams of fortune, discarding the pitiful consequence of bankruptcy as well as speculators’ steady profits. Aside from the abuse,

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\(^{52}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), December 16, 1920, sec. 4.  
\(^{53}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), January 3, 1923, sec. 4.  
\(^{54}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), January 6, 1921, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), December 9, 1922, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 23, 1923, sec. 4.
flower society exposed local authorities’ inability to enforce their decrees and the lack of proper modern governance tools.

**Battles between Clans or Villages**

Village battles’ long duration and extreme violence reflected rural dwellers’ arduous livelihood and their self-mobilization to defend collective interests. In early November, 1922, the Zhou family in Five Finger Mountain village and the Xu family in Sphere Mountain village had severe disputes regarding the boundary of their irrigation systems and began to fight with each other. The local police could not terminate battles\(^{55}\) and waited until the county magistrate’s visit two days later. The magistrate summoned a negotiation between two lineages and produced a settlement through the judicial procedure.\(^{56}\) However, their battles were intensified after Xu breached the agreement in December. Zhou felt cheated and organized a “do-or-die fight,” which cost more than thirty lives and countless injuries.\(^{57}\) In March 1923, Xu kidnapped a Zhou family member and sent him to the county seat and, by faking his provincial senator status (Zhou exposed Xu’s phony status in August\(^{58}\) ), coerced the magistrate to imprison Zhou.\(^{59}\) Almost a year later, the two lineages launched another major battle, and each had a blacksmith produce weapons for fighting and launched their two days’ war in September.\(^{60}\) Though the battles’ outcome remained unknown, neighboring villages greatly complained of their own sufferings during these village battles.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{55}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 3, 1922, sec. 4.

\(^{56}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 5, 1922, sec. 4.

\(^{57}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), December 9, 1922, sec. 4.

\(^{58}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), August 10, 1923, sec. 4.

\(^{59}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), March 26, 1923, sec. 4.

\(^{60}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), August 17, 1923, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), August 28, 1923, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), September 24, 1923, sec. 4.

\(^{61}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), September 26, 1923, sec. 4.
Village battles were more a part of the rural politics than melees simply for agricultural resources. They were not only “extremely widespread during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and especially common in southeastern China” but also commonly existed in Europe. In extreme scenarios, the animosity between neighbor villages could be sustained for a hundred years. Lucien Bianco points out the cultural causes of village battles, the so called “logic of identity and exclusion.”

My analysis examines the political rivalry of village battles and emphasizes its correlation with modern governance. Prior to the establishment of a powerful modern government, the family and lineage leaders took the responsibility to implement the justice and public interest. Local leaders had different duties including village interests, lineage honors, and the logistics and negotiations for fighting. Even though they could manipulate villagers for private grudges, they had huge threats of losing their current privilege. In comparison, fighting was the only alternative for common villagers whose reluctance would no doubt make them pariahs and punished by lineages. Overall, as a complex of political considerations, lineage leaders and villagers were forced by the social norms to fight against the common enemy, and their collaboration eventually reinforced internal cohesion and identity.


66 Usually lineage is constituted by families with same surname. In my analysis, the roles of family and lineage overlap.

Village battles nonetheless exposed the absence of effective enforcements from the modern state. The complexities of village battles were out of the control of the county magistrate and his police squads. Because the legal settlement was by no means protected by state enforcements, villagers simply breached their agreements and abandoned bureaucratic procedures. In consequence, the state urgently demanded reform to penetrate and restructure the rural society and implemented a modern agency as a vehicle to reinforce a consciousness of nationhood and better manage the rural affairs for the sake of social stability.

In conclusion, traditional organizations’ historical continuity and popular basis were justified by their contributions to the family, lineage, and village. In a pre-industrialized society, routine risks such as flood, famine, illness, age, and death were family burdens. Western Europe’s industrialization and its creation of civil society suggest that a modern welfare state can be measured by its ability to assist citizens.\(^{68}\) The disagreements between rural dwellers and *Yueduo Daily*, to some extent, were caused by their different ideas of the public good in their objective survival conditions. Traditional organizations protected the public good within the boundaries of family and lineage. Rural dwellers relied upon these private powers and would frequently deploy violence in the absence of state intervention. Therefore, *Yueduo Daily* blamed villagers’ narrow-minded behaviors and regarded traditions as vicious forces threatening the society as a whole. One of their solutions was to create a modern and universally beneficial agency, the peasant association, to remedy the rural backwardness, eventually revitalize the countryside, and even strengthen the sense of nationhood.

### IV. Inventing Peasant Associations: Elites and Their Agricultural Promotion

The peasant association was a modern product in essence, and its leaders implemented constitutional principles, scientific experiments, and mass education to revitalize the agricultural livelihood. Rural modernity in this sense referred to the agricultural promotion, civic education, and hygiene. Republican elites frequently attempted rural reconstruction projects, such that “by the mid-1930s there were more than one thousand reform locations with over six hundred participating organizations.”\textsuperscript{69} The elite-led peasant associations were invented under this social pattern in the early 1910s. Due to the paucity of available sources, Schoppa’s \textit{Chinese Elites and Political Change} states that “[the] existence, roles, and accomplishments of agricultural associations are the most irregular of all \textit{fatuan}, varying according to county and to time.”\textsuperscript{70} Schoppa nonetheless defines agricultural (peasant) associations as elite organizations and ascribes their major failures to financial constraints.\textsuperscript{71} The availability of \textit{Yueduo Daily} allows me to evaluate peasant associations’ constitutions, commitments to contingencies, and quotidian challenges. While the elites’ peasant associations chose not deploy traditional forces, their rural projects were struggling with poor state funding, local gentry’s passive participation, and the lack of public consent.

In early Republican China, the county bureaucrats closely cooperated with local elites to carry out voluntary charities and public welfare projects. The state initiated the plan of peasant associations for agricultural promotion and assigned heavy duties to local elites without sufficient subsidization. It was a transition for the role of local elites, who now stood for the societal and national welfare and might encounter conflicts with and resistance from the rural basis. The implementation of peasant associations was a significant step towards the rural modernity, but still it did not reconcile the tensions between traditional powers and state

\textsuperscript{69} Kathryn Alexia Merkel-Hess McDonald. \textit{A New People: Rural Modernity in Republican China.} (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2009), 1.
\textsuperscript{71} Schoppa. \textit{Chinese Elites and Political Change.} 39, 118.
bureaucracy. Neither the new agency served the cultural and social purposes as what traditional mobilization did. Thus, rural dwellers distrusted peasant associations and maintained their preference with traditions.

Peasant associations were constitutionally established by the state and local elites promoting agricultural production. The memberships were restricted to the well-educated and the propertied. The sixth and seventh articles in the “Modified Peasant Association Constitution” proclaimed to recruit members with agricultural expertise, experience, property, or business. The next article banned disenfranchised citizens, the bankrupt, and the mental ill. Though no extant sources reveal the selection and backgrounds of members in Zhuji County, the guidelines suggested the alliance of state power and the elite strata for social control. Furthermore, the luxury expenditure of Zhuji County peasant association’s chamber hall, which cost more than 2,400 yuan, reinforced this association’s elitist standing. Peasant associations’ assistance in agricultural affairs was also written in constitutions. Their members were expected to prepare famine surveys and agricultural suggestions to the local authorities, and to establish exhibitions, experimental lands, and winter schools to display agrarian products and technology among peasants.

Peasant associations’ development was constrained by fundraising. The operational spending derived from the membership fees and state’s tax incomes. Every member was to pay one-yuan entry fee and a two-yuan annual fee, and honorary titles were be awarded to generous donors. Besides that, though the constitution allowed peasant associations to apply

72 The local peasant associations’ constitutions followed the order from the national constitution. Thus, I only state the national constitution here. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), August 20, 1923, sec. 4.
73 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), August 21, 1923, sec. 4.
74 Zhuji minbao she, ed., Zhuji gaiguan, 1925, section “Zhuji gaiguan”, 112.
75 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 9, 1923, sec. 4.
76 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), August 21, 1923, sec. 4.
77 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 8, 1923, sec. 4.
78 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 9, 1923, sec. 4.
for state funding, the approval of budget expenditures was extremely volatile, depending upon individual scenarios. In 1925, Zhuji’s county peasant association had two hundred and sixty members and 745-yuan budget: a 500-yuan tax revenues’ subsidy, a 70-yuan tuition income running the agricultural winter school, and a 175-yuan land lease income.\(^\text{79}\)

However, most township peasant associations in Zhuji County were financially stagnant. For instance, the peasant association in Changqiao Village was a mirage. Because none of its members paid annual fees, the association did not even have a doorplate, hold annual meetings, or maintain a book of accounts.\(^\text{80}\) As a result, the county government could not even collect member rosters from township peasant associations.\(^\text{81}\) Furthermore, another county peasant association in Xiaoshan was illusory, having only a president and a vice president without anyone or anything else.\(^\text{82}\) The poor administration caused by unbalanced developments and monetary struggles not only reflected the state power’s insufficient support, but also suggested local elites’ passive involvement.

Peasant associations’ experimental land also confronted rural dwellers’ resistance regarding agricultural resources. Zhuji County’s peasant association received a hundred mu land donation from a young monk in Helin Temple and used this property for agricultural experiments. However, a group of senior monks in other temples denied this property transaction and sued the peasant association. The experimental land also irritated neighboring villagers, who accused the peasant association of wasting water resources since its experiments barely produced any plants. Though villagers did not sue the peasant association,

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\(^\text{79}\) Zhuji minbao she, ed., Zhuji gaiguan, 1925, section “Zhuji gaiguan”, 112.
\(^\text{80}\) Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), January 9, 1921, sec. 4.
\(^\text{81}\) In July 1920, the provincial government urged the Zhuji County to collect and deliver the peasant associations’ rosters from villages. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), July 31, 1920, sec. 4.
\(^\text{82}\) Another news story in Yueduo reported the illusory county peasant association in Xiaoshan which just had a president and a vice president without operations. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 11, 1923, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 20, 1923, sec. 4.
which, they believed, was under the authorities’ protection, the peasant association nonetheless terminated its experiments and leased the land to tenants for money-making. The irony of the experimental land not only exposed rural dwellers’ discontent or “myopic” understanding of modern production, it also embarrassingly disclosed the peasant association’s lack of commitment to fulfilling its promised goals.

Furthermore, the lack of peasant associations’ concrete operations was exposed in famine relief. In 1922, a disastrous flood, lasting more than a year in Zhuji County, suspended voluntary organizations and intensified social problems such as vagabonds and banditry. *Yueduo Daily* stated that, “our county’s self-governance affairs were not developed but stagnant because of it [flood].” For example, the foundling hospital in Fengqiao Township was shut down after thirty years’ operation. The only secondary school in Zhuji County could not receive its governmental funding, and the principal resigned. Under such circumstances, the county peasant association in Xiaoshan proposed a natural hazards meeting to investigate rural loss and stabilize rural households. The members planned to report the hazards to the county government, to found an agriculture newspaper, and to design effective plantation strategies to cover peasants’ loss. Peasants were supposedly taught to plant divergent economic products such as early season rice and high-quality silkworm to generate household incomes. Yet, the feasibility and implementation of the reconstruction plan were uncertain, and the plan was unable to address the urgent demands including hunger and housing shortage in the countryside.

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83 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), November 17, 1919, sec. 4.
84 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), April 4, 1923, sec. 4.
85 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), January 26, 1923, sec. 4.
86 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), March 14, 1923, sec. 4.
87 *Yueduo Daily* (Shaoxing), October 7, 1922, sec. 4.
On the other hand, flood relief was simultaneously implemented by traditional organizations. The following describes a typical relief effort:

The leader of the village called other property owners and villagers for a fundraising meeting to fix the ruined rice land ridge. The leaders promised three thousand dollar donations for basic expenditures. Other property owners paid two dollars per mu. Tenants paid one dollar per mu. If those tenants were in poverty, they could work in the reconstruction project for 0.4 dollars per day and reimburse their assets.88 Since relief work saved the homeless, preventing rice riots, and repairing the irrigation systems, it was widely practiced among villagers 89 and successfully mobilized peasants for reconstruction plans. During the famines, villagers apparently discarded the modern agency, the peasant association, and relied on traditional powers to overcome hardships.

Overall, peasant associations’ deployment of constitutional principles, experimental lands, and winter agricultural schools reflected local elites’ efforts in relation to rural modernity. Since the state and local elites allied together to promote agricultural production, they restricted the memberships to professional experts and property owners and emphasized projects such as introducing innovative agricultural seeds and fertilizers to the countryside. Peasant associations, however, did not mobilize their elite memberships or fulfill ordinary people’s expectations. Many challenges between the local elites and peasants were unsolved. Peasants did not perceive their own foreseeable benefits and resisted the implementation of experimental lands. Gradually, some revolutionary-spirited elites recognized education as an effective vehicle to implement peasant associations and universalize the idea of society and nationhood. The modern education itself also modified the goals of peasant associations, deviating from their primary concerns for agricultural promotion.

V. Politicizing Peasant Associations: Elementary Schools

88 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), November 30, 1922, sec. 4.
89 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), December 6, 1922, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), December 10, 1922, sec. 4.
When local elites’ investments were moribund, a new peasant association, advocating for rent reductions, was created by a group of intellectuals in Yaqian Village of Xiaoshan County in 1920. Yaqian intellectuals had a sense of “anti-elitist elitism,”90 embraced the class-struggle theory, and claimed that “the peasants had yet to learn how to be self-reliant” and the rural dwellers were unable to “organize the movements by themselves.”91 The majority of Yaqian intellectuals was rural youth finishing education at the Zhejiang Provincial First Normal (“First Normal”) and having “their profound ambivalence toward the cultural iconoclasm and Westernized urban lifestyle embraced by the educated elite.”92 Modern education was a transformative force in politicizing peasant associations by phrasing their revolutionary agendas for rent reduction besides agricultural promotion. Regarding the mass education in the early Republican era, Thøgersen’s A County of Culture argues that “[the] new values were preached in the classrooms, and schools played a key role in all political manifestations.”93 Charles Hayford also asserts that mass education was rapidly spread throughout China in the form of night classes and literacy classes for peasants in the 1920s.94 Rural elementary schools not only promoted social mobility and cultural enlightenment, but also provided young teachers with a livelihood and cultivated the forces for revolutionizing the peasant associations later on.

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Cultural and Social Landscape of Education

Previous historiography considered the socioeconomic factors as fundamental to society but overlooked the cultural impacts on educational enterprises. For example, James H. Cole’s *Shaohsing*, influenced by G. William Skinner’s central marketing town hierarchy, queries why the commercially underdeveloped Zhuji County could have the sheer number of elementary schools it did.\(^5\) Jacob Eyferth challenges the central assumption of Skinner’s theory: “[his] environmentally deterministic model leaves little room for human agency…At the most basic level of the model, there is no freedom of choice…”\(^6\) My analysis combines the socioeconomic and human factors to examine the high enrollments of primary schools in Zhuji County.

The meritocratic culture persuaded rural families to give more support to their offspring’s education in order to alter social hierarchies. One major legacy of civil examinations in Chinese society was formulating education’s utilitarian purposes. The state deployed the civil examinations to recruit talent for public services and maintain its own social control. The grassroots, on the other hand, were willing to participate in public affairs and improve their social status.\(^7\) To some extent, the primary goal of education was ossified by the civil examinations and equivalent to “Promotion and Wealth” (*shengguan facai*). Yu Dafu sardonically recalls the advanced elementary school in the countryside:

The modern elementary school at that time was a target for people’s surprise and worship. When the academy of classical learning was transformed into a Chinese Western-style building, even villagers who lived 30 km away from the county seat

\(^5\) “Yet the county-by-county figures also reveal some interesting anomalies, the reasons for which remain unclear. What, for example, caused the phenomenal rise in enrollments in Chu-chi [Zhuji] ?…On these questions, unfortunately, the available sources are mute.” James H Cole. *Shaohsing: Competition and Cooperation in Nineteenth-century China*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986). 144.


\(^7\) See examples from Ping-ti Ho’s *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* and Benjamin Elman’s *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*. 
would bring their food and umbrella to visit this site in the county seat…The words, “Western school,” became tea house, wine house, and the rural city’s central topic. For school students with black uniforms, they were deemed as universal Zhang Tianshi [an ancient palmist and fortune teller]…

Yu criticized the alienation of education from the ordinary people. True, education was one of the few alternatives for peripheral dwellers to climb the ladder of success. That is why Zhuji Minbao’s editors would argue that commercial stagnation reinforced rural residents’ pursuits of education. However, the altruistic and ethical deliberations in education were severely hampered by the social meritocracy itself.

In reality, the rural mass education was dominated by the lineage elementary schools with inappropriate curricula. While Zhuji County had 352 elementary schools in 1922 and more than 400 in 1933, most of them were improvised and rustic lineage elementary schools. In 1922, only 1,833 students enrolled in higher elementary schools compared to the 14,725 students at lineage schools. Lineage schools, subsidized by lineage or charitable properties, prepared rural students’ entrance for the advanced level studies at central market towns. Also, their flexible schedules permitted children to work in agricultural seasons for their families’ livelihood. However, lineage schools were highly backward in the views of Zhuji Minbao and Yueduo Daily, which chastised their meaningless teaching of Confucian classics, Chinese herbal medicines, and fortune-telling. Instead, local newspapers

99 “Two different career patterns are contained in the life stories of those Zouping men who grew up during the 1910s and 1920s and who acquired specific skills beyond what was offered in primary school or followed from participation in agricultural production: an academic track leading to schools in Jinan and elsewhere and a vocational track following the apprenticeship model.” Stig Thøgersen, A County of Culture: Twentieth-century China Seen from the Village Schools of Zouping, Shandong. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 83.
100 Zhuji Minbao. Zhuji Gaikuang, 2.
102 Zhuji Minbao. Zhuji Shehui Xianxian, 51.
103 Zhuji Minbao. Zhuji Gaikuang, 4. Many news articles in Yueduo Daily critiqued the lineages schools such as 1910-10-22, 1921-1-13, 1921-7-14, 1921-9-4, 1923-5-21. The large number of news
advocated for the expansion of higher elementary schools with well-rounded modern curricula.

Yet, entering modern elementary schools was a heavy burden for rural families. Higher elementary schools were located in central market towns and charged expensive tuition. They offered two or three years’ curriculum including gymnastics, mathematics, and science to prepare students for secondary education. Rural dwellers’ education opportunities were also hindered by the lack of adequate transportation, the expenditure of tuition, and the demand of family labor. In fact, modern education, which was more time-consuming and costly than lineage school, intensified the educational inequality in rural society. Meanwhile, the curriculum-setting of modern education was inadequate to rural dwellers’ needs. A rural survey conducted by two elementary schools in Yaqian Village reflected that the teaching of literature and plays in primary schools hardly improved students’ literacy and arithmetic.

The role of modern elementary education became controversial. In 1934, the local educators urged the integration of education’s pragmatic and enlightening functions:

We should think of education and farming as the same thing. If we want to improve agricultural productivity, the first thing we need is educated peasants. Education is for knowledge. But knowledge is valuable and real only if it could be used in reality. We should realize “education is a tool for promoting labor productivity. We should strive to study for our society.”

Education as a tool for agricultural productivity was debatable. For peasants, Confucian classics, Chinese herbal medicines, and fortune-telling were conducive to their quotidian life.

On the other hand, modern education, with its barriers to entry, attempted to indoctrinate

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104 Two elementary school teachers’ home visits to rural families at Yaqian village in 1922 reflected peasants’ difficulties to access educational resources and the shortcomings of modern education besides their concerns about tuitions. Guansan Wang, "Home Visit." In Yaqian Nong Min Yun Dong, 45-47. (Beijing: Zhong Gong Dang Shi Zi Liao Chu Ban She, 1987), 45.


106 Zhiyue Zhu, Zhuji Xiangtu Zhi. (Shaoxing: Zhejiang Province Shaoxing Junior High School Affiliated Elementary School, 1934), 140.
peasants with the concept of society and nationhood and revitalize the countryside through industrialization. Yet, the lack of social infrastructure in rural society limited such ambitious plans and augmented the controversy over primary education.

The Tension and Enlightenment in Hometown

The increasing number of school diplomas nonetheless devalued graduates’ meritocratic status and coerced them to find employment in the countryside. The greatest obstacle for students was their inability to convert their knowledge in the mundane world, and so historically some degraded to vagrants. Students disdained the rural tradition but also resisted the commercialized urban culture. For the sake of their livelihood, they overcame their mental reluctance and took teaching jobs at village schools. Yu Dafu ridiculed his hometown people, who “had no properties, no jobs, no goals, and no [life] plans. [but they] just [live] like cockroaches: born, die, and reproduce.” The tedious time in Fuyang County depressed this young student so that when his ship approached Nagasaki harbor, Yu did not feel homesick, but said rather “this time was like on my way back to [my]

107 The situation for many university graduates was no better in the 1930s who also faced serious unemployment. Wen-Hsin Yeh, The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 202-205.
108 It was a tradition in Shaoxing society. The civil examinations washed out most of the applicants. Those who were educated but not degree holders normally hated working like peasants and distinguished themselves from others in rural society. Yet there were few occupations left for them. The best choices for them were government clerkships and business trainees in rice stores and pawnshops. Besides that, they could be Pojiaogu, a Shaoxing dialect word meaning scam. But they might be not as bad as scammers or bandits if they still identified themselves as gentry class candidates. Such people could be found in Chinese literature. Lu Xun wrote a story of Kong Yiji. Zhou Zuoren in his essay, compared Pojiaogu to Don Quixote style person in the Novelas de Picaros genre.
109 “Our County had hundreds of normal graduates. But only 52 of them came back for service in 1921, and 42 in 1922...In 1922, the other 545 teachers were not normal graduates rather than former Qing Xiucui and junior high school graduates.” Zhuji Minbao. Zhuji Gaikuang, 4.
110 “In this way the formal qualifications of the teaching corps became updated, but the degree of professionalization remained low because graduates from all departments turned to teaching as a way of surviving.” Zhuji Minbao. Zhuji Gaikuang, 85.
home country. Probably due to the bored life and two years’ torpor, I already cut off my homesick feeling.”112 Such a mentality was not unique in China but a shared phenomenon in burgeoning societies during modernization. For example, a late Meiji Japanese writer, Natsume Sōseki, depicted rural youths’ inner voice in Kokoro: “each time I returned, I brought back with me a little more of Tokyo… I ceased to enjoy being at home. I wanted to hurry back to Tokyo.”113

County youths’ fever for the cosmopolitan lifestyle, contrasted with the reality, stimulated them to change the countryside. Their frustrations with the barriers of higher education did not preclude but rather augmented their energetic determination to transform the hometowns. Returned school graduates promoted cultural enlightenment and patriotic movements in elementary schools. Zhuji youth facilitated free summer schools for rural children and published the first county newspaper, Zhuji Minbao, in 1919.114

Patriotic movements were rural youths’ major concerns and agitated their enthusiasm for rural modernity. In the early Republican era, the humiliations from imperial powers intensified Chinese people’s patriotism and desire for national empowerment. After the First World War, though China assisted the victorious Allies, it was not able to reclaim the lost territory in Shandong (Shantung) Province and was forced to surrender it to Japan according to the Treaty of Versailles.115 Such diplomatic failure outraged the college students in Beijing, who launched the May Fourth Movement. Young students in Zhuji County also facilitated thousands of elementary school students and faculty to commemorate the annual “Day of National Humiliation.”116 Their speeches and demonstrations lambasted the early

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112 Dafu Yu, "Autobiography.", 300.
114 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), June 24, 1923, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), June 26, 1923, sec. 4.
Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), June 28, 1923, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), June 30, 1923, sec. 4.
116 Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), May 16, 1921, sec. 4. Yueduo Daily (Shaoxing), May 19, 1923, sec. 4.
Republican government’s stagnation and stirred up the public passion for patriotism. A civics textbook written by a local elementary teacher in 1934 stressed that: “salvaging our nation should start from loving our hometown. Loving our hometown is the foundation to love our nation.” The immaterial relation between hometown and nationhood was being bridged by the elementary education. Rural youth, with a strong guxiang identity, recognized the significance of rural modernity to revitalize their hometown and national welfare as a whole. Hometown became a crucial space for rural youth to practice their endeavors towards rural modernity via running elementary schools, disseminating progressive thoughts in printing enterprises, and organizing the grass-roots mobilization, peasant associations.

Peasant Associations in Yaqian Village

In October 1921, two years after the May Fourth Movement, Shen Dingyi and a group of normal school graduates founded a radical peasant association for rent reduction in Yaqian Village. Its foundation was the Yaqian Rural Elementary School, which had already disseminated the class-struggle and assembled rent reduction campaigns among villagers. The conjunction of elementary school and peasant association not only enabled radical youth to receive leadership training, but also introduced peasants to cosmopolitan values such as self-determination and social contracts. Though the Yaqian Peasant Association was interrupted by state oppression, its core values including mass education and rent reductions

were inherited by later revolutionaries and made a profound impact on the radicalization of peasant associations.

The creation of Yaqian elementary school was the radical youths’ echo to the educational inequality and social stratification of the time. The Yaqian Elementary School Manifesto criticized the bourgeois privilege and monopoly of higher education:

In the civil examination era, [those ranked as] “poor study” still had some hope. Now, proletarian children do not even think about going to free schools. How could they hope for secondary and professional schools, universities, and study abroad! In this way, the poor would be forever poor and the rich would be forever rich in this world. Most humans will be entrapped in poverty and stupidity. Isn’t it the suicide of the human?\(^{120}\)

In Republican China, secondary and higher education were expensive and limited to the top ten to fifteen percent of the urban population on a national level.\(^{121}\) The manifesto embodied the elementary teachers’ anti-elite elitism as it presumed education to be the panacea to cure the illiterate population. Radical youth prioritized their own dissatisfaction with the stratified social mobility instead of peasants’ urgent demands for livelihood. Yaqian Elementary School was a radical echo of rural intellectuals’ perceptions of social inequality and a significant initiative for implementing socialist thoughts in China.

The teachers in Yaqian Elementary School actively promoted the mass education movement, preparing for the launch of a new peasant association. Taking radical youth like Yang Zhihua and her colleagues as an example, they conducted rural surveys in peasant families in order to design a curriculum accommodating village children’ work study

\(^{120}\) “The Manifest of Yaqian Rural Elementary School”. Shanghai: New Youth. August 1921.

schedules. Their efforts left an impressive legacy that is still remembered after six decades. Yang and her colleagues even invited hundreds of elementary teachers in Zhejiang Province to attend their Marxism and pedagogy conferences. Yaqian Elementary School also incorporated rural youth’s revolutionary agendas. Yang recalled her two years in Yaqian Village by saying that “the rural school motivates peasant movements.” Another elementary teacher, Xuan Zhonghua, insisted on the correlation between peasant movements and mass education: “the leaders of peasant movements should be rural elementary teachers. The progress of peasant movements depended on their training for mass movements.” Radical youth regarded the Yaqian Elementary School as a vehicle to circulate their advocates in the countryside and a desideratum for the implementation of peasant associations.

However, the predicament of anti-elitist elitism was further intensified as long as the peasant associations developed. The founder of the Yaqian peasant association, Shen Dingyi, stated that:

When we want to do something in rural society, should we take off our long gowns like ordinary peasants and workers or behave like gentry that betrayed them [peasants]? If we took off our long gowns, in the current labor industry, it is really difficult. So I think one person should centralize power, then the organization [can] centralize it. When the situation is stable, we should decentralize authority...

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122 Guansan Wang, "Home Visit." In Yaqian Nong Min Yun Dong, 45-47. (Beijing: Zhong Gong Dang Shi Zi Liao Chu Ban She, 1987), 45.
123 A student from Yaqian rural school, Shen Songchun, remembered that “He [Shen Dingyi] opened a school at his home calling for poor children to study. The school also had adult classes at night. [There were] eight persons per desk [and] around ten desks. Xuan Zhonghua was the teacher.” Songchun Shen, "Yaqian Peasant Association's Situation." In Yaqian Nong Min Yun Dong, 95-96. (Beijing: Zhong Gong Dang Shi Zi Liao Chu Ban She, 1987), 96.
124 Zhihua Yang, "Yang Zihua's Selected Memoir." In Yaqian Nong Min Yun Dong, 80-81. (Beijing: Zhong Gong Dang Shi Zi Liao Chu Ban She, 1987), 81.
125 Zhihua Yang, "Yang Zihua's Selected Memoir.", 80.
127 Long gowns were traditional male clothes exclusive to literati who were not involved with heavy labor work. Xiusong Yu, “Appendix II: Yu Xiusong's Diary, Correspondence, and Writings.” In Yu Xiu Song Zhan editor by Xiuping Chen. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chu Ban She, 2012), 210.
It was a quandary choosing either to abandon local elites’ hereditary leadership or to promote the illiterate population’s self-initiatives. On one hand, the traditional power dynamics in rural society were never abandoned, but utilized by revolutionaries. For example, Wang Qisheng’s studies demonstrated that local elites still dictated the Communists’ rural movements in Hunan Province. On the other hand, intellectuals’ approaches were idealistic, lacking practical experience to mobilize the rural population. In the end, Shen had to serve the charismatic leader of peasant associations, though his goal was boosting peasants’ inner-motivations. The unresolved distrust between rural intellectuals and peasants resulted in a fragile leadership structure and foreshadowed this movement’s collapse.

In the meantime, for young students’ unconventional wanderings and prospects, their approaches to rural modernity were different. As with Rottmann’s argument that personal interests were crucial for urban youth to fight for the New Fourth Army, I use the different approaches of two young intellectuals, Yu Xiusong and Xuan Zhonghua, toward rural movements to indicate the complexities of rural modernity and peasant associations’ radicalization in the coming future. Yu Xiusong was born to an intellectual family in Zhuji County in 1899. He dedicated himself to scholarship but dropped out of the First Normal to pursue his revolutionary aspirations. When Yu left his hometown in 1920, he told his younger brother, “I don’t know when I will come back. I have to wait until all the beggars

129 “As expected in a time of foreign invasion, many recruits were politically and patriotically inspired by the issues of their time, but wartime conditions such as unemployment or personal circumstances like family ties to someone in the army could just as easily push a person out of a city.” Allison Rottmann, Resistance, Urban Style: The New Fourth Army and Shanghai, 1937-1945. (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, Fall, 2007), 181.
130 An overview of the young generation of this era can be found in memoirs such as Wang Fanseng, an early Communists and famous Trotskyists who spent his later years in Hongkong and England. Fanxi Wang, Chinese Revolutionary: Memoirs, 1919-1949. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
can have enough food in this world (to come back home).” Yu first joined a work-study group in Beijing for a half year and shifted to a steel factory in Shanghai, where he built close connections with influential intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and Chen Wangdao. Yu could not endure the monotonous factory life after three months, saying that:

Today I…don’t want to labor or study…My desire for education is growing every day. My situation in the factory is useless...In the future, I will try my best to promote education and learn some agricultural knowledge. [I will] do some hours of agricultural work per day—say gardening.\textsuperscript{131}

So Yu Xiusong went to Yaqian at Shen Dingyi’s invitation. Because of the frustrating work-study program, Yu revived his intellectual pursuits and began to learn Japanese from Shen Dingyi’s cousin (who attended school in Tokyo) and planned to study agriculture in Japan.\textsuperscript{132} Yu did not stay in Yaqian and left for Shanghai because he thought that “in Yaqian, it was good to help Dingyi organize peasants. I could try my best to operate a school. But no one can teach me a foreign language.”\textsuperscript{133} Yu perceived agricultural productivity as the essential factor for rural reconstruction and stopped trying hard labor.

On the other hand, Xuan Zhonghua was born to a peasant family with ten children and seven mu of rice lands in Zhuji County in 1898. When he was eleven, his father sold land to pay for Xuan’s studies in a higher elementary school, Tongwen gongxue. Xuan showed his promise in politics by writing fifty essays about China’s foreign relations and domestic affairs.\textsuperscript{134} Xuan taught two years in lineage schools before he entered the tuition-free First Normal in 1915. During and after his time in First Normal, Xuan was a student leader.

\textsuperscript{131} Xiusong Yu, “Appendix II: Yu Xiusong's Diary, Correspondence, and Writings.” In Yu Xiu Song Zhuan edited by Xiuping Chen. (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chu Ban She, 2012), 192.

\textsuperscript{132} Yu Xiusong was executed by KGB in Moscow in 1939.

\textsuperscript{133} Xuanlu is the style name of Shen Dingyi. Xiusong Yu, “Appendix II: Yu Xiusong's Diary, Correspondence, and Writings.”, 220.

\textsuperscript{134} Including “Solve China’s Current Fiscal Straits Besides Foreign Debts”, “The Paper of France’s Annexation of Vietnam and Britain’s Occupation in Burma”, and “The Paper of Guangxu Emperor’s Reformations and Self-Empowerment”. I can only trace these titles rather the contents from Yinglie Qiangu: Zhejiang Gemin Lieshi Shiji Zhuanji. Vol. 1. (Shaoxing: Shaoxing Shi Zhengxie Wenshi Ziliao Weiyuanhui, 1982), 33.
organizing labor unions in printing factories. In October 1921, Xuan represented the newly founded Chinese Communist Youth at the international conference in Moscow, which he recalled as “the most honorable and revolutionarily meaningful thing in [my] life.” After his return to Zhejiang Province in 1922, Xuan went to Yaqian village and became the elementary school’s principal. While there, Xuan dedicated himself to peasant movements and published a number of rural reports in his weekly periodical, Responsibility. Country youth like Yu Xiusong and Xuan Zhonghua dedicated themselves to the countryside. They had emotional attachments to their hometowns and considered rural modernity as the best solution for revitalizing China, though they adopted different approaches: agriculture productivity and rent reduction, respectively. Besides that, rural elementary schools offered employment and enabled them to clarify and reinforce their revolutionary agendas through the interactions with the rural population. Because of modern education, radical youth could disseminate enlightenment thought to the peripheries, but also demonize the rural world to justify their politicization and radicalization of peasant associations. The conjunction of elementary teachers and peasant associations eventually became a revolutionary model for violent campaigns and revolts in rural China. To this extent, the transformation of peasant associations was directed by the contest of cultural modernity in terms of ideological beliefs.

VI. Radicalizing Peasant Associations: Revolutions and Rivalries

The fate of peasant associations was tied with the capricious political atmosphere during the 1920s. Though revolutionaries together launched the Northern Expedition and took over Zhejiang province from warlords in November 1926, their internal alliance was tenuous. Because the Nationalists dominated the high bureaucracy, the Communist Party had no choice but to concentrate on grass-root movements, though it also matched their political agenda for seeking popular support. The Central Committee of the Communist Party stated that: “[We should] try the best to give in normal and abstract upper-level work to the Nationalists… [We] should focus on grass-roots work in order to gain real mass power.”138 As a result, local party branches and mass movements were developed by the Communists on behalf of the Nationalists until their rupture in April 1927. Since the Communists identified themselves as “a working class’s party” in urban centers,139 their marginalization of the countryside in their political agendas was not easily ceded. In 1926, the Hangzhou branch wrote, “The peasant movement was simply never implemented … [Our] current goal is to investigate [rural society].”140 A year later, this goal was still not realized: “[peasant movements] were not developed because [we have] no [specialized] comrades.”141 In February 1927, the Central Committee admitted, “The Party never paid attention to them [peasants in Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces].”142 Rural movements gradually came into revolutionaries’ attention and was initiated after the North Expedition.

141 1925-1927 (Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Jiaxing, and Wenzhou areas). 181.
142 *Shanghai Geming Lishi Wenjian Huiji: February 1927 (Zhongong jiangze quwei di yi ci daibiao dahui youguan wenjian)*. (Shanghai: Central Committee Archive and Shanghai Municipal Archive, 1990), 142.
After the recovery of Zhejiang, revolutionaries recognized peasant associations’ essence in revitalizing the “withered” rural society and adopted different approaches. While the land rent reduction program (“Erwu jianzu”) was a consensus, the Nationalists’ goal was enabling ordinary peasants to accumulate wealth and reinvest in machines and fertilizers in order to enhance rural productivity as a whole. The Nationalists proclaimed their solution not only eliminated despotic gentries’ exploitation of ordinary dwellers, but also avoided “Capitalism’s calamity and Communism’s poison.” In contrast, the Communists adopted the class struggle to overthrow private ownership by organizing rural armed force and instigating radical political belief among peasants. The Communists further insisted that their ultimate mission was not to strive for these “marginal economic gains” for peasants but rather to reform and develop the Party itself through the recruitment of qualified comrades.

Revolutionaries’ rural movements were not only ossified by the party politics between revolutionaries which resulted in conflicts and tragedies, but also were restricted and directed by the social infrastructure and cultural modernity.

*Peasant Associations: The Nationalists’ Approaches and Outcomes*

The Nationalists distrusted the residual powers from the old regime and utilized youths’ potentials to push forward their peasant associations. After they controlled Zhejiang, the Nationalist government asked each county to “transfer all old county peasant associations’ funds to mass movements… [Such transfer] should be conducted by every Nationalist Party’s county branch.” The local elites were the embodiment of the old regime and should have been supplanted by the enlightened youth who could willingly conduct the

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rent reduction campaigns. Based on my statistical analysis of 72 Nationalist Party members’ vitae in 1937 from Zhuji Municipal Archive, the average and median ages of the Nationalist Party members in Zhuji County were approximately 26 years. Among them, 18.3% received secondary education, 66.2% attended elementary schools, and the rest, 15.5%, were illiterate. The revolutionary-spirited youth were expected to have the will and scientific methods to supervise the rural mobilization and undergird the Nationalist’ popular basis.146 Radical youth interrupted the existing power dynamics, causing their contentions with the local elites.

The Nationalists’ rural campaign was dogmatic in the attempt to proselytize the “Three Principles of the People” (Sanmin Zhuyi) among the rural population. “Peasant movements,” the Nationalists claimed, “could be achieved step by step as long as they followed the Prime Minister [Sun Yat-Sen]’s guidance.” After investigating peasants’ lives and indoctrinating them in national politics as well as the Nationalists’ policies, they said that “then we should ask them to organize peasant associations right away. When the peasant associations were accomplished, our rural mobilization was totally successful.”147 The Nationalists’ optimism and their doctrinal advocacy of Sun Yat-Sen encountered both resistance and manipulation from the rural society.

Rural dwellers’ responses to rent reduction campaigns strayed from the Nationalists’ expectations. As surveyed by the rent reduction propaganda campaign in Cixi County, peasants were inactive vis-à-vis the Nationalists’ itinerant speakers because even if they had a rough sense of the policy, villagers feared landowners’ dominant power.148 Local gentry and vagabonds obstructed peasant associations’ progress. To those who actively joined in peasant

associations seeking rent reductions, the “despotic gentry” would viciously accuse them of being Communists. Because ordinary rural dwellers were powerless to cope with gentries’ traps, peasant associations remained futile in many cases. In the meantime, “local ruffians” would spread a rumor: only the members of peasant associations could attain the privilege of rent reduction. With that, they attracted many naive peasants’ enrollments and profited from membership fees. The implementation of peasant associations was also protested by the local charities standing for the righteous.

Local charities’ discontent with the peasant associations further exposed the Nationalists’ dilemma in meditating the grass-roots conflicts. According to charities’ correspondence from Yin County to the provincial government, peasant associations distorted the custom of weight measurement for rent transactions. Peasant associations, asking for 14 tael (liang) equivalent to 1 catty (jin) and tenants’ right to use moist grain to pay their dues, irked landowners who usually sold their rent collection to rice shops. Rice shops accepted only dry grains and used the weight measure: 18 tael equivalent to 1 catty, thus landowners would lose 23% of their rents (23 catty in every 100 catty) if they agreed with the peasant associations’ appeal. The correspondence also chastised peasant associations for excluding landowners and running the association in the hands of “unemployed businessmen” instead of “real farmers.” Charities, on behalf of local elites and landowners, castigated peasant associations’ obliviousness and obstinacy to agricultural knowledge and asked for the provincial government to abolish peasant associations and re-appoint suitable cadres. The Nationalist government approved their request for maintaining the measurement

149 ZISDAG, M1-1-696. Zhejiang dangwu, October 20 1928, Issue 20, Page 53.
150 ZISDAG, M1-1-696. Zhejiang dangwu, October 20 1928, Issue 20, Page 54.
151 ZISDAG M1-1-711. Zhejiang sheng zhengfu gongbao, October 28 1927, Issue 141. According the rural custom, 16 tael or 15 tael 3 mace is equivalent to 1 catty. 1 tael is 31.25 g and 1 catty is 500g. Such custom was not changed until 1959 by the Communists. In nowadays, 1 tael is 50g and 1 catty is still 500g.
custom and sent staff to investigate the land conflicts. Yet, nothing related to peasant associations was mentioned in the provincial report. While implementing rent reduction through peasant association was a fundamental policy for the Nationalists, they also had to prioritize the interests of the local elites in order to stabilize the fragile regime and expand its own public support in rural Zhejiang. In this vein, the Nationalists soon after compromised their rural campaigns with the landowners in the next two years.

Besides appeasing the local elites’ unrest, the Nationalists had to consolidate their own peasant associations by eliminating the Communists’ dominance on rural mobilizations. After the “April Twelve Incident (Siyi’er shijian),” the governor of Zhejiang Province asked each county to “use nearby troops to suppress” those peasant associations that had “violating behaviors.”152 Fearing the Communists-led rural movements’ incisive effect on their own authority, the Nationalists delegitimized the rent reduction campaign in 1929. Responding to this decree, the public opinion according to the county survey by the provincial secretary office, signaled a general trend.153 In Zhuji County, tenants felt suspicious of the Nationalist Party and resented the county government. Landowners were content and concluded that the county government was more powerful than the Nationalist Party. Though the “reactionary members” (Communists) were actively inciting peasants for uprisings, the public consensus was to settle this year’s rent dues earlier and avoid future conflicts. In many other counties, reactionary members were unresponsive, except among the poor villagers in Yueqing County, where they posted a banner stating: “[Since we have] No Food, [we have to] Take Risk.” Abolishing the rent reduction campaigns enabled the Nationalists to mitigate the Communists’ threats and enhance their cooperation with local elites on rural governance by virtue of sacrificing tenants’ rent reduction appeals.

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Though the legacy of the Nationalist peasant associations remained ambiguous for various reasons, the success of their efforts were proved by the unease of the Communists. The Communists, who were alerted by the rent reductions made by the Nationalists’ peasant associations, claimed that: “[though] coercion policy and reformism were the ruling authority’s contradiction, their attacks on [our] revolution are the same and the reformism is fiercer.” Indeed, in the Communists’ view, the Nationalists’ rent reduction campaigns, peasant banks, and tenants council were “extremely fatal” and “blurred laborers and peasants’ class consciousness, moderated their revolutionary sentiment, and induced them to the anti-revolutionary side.” The Nationalists’ contribution in rural movements was further confirmed by another Communist report. In June 1929, the Nationalists in Yongjia County organized more than 500 “yellow” peasant associations, including 90,000 people. One of the C.P.’s provincial committee could not but sigh that “rent reduction was generally achieved. It is really astonishing.” Even though the historiography of the Nationalists’ rural campaigns at the grass-roots level is wanting, their enemy’s concern did demonstrate what the Nationalists had achieved.

Another outcome of the Nationalists’ political agenda was the creation of Zhejiang Penitentiary to fortify their persecution of political radicals and prevent dissidents’ penetration in the countryside. The Nationalist Party’s monthly journal in Zhejiang Province claimed that “Communists’ harm to our Party was ephemeral and not detrimental…the most dangerous group was the corrupt and un-revolutionary opportunists.” Right after the “April

154 Shengwei Wenjian 1929. 6.
155 Shengwei Wenjian 1929. 7.
156 Communists called their own rural organizations “Red,” the Nationalists’ “Yellow,” and the middle way “Grey”.
157 Shengwei Wenjian 1929. 230.
Twelve Incident,” the Nationalist government in Zhejiang planned a penitentiary to jail and re-educate political dissidents, the so-called anti-revolutionaries. The penitentiary had two divisions: the elementary, structured into “a reformatory, a hospital, and a school,” and the special, affiliated with Zhejiang Provincial Army Prison, a notorious place to persecute dissidents. The standards of entry showed the Nationalists’ objectives:

Elementary division:
   a. For revolutionary activities, but [who has] naïve thoughts and [is] misled.
   b. Induced or bribed by Communists, [at a] less serious [level].
   c. Misinterpret Three Principles of People so that [those who] have reactionary thoughts and activities.

Special division: Communists and reactionarie members [at a] serious [level].

This classification indicating Zhejiang Penitentiary’s target groups was extensive, not exclusively Communists.

Various political ideologies, not the dichotomous rivalry between two parties, competed in the society at the time. In fact, the intensity between the two parties had a cumulative effect and did not reach its apex before the Communists’ rural revolts. A “reformatory” Communist satirized Zhejiang Penitentiary, saying that “the lecturer is a former secretary of the special court [whose discussion about] C.P. is simply baffling. The way of [his] talking [is] like a virago.”

He indicated the diversity of the imprisoned groups, including “peasants, labors, students, and soldiers. The majority is intellectuals, especially elementary school teachers…The most tend to [believe in] the New Life Society, who usually used to be the Nationalists. Then [the lesser] is anarchists and the Third Party.” This report, along with the Zhejiang Penitentiary, suggested the political complexity of this era and the Nationalists’ attempt to stabilize their social control. Zhejiang Penitentiary was increasingly

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162 Shengwei Wenjian 1929. 269-275.
crucial as long as the undisguised hostility among revolutionaries grew. After Zhuji County’s peasant revolt in April 1930, at least 95 people were imprisoned or tried in Zhejiang Penitentiary, according to the materials in Zhuji Municipal Archives.

*Early Communists’ Struggles to Found Peasant Associations*

The Russian October Revolution introduced Communism to China. In the autumn of 1919, the Soviet Union altered its foreign relations with China:

> If the people of China wish to become free, like the Russian people, and be spared the lot prepared for them by the Allies at Versailles, which would make of China as a second Korea or a second India, let it understand that its only ally and brother in its struggle for national freedom are the Russian workers and peasants and their Red Army.\(^{163}\)

Although Soviet Russia claimed to abolish the tsars’ treaties with the Chinese, its statement, “Karakhan Manifesto,” was legally ineffective by international law and later refuted by Joseph Stalin, who excused it as a “translating mistake.” However, in contrast to the diplomatic and military failures not only in the Versailles Treaty but throughout the history since the First Opium War in 1839, the Soviets’ elusive support was unprecedentedly stimulating. In response, Chinese youths were mesmerized by the Russian Revolution and imported Bolshevism, a political ideology and panacea to fight against the imperial powers and domestic corruptions. A pioneering Communist, Qu Qiubai, wrote of his dramatic journey to Moscow:

> The wheels are operating thunderously which encourages the ardent sound. My blood vessel is furiously stretching with uncertain hope…The iron bridges and factory chimneys…[The red capital] is at the climax of the European proletariat’s ‘heart

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ocean,’ surging Russian laborers’ hearts, and standing at the islet of the Capitalist typhoon for more than three years.  

The early Chinese Communists, identifying themselves as internationalists or populists, had strong nationalistic and elite obligations, a product mixing the humiliation from colonial powers and the legacy of the literati mentality, paralleling nineteenth century Russian intelligentsias’ self-hatred of their motherland. Also, as Hans J. Van de Ven argues, they underwent a discursive journey from friendship to comradeship. Van de Ven’s analysis suggested that early Communists struggled with rural campaigns before their pinnacle in the 1950s. In my view, such struggle was crucial to determine the most faithful comrades and even foreshadowed the success of the Communists in 1949.

Elementary teachers were treated as the primary forces for the growth of Communism, but their petty intellectual instincts were also harshly criticized. In 1925, the Central Committee recognized in educated rural youth the valuable assets for rural movements and insisted that,

We should focus on rural elementary teachers who are progressive intellectuals and leaders…they were youth and normal graduates who could not afford further education. Their livelihood is poor and struggle with the backward customs so that they would easily sympathize with our proposals.

In order to buy their support, the Communists instigated elementary teachers to strike and demonstrate to raise salaries and pension funds. As a result, the Party’s leadership

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165 Qi wrote, “My Russian history professor said that ‘…to be honest, is all of our art, science, and literature not importing from Western Europe? Un-Europeanized Great Russians are stupid and dirty and their worst instincts are obvious. For aristocratic youth, which is another story, they are not purely Europeanized and always stand in the transformative era of Western European culture in history.”’ Qiubai Qu, "My Heart History in the Red Capital." In Qu Qiubai Wenji: Wenxue Bian, 113-254. Vol. 1. (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 1985), 156-157.
positions in Zhejiang were dominated by petty intellectuals who, however, exposed their petty bourgeois instinct: they were reluctant to revolt or “eat bitterness,” but indulged in love affairs.

Romantic love severely factionalized the Party’s cohesive operation. Taking a love triangle in Zhejiang Committee as an example, Zhuo Shikan was intimate with comrade Wu’s wife, Yuying. Wu was greatly depressed and attempted suicide in front of Yuying. Zhuo felt insecure after knowing about Wu’s suicide attempt so that he and Yuying visited her parents’ home, where they coincidentally met Wu. Zhuo asked Yuying to stay with him and told Wu: “if you come with us, I will shout, calling you C.P. on the street. Now I am an anti-revolutionary so I don’t care about anything.” Zhuo and Yuying went back to the provincial committee, where Zhuo cried “human beings have no hope anyway. I don’t need revolution. I want to be an anti-revolutionary.” Zhuo ate some matchsticks and recovered in the hospital after several hours. Since love affairs seriously distorted the operation, the Party began to supplant petty intellectuals with laborers and peasants who had proved capacities to “eat bitterness” and discipline themselves.

The monetary constraints also degraded Communists’ morale and limited their activities. Requesting funding supports from the upper branches was the most frequent topic: “our comrades have no money for food. We do not have the money to print pamphlets so that we are waiting idly for the Central Committee’s funding…Economic problems are devastating…” Local comrades oftentimes visited the provincial committee for money and sightseeing:

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170 Guangfu Dai and Zhenlin Bao, eds. Zhejiang Geming Lishi Wenjian Huiji: Shengwei Wenjian 1928 (xia). (Zhejiang: Central Committee Archive and Zhejiang Provincial Archive, 1987), 33-34,
171 Shengwei Wenjian 1928 (xia), 45-46.
Recently, the principal members in every place casually leave their work to the Provincial committee to report work and get money. Such a thing is inappropriate. In fact, [you] can write letters to report and use money order [to receive funding]...If [they] come here for private reasons and impede their work, [they] will be not be served but penalized.\textsuperscript{172}

The entire Party was actually wrestling with financial issues so that the higher committee chastised the local comrades as “mercenary revolutionaries” who only worked for money and admonished them to “be professionalized” (which meant they should seek extra employments) to resolve financial constraints independently.\textsuperscript{173} Being “professionalized,” the Party believed, was also an opportunity to build connections with the masses.\textsuperscript{174}

Another bad consequence of financial constraints was the alienated relationships within the Party hierarchy. County branches acted very independently and were disaffected with their upper branches. The Provincial committee complained of local comrades’ discontent, saying that “Zhuji County developed more than 300 comrades. But the Provincial committee did not actively guide them... [in these county places, their] work is very chaotic and wrong.”\textsuperscript{175} County comrades believed that the Provincial committee only “protected their own safety,” “consumed the most funding,” and was “alienated from the grassroots and [gave] unrealistic guidance.”\textsuperscript{176}

The Party nonetheless designed a “Benefit Society” to assist those imprisoned or deceased comrades to ameliorate the jeopardized morale:

(3) The Standards for Aid:
A. The deceased’s funeral expenses are $ 20 maximum.

\textsuperscript{172} Guangfu Dai and Zhenlin Bao, eds. \textit{Zhejiang Geming Lishi Wenjian Huiji: Shengwei Wenjian 1928 (xia)}. (Zhejiang: Central Committee Archive and Zhejiang Provincial Archive, 1987),154-155.
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Shengwei Wenjian 1929}. 23-24.
\textsuperscript{175} \textit{Shengwei Wenjian 1928 (xia)}. 43.
\textsuperscript{176} \textit{Tudi Gemin Shiqi Gedi Wuzhuang Qiyi: Zhejiang Diqu}, edited by The Historical Sources Committee of China's People Liberation Army, 513-515. (Beijing: Liberation Army Press, 1997), 285.
B. The deceased’s family members who cannot make a living will be compensated once for $2 per capita every month. One year is the maximum.
C. Those who are injured and cured in the hospital will be compensated for $0.4 per day, three months maximum. The over amount will not be aided; those who are injured but not cured in the hospital will be compensated once for $3 maximum.
D. Those who are arrested will be subsidized for food expenses for $3 per month, spring & winter clothes for $6, and summer & autumn clothes for $4.
G. Rescue expenses (including attorney and activity fees) are $20 per capita at maximum.

Fees [beyond that amount] are special expenses which should be discussed by the Party and the Benefit Society. ¹⁷⁷

In reality, the extremely limited assistance was oftentimes not even delivered to comrades and their families.

Even though numerous problems could eliminate Communist followers, struggles also created a group of staunch supporters who forged firm revolutionary beliefs and played decisive roles in radicalizing the peasant associations. Ideological belief probably became the driving force for the remaining comrades. The Hangzhou committee in 1930 stated:

Because of financial difficulties… Any special fee exceeding $1 has to be passed by meeting. Comrades still have a clear sense of money and do not have any mercenary thoughts. The technical secretary does not complain even after running out of $20 and pawning all [of his] clothes. ¹⁷⁸

**Peasant Associations: The Art of Revolutions**

Peasant associations entailed many new roles in Communists’ definitions. The Central Committee’s seventh rural movement decree of June 6th, 1927 announced that the “peasant association was the inchoate form of rural authority instead of Communist Party [itself].” ¹⁷⁹
On June 16th, the eighth rural movement decree stressed that “peasant associations should be the only ruling power in the village against the feudal landlords.” ¹⁸⁰ The ninth decree

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proclaimed, “peasant associations were not an occupation organization anymore but a political alliance in the village,” which not only solidified peasants but also handicraft workers, elementary teachers, petty merchants, and petty landlords who sympathized with Communism.  

“Communism,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued in 1848, “deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labor of others by means of such appropriations.” Thirty years later, the practice of Marx’s manifesto, in the eyes of Friedrich Nietzsche, was quite the opposite:

Socialism is the visionary younger brother of an almost decrepit despotism, whose heir it wants to be…it needs the most submissive subjugation of all citizens to the absolute state, the like of which has never existed. And since it cannot even count any longer on the old religious piety towards the state, having rather always to work automatically to eliminate piety (because it works on the elimination of all existing states), it can only hope to exist here and there for short periods of time by means of the most extreme terrorism. Therefore, it secretly prepares for reigns of terror, and drives the word “justice” like a nail into the heads of the semi-educated masses, to rob them completely of their reason (after this reason has already suffered a great deal from its semieducation), and to give them a good conscience for the evil game that they are supposed to play. Socialism can serve as a rather brutal and forceful way to teach the danger of all accumulations of state power, and to that extent instill one with distrust of the state itself.

Humans, as a category in Marxism, have their species’ power in nature and the essential human power based upon the relations of production. Humans are primarily equal and their differences are caused by the alienated social system. Thus, Marx believed, people’s private interests and other evil deeds could be eliminated by the transformation of relations of production. Nietzsche, on the other hand, viewed humans on a spectrum between animal and superman. To this extent, humans are not equal and their differences vary by their wills. Nietzsche was cautious of Communists’ herd morality and its disastrous effect, like that of

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Christianity. It is debatable whether Communism was a form of tyranny or social evolution. Nonetheless, my historical analysis suggests that the peasant associations became a political gambit for Communist revolutionaries to launch belligerent revolts.

In Zhejiang, Communists made studied tactics to proselytize the rural population to join the peasant associations. As an impoverished elementary teacher, Zhuo Lanfang joined the Communists Party when he realized that his predicament was not “a personal problem” but the “problem of the society.” After several audacious peasant revolts in his hometown, Fenghua County, Zhuo was the master of rural movements in Zhejiang Committee who insisted that “organizing struggle is not simply a technical problem. It derives from the integration of politically and organizationally objective observations, experiences, and theories. It is an art of revolution.”

Zhuo divided the mobilization strategy into four steps. First, Communists should make a pithy proposal tangible to peasants’ livelihood which should be “concrete questions that are not vague. For example, anti-tax (what kind of tax), raising salary (at least how much), killing landlords (name whom).” Second, they should launch campaigns in those places where peasants suffered most and the Party concurrently had a popular base. Comrades should visit rural “clubs” where villagers gathered and build local connections. Third, Communists should instigate peasants’ public passions by stirring up their hatred of landlords. Killing landowners must be carried out on behalf of the peasant associations. Comrades were forbidden to coerce peasants to destroy village temples or commit “irresponsible killing” of landlords which would only irritate the public. Fourth, before any struggle, village party comrades should call meetings to finalize strategies and have county

comrades supervise the struggle. Zhuo further instructed the flexibility of the mobilization strategies:

Our previous movements were mechanistic. We coerced and threatened the masses to [passively] compromise with our Party policies. In the future, we need to take every opportunity to approach them and observe their psychology so that they will not suspect but be interested in [us].

Attacking rural landlords had a deeper implication than fighting for peasants’ interests. The violence itself awakened peasants’ awareness of their own potential, the strength of mutual collaborations, and the power of Communism.

Another Communist agenda was fomenting rural dwellers’ discontent with the Nationalists, though such attempts were not always successful. In places where the Party had no leadership, the Communists’ strategy was to help peasants petition the local government. Instead of achieving peasants’ appeals, Communists were instructed to induce the masses to ask for higher requests (sometimes ridiculous scales), which the local state could in no way afford. If the local government suppressed the masses, then it became an opportunity to accuse the Nationalists of tyranny. If the local authority gave in, Communist propaganda would assert that the success belonged to the collective power, not the state’s mercy. Such tactics caused troubles by naively overlooking peasants’ intelligence and betraying their standpoints. Peasants oftentimes did not believe in the Communists’ heretical advocates and rejected mobilization. They instead waited for the Communists to fulfill that about which the Party bragged. In extreme cases, peasants arrested Communists, who burned down villagers’ houses to foment revolts, and sent them to the county government for peace. As

187 Shengwei Wenjian 1928 (xia). 146-147.
188 Shengwei Wenjian 1928 (xia). 225-226.
190 Shengwei Wenjian 1929. 11.
a result, C.P. had to adapt their strategies and insist to their comrades that “struggle must stand in the masses’ interests and must estimate the odds of success.”

Mobilizing rural dwellers for peasant associations was not hard if the peasants’ concerns were met. In Yongjia County, several C.P. members operated a village night school so that they could get in touch with peasants and investigate local social tensions. After three days, Communists organized a village peasant association with more than 60 peasants for their campaign: boycott landlords’ weight measurements and police intervention in rent collection. Peasants realized that these outlanders were not sending them to the army but helping them survive. As a result, the C.P. attracted more than a thousand peasants to its meetings and established 7 village associations with 535 members within half a month.

However, running peasant associations was a challenging task because of the divergent motives and approaches among laborers, peasants (“gongnong”), and petty intellectuals. Labor and peasant comrades complained of the Party policies:

1. If the Party trusted me in the past, Jiang A’xing could make Zhejiang as our base area like [what] “Zhu Mao” [did]. But the Party is bastardy and did not respond me within a month so that A’xing was sacrificed (commented by a post office laborer in Ningbo)…6. The mass movement is difficult. They don’t believe in [Communism]. Kill some landlords, then our work will be easier (commented by a peasant comrade from Huangyan County) 7. [The Nationalists’] rent reduction campaign is good (commented by a peasant comrade from Yongjia County) …10. We should organize our own Green Gang so that peasants will not join their gang nor know which Green Gang is the real one (commented by a peasant comrade from Rui’an County).

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191 Shengwei Wenjian 1929, 92, 95.
193 “Zhu Mao” meant Zhu De and Mao Zedong. In October 23, 1927, rather than following the Central Committee’s order to attack the big city, Changsha in Hunan Province, Mao Zedong went to the Jinggangshan mountain region in Jiangxi Province where he created the first “revolution base” and led Red Army guerrillas.
194 Green Gang is a Chinese secret society and criminal organization, which was notorious for its criminal and political activity in Shanghai during the early 20th century
The discrepancy between the Party and comrades was caused by several reasons. Peasant comrades hated the Party’s pedantic and unrealistic propaganda. Sometimes, they vowed to “never come back again [after the first meeting].” On the other hand, in order to get support, the Party had to woo peasants by promising monetary benefits. For example, workers and peasants were told that if they acted (e.g., boycott and revolt), then they would be compensated “from several thousand to several dozen thousands yuan,” though the Party never had the money.

Moreover, the divergent motives exposed the tensions of societal change. Peasant comrades’ violent and gang-like predilections resembled the straightforward and effective flower society and village battle. Peasants perceived peasant associations as another form of village battles. Their queries to the Party confirmed this point: “1. Who is our leader? 2. Do we have comrades in the county government? 3. When will the Red Army or “Zhu Mao” come? 4. What are the benefits of being Communists and their advantages after [we] succeed with the revolution? 5. When will the Party distribute guns to us?” The local elites’ and the traditional grass-roots mobilizations still dominated the countryside. Supplanting them with Communist ideology was extremely difficult based upon the limited social infrastructure such as the wanting mass education.

In contrast, petty intellectuals within the Party perceived rural society as the symbol of backwardness and understood modernity as societal evolution. The peasant associations which embodied class struggles, they believed, could liberate peasants from the enslavement

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of traditional powers. Communism, to this extent, was a secular and humanitarian proposal, a by-product of cultural modernity. Such belief led petty intellectuals to upbraid peasants’ ignorance: worshiping charismatic leaders, misunderstanding class struggle, and waiting for external supports. They also insisted that “God is the landlord class’ best solution to suppress peasant revolutions.”

The Communists’ peasant associations easily overthrew the status quo, but had no means to construct a new social order. Instead, they caused chaos in the rural society. The so-called “Art of Revolution” stirred up people’s belligerence and avariciousness rather than brought enlightenment for societal interests. The following two subsections examines the development of peasant associations and a revolt organizer in Zhuji County to demonstrate peasant associations’ radicalization and ossification into tools of revolt.

**Communists’ Peasant Associations in Zhuji County**

A dozen elementary teachers in Zhuji County founded the local branch of Nationalist Party in the summer of 1926. The initial operation depended on Xuan Zhonghua, who was the chief member of Zhejiang Provincial Nationalist Party. After the revolutionaries’ Northern Expedition, these radical youths occupied the Christian church at the county seat for their headquarters and established a peasant movement training school to prepare peasant associations and land rent reduction. At this training school, they recruited a hundred rural dwellers across the county and gave them political and military training. One of the students recalled his experience: “the course contents were Current Politics Situations, Three Principles of the People, and Peasant Movements’ Goals and Meanings, as well as singing songs and military drills. After a month’s training, we went back to the villages and

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organized peasant associations.” Village peasant associations were empowered by the county government to make the fair amount of rent payment and even organize demonstrations for rent reductions.

However, the disruption of the First United Front and the strong resistance from landowners suppressed peasant associations and their rent reduction campaigns. For example, the county government banned Baifeng Village’s rent reduction campaigns in the local elementary school in 1928. Also, during the re-election of the county peasant association, though Communists won the seats by a democratic vote, the government disregarded the result and put the Communist candidates in prison. As a result, Communists retreated to the countryside and refused to cede their Party’s files and weapons. Shou Songtao recalled: “We went to the countryside separately to recruit new party members, build peasant associations and struggle for rent reduction. A few adhered for a while, [but] many could not see hope and went to Shanghai for a living.” After that, the Nationalist Party relinquished the Communist members in its county branch and consolidated its own political base in Zhuji County.

*The Death of a Peasant Army Organizer*

He Daren was born in Springfield (“Quanfan”) village in 1907. After finishing village school, he attended the advanced elementary school, *Dadong gongxue*, in Fengqiao Township. At one point, Daren was punished by the school because he challenged the classics teacher in the classroom. Whether for lack of money or failures on the normal schools’ competitive entrance exams, Daren dropped out and began his self-study by reading progressive magazines such as *New Youth*, *Guidance*, and *Chinese Youth*, given to him by his uncle, Wang Shouhua, who frequently mailed these journals from Shanghai.

Before Daren turned 20 in 1927, his life was farming at home and reading magazines with fellow village youths. When the Nationalists’ Northern Expedition Army came to Zhuji
County, he joined the military but left the troop after the “April Twelve Incident,” when his uncle was assassinated by the Green Gang under the Nationalists’ order. Daren eventually joined the Party during the Lunar New Year in 1928. While he was watching a village opera, Daren met his elementary school classmate, Chen Baiqing, a secret Communist in Fengqiao Township actively recruiting new comrades. Baiqing was amazed by Daren’s magazine knowledge and referred him to the Party.

Around Springfield, Daren developed several Communist bases in neighbor villages. One time, his party fellows objected to his recruiting a village vagabond, Hu Yutian. Daren adhered to his decision saying that “the real thieves are bureaucrats and landlords who never labor but gain…It is because of his poor and hard life, Hu Yutian occupies bureaucrats’ and landlords’ exploitation on people. [Yutian] is actually taking back his own property.”

Within two years, Daren became the Party secretary of the Fengqiao Township, supervising 200 comrades and 25 village branches.

On April 16, 1930, Zhuo Lanfang, the special commissioner of the Central Committee, visited Zhuji County and asked the county committee to initiate revolts. Most members denied this plan except He Daren and Chen Baiqing. Lanfang immediately revoked the current county secretary and appointed Daren the new county secretary and chief commander of the peasant army in Fengqiao Area. In his undated letter to Daren, Zhuo clarified this revolt was preparing a guerrilla war to kill landowners or village heads, seize local elites’ armed forces, distribute grains, and establish peasant associations and a peasant association.

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army. However, because of the lack of big landlords (as what they claimed), Daren and Baiqing attacked Fengqiao Township directly.

On the early morning of April 25, Daren and Baiqing led their troop of dozens of peasants armed with broadswords, guns and red banners, to occupy Fengqiao Township. It was an easy success. After they killed one soldier and two policemen, the other defenders, including local landlords, ran away. But at the same time, the president of the Fengqiao Chamber of Commerce, Chen Zhongmo, wired this incident to the provincial government and requested backup. Daren and his troop called up a public meeting in the opera theater at Fengqiao Temple. In front of a hundred people, Daren delivered an energetic speech and asked them to join in peasant associations and the peasant army for a better life. After the meeting, they opened rice shops, clothes shops, and grocery stores, but not the pawn shops (which they believed stored poor people’s properties), and distributed these goods to the masses. At 10 a.m., Daren’s Fengqiao troop organized several hundred peasants to neighboring villages, where they seized landowners’ barns and burned land deeds and due bills.

In the meantime, another peasant troop in North Area founded the “North Area Soviet Government.” Daren’s troop and the North Area troop united at Bao Village during the second day and had a thousand people in total. While they were conducting military planning, two companies of the Provincial Defense Troop already re-occupied Fengqiao.

202 The fate of Chen Zhongmo was a bit dramatic. After C.P. came to power in 1949, Chen Baiqing paid a visit to his hometown, Fengqiao, and asked the whereabouts of Chen Zhongmo who was still alive. With that said, the township government organized an open trial on Chen Zhongmo and executed him in public right away. “Zhuji Uprising.” In Tudi Gemin Shiqi Gedi Wuzhuang Qiyi: Zhejiang Diqu, edited by The Historical Sources Committee of China’s People Liberation Army, 513-515. (Beijing: Liberation Army Press, 1997), 515.
Daren and Baiqing suggested their next operation in Ruanjiapu, a township without defense force. Yet, the majority insisted a coup de main attack on Fengqiao.\textsuperscript{203}

The peasant troop’s second attack on Fengqiao was repulsed by the army’s machine guns. That every evening, the rest of the peasant troop ran away. At least five comrades including Zhan Libo, Cai Denggui, He Zhaoyuan, Wang Bingzhao, and Xuan Chunfa were killed, and their heads were hung in Fengqiao Temple’s opera theater.\textsuperscript{204} There is no extant source about these people except the oral memory of Xuan Chunfa’s relative, He Zhongle.\textsuperscript{205} Xuan Chunfa was a tenant in Wangkeng Village and the squad leader in the peasant army. The day before his attack on Fengqiao Township, he had a dinner at his elder sister’s home. After his death, none of his family dared to take back the cadaver, and his pregnant wife had to remarry before her childbirth.

VII. The Legacy of Revolts and the Perspectives of Peasants

The immediate legacy of Zhuji was the destruction of Communists’ activities in Zhuji County until their resurrection in the People’s Republic. In May 1930, Daren and Baiqing met Zhuo Lanfang at the Central Committee in Shanghai. They were rewarded with attendance of the Central Committee’s Training Class and promoted to the secretaries of Hangzhou and Jiaxing, respectively. Daren was captured by the Nationalists in 1931 and executed in Zhejiang Provincial Military Prison. Baiqing was imprisoned at the same prison.


\textsuperscript{204} Based on my interview with He Zhongle, he said that Xuan Zhonghua’s head was hung on Cuixian Bridge. Traditionally, Cuixian Bridge was the place to publicly expose criminals. But Chen Baiqing’s memoir stated that these heads were hung on the theater stage though he had already run away at that time. Nevertheless, I chose to use Baiqing’s written words.

\textsuperscript{205} He Zhongle was born 1934, four years after Xuan Chunfa’s death. His knowledge of Xuan Chunfa came from his mother who was Xuan Chunfa’s sister. Zhongle He, interview by Hekang Yang, Quanfan Village in Zhuji County, May 2015.
for seven years and went to Yan’an after his release. In Zhuji County, only sixty of the eight hundred comrades remained after the revolt. A peasant comrade in the county committee attributed the revolt failure to inappropriate leadership\textsuperscript{206} and criticized Zhuo Lanfang because he “left [during the revolt] and his idea is leftist empty talk and military adventure.”

The collapse of peasant associations was accelerated by the Nationalists’ propaganda. The magistrate of Fuyang County admonished villagers:

C.P. is bullshitting. Even if they succeed, you ignorant peasants will not get benefits but be forced into the army until becoming “colonial slaves” (wangguonu). These benefits [instead] all belong to Russians. You should not listen to Communists’ lies but confess and surrender as soon as possible. I will not punish your ignorance. But if [you do] not [obey], I clearly know who are Communists and will execute you by shooting when I have captured you.\textsuperscript{207}

The Communists’ class struggle and belligerent revolt detached the Party from the public sphere. The Nationalists seized this chance to vilify Communism and eliminate peasant associations.

In the long run, history is written by the survivors, not the winners. Understanding the legacy of the peasant revolt requires a comprehensive test on various stakeholders in the revolts. The survivors, who were the opponents to Daren and Baiqing and dismissed by Zhuo Lanfang, created the historical narrative for this particular revolt in Zhuji. In their views, He Daren and Chen Baiqing were opportunists who “orally supported Zhuo Lanfang’s order” but “only led ten comrades to make a demonstration around the town.” Zhuo Lanfang “make a wrong decision himself…[as he] did not join the real struggle and ran to Shanghai instead.”\textsuperscript{208} Party politics was a hidden side of memoirs.

\textsuperscript{208} Chen Jin and Shuwang Jin, ”Something about Early Party in Zhuji.”, 80.
The survivors’ retrospective view revealed their agendas of rural modernity in the early Republican era. Jin Cheng never went back to his hometown for 58 years, and he was greatly moved by the newspaper collections from Zhuji County in 1981:

I read them very happily! They helped me understand the drastic changes in Zhuji in the last 30 years … [During the 1920s] when we said that, after the revolution succeeded, our production, life, and culture would have big changes. We could mollify mountain and river, use machines for agricultural work, fix reservoirs, have electricity for light, have water for fishing, and build factories in the countryside. Many peasants were suspecting [us] and some of them thought that we were daydreaming and telling something from Journey to the West and Investiture of the Gods.\footnote{Two 16\textsuperscript{th} century Chinese myth novels. Cheng Jin, Wei Dang Jiao You Liu Shi Nian: Jin Cheng Wen Ji. (Beijing: Hua Wen Chu Ban She, 2008), 327.}

Jin’s account obscured the mistakes they made and stressed their dedication to rural modernity. Revolutionaries’ accounts were uncritical and justified by the contemporary status quo instead of the earlier historical moments themselves.

\textit{The Voices of Ordinary Criminals}

The masses were always voiceless in history. Fortunately, I am able to examine ninety five ordinary people’s backgrounds and motives from their trial documents in Zhejiang Penitentiary.\footnote{ZJSDAG, M1-1-725.} First, the following table lists their occupations, political beliefs, ages, and sentences:

Table 1. Zhuji County’s Criminals in Zhejiang Penitentiary\footnote{Remarks: 1. Because of the incomplete information in some individual forms, the total number of people (95) is different by occupation (70) and by political belief (83). 2. “Education or Related” contains teachers (17), student (1), and people who only wrote “study” (3) in their forms though three of them were already more than 25 years old. Four individuals in this category also worked in governmental affairs. “Peasants” literally means people who worked purely in agriculture. The occupations in the “Non-Agricultural Labor” were very diverse including a magazine columnist, a printing worker, a bookmaker, three textile workers, a rickshaw worker, a tofu maker, a tailor, a pig castrater, a plasterer, an electronic technician, a fortune teller, a storekeeper for a bureau’s materials, a rice shop clerk, and a businessman. 3. For political belief, the unclear category results from the incomplete information in 45 of the individual forms.}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sentences (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education or Related</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasants</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Agricultural Labor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Belief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communists</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Affiliated</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Nationalists passed harsher sentences on Communists and non-agricultural laborers, who usually incited the unrest among peasants and destabilized the societal controls. Also, the young generation constituted the categories of “Communists” and “Education or Related” suggesting rural youth’s tendency to revolution. Finally, the diversity of the “Non-Agricultural Labor” (see note 210) indicated the social transition of the division of production that traditional and industrial occupations intertwined.

Second, I analyze their motives based on three individuals’ reformatory sheets, case by case. The first protagonist was a peasant and later an electronic technician:

**#1 Name:** Luo Ziwen. **Style name:** Yaming.  
**Age:** 32. **Place:** Zhuji 10th Area, Xidoumen. **Sex:** Male.  
**Education:** When I was young, I studied three years at Zuoyinhe Elementary School.

**Social Experiences:** I gave up studying in my teenage years and farmed at home. I gave up farming at 28 years old and started doing electronics in Shanghai.

**Experience in Communist Party:** In early December 1927, I joined my village branch working in propaganda. In the next two years, I did the same work. In April 1930, when the revolt began, my work was posting banners and sending posters. After that, I ran out for a wandering life and then came to Shanghai for a living in May 1931. Because the Lunar New Year was closing, in my trip from Shanghai to Zhuji, I was captured in Hangzhou.

**Family Situation:** My family has 15 people. Only two brothers and I work in production; the rest are consumers. We have 20 mu lands for living. The flood and drought in recent years
made the family decline and indebted for 600 yuan. Thanks to the harvest in the last year, we could still survive the current life. Otherwise, it will be dangerous!

Reformatory Behavior: The things I did in the Communist Party were already reported specifically, frankly, and honestly.

Current Work: None.
Thoughts: If we want to revitalize China from the current threats, we should start from mass education, spreading it to the peripheral regions so that people have the general knowledge to understand the “Three Principles of the People.” That was indeed the only way to revitalize China. When the masses have the knowledge, they can understand our sufferings under imperialism’s iron hooves. If I want to get rid of my chains, [I] must live under the leadership of the Nationalist Party so that life can recover.

Current Work Behavior: My body is very weak after wandering for three years. But for livelihood, I have to bestir my spirit. I go out early and come back late, working for whole days.

Expectation on Personal Prospect: If I want to expect my personal prospects, it must take China’s prospects as an assumption. If China’s prospects could not be guaranteed, the individual prospects could not even be talked about. Thus, my personal expectation was China’s.

Opinion of China’s Prospects: Our China’s written history was more than 5000 years. But why did the most powerful China become a weak China at present? Everything is not significantly different compared to the barbarous age. Europeans and Americans’ history is later than ours. Why could their nations’ changes surpass ours? It is because they had determined confidence to universalize education and promote industries. Due to the reformation of machines, everything had a good outcome. They had an extremely creative spirit (effort). For example, they spent a lot of spirit (effort) and money on inventing a machine. During this long process, they would not terminate the project though they had failures at many times. This honorable spirit is what our people could not reach. Our Chinese labor work always gives up halfway.

Though Luo Ziwen did not mention anything of peasant associations, his confession proved the penetration of peasant associations and revolutionaries’ proposals on the rural population. Luo recognized the significance of mass education on cultivating the sense of citizenship and himself possessed a national identity by connecting his own prospects to the nationhood. Also, Luo discussed the “Three Principles of the People” and used the revolutionaries’ rhetoric to display China’s backwardness and juxtapose to Western societies’ success on industrialization. The worldviews of the 32-year-old peasant vibrantly
demonstrated the penetration of modern thoughts to the rural society via revolutionary movements.

On the other hand, the confession of a 40-year-old villager, Qian Guitang, was less polished:

# 2 Name: Qian Guitang. Style name: Zhongben.
Education: When I was young, I had four years’ education in my village.

Social Experiences: I started farming at 11 years old without other skills. Experience in Communist Party: Though I was induced by Luo Dicu to join C.P. for three months, I have no idea about what C.P is. But I don’t feel good about C.P.’s revolt in 1930.
Family Situation: Without working for a single day, parents, wife and children will be in starvation.
Reformatory Behavior: I will not specify my pain. But I damaged my parents’ name and lost about 500 yuan. Since that, the family life was really hard. I have no other way but let my wife do maid work [and she] has not come back yet.
Current Work: None.
Thoughts: I want to have diligent spirit to feed my parents, wife, and children instead of begging for others’ help.
Material Life Behavior: One porridge meal and two rice meals per day or two porridge meals and one rice meal per day.
Expectation on Personal Prospects: I rent ten mu land this year and hope to have a harvest so that I can stand in society.

Opinion of China’s Prospects: For our Republic of China’s citizens, if the farmers could grow more plants, the laborers could make more domestic made products, the businessmen could make life more convenient, and the literati could diligently fulfill their missions, then [our] international influence naturally becomes powerful. Otherwise, our nation and our folk will have the threat of perishing.

Qian Guitang was a middle-aged breadwinner without party membership and urban living experiences. He worried about the ruined family reputation, debts, and his declining livelihood, so he decided to rent 10 mu rice paddy lands for the next year. Instead of using revolutionary rhetoric, Qian disagreed with the revolt and believed in the traditional social strata in term of farmers, laborers, businessmen, and literati, “Shinonggongshang.”
Last, the third protagonist was a 32-year-old tailor who helped the C.P. transport documents:

# 3 Name: Sun Xianxiang. Style name: Zhiming.
Education: Barely several months.

Social Experiences: Our classmates in [Zhejiang] Penitentiary should take the Nationalist Party’s responsibility.
Experience in Communist Party: I was the transportation staff for the Party affairs.
Family Situation: Normal.

Thoughts: My thought is to let the Three Principles of the People solve the people’s sufferings.
Work: After I leave the Penitentiary, I will obey society’s rules. If there are anti-revolutionaries, we should have the right to supervise them. It is a kind of banditry. We have the reporting right. The Xiabei Area in Zhuji County is the best place.

Current work: My current work is as a tailor. But my work is not a good industry. Because the current rural society is bankrupt…. [Can’t read] I work every day but only earn 8.4 yuan.

Expectation on Personal Prospects: Of course I want to have a family but.

Opinion of China’s Prospects: When China [was] in the imperialism era, [the country] was almost dying. But then there is a Prime Minister Sun [Sun Yat-Sen] in our country who spends tremendous efforts to save the nation. So when China [was] in the imperialist era, it is much stronger than the current country.

Remarks: It is unfair to [accuse] what I have committed at this time. I was laboring at my home in Jiangzao village. Then the police took the good people lawlessly in order to get money. The problem is that if I am really gambling, I will run away instead of staying at home for labor work.

Sun Xianxiang’s writings had serious grammar and logical problems. Apparently, he tried his best to flatter the Nationalists to minimize his sentence. He also mentioned “Three Principles of People” and was re-educated at the penitentiary, so that it was not surprising he would discuss the role of Sun Yet-Sen in the Chinese revolution. The final remark indicates his former Communist experience and illegal gambling placed him in trouble with the local authority.

Overall, the diversity of rural professions challenges the stereotype that rural society was constituted merely by peasants. More importantly, poorly educated peasants’ discussion of mass education, political ideology, and nationhood paralleled the proposals made by
peasant associations and revolutionaries throughout the years. To that extent, peasant associations’ missions were partially fulfilled. Rural dwellers developed their opinions and their modern consciousness of societal progress and the self-determination of life.

VIII. Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, modernization was an urgent agenda in China. After ceding to the Twenty-One Demands with Japan in 1915, Chinese officials delivered a proposal to the president of Republic of China, Yuan Shikai:

Popularize Education…The traditionalists still propose the utilitarian benefits of civil examinations which destroy the flourishing opportunities of education and baffle the people…Popularizing education can enhance the ordinary people’s knowledge, give them to have living skills, and enable [our country] to compete with the world…If the country only has some esoteric pundits and the people are ignorant and never enlightened, then [we] cannot establish the nation and [our] nationals will perish eventually.

Enhance Industry…Chinese have talked about industrialization for decades but its impact is insignificant. The only reason is that the implementers have no professional knowledge and the government do nothing besides taking taxes. The previous graduates from professional schools learn only the normal advanced knowledge. Now we should send university graduates to Europe and America and focus on internships…The proposals should not be vague but pragmatic: subsidize capital, relieve taxes, expand market, develop transportation, and admonish the bureaucrats…When the people enjoy the benefits, the nation will also benefit.

…Now the treaty is newly settled. Our citizens, after suffering such extraordinary humiliation, must passionately fight…[we shall] “Sleep on Brushwood and Taste Gall” (woxing changdan) …212

212 Yunsheng Wang. China and Japan in the Past Sixty Years, 1st ed., vol. 6 (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1980). “Sleep on Brushwood and Taste Gall” has a symbolical meaning in the early 20th century of resisting the treaty ports, foreign concessions and colonial humiliation. Culturally, particularly in Zhejiang, it represents self-improvement and dedication. In 492BC, at the end of the “Spring and Autumn” period in Chinese history, Goujian, the king of Yue in modern Zhejiang, was taken prisoner after a disastrous campaign against King Fuchai, his neighbour to the north. Goujian was put to work in the royal stables where he bore his captivity with such dignity that he gradually won Fuchai's respect. After a few years Fuchai let him return home as his vassal. Goujian never forgot his humiliation. He slept on brushwood and hung a gall bladder in his room, licking it daily to feed his appetite for revenge. Yue appeared loyal, but its gifts of craftsmen and timber tempted Fuchai to build palaces and towers even though the extravagance ensnared him in debt. Goujian distracted him with Yue's most beautiful women, bribed his officials and bought enough grain to empty his granaries. Meanwhile, as Fuchai's kingdom declined, Yue grew rich and raised a new army. Goujian bided his
For the central government, the task of modernity was to establish mass education and industrial projects defending its sovereignty against imperialist invasions. However, advocating modernization was nothing new since the late Qing Dynasty. The old regime already accelerated the industrial plans since the 1880s under the guidance of “Chinese Learning for Fundamentals and Western Learning for Practical Applications” (中学为体西学为用).

The significance of modernity in the early twentieth century was its cultural reform. Modern education and Westernization in treaty ports enabled people to interpret their history and society from different perspectives. Bernard Russell visited and taught in China in 1920 and argued in The Problem of China that,

The traditional civilization of China had become unprogressive, and had ceased to produce much of value in the way of art and literature. This was not due, I think, to any decadence in the race, but merely to lack of new material. The influx of Western knowledge provides just the stimulus that was needed.²¹³

Chinese modernity, in Russell’s central argument, should start from cultural exchange and innovation. The combination of national infrastructure and cultural modernity became the impulse for societal change. I define modernity as a force to eliminate people’s dependence on family, lineage, and religious protections and supplant them by new social values such as citizenship and nationhood.

Driven by progressive minds, intellectuals denied the legitimacy of traditional power dynamics including lineage, family, and other rural ties. Instead, the domestic tumults, foreign threats, and the desire for modernity stimulated them to invent an innovative agency time for eight long years. By 482BC, confident of his superiority, he set off north with almost 50,000 warriors. Over several campaigns they put Fuchai and his kingdom to the sword.

in the countryside: peasant associations. Historically, traditional powers were justified to have moral authority and protect small circles’ common good. The enlightened intellectuals believed that such parochial worldviews would hamper the establishment of societal welfare. Traditions should be replaced by a modern organization which coalesced rural dwellers’ collective interests. The creation of peasant associations was significant, reflecting local elites’ exploration of alternative organizations in a civil society. But the implementations were troubled by the insufficient support from states and elites, the village resistance, and the lack of public consent.

Relying upon elementary schools, rural youth developed their mobilization skills and transformed the local elites’ peasant associations into a rent reduction tool. While rural youth shared rural revitalization with local elites, they disagreed with the latter’s approach and wanted to overthrow the establishment and build their own power. Mass education undertook the duties to universalize agricultural promotions and inevitably re-defined the meanings of peasant associations. Yaqian intellectuals, possessing an elitist standpoint, intended to cultivate peasants’ self-determination by fighting against landlords. However, as the dilemma Shen Dingyi had described, young intellectuals had to choose between either having prominent people as leaders, which undermined the grass-roots’ initiatives, or having peasants as populist leaders who resembled the problems of traditional mobilizations. Eventually, the traditional mobilizations were tolerated and infused into the making of the modern peasant associations. With Yaqian Village’s experiments, peasant associations surpassed their only role in agricultural promotion and awakened ordinary people’s revolutionary potentials.

After 1927, revolutionaries marginalized the self-cultivation of peasant associations and emphasized class struggle. Instead of deliberating Yaqian intellectuals’ conundrum, their radical movements relegated peasant associations as the subordinate organization to achieve
their political gambits. The irony was that they relied on traditional powers from village battles, flower society, and temple fair but in the meantime had to ensure their secular and revolutionary agendas. For the Communists in particular, the Leninist leadership style and their “art of revolutions” ossified the peasant associations and justified their peasant revolts.

This paper studies the internalization of modernity by two generations of rural youth. The revolution was initiated by normal graduates’ advocates and practically implemented by elementary students. School networking played a decisive role in spreading rural campaigns from the central committee to the peripheral villages. Yu Xiusong and Xuan Zhonghua were the First Normal graduates and the forerunners of Chinese revolutions. They had the privilege to receive urban culture and modern thoughts through reading groups and other channels of mass media. Compared to other rural residents, they possessed cosmopolitan worldviews and were idealistically eager to change the backward countryside. For various reasons, many of these young intellectuals returned to their hometowns and took over the teaching posts in local schools. They organized nationalistic demonstrations, edited textbooks for civics class, and created newspapers and magazines delivering progressive thoughts. More importantly, they fostered another generation of rural youth in rural elementary and secondary schools who directly practiced rural movements.

He Daren and Chen Baiqing, two of the elementary school graduates, executed political orders and dealt with quotidian peasant challenges in their hometowns. Unlike normal graduates, the second generation of rural youth was less concerned with the theoretical principles than with brainstorming practical solutions to mobilize the rural population and fulfill their political missions. They were the Chinese revolutionaries sharing revolutionary motivations and mental activities with other non-elites including laborers, artisans, and peasants. The grass-roots comrades simplified the agendas of societal progress and adopted a consequentialist approach to achieve the revolutionary outcomes. Nonetheless,
the confessions from peasant comrades reflected the profound influence of peasant associations and revolutionaries’ advocacy in the rural society.

Under local elites and young revolutionaries’ multiple endeavors, peasant associations conflated traditional mobilizations and modern thoughts and transformed from an agricultural promotion agency to a revolutionary tool. Temple fairs, flower society, village battles, and lineage schools served a variety of social purposes, and they deserved further critical examinations. Furthermore, since the founders and many bureaucrats of the People’s Republic are constituted by radical youth, the studies of rural youth are highly pertinent to evaluate the formation and development of the Communist regime after 1949.
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