Communism and Ethnic Revolt: Some Notes on the Chuang Peasant Movement in Kwangsi 1921-31

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Of all the soviets established in China in the late 1920s, none have received less attention than the Right and Left River Soviets in Kwangsi. Their brief lives, their minor local impact and their relative unimportance in the development of the CCP explains this neglect. But there are two aspects of these two soviets, especially of the Right River Soviet (Yu Chiang Su-wei-ai), which are of interest. The first is the ethnic composition of much of the soviet membership; the second is the way in which these soviets related to the Party Centre, and how they reflected, and suffered from, the shifts in Li Li-san’s policies towards soviets in general. The question of relations between Li and the major soviets, and between Li and the Comintern, has been discussed at length (notably by Richard Thornton, in The Comintern and the Chinese Communists, and by Hsiao Tso-liang, in Power Relations within the Chinese Communist Movement, 1930–1934) and needs no further comment here. The aim of this article is to describe the relations between Han Chinese and minority peoples within the soviet movement, and to show how the Centre at Shanghai behaved towards a soviet over which it had a far greater degree of authority than was the case with most of those established in the late 1920s.

Most soviets were established around a nucleus of Communist troops driven by Kuomintang forces into some remote area, usually on the border between two provinces; power in the soviet area belonged to the local Communist commander, not to the CCP Centre. The Kwangsi soviets differed from this pattern. Though they were established around nuclei of armed forces, there was no autonomous local commander; they were set up on instruction from the Centre, and were headed by Central appointees. The relationship of the two soviets, and especially of the Right River Soviet, to the peasant movement was also distinct. In other soviets, the peasant movement usually grew out of the soviet. In Kwangsi, the Right River Soviet was established on the base of an existing peasant movement. This movement paralleled other peasant movements of the 1920s, in that its members were largely poor peasants, driven to desperation by economic hardship and by political oppression. But it differed fundamentally from most others in that its main organizational link was not an economic or class bond, but an ethnic one. Its members were Chuang peasants, people whose long subordination to the Han peoples of Kwangsi had created a hatred for the Han which did not distinguish
between Han landlords and Han peasants. The movement was both a movement of peasant protest and one of ethnic protest, with the ethnic strand of the movement usually dominant.

Technically, the Chuang make up 35 per cent. of the present Kwangsi Chuang Autonomous Region (formerly Kwangsi Province), but few of these people are really distinct from the Han. The majority of the Chuang were absorbed by successive waves of Han immigrants, and did not maintain a separate identity. Those few Chuang who kept a distinctive Chuang identity lived in the hills in the north and west of the province; they identified not with the sinicized Chuang, but with other minority peoples living in the same areas, the Miao and the Yao.

The tribal Chuang lived in extreme poverty, scratching a subsistence living in the barren hills to which Han immigration had driven them, and victimized by Han merchants, landlords and officials. Their only response to this displacement and persecution was blind rebellion. In the nineteenth century alone, there were several hundred Chuang rebellions, all of which were crushed. The Chuang peasant movement of the 1920s, which culminated in the establishment of the Kwangsi soviets, started as yet another despairing revolt. But it was not so easily crushed as its predecessors, for three main reasons: a general state of anarchy in Kwangsi; the emergence, for the first time, of an able Chuang leader, Wei Pa-ch’ün; and the intervention of the CCP in the late 1920s.

In the early 1920s, conditions in Kwangsi were a microcosm of national conditions; the province was plunged into a prolonged state of anarchy as petty militarists battled with each other for control of the province. One of the main areas of contention was the valley of a tributary of the West River system, the Right River, down which passed the rich and expanding opium traffic from Yunnan. (For a map of the area, see p. 135.) Opium in transit from Yunnan was transferred from horse caravans to river boats at Po-se, where it was also taxed. Control of this city gave any petty militarist a large and secure income, for the traffic was so lucrative that it could stand heavy taxation. During the early 1920s, roving bands of soldiers battled with each other for Po-se, and created a state of extreme insecurity in the whole West River valley. The depredations of these soldiers forced the Chuang peasants living in the hills above the river to organize self-protection associations, which soon expanded their functions to encompass resistance to local landlords and officials, most of whom were Han. The associations thus took on a distinctly ethnic character.

Similar self-protection associations were set up in other parts of Kwangsi, but most dissolved as the province came under the control of the Kwangsi Clique (Li Tsung-jen, Pai Ch’ung-hsi, Huang Shao-hsiung). The Chuang peasant associations, brought into a loose framework through

the efforts of Wei Pa-ch’ünn, kept going, and developed into an autonomous movement. Wei was an unusual and romantic figure, a sinicized Chuang of landlord origin, capable of operating in both Han and Chuang circles. He was close to the unsophisticated tribal peoples, and he understood their problems; they in return endowed him with a mystical aura, and called him the “magic dragon” (shen lung). But he also understood Han society, and he had acquired a knowledge of Han political and military organization during a youth spent roaming south China; this knowledge may have included an acquaintance with Marxism-Leninism.

Nevertheless, there was no Marxist flavour to the Chuang peasant movement which Wei helped to organize in 1923, in the hills of Tunglan hsien, to the east of the Right River. It was simply a movement of self-protection and ethnic protest. In 1924, local pressure on the movement forced it into temporary eclipse, and Wei himself had to leave Tunglan. He went to Canton, where he studied at the Peasant Training Institute, possibly under the instruction of Mao Tse-tung.\(^6\) When he returned to Tunglan in 1925, his Marxist leanings were clear; he named the place where he established his own peasant training institute Lenin Crag.\(^5\)

For a while, the movement benefited from a new atmosphere of tolerance of mass activity in Kwangsi. The Kwangsi Clique had formed an alliance with the Kuomintang in Canton, one condition of which was that the formation of mass movements within the province should be encouraged. CCP organizations were set up in the major cities of Kwangsi, but they did not penetrate into the remote Right River Valley. The main impetus of the Chuang peasant movement remained racial antagonism, not revolutionary struggle; the allies of the Chuang were not Han revolutionaries, but other oppressed minority peoples; Chuang clashes with local landlords were not preceded by invocations of Marx and Lenin, but by the drinking of chicken’s blood and the swearing of ritual oaths.\(^5\)

During 1926, the Chuang peasant movement prospered; as many as a hundred thousand people were organized, taking the movement far beyond the borders of Tunglan hsien.\(^6\) The CCP leaders of Kwangsi began to take an interest in it, and were disturbed by its lack of Marxist revolutionary character, and by the absence of Party leadership. Wei Pa-ch’ünn’s flamboyant nature – he delighted in Robin Hood style escapades, such as flitting in and out of enemy strongholds in elaborate disguises – appealed to his followers, and give him a reputation for invincibility; but it hardly made him an ideal leader from the CCP’s point of view. Wei had obviously cast himself in the tradition of romantic rebel, not in the modern role of sober class warrior. He was not even


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a member of the Party. To remedy this situation, and to correct the local leadership, the CCP sent organizers into the area, who quickly brought Wei and his lieutenants into the CCP. But there was not time for relations between the Chuang peasant movement and the CCP to mature; in 1927 all CCP organizations in Kwangsi were smashed in the Ch'ing-tang (the Kuomintang purge of Communist elements). The Chuang movement retreated into the hills, abandoned all the towns it had captured, and clung tenuously to life until 1929, when a major political upheaval gave it a chance to revive.

The political upheaval was the temporary eclipse of the Kwangsi Clique, which lost control of Kwangsi province (and of its holdings beyond Kwangsi) after an ill-considered trial of strength with Chiang Kai-shek and the Nanking government. A group of Leftist officers, technically in alliance with Nanking, came to power in Kwangsi. Two of these men, the cousins Yü Tso-po and Li Ming-jui, were on the verge of joining the CCP, and they gave tacit encouragement to Communist activity within the province. In the main centres of the province, and in Tunglan, political activity surged up. The provincial authorities provided financial help for the peasant movement, which expanded rapidly. The CCP Centre sent cadres into the area, to "strengthen the leadership," and, more importantly, to prepare for the establishment of a soviet.

In laying the groundwork for a soviet, the Centre was implementing a decision of the Sixth CCP Congress, that soviets should be established wherever possible, and that troops in the soviet areas should be organized into Red armies. In most cases, this decision merely gave official sanction to soviets that already existed, or which came into being shortly afterwards, established independently of the Centre, and usually dominated by a locally-based leader – Mao Tse-tung and Chu Te in Kiangsi, Ho Lung on the Hunan-Hupeh border. These soviets presented a dilemma to Li Li-san, the leader of the Party Centre. The soviets, which were gradually becoming the main focus of Communist activity in China, did not depend on the Centre for their development; their success depended on local conditions, and on the initiative of their leaders. The Centre could offer almost no material help; in most cases it had difficulty in even communicating with the soviets. Li Li-san was committed to encouraging the development of soviets, but in the process his own position, already insecure, was eroded, as local leaders gained personal prestige and authority. The drift of power from the Centre to the soviets, which Li had hoped to reverse, accelerated as the soviets developed; the soviet leaders became less, not more, amenable to central control.

In Kwangsi, the situation was much more favourable to the Centre. Here the CCP leaders, with the exception of Wei Pa-ch'üan, were drafted in by the Centre, and were agents of the Centre. Teng Hsiao-p'ing, Lei Ching-t'ien and Chang Yün-i owed no local allegiance, and there were no local CCP leaders who approached their stature within the Party.

7. Ibid., p. 319.
Wei commanded no independent military force. He was a Communist, but of recent vintage, and few of his followers shared his political convictions. He was bound to them, and they to him, by shared ethnic loyalty, not by shared political loyalty. Though his Party membership committed him to accept Central directives, his status within the Party was so lowly that he could only be regarded as the subordinate of the Centre’s emissaries, as the bridge between them and the Chuang peasant movement.

The area in which the soviet was planned was still very small, though it was expanding, and it lacked one key ingredient—an independent military force. But in Nanning, the provincial capital, this ingredient was being nurtured, and the Right River Valley was being prepared to receive it. The political situation in Kwangsi was still very unstable, and the return of the Kwangsi Clique to power was widely anticipated. Communists in Nanning had gained control of two regiments of troops, which, in the autumn of 1929, they led into the Right and Left River Valleys, just before the Kwangsi Clique returned to power. They took with them a number of urban activists, plus a large quantity of arms and ammunition. In the Right River Valley, and in the Left, these troops seized control of several hsien, and incorporated many local military units. On 11 December (the second anniversary of the Canton Commune) an uprising occurred at Po-se, which was less of a revolt (since Communist troops already controlled the city) than a necessary formality for the establishment of the Right River Soviet and the Red 7th Army. The Soviet covered 10 or so hsien, those occupied recently by Communist troops, plus those already dominated by the Chuang peasant movement.

Soon afterwards, a second soviet, the Left River Soviet, was proclaimed at Lungchow, near the border with Annam, and the Red 8th Army was formed out of troops recently arrived in the area from Nanning. The establishment of this soviet coincided, probably fortuitously, with an anti-French uprising in Annam, launched in February 1930 by members of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. Coincidence led to co-operation, though probably of a very limited nature. The French consulate at Lungchow was attacked, and a French plane shot down. The French authorities responded by closing down the border. Both uprisings were short-lived; the Left River Soviet collapsed after two-thirds of its 3,000 troops deserted; the Annamite rebellion was put down by French troops. Remnants of the Left River Soviet made their way to the Right River Soviet, which had been established on a much firmer foundation.

For a while, the Right River Soviet prospered. It controlled about 10 hsien, it had access to the rich opium revenues of Po-se, and it commanded about 10,000 troops. The opium revenue was apparently

regarded as fair game, and the connexion with the opium traffic apparently aroused no embarrassment. The revenue gave the Soviet and its authorities the freedom to consider schemes of expansion.10

These authorities were not the local Chuang leaders whose peasant movement had provided the groundwork for the establishment of a soviet. They now found themselves eclipsed. A new kind of Han hegemony appeared. All the key posts in the Soviet went to Han: Lei Ch'ing-t'ien was Chairman of the Soviet, Chang Yün-i was Commander of the Red 7th Army and Teng Hsiao-p'ing was Party Commissar. Wei Pa-ch'ün had no political authority; he was given only the subordinate position of commander of a regiment of Chuang and Yao irregulars.

Wei was in an extremely precarious position; he was obviously regarded with less than enthusiasm by the new Communist leaders. But his association with them threatened to divorce him from his own followers, the Chuang peasants. So long as the pace had not been forced, Wei had been able to function both as a Chuang and as a Communist, introducing his unsophisticated people gradually to new ideas, relating Marxist ideas to their own experience, explaining to them painfully slowly ideas which were beyond it. The concepts of freedom and equality, for example, did not exist in the Chuang language. They were demonstrated to the Chuang peasants by direct physical examples: first show one man riding on another's shoulders; then throw him off; this is liberation, the attainment of freedom. Show one man grabbing something from another; then show them sharing it; this is equality.11 This was obviously a laborious and time-consuming method of political education, but it was the only one which promised any success. With the establishment of the Soviet, however, came pressure to speed up the political process, a pressure which alienated the Chuang peasants, whose development could only be gradual. No allowance was made by the newcomers for the special difficulties of the Chuang peasants in accepting new ideas, brought to them by Han activists; they were treated simply as peculiarly backward peasants, not as a people whose long experience of Han oppression made them resistant to Han influence, however benevolently intended. This insensitivity made it difficult for the Chuang to distinguish between their old Han "oppressors" and their new Han "liberators." In fact, as Communist troops moved out to expand the Soviet area, they met hostile receptions from Chuang and other minority peoples who were not prepared for their coming, and regarded them as just another aggressive Han army.12 Wei was unhappy about the behaviour of the newcomers, and since he was unable to moderate it, he kept himself somewhat aloof from his new colleagues. But whether he liked it or not, he and his movement were involved inextricably with the Soviet, their fate bound up with its success or failure.

In the period immediately after the establishment of the Soviet, its leaders concentrated their attention on expansion, on bringing more hsien within the compass of the Soviet. They were forced to expand westwards towards Kweichow, where the authority of the Kwangsi Clique was non-existent, rather than eastwards into the populous areas of Kwangsi. They were thus involved in arduous campaigns through rough country whose inhabitants, mainly minority peoples, either fled or gave them a hostile reception. In retrospect, this policy of expansion was unwise. It brought no valuable territorial gains, and it prevented the consolidation of areas already held. While the focus of attention was expansion, the work of securing the core of the Soviet area was neglected; with the main force of the Red 7th Army away, the base was vulnerable to attack by enemy forces.

Within the Soviet, there was uncertainty and inconsistency over policy; there seems to have been no clear demarcation of authority between the leaders on the spot and the Centre, or between the various levels of leadership within the Soviet itself. The top leadership of the Soviet was apparently unwilling to make major policy decisions locally, but since there was no radio link between Shanghai and Kwangsi, and since communication by courier took about 40 days, this meant that policy was vague, and its application haphazard. There was no consistent policy on the key problem of land distribution. The slogan of land confiscation and redistribution was used, but was not implemented systematically; land was confiscated only from landlords who had fled; little action was taken against those who stayed, though rents were reduced, and debt notes, chiefly to landlords, were destroyed. Equally importantly, the irregular militia units maintained by the landlords were not destroyed. When Communist troops moved out of one area, on their way to further conquests, these units quickly struck at the infant soviet organizations.

The establishment of lower-level soviet organizations was carried out imperfectly and partially; they were established in only half the hsien controlled by the Soviet, and even in these cases were frequently ineffectual; some were run by the original local leaders, whose sympathies were not with the peasants. Little real control rested in the hands of the new organizations. When Communist troops departed, and when troops of the Kwangsi and Yunnan provincial armies reappeared on the scene, they were quickly destroyed. By the summer of 1930, many of the original centres of the Soviet had been lost; the high tide of soviet activity had passed, and the Right River Soviet had shrunk to an area not much larger than the original base of the Chuang peasant movement.

At this point, with the Soviet critically weakened, it was dealt a death blow – by the CCP Centre. Teng Hsiao-p'ing returned from Shanghai

13. Ibid. p. 12.
were (where he had presumably attended the conference of delegates from the soviet areas held in Shanghai in June 1930) with instructions that the Red 7th Army should leave the Soviet and move to Kiangsi. These instructions were based on the Politburo's injunction on "The New Revolutionary Rising Tide" (11 June 1930), which called for the "co-ordination of a large and mighty Red Army," and for the abandonment of the "serious Rightist mistake" of guerrilla warfare; they prepared the way for Li Li-san's new policy of attacking urban centres. The Centre cannot have intended the Red 7th Army to participate in the first of these attacks – the attack on Ch'angsha took place in July, before Teng reached Kwangsi – but it may have been felt that the army, with about 10,000 men, might be useful in later operations. It would also provide a balance to Communist forces outside the Centre's direct control.

The Centre's instruction bore no relation to the actual situation in Kwangsi, or to the Soviet to which the 7th was attached. It was based on the dictates of the Centre's general line, not on the demands of the local situation, about which the Centre had in any case no current information. The order to withdraw the 7th was in fact a betrayal of the Soviet, which had no hope of survival without its own military force. Wei Pa-ch'üin clashed bitterly with Teng, and demanded that the order be ignored, but, though the survival of the Chuang peasant movement depended on the 7th staying, Teng refused to disobey the Centre's command. The 7th left in October, leaving behind only Wei's own unit of irregulars. The march of the 7th to Kiangsi turned out to be a rehearsal for the Long March; only 6,000 men, a third of those who left Kwangsi, survived the agonizing series of battles against cold, hunger, harsh terrain and the harassment of enemy troops. This remnant finally struggled into the Kiangsi Soviet, after a march of over 1,100 kilometres, in the late spring of 1931.

Wei Pa-ch'üin and his own force abandoned the last towns held by the Soviet and moved back into the hills. For a while they held out, launching guerrilla attacks on the forces of the Kwangsi Clique sent to flush them out and to pacify the former Soviet area. But their efforts were doomed; the Soviet area was devastated, Wei himself betrayed and executed. His head was displayed throughout the province, as a grisly warning to would-be dissidents.

The collapse of the Chuang peasant movement was perhaps inevitable. It had depended very much for its survival with the preoccupation of the provincial authorities with other matters; its peaks of development had coincided with the periods of maximum turmoil in Kwangsi. After its defeat on the national scene, the Kwangsi Clique established a firm hold over Kwangsi, and would have turned its attention to the rebellious peasant movement, whether or not a Soviet had been formed upon its

17. Ibid., p. 262.
base. But the Communist take-over of the Chuang movement invited swift and massive retaliation; it had turned the Chuang movement from a perennial minority uprising into a Communist "cancer," which had to be cut out immediately and incisively. Communist intervention had exposed the Chuang movement to the full wrath of the Kwangsi Clique — and had then left it defenceless.

There was an air of irresponsibility about the actions of the Centre and its appointees in Kwangsi towards the Kwangsi peasant movement, actions for which the Chuang peasants, not the Centre, suffered the consequences. None of the Soviet leaders were local men, and none seemed to have acquired any affection for a region which they, like many Han before them, regarded as backward and benighted. The Centre had simply seized the opportunity which an established peasant movement offered to set up a soviet over which a greater degree of control seemed possible than was the case with other soviets, without working out what this venture might mean for the local inhabitants. When the Soviet started to disintegrate, in part as a result of the inadequacy of local leadership, the Centre withdrew its involvement, removed the Soviet's major asset, the Red 7th Army, and left the Soviet to certain collapse. The collapse of the Soviet points not so much to cynical opportunism and manipulation, but to the absence of a consistent line at the Centre, and to haphazard and ineffective implementation of what policies there were. Li Li-san's shift from a policy of soviet-based revolutionary development to one of military attacks on cities failed. It was a personal disaster for Li; he did not secure an urban base, but only his removal from the leadership of the CCP. It was a greater disaster for the Kwangsi Soviet; it precipitated the collapse of the Chuang peasant movement of resistance to Han oppression. The ineptitude of Han communists opened the way for anti-communist Han to crush the revolt of the Chuang peasants.
KWEICHOW

RIGHT RIVER SOVIET

Feng-shan
Tung-lan

Ling-yin

Po-se

Feng-i

En-lung

Ssu-lin

T'ien-pao

Kuart

Nanning

ANNAM

LEFT RIVER SOVIET

Lungchou

Provincial boundary
National boundary
Approximate limits of Soviet Authority
Locus of Chuang peasant movement
Scale: 1,600,000:1

50 Kilometres