

Shaanxi's Early Communist Movement

In many respects, the Communist movement in Shaanxi resembled that in other Chinese provinces: young men in elite schools, inspired by new ideas and motivated by a passionate patriotism, gathered with friends to share concerns and publish journals advancing an increasingly radical vision of social transformation and national regeneration. But Shaanxi was not like other provinces, and inevitably the concerns of these young men reflected the conditions of their physically isolated and culturally conservative home. To understand the long and tortuous journey traversed by the revolutionary movement in Shaanxi, we must grasp both its general and its particular characteristics. The former allowed it to join the larger revolutionary movement in China; the latter let it sink roots in the fertile soil of Shaanxi. The two tendencies persisted throughout the history of the revolution, periodically manifest in sharp conflicts between local and national leaders. Although northern Shaanxi became the center of the Communist movement from 1935 to 1948, the tension between the local party and the Center endured. To understand this dynamic, we must start with the Shaanxi party's early history.

MAY FOURTH AND THE NEW CULTURE MOVEMENT

In the early Republic, Beijing was both the political and the cultural capital of China. The presidency of Yuan Shikai ended with his death in 1916, following Yuan's abortive attempt to restore monarchical rule. Yuan was succeeded by a series of brief and ineffective warlord governments, whose conservatism and incompetence frustrated the high hopes of the 1911 Revolution. Sun Yat-sen was driven into exile, and his Revolutionary Alliance was reorganized as the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or Kuomintang in an earlier spelling), which struggled through its own internal divisions to maintain a fragile base in Sun's home province of Guangdong, far to the south.

Through these troubled years, China's intellectuals engaged in wide-ranging debates over the source of China's problems and the way forward. Many were in Beijing, and ambitious and talented students from across the country were attracted to the distinguished faculty and intellectual dynamism of Peking University or to the new pedagogy of the less expensive Beijing Higher Normal School. As college students at elite schools, they were a privileged and talented group. Though many came from rural families of moderate means, they had teachers and associates who inspired and supported them to seek the new learning promoted in China's coastal cities. Shaanxi students were a distinct minority in the national capital, and they tended to stick together—one group forming an eating club to enjoy their local cuisine. Beijing food was not to their taste, and a substantial meal of Shaanxi dishes brought them together on Sundays and holidays.¹ They lived in an area popular among young students; Mao Zedong had lived in a neighboring compound during his Beijing sojourn in 1918.² Their greatest concern was the dismal condition of their native province, and they formed a Shaanxi student association to appeal for an end to chronic internecine warfare, publishing a small handbill entitled "Anguished Words on the Shaanxi Disaster" (*Qinjie tonghua* 秦劫痛话) to expose the "dark and backward" side of their home.³

Among these students were Wei Yechou, from a rural family in Xingping near Xi'an, and Li Zizhou, son of a silversmith in Suide, northern Shaanxi. The two had studied together in Xi'an under a progressive teacher inspired by Sun Yat-sen's program for China's revival, and they arrived in Beijing in time to participate in the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the patriotic student movement protesting the Versailles Peace Treaty's granting of the German concessions in Shandong to Japan rather than returning them to China. The intellectual dynamism spawned by the May Fourth Movement produced a flood of spirited student publications, and in January 1920 the Shaanxi activists joined this tide with a magazine called the *Shaanxi Clarion* (*Qinzhong* 秦钟).

In the May Fourth era, progressive intellectual life in Beijing was infused with enthusiasm for the New Culture ideals of science and democracy, and the *Shaanxi Clarion* fully reflected that spirit.⁴ Its founding principles were freedom, justice, and human rights—the ideals of the Republican Revolution that had been frustrated by imperialism and warlordism. Evoking the common image of China as a sleeping giant, it sought to awaken (*juewu*) the youth of Shaanxi to realize that "the old [Confucian] virtues are not appropriate for life in the present age."⁵ Wei Yechou introduced his Shaanxi readers to "The New Thinking beyond Tongguan," the pass that had long sheltered the province from invasion but that now blocked the introduction of new ideas from the coast. The heart of this new thinking was "1. a scientific attitude, 2. a democratic spirit, and 3. a progressive view of life." Above all Wei urged a critical spirit toward the ancient shibboleths of Chinese culture, urging young people to always ask "Why?"⁶ When May Fourth youths advocated for science, they meant precisely this critical spirit—not some later notion

of progress through technological advance. Future issues promoted democracy, using the May Fourth rendering as “de-mo-ke-la-xi” (德莫克拉西) rather than the later *minzhu* (民主)—a usage that underlined its Western implications of liberal democracy.⁷

The *Shaanxi Clarion* quickly aroused the opposition of conservative civil and military officials in Shaanxi for everything from its use of the vernacular *baihua* to its criticism of Confucianism and promotion of radical ideas of gender equality.⁸ This opposition plus internal divisions led to the collapse of the journal in the summer of 1920, replaced in the following year by *Common Progress* (*Gongjin* 共进), house organ of a student association of the same name. Four years later, Wei Yechou reflected on the origins of the Society for Common Progress: “Our association was born in response to the confused and immature cultural movement that came with the May Fourth Movement. Its pure-minded search for improvement and innovation was romantic, its ideas unfocused, and all sorts of problems were discussed. . . . Because we began as a group of friends, we stressed friendship and common feelings, and thought that good friends were the same as comrades [*tongzhi*].” The lack of unifying principles and the different conditions under which members lived gave rise to a variety of different opinions, and soon a split deprived the society of almost half its members.⁹ By the time of this speech, Wei was already a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and was urging a more disciplined approach to political struggle, but that would take time to evolve. The founding charter of the Society for Common Progress had indeed referred to its members as “comrades,” but in 1922 that term reflected a shared “interest in self-cultivation” and the society required of its members certain minimum standards of “taste and character.”¹⁰ At its start, this was a gathering of progressive intellectuals committed to leading their province forward as much by the example of their personal virtue as by the content of their political program.

Like its predecessor, *Common Progress* ran articles on a variety of classic themes of the New Culture movement: use of the vernacular language, reform of education, opposition to the worship of Confucius, criticism of patriarchy as the social foundation of despotism, the elimination of arranged marriage, the evils of opium, the peril posed by the threat of imperialism and warlordism, and hopes for a future guided by the awakened youth of China.¹¹ Over time, leftist political themes colored this agenda of social and cultural change, but this was hardly a steady process toward Marxist orthodoxy. The progressive youth of Shaanxi were struggling, each in his own way (for they were still all male), toward a more viable political strategy in a national and local context that was constantly in flux. The evolution of these young intellectuals’ radicalism is reflected in their journal’s discussions of Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution.

When Russia’s October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power in 1917, the news reached China through foreign media, which were either hostile or noncommittal. A dramatic turning point came in July 1918 when Li Dazhao, the energetic

and influential librarian at Peking University, published a series of articles in praise of the revolution. Li Dazhao, a popular figure among Beijing's young radicals, a "fatherly patron" in the apt words of Hans van de Ven, is generally recognized as one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party,¹² though he was not present in 1921 when a small group of intellectuals gathered in Shanghai for the first party congress. Li's initial writings on the Russian Revolution reflected populist views and a chiliastic enthusiasm more than any rigorous Marxism.¹³ Both Li Zizhou, himself a Peking University student, and Wei Yechou were among his acolytes, and he later allegedly introduced both into the CCP.¹⁴ It is not surprising, then, that the Shaanxi radicals' journals presented a view of Bolshevism quite distinct from any orthodox Marxism-Leninism.

The first discussion of Bolshevism came in the penultimate issue of the *Shaanxi Clarion*. It began by criticizing the contemporary term for Bolshevism, *Guojidang* (过激党, literally "radical party"), as an incorrect translation introduced by the "little Japanese imperialists." Dismissing Marxist economic theories of production and distribution as beyond the author's concern, the article identified three fundamental principles of Bolshevism: overturning militarism, overthrowing the privileged class (*teshu jieji* 特殊阶级), and ending private property. Its aim was "equality, happiness, justice and humanity." Despite this rather naive understanding of Bolshevism, the article concluded on a surprising note: the way to avoid Bolshevism was to build a secure, free, egalitarian, and democratic China. At this stage, in the summer of 1920, the *Shaanxi Clarion* was still introducing Bolshevism as a radical path to be avoided through the introduction of democratic reforms.¹⁵

By the summer of 1922, *Common Progress* was acting more like a front for the CCP. In July, it reprinted the June 15, 1922, declaration of the party. This declaration, coming after the party had joined Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party in a united front, identified the Communist Party as the "vanguard of the proletariat" but stressed the need to work with democratic forces since the proletariat was not yet mature enough to take power. The concrete measures that the journal proposed were very much in line with progressive intellectual opinion and Nationalist Party orthodoxy: tariff reform and the abolition of extraterritoriality, elimination of the warlords, universal suffrage, freedom of speech and assembly, progressive taxation, and equal rights for women.¹⁶ Even while celebrating the sixth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, *Common Progress* declared, "Of course China's problems are not the same as Russia's problems; and we absolutely cannot say that what they did is what we should do."¹⁷ At this point, the Russian Revolution was an inspiration, not a model.

If there was one point that divided Communists and Nationalists, it was the issue of class struggle. *Common Progress* was filled with discussions of class, but they bore little resemblance to Marxist classes defined by the relations of production. Li Zizhou published a poem in 1923 in honor of the railway workers killed when the northern warlords suppressed their strike in the infamous "February 7

Incident.” It opened with the line “The class war has begun,” but the class he referred to was not the proletariat but “the class of common people” (*pingmin jieji* 平民阶级).¹⁸ A 1924 article titled “Class Struggle and Class Consciousness” referred to popular discussions of the “armed class” and the “unarmed class.” On the one hand, this reflected a common preoccupation with the fight against militarism; on the other hand, the reference to an “unarmed class” (*wuqiang jieji* 无枪阶级) was a pun that put intellectuals in the place of the “proletariat” (*wuchan jieji* 无产阶级).¹⁹ This commitment to intellectual primacy was most explicit in a notable article by Liu Tianzhang, a founder of the Society for Common Progress, one of the most prolific contributors to its journal, a later Communist, and soon a martyr of the revolution. Imagining Shaanxi after the expulsion of a hated warlord, he proposed a “regency of the intellectual class” (*zhishi jieji shezheng* 知识阶级摄政) and later described the emerging world as “the age of intellectual dictatorship” (*zhishi jieji zhuanzheng shidai* 知识阶级专政时代).²⁰

Over time, these young radicals recognized that students and intellectuals alone could not transform China. But their vision was still far from a rigorous Marxism. In 1925, the Second Congress of the Society for Common Progress identified China’s “two big classes”: “One is the imperialists and their warlord tools, the running dogs of the warlords, the politicians and officials, evil gentry and corrupt functionaries, and all evil powers combined to form the ruling class. The other [class] is the mass majority oppressed by this ruling class: the peasants, workers and small merchants, the ruled class.”²¹ This was a very broad conception of “class,” essentially dividing the world between the imperialists and their warlord allies on the one hand, and the broad mass of the Chinese people on the other. It reminds us of Mao Zedong’s early article “The Great Union of the Popular Masses.”²² More importantly, it coincided with the Nationalist Party’s commitment to a broad popular movement against the twin ills of warlordism and imperialism.

REFORMING A BACKWARD PROVINCE

In the respects just enumerated, the young radicals who would soon lead the Communist Party in Shaanxi were much like early Communists elsewhere: young male patriots, exposed in the coastal cities to May Fourth ideals of science and democracy, opponents of autocracy, militarism, and imperialism, inspired by the Russian Revolution but not entirely clear about what Marxism-Leninism meant, and enthusiastic supporters of a revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen and backed by the Communist Party. In other respects, their concerns and convictions were very much shaped by the specific conditions of their province.

No stereotype was more pervasive than the isolation and backwardness of Shaanxi, and indeed of China’s entire Northwest. The *Shaanxi Clarion* compared progress in the rest of China to Shaanxi, “far in the west, with transport inconvenient and news sparse. The place is so dreary, the people so antiquated and

stubborn, there is no one to promote the new culture or new ideas.”²³ An article on “the shame of Shaanxi” attributed the province’s conservative culture to “inconvenient communication and the lack of external stimulation.”²⁴ To overcome this isolation, a railway linking Xi’an to the coast had been planned since the late Qing, but it would not be completed until December 1934. Foreigners also referred to the “old and isolated province of Shensi” and observed that from Beijing it took longer to reach Xi’an than London.²⁵ Isolated in the interior, Shaanxi was left behind while others forged ahead, and the sense of despair among its youth was palpable: “Our Shaanxi is in a remote area, far from those [new] tides [of learning], and life still follows the old ways. If things go on like this, not only will we be unable to compete with the West, we won’t even be able to catch up with other provinces.”²⁶

The cause that aroused the most passion among these young intellectuals was opposition to the warlords who ruled their province. Anti-warlord sentiment was certainly not unique to Shaanxi: it was a pervasive theme of May Fourth writings. Warlords represented a new military class that offended Chinese traditions of civilian rule, frustrated the new intellectuals’ ambitions for political leadership, and contravened global opposition to militarism in the wake of World War I.²⁷ In Shaanxi, the first object of their criticism was Chen Shufan, the military officer and Society of Brothers member who had joined the 1911 uprising at the last moment, then risen to power by ingratiating himself with Yuan Shikai and his warlord successors. Though Chen was a Shaanxi native, his harsh rule was widely resented by progressive intellectuals.²⁸ The early 1920s brought a prolonged and bitter campaign against Liu Zhenhua, the Henan warlord who dominated Shaanxi from the fall of 1921. This movement combined righteous intellectual opposition to the “armed class” with a parochial commitment to provincial rule by Shaanxi men.²⁹ There was broad support for self-government, and while the activists wanted to import new ideas to lead their “backward” province forward, they did not want political leadership to come from outsiders. Routinely condemned as a “Henan bandit warlord,” Liu was blamed for the incessant conflict among the province’s petty local warlords, the promotion of opium cultivation for tax revenue, the corruption of officialdom, and the decline in social order. He came to represent everything that was wrong with Shaanxi under warlord rule.³⁰

In China’s coastal provinces, change was in the air: the spread of new ideas from the May Fourth movement, educational reform, improvements in communication, new municipal governance, and even a burst of industrial activity while Europe was still recovering from World War I. Meanwhile, in Shaanxi, things seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. Commentators noted three things that left their province worse than under the empire: warlords, opium, and bandits. The 1911 Revolution brought a massive increase in the size of the military, as Shaanxi revolutionaries fought Qing loyalists from Henan to the east and Gansu to the west. When bands from the Society of Brothers seized power in the counties, Shaanxi was consumed by competing military satraps, each seeking to secure and

expand its base. Needing funds, these local militarists increased taxes. The opium tax was the most profitable, as the late Qing efforts at opium prohibition were reversed and warlords mandated opium production for its tax revenue, resulting in widespread cultivation in the best-irrigated fields.³¹

The spread of banditry was another corrosive consequence of warlord rule. The process began with the fall of the Qing in 1911, but the size of bandit gangs and the severity of their attacks increased in the 1920s. In the constant battles between competing warlords, defeated soldiers either joined a bandit gang or abandoned their weapons and fled, a choice that made guns available to outlaw gangs. Bandits preyed on commerce, thus retarding economic development, and made it difficult for students to travel to Beijing, enhancing the province's isolation from modern influences.³² A long and persuasive article in *Common Progress* on "the bandits of Shaanxi" argued that bandits had been rare under the Qing. Largely concentrated in the Huanglong mountains north of the Wei River valley, they had rarely attacked innocent villagers.³³ Foreigners traveling through Shaanxi before the 1911 Revolution agreed. In 1908–9, an American surveying party passing through northern Shaanxi reported that in the hills south of Yan'an, where occasional robberies had once occurred, an improved road and a nearby garrison had eliminated the problem.³⁴ The *Common Progress* article attributed the republican era banditry to the "uneducated revolutionaries" and Society of Brothers thugs (*liumang*) who had led the 1911 Revolution. To an earlier generation of revolutionaries, the Society of Brothers was a popular force to overthrow Manchu rule. Now the Society represented poorly educated, culturally conservative, and unruly elements who welcomed their bandit Brothers into the army. The result, however, was that "the more you pacify, the more bandits there are." Unpaid soldiers would mutiny, occupy a town, then await pacification and a path to official recognition, increased funding, and promotion in the regular army. Others would observe this practice and "see becoming a bandit as a road to wealth and position." Sometimes decent law-abiding peasants joined a bandit gang to gain advantage in a local feud; and unemployed former students might "see bandit gangs as a disbursement office." In the end, officials were responsible for Shaanxi's banditry: "If bandits were not protected and nourished by officials and armed by officials, the bandit scourge would not spread without end."³⁵ A foreign traveler had a similar analysis: bandits in Shaanxi were "mostly ex-soldiers and Ko Lao Hui men [Society of Brothers], and are composed of the same material as the provincial troops, with whom they exchange roles from time to time."³⁶

As we shall see, a later generation of Communists would again view bandits as a revolutionary force to be harnessed; but the *Common Progress* radicals saw them as a plague on the people. Their solution was not so different from that of the late Qing: to "arouse upright gentry to organize militia and seek a path to local self-government."³⁷ Unfortunately, to raise a militia, the best option was often to recruit the bandit gang that had occupied a town to await "pacification." Brigands had so

entered the fabric of Shaanxi politics and society that *tufei* was a term routinely applied to one's opponents, and "bandit" can be a misleading translation. By and large, these were not Robin Hood bands hiding in the woods. They occupied villages and towns in bands that might number in the hundreds. Often better-armed and more determined fighters than local militia, they could be a formidable military force. When they supported themselves by collecting protection money from the local population, they were not so different from a tax-collecting local warlord. In any event, they were most surely a part of the "armed class" and a force that the radical intellectuals opposed.

In this grim context of warlords, opium, and bandits, the new schools springing up in Shaanxi became the primary force for change and flash points of conflict with the authorities. Once they finished their studies in Beijing and other coastal cities, progressive students were reluctant to take jobs in a provincial administration they so bitterly opposed.³⁸ The new schools provided a refuge, often under the protection of sympathetic local elites. Students and progressive teachers were constantly at odds with conservatives in the education establishment, and student strikes abounded. Naturally, most new schools were in the Wei River valley, especially in Xi'an and Sanyuan, the commercial and cultural center north of the river. But Shaanbei had modern schools in the richer and better educated northeast of the province.

In 1916, Jing Yuexiu was appointed commander of the garrison in Yulin, a post that he held until he died in 1936, shot when his pistol dropped and discharged while he was relaxing with his opium pipe. Jing was a military school graduate from a prosperous merchant family in Pucheng in Guanzhong, a member of the late Qing provincial assembly who qualified not from any academic degree but from his family's wealth. His younger brother had studied in Japan and returned to found the Shaanxi branch of the Revolutionary Alliance. Well connected to both revolutionaries and Society of Brothers leaders of the 1911 Revolution, Jing Yuexiu distinguished himself in defense of the new regime and in 1916 was appointed to command in Yulin. For twenty years, he served as the "local emperor" (*tuhuangdi*) of Shaanbei, settling disputes with the Mongols, hunting bandits, and taxing opium fields to support his army. He promoted local education, industry, and military modernization. Although Jing would later become a fierce anti-Communist, in the early 1920s his support of the Nationalist Party and promotion of local education, industry, and military modernization made him an ally of the early progressives.³⁹

Yulin Middle School, established by Jing Yuexiu to serve all twenty-three counties of Shaanbei, was an early center of radical activism. Du Bincheng, from a prominent gentry family in neighboring Mizhi, returned from Beijing Higher Normal School to reform education in Yulin, first as education director and after 1918 as principal of Yulin Middle School. In the early 1920s, he would hire both Wei Yechou and Li Zizhou as teachers. Among their students would be two men who later led the guerrilla movement in Shaanbei: Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang.

When Gao Gang, the most prominent Shaanbei leader of the wartime period and a national leader until purged in 1953, was kicked out of his local school for leading a protest against "slavish education," Du Bincheng took him in at Yulin Middle School.⁴⁰ Wei Yechou's teaching position in Yulin would soon be ended by conservative opposition; but in 1924 the provincial Fourth Normal School was established in Suide, the second relatively prosperous political center in northeast Shaanxi, and Li Zizhou (himself a Suide native) was named principal. Protected by a sympathetic magistrate, Li promoted the Society for Common Progress and the Nationalist Party among his students and used them to recruit a smaller elite group into the Communist Party.⁴¹

In the 1920s, under Li Zizhou's influence, Suide became the center of progressive activism in northern Shaanxi. In general, party organizers from outside the region found it hopelessly backward, "two to three centuries behind the southeast provinces."⁴² It did not seem a promising base for revolution. Repeating the old shibboleths, they wrote that "in Shaanbei, the land is barren and the people few; most peasants' enthusiasm for revolution is behind Hanzhong [southern Shaanxi] or Guanzhong."⁴³ But Suide was a cultural center in the region, with a local elite of liberal leanings, prohibiting opium and gambling and allowing young women to cut their hair, wear skirts, and walk the streets to school. The local party looked to Li Dazhao in Beijing for leadership, and in addition to Li Zizhou, the Peking University librarian sent several students to teach and organize there. At Suide Normal, Li Zizhou openly taught Marxist texts and strongly supported Sun Yat-sen's program of alliance with Russia. The local military was small but supportive, and Communist officers soon commanded most of the units. Communist control of the educational establishment was critical, and the party was able to appoint its members to teaching positions in local primary and middle schools.⁴⁴ Through the schools they promoted cultural issues popular with the young: opposing foot-binding and arranged marriages, supporting young women who chose to bob their hair. Conservative teachers who continued to insist on traditional virtues of obedience and reverence to ancient wisdom were a favorite target of student protests. These same issues, however, reflected a certain isolation from the great mass of peasants, and when students attacked "superstition" in local temples, many villagers organized "spirit soldiers" (*shenbing* 神兵) to resist.⁴⁵

By late 1926, both Wei Yechou and Li Zizhou had left northern Shaanxi. Though radical activity and peasant organizing continued in the counties around Suide, the center of cultural conflict shifted to the more developed educational system in the Wei River valley. In the area around Xi'an, students engaged in repeated protests and strikes against conservative administrators, Confucian education, prohibitions on young women's new haircuts, and warlord attacks on students; over such national issues as the Washington Conference and Japanese aggression in Manchuria; for the National Congress promoted by Sun Yat-sen in 1925; and in mourning of Sun's death in the spring of that year.⁴⁶

Although party history accounts describe massive protests led by Communist activists in the student movement, contemporary records paint a different picture. The first central party agents arrived in 1922 from Wuhan, representing the Socialist Youth Corps (Zhongguo shehui zhuyi qingniantuan 中国社会主义青年团). They reported in 1924 that they were unable to operate openly in “bleak and sunless Shaanxi.”⁴⁷ Dependent on the Center for financial support, they repeatedly appealed for funds.⁴⁸ All of their activities were based in the schools, and progress required the leadership of the few Communist teachers.⁴⁹ Even in the schools, Communist numbers were miniscule, and the party was more successful in dominating student organizations than in reaching the mass of students.⁵⁰ They faced competition from anarchists on the left and Nationalist Party conservatives on the right.⁵¹ Even those sympathetic to communism felt the country was not ready for it, and they fully supported only the Guomindang's program of national revolution.⁵² In early 1925, Xi'an had two competing Socialist Youth cells of only a dozen members each. They distrusted each other deeply, especially the non-student members whose loose morals led to suspicions of “hooliganism” (*mangqi* 氓气). The straitlaced Socialist Youth leaders were offended when members of the rival clique watched operas, visited prostitutes, or smoked opium.⁵³ Obviously, the early progressives' commitment to personal virtue continued in the formative period of the Shaanxi party. In northern Shaanxi, without the leadership of committed teachers, even when students “awakened” to the new culture, this only meant that they were “drunk with maudlin poetry and thoughts of love.”⁵⁴

To the extent that leftist students and intellectuals gained influence in Shaanxi, it was through their ties to the Nationalist Party and connections to local elites with power and influence. The journal *Shaanxi Clarion* listed Du Bincheng in Yulin and the Nationalist Party veteran Yu Youren in Sanyuan as distributors, providing excellent cover for its radical ideas.⁵⁵ Du Bincheng would soon leave Yulin and enter the entourage of Shaanxi warlord Yang Hucheng, where he would maintain contacts with and offer assistance to beleaguered party members. Yang himself had clear leftist sympathies. After his father was executed by a Qing magistrate, he had joined the 1911 Revolution and then a bandit army claiming to “rob the rich and aid the poor.” He was protected by Jing Yuexiu and befriended by Wei Yechou when recovering in Yulin from defeat in Guanzhong, and he became one of the militarists most sympathetic to the party's leftist agenda, providing funds for Wei Yechou's radical journal in Xi'an.⁵⁶ Yu Youren was another critical patron. A Sanyuan native from a merchant family of some means, he had passed the provincial *juren* examination in the late Qing before running afoul of the authorities for anti-Manchu sentiments, then went to Shanghai, where he edited several influential newspapers for Sun Yat-sen's Revolutionary Alliance in 1910–12. In the early years of the Republic, Sun sent him back to Shaanxi to establish a northern base for his revolutionary movement, and in 1918 Yu commanded the National Pacification Army (Jingguojun 靖国军) together with Hu Jingyi, a veteran of

the 1911 Revolution. The National Pacification Army would control fourteen counties in the Wei River valley, concentrated on the northern side of the river and centered in Yu's home county, Sanyuan.⁵⁷

Sanyuan lay on the fertile Guanzhong plain, its fields watered by a series of canals built as early as the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).⁵⁸ Lying on the road to Gansu, it was, in the words of one Western visitor, "a city of great commercial importance."⁵⁹ More importantly, it had more and better schools than any place in the province—indeed, under the Qing, the provincial education commissioner was based there, not in the provincial capital.⁶⁰ In the 1920s, when most counties had at best a single middle school, Sanyuan had a teachers' college, two middle schools, a vocational school, and a girls' school. With active student unions, student publications, lots of extracurricular activities, and a sympathetic local government, it attracted the best and most politically active students from all the surrounding counties.⁶¹ In 1925, when Xi'an students got into a fight with the local warlord, went on strike, and then had their student union suppressed, Wei Yechou led the activists to Sanyuan, where they continued their protest until the unpopular warlord was driven from the province.⁶² With a history of connections to Sun Yat-sen's revolution and the protection of the National Pacification Army, Sanyuan provided a particularly fertile ground for revolutionary organizing. In Sanyuan, one report boasted, half of the students supported Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles and admired the Communist Youth members' promotion of Sun's program. Another quarter were troublemakers who opposed everything; and the final group was apolitical bookworms.⁶³

Communists played a vital role in the Shaanxi revolution of the 1920s, but the revolution they were organizing was a national revolution, and they operated in the context of a united front with the Nationalist Party. This united front, furthermore, had a peculiar nature in which members of the CCP joined the Nationalist Party and acted in its name. As one contemporary document put it, "In all our work, in the military or among peasants, we operate in the name of the K.M.T. [*sic*]."⁶⁴ In fact, the Nationalist Party apparatus in Shaanxi was largely built by Communists, acting on a Center directive that "wherever there is no Guomindang organization, the Communist Party should assist in establishing it."⁶⁵ At the provincial level, a Communist edited the Guomindang party paper; Li Zizhou headed its organization department; and Wei Yechou was responsible for propaganda and a delegate to the Second Nationalist Party Congress. Indeed, though Wei is always claimed as a leader and soon a martyr of the Communist movement, he was a determined practitioner of what would later be condemned as an "opportunist" line of working through the Nationalists. It is often difficult to determine from his actions where his primary loyalties lay.⁶⁶

An internal party document reported the consensus of early CCP members in 1925:

We can see that [activist youth] are very much in favor of communism, but they fear it is difficult to put it into practice. We must realize that our organization can

only spread its message secretly and cannot reveal its operations. We should maintain covert relations with similar organizations domestically and internationally and work together for future realization [of our ideals]. Our present actions must be none other than working and propagandizing for the national revolution, carrying out our program through other organizations. Indeed, the recent sudden revival of the Nationalist Party and the propaganda on its behalf are entirely due to our party's activists' joining it.⁶⁷

The result, however, was that whatever Communist activists may have contributed to this early stage of the revolution, and however much they pledged allegiance to and sought financial support from the CCP Center domestically and the Comintern internationally, the public face of the revolution in the 1920s was a national revolution under the flag of the Guomindang.

The aroused youth in the new schools would provide much of the leadership and energy for this revolution. By the mid-1920s, however, it was clear that intellectuals alone could not transform China. The revolution would require military force. For this, the Nationalists had established the Whampoa Military Academy in Guangzhou, with financial support, armaments, and instructors provided by the Soviet Union. Balancing this Communist influence was the academy's commandant, Chiang Kai-shek. In the name of the Nationalist Party, such Shaanxi Communists as Liu Zhidan were sent there for training, and in all eighty students were sent from Sanyuan.⁶⁸ The revolution would also require a popular base. For this, in Guangzhou, the Nationalists founded the Peasant Movement Training Institute (Nongmin yundong jiangxisuo 农民运动讲习所), briefly headed by Mao Zedong and designed to train young cadres to enter the countryside to organize peasants. In a predominantly rural province like Shaanxi, all acknowledged that the driving force of revolution would come from the peasantry. Sanyuan sent a number of young men to train for this task in Guangzhou.⁶⁹

All this activity was further energized by the wave of anti-imperialist sentiment that swept the country following the May 30th (1925) Incident, in which British-led police shot unarmed student protesters in Shanghai. The revolutionary movement in Shaanxi was certainly gaining strength when in 1926 Chiang Kai-shek launched the Northern Expedition to unify the country under the Nationalist Party banner. In the wake of that military expedition, the peasant movement spread rapidly in the Yangzi valley, especially in Hunan, where Mao Zedong was a key leader.⁷⁰ The process in Shaanxi was similar. There the arrival of Feng Yuxiang and his Guominjun carried the revolutionary movement to a new stage.

FENG YUXIANG AND THE NATIONAL REVOLUTION IN SHAANXI

Feng Yuxiang—famed as the “Christian warlord” who allegedly baptized his troops with a fire hose—was a relatively progressive militarist, who sought to train and

discipline his troops, imparting a commitment to ethical behavior and a concern for popular welfare. He gained celebrity in 1924 when he turned on his commanders, captured the national capital, drove the retired Qing emperor from his palace in Beijing, and renamed his army the Guominjun (National People's Army). His growing power and relatively progressive policies attracted the attention of the Soviet Union, which was searching for a North China ally to balance and coordinate with the Nationalist Party in the south, and Feng began receiving arms from the Soviets. Soon, however, his army suffered setbacks and was reduced to a base in Chahar and Suiyuan, present-day Inner Mongolia. Seeking to revive his fortunes, Feng traveled to the Soviet Union in the spring of 1926 and at the same time dispatched emissaries to Guangzhou to discuss an alliance with the Nationalist Party. On the way to Moscow he was joined by Yu Youren, who promoted the alliance with the Nationalists and, presumably, Shaanxi as a suitable base for Feng's troops. When Feng returned in August, he was accompanied by Soviet military advisers and Chinese Communists who had been studying in Moscow, including Deng Xiaoping. A tortuous supply line was established to bring military equipment through Mongolia. Meanwhile, Feng was added to the National Party's Central Executive Committee, and in September a grand ceremony was staged at Wuyuan on the Inner Mongolian steppe, in which Feng swore his troops to the ideals of Sun Yat-sen's revolution and friendship with such countries as supported it—namely the Soviet Union.⁷¹

In the fall of 1926, Feng led his army on a rapid march through Gansu to Shaanxi, relieving an extended siege of Xi'an by the warlord Liu Zhenhua, who had returned to the province in the spring, and driving Liu's army back to his native Henan. By early 1927, the entire Wei River valley was under the command of an army allied with the Nationalist Party and the Soviet Union. After years of struggling in the darkness of a "backward" region, suddenly there was hope for a "revolutionary Northwest" far from the reach of the imperialist powers.⁷² With a direct overland link to the Soviet Union, Shaanxi emerged as the northern front of the National Revolution, balancing the power of Guangzhou, where, in the wake of Sun Yat-sen's death, right- and left-wing forces were engaged in an increasingly bitter struggle for control of the Nationalist Party.

In Shaanxi, leftists played a prominent role in the new regime. After his trip to Moscow, Yu Youren was regarded as a sincere leftist, and he assumed the post of Shaanxi governor. Yu quoted Lenin in his writings, circulated Leninist pamphlets, and supported workers' rights and world revolution. One pamphlet, "Communism and the Communist Party," was openly sold in party and army bookstores.⁷³ A Sun Yat-sen Academy was established on the grounds of Northwest University to train cadres for the new regime. It was headed by several Communists, including Li Zizhou.⁷⁴ A parallel Sun Yat-sen Military Academy was set up for the army, and here Communist influence was even more pronounced. It was headed by Shi Kexuan, a Moscow-returned Communist, its political department was led

by another Communist, and Deng Xiaoping, Li Zizhou, Liu Zhidan, and several Soviet officers joined the instructional staff.⁷⁵ The academy's cadets, including the later Shaanbei leader Gao Gang, would provide an important leftist military force, but the Communists also inserted themselves into Feng's National People's Army, where 80–90 percent of the political officers were said to be Communist Party members.⁷⁶ Two commanders who would later have repeated interactions with the Communists, Yang Hucheng and Deng Baoshan, were regarded as particularly progressive and open to the party's message.⁷⁷ Propaganda work was stressed, and Communists played leading roles in editing the Nationalist newspapers and journals in Shaanxi.⁷⁸ The party's success in penetrating the new government was so pronounced that it was later criticized as overreach: "The party led comrades to occupy government offices as though they could carry out C.P. [*sic*] dictatorship."⁷⁹ Careerism was a threat to the party's revolutionary mission: "Comrades all race to work in the government, are divorced from the masses, and see the party as a rice bowl, a road to official position."⁸⁰

As they sought to direct the revolution in Shaanxi, the Communists' most urgent task was party-building: increasing party membership and improving discipline. In February 1927, there were only 338 members in the Shaanxi CCP.⁸¹ In March came a call to increase this number to 1,200 within three months, of whom two-thirds were to be peasants.⁸² Soon the target was increased to 3,000–4,000 members.⁸³ In fact, membership increased to 2,170 by May (plus roughly 200 in the army), of whom 52 percent were intellectuals, 30 percent peasants, 4 percent workers, 5 percent police or soldiers, and 8.5 percent others. There were only 58 women in the party, all "intellectuals" (probably students).⁸⁴ The Communist Youth League saw a similar increase, from 525 to 2,400 members.⁸⁵ But the party wanted more than just numbers, it wanted disciplined revolutionaries. Firm discipline and secret work should replace the "romantic" behavior of the past.⁸⁶ The Suide branch was criticized for lax organization that allowed a spy to enter, and for being "ideologically rather simple-minded."⁸⁷ The criticism was no doubt warranted, for the Suide members had mobilized around such cultural issues as opposition to foot-binding and arranged marriage, and to the "superstitious" practices of peasant society. In later memoirs, Communists recruited at this time recall being invited to join the Communist Party and having to ask what it was. One recruit from this era was introduced to the term *soviet* (*suweiai* 苏维埃) and was unsure if it was a person or a place. These youths were plainly joining the party with little knowledge of its basic doctrines. What inspired them was the reputation of the local party leader: personal connections and character were more important than ideology.⁸⁸ The provincial authorities were not pleased. The Weinan committee was accused of clique struggles and localism that represented a "counter-revolutionary attack on party discipline."⁸⁹ It was not easy to turn the loose group of friends who had gathered in the Society for Common Progress into a disciplined revolutionary organization.⁹⁰

The party made the efforts required of a proletarian vanguard to organize workers in Xi'an,⁹¹ but the real focus of activism was the peasantry. The notion that it was only Mao Zedong and his 1927 "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan" that turned the party's attention to the peasantry is a myth. The Shaanxi provincial committee recognized that "the Chinese Revolution is now in the peasant revolution stage."⁹² By 1927, the activists sent to the Peasant Movement Training Institute in Guangzhou had returned, and local institutes of the same name were established in Sanyuan and in Shaanbei's Anding County. Students were trained to go into the surrounding countryside to organize peasant associations. The spread of these associations reflected proximity to the schools where the party was most active: Sanyuan and surrounding counties, Weinan in the eastern Guanzhong region, and Suide and surrounding counties in Shaanbei. In all, it was claimed, 370,000 peasants were enrolled (over 200,000 in another document), though the extent of these peasants' revolutionary commitment is debatable.⁹³ As elsewhere in China, it was young students, many from rural families, who led the effort. Party operatives found that rural teachers were among the most successful peasant organizers, and in counties like Anding every rural branch was headed by a teacher.⁹⁴ Keeping in mind that it required some family resources to afford a middle school education, most of these men came from families of at least moderate means. The movement that they promoted was appropriately limited. In the villages, activists were encouraged to join with rich peasants and "enlightened gentry" to oppose local bullies or bandit gangs. "In the current peasant movement, we cannot raise overly radical slogans, such as opposing miscellaneous taxes or participation in government." Organizers were specifically reminded to support Feng Yuxiang and Yu Youren.⁹⁵

The injunction to support Feng and Yu was particularly important, for it reflected the fact that the peasant movement in Shaanxi was an integral part of the National Revolution. Just as histories of the Chinese Revolution link the Hunan peasant movement to Mao Zedong and his later rise in the Communist Party, so do histories of Shaanxi focus on the leading role of the Communist Party in the peasant movement there. That leading role is undeniable, but it is equally true that the peasant movement was an integral part of the united front policies and was carried out in the name of the Nationalist Party. When a peasant congress was held in a Shaanbei county's Confucian temple, the portraits on the wall were of Sun Yat-sen and Lenin.⁹⁶ The peasant associations everywhere relied on the active support of local governments and the military. The head of the provincial education bureau was a Communist, and he was able to appoint leftists as county education officials, who in turn appointed Communists and other progressives to the schools that became the local centers for peasant organizing.⁹⁷ The support of Feng Yuxiang's army was also important. Feng specifically ordered his troops to assist in the establishment of peasant associations in their areas of operation.⁹⁸ The CCP would later complain that their own efforts paled

in comparison to Feng's: "Old Feng used the [1927] May Day celebrations to swear to support the interest of workers and peasants and to advance the world revolution. He went all out to steal the limelight as a Red. In contrast, our propaganda seemed very ordinary. When we put out our own leaflets, there was little response. Obviously, the minds of the masses have been numbed by Old Feng's Red rhetoric."⁹⁹ The peasant movement spread as rapidly as it did precisely because it was protected and supported by the authorities—and especially by those who controlled the guns.

As elsewhere in China, the peasants, once aroused, were not easily restrained. Both Communist and Nationalist propaganda attacked "local strongmen and evil gentry" (*tuhao lieshen*).¹⁰⁰ In Shaanxi, bandit gangs, which were often disbanded or unpaid soldiers who preyed on the rural population, were another target of the peasant movement. To confront these local opponents, the peasant movement organized self-defense forces (*ziweidui*), though it was rare for these organizations to have more than a few firearms, usually supplied by sympathetic soldiers in Feng's army.¹⁰¹ The whole purpose of the movement was to empower peasants to assert their rights against those who oppressed them. Above all, they confronted those who extracted money: tax collectors. Surcharges on the land tax and expansion of various new taxes—on salt, meat, flour, tobacco, tea, lumber, and especially on opium—were some of the most hated aspects of warlord rule.¹⁰² Accordingly, at the height of the peasant movement, tax offices were targeted and records burned, and tax collectors were beaten and sometimes killed. The "evil gentry" who were targeted were often those responsible for tax collection.¹⁰³ In general, the Shaanxi peasant movement of the 1920s conforms to the pattern identified by Lucien Bianco: it was not a class struggle of peasants against landlords but a struggle of peasants against an extractive state.¹⁰⁴

The party's injunction against attacking "miscellaneous taxes" was in vain. It was precisely these taxes that the peasants hated. But in opposing them, they threatened the revenues of Feng Yuxiang's regime. He was willing to tolerate this for a time. Even after Chiang Kai-shek turned on the CCP with the Shanghai massacre of April 1927, Feng Yuxiang wavered and seemed to lean toward the left Guomindang regime in Wuhan. But in June he met with Chiang in Xuzhou and correctly read the political winds. He threw in his lot with the Generalissimo, banned the peasant movement, and closed the Communist-edited publications.¹⁰⁵ The radical stage of the National Revolution in Shaanxi came to an abrupt end. Feng sent the Soviet advisers in his army back to Russia and expelled the leading Communists from Shaanxi, some of whom he also sent to Russia. His was not a bloody purge on the Shanghai model—in an oft-cited phrase, the Communists were "politely escorted from the province" (*lisong chujing* 礼送出境)—but it drove the party underground and left its remaining operatives vulnerable to elimination. The revolution in Shaanxi had entered a new stage.¹⁰⁶

THE PARTY ON ITS OWN

The early growth of the revolutionary movement in Shaanxi was fundamentally linked to the united front between the Nationalist and Communist parties. That unity did not end overnight—not with Chiang Kai-shek's April coup in Shanghai, not with Feng Yuxiang's change of heart in June. Many Communists still hoped to work with the left wing of the Guomindang in Wuhan. An emergency meeting of the party Center met in that city on August 7, 1927, with the new Comintern representative, Besso Lominadze, firmly in charge. The absent party leader, Chen Duxiu, was accused of right opportunism and blamed for the party's defeat at the hands of the Chiang Kai-shek. Nonetheless, the party still hoped to work with the left wing of the Guomindang, organizing uprisings in its name. The old leadership was also accused of unduly restraining the peasant movement, and the party now called for "systematic, planned peasant insurrections, organized on as wide a scale as possible." It recognized, however, that insurrections would require party-controlled military forces, and in this context Mao Zedong issued his famous dictum that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." The party now called for active propaganda on behalf of rural revolution, with soviets added to the agenda of the Communist Party in November 1927.¹⁰⁷

Li Zizhou had been sent from Xi'an to attend the emergency meeting, but he arrived in Wuhan after it had adjourned.¹⁰⁸ His oral report to the Center was remarkably frank and obviously prepared without prior knowledge of the Center's new line. According to Li, the Shaanxi party was 80 percent intellectuals. Having previously dealt largely with local magistrates, members had difficulty adjusting to mass work. Furthermore, the opportunities for peasant mobilization were limited. In the Wei River heartland, 80 percent of the peasants owned their own land. Their main complaint was excessive taxes and the usurious loans needed to pay them. In Shaanbei, there was plenty of open land, and taxes were again the main complaint—especially the opium tax. Even in the peasant associations, most members were owner-cultivators and unmoved by overly radical slogans. With regard to Feng Yuxiang, Li cautioned against opposing him right away, urging work within the Guomindang and the Shaanxi government.¹⁰⁹

The Center would have none of this, and Li was roundly criticized. Working with Feng Yuxiang and his army was wrong, just a "game of warlords and politicians." Dismissing Li's local knowledge of land distribution in Shaanxi, it insisted on land confiscation and a "land to the tiller" slogan. While Li claimed that Shaanxi bandits lacked any sense of justice (*yiqi* 义气) and that "in Shaanxi, you could say that there is no difference between soldiers and bandits," the Center insisted that "most bandits are poor suffering peasants" and claimed the Hunan experience had demonstrated that "rascals and thugs [*dipi liumang* 地痞流氓] are brave peasants."¹¹⁰ The defense of the radical actions of rascals and thugs had been one of the controversial portions of Mao Zedong's report on the peasant

movement in Hunan, and Mao had been a key participant in the August 7 emergency meeting.¹¹¹ Now his view prevailed in the Center's response to Li Zizhou and the Shaanxi party.

Soon after Li's return, the newly formed Shaanxi-Gansu Provincial Party Committee held its first enlarged meeting on September 26. The local party was in turmoil, and defeatism was widespread. Between five and six hundred members left the party when Feng Yuxiang withdrew his support of the revolution, and in September the membership was down to 1,681.¹¹² In the summer months, peasants were busy in the fields and students had left school for vacation, bringing rural organizing to a halt.¹¹³ In northern Shaanxi, the warlord Jing Yuexiu had turned against the revolution in July, suppressed party work, temporarily closed the radical schools in Suide and Yulin, and brought enough pressure on the radical students and teachers to halt most party activity. Once one of the strongest party branches, the Suide party was now accused of careerism, and a split broke out between student and teacher factions. Other than small-scale underground work, much of the party's revolutionary movement in Shaanbei collapsed.¹¹⁴

The September 1927 meeting of the Shaanxi-Gansu provincial committee initiated a new stage for the party organization in the Northwest. Prior to this, there had been no provincial committee, and local branches had been loosely coordinated. The committee was based in Xi'an, and the inclusion of Gansu in its name was more aspirational than real: Gansu had few party members, most were scattered in the army, and the committee's reports dealt almost exclusively with Shaanxi.¹¹⁵ When Li Zizhou returned with the decision of the August 7 emergency meeting, the new provincial committee accepted it as a "directive of the Comintern" and promised to "absolutely follow the directives of the Center." Dissenters were invited to leave the party.¹¹⁶ The Shaanxi party was moving toward a new era of disciplined operation. Still, it was not entirely clear how best to follow the new line, especially the injunction to continue working with the left Guomindang.

The provincial leaders were acutely conscious of Feng Yuxiang's history of close cooperation with the Soviet Union and were reluctant to oppose him openly.¹¹⁷ When the Center criticized the Shaanxi party for its vacillation on Feng, the local leadership placed its hopes on Yu Youren, still regarded as a reliable leftist. As Yu Youren was the Guomindang's political leader in Shaanxi, and Feng Yuxiang had already left for Henan, this seemed a plausible strategy; but in August, Yu left for Wuhan, and the Shaanxi party lost its last major left Guomindang ally.¹¹⁸ The provincial party leadership was painfully aware of the school-based party's weakness and isolation, describing many members as "hack teachers, small gentry, and petty politicians" with "zero influence among the masses."¹¹⁹ Members were afflicted with a "bookish [*shusheng* 书生] attitude" regarding peasants as backward and ignorant. The Center was particularly critical of the Shaanxi party on this point, and the provincial leadership readily adhered to the new line, endorsing land distribution and a reliance on such previously scorned elements as "Red

Spears, bandits, and thugs.”¹²⁰ In a popular slogan of the day, the party would now “oppose the ways of bookworms and little ladies, promote the spirit of thugs and viragos.”¹²¹ Still, little came of these efforts and the real focus of the party’s revolutionary ambitions was units of the Shaanxi military.

Two officers whom the party regarded as particularly sympathetic were Yang Hucheng and Deng Baoshan. Party members shared similar backgrounds with junior officers in these armies and were able to infiltrate the military through school or other social connections.¹²² Yang Hucheng would play an important role in the later history of Communist-Nationalist relations, releasing Communists from prison when he rose to dominate the province in 1931, and allying with the Northeast warlord Zhang Xueliang to kidnap Chiang Kai-shek in the Xi’an Incident of 1936. In 1927, Yang followed Feng Yuxiang to Henan, and the Shaanxi Communist leader Wei Yechou went with him as political commissar. That collaboration would not last. Wei soon began organizing peasants in neighboring Anhui, then joined an uprising in April 1928 in which he was arrested and executed—one of the early martyrs of the Shaanxi revolution.¹²³ Deng Baoshan, who had been chief of staff to Yu Youren, remained in Shaanxi and welcomed endangered Communists and other leftists into his army.¹²⁴ These sympathetic military officers managed to protect known Communists whom they regarded as progressive patriotic comrades. The party Center, however, wanted uprisings. They got them, but they would be few, short-lived, and insignificant threats to the new regime.

The military risings of 1927–28 were all based in areas where the Communists had had some success organizing during the united front period. The first began in Qingjian, a Shaanbei county separated from Shanxi by the Yellow River, famous for its sweet dates and smooth millstones. Its towns featured opium dens and crafty gamblers, and the population was tough and quick to fight. Qingjian lay just south of Suide, site of the normal school where Li Zizhou, as principal, had built the strongest party branch in Shaanbei. Anding, just west of these two counties, was also a party stronghold. Though based in and growing from the local schools, the party had been quite successful in infiltrating the junior officer corps of the local army.¹²⁵ That is where it placed its hopes. The most promising unit was a brigade, garrisoned in five counties around Qingjian, commanded by Shi Qian, who was a popular type of Shaanxi martial artist; they were swordsmen (*daoke* 刀客) known for their sense of social justice, many of whom had joined the Society of Brothers in the 1911 Revolution.¹²⁶ Shi had enrolled in the army in 1911 and risen through the ranks despite being crippled in an early battle.¹²⁷ He was both a powerful opium dealer and, like other veterans of the 1911 Revolution, a friend of Shaanbei progressives. In the 1920s, he sent one of his officers, Li Xiangjiu, to Beijing, where he lived with Li Zizhou, joining the Society for Common Progress and later the Communist Party. Shi’s son and godson also joined the party. During the radical period in early 1927, Shi welcomed radical student activism and sent his own soldiers to help organize peasant associations. In neighboring Anding, the local garrison was

headed by Xie Zichang, a later leader of the Shaanbei revolution, and he too mobilized students and sent soldiers to organize peasants.¹²⁸

After its September meeting, the provincial committee sent Tang Shu, a Whampoa graduate and Hebei native, to lead an uprising in Qingjian. Jing Yuexiu, the Yulin warlord, suspicious of long-gowned students agitating among his soldiers, invited Shi Jian to his fiftieth birthday party in Yulin and had him assassinated. Li Xiangjiu, by then a battalion commander in Shi's army, hailed from Shi's home county and, to avenge his patron's death, assumed command and led a mutiny on October 12. Xie Zichang's unit from neighboring Anding joined the uprising. A well-armed rebel force of perhaps six to seven hundred men confiscated money and opium from local merchants, then moved south through Yanchang and Yanchuan counties and occupied Yichuan, disarming some troops, executing hostile officers, and confiscating more money and opium, which Tang Shu took to Xi'an to support the provincial committee. The Xi'an-based committee doubted the revolutionary potential of Shaanbei, especially when the Center was urging greater attention to the working class. In the eyes of the provincial committee, "Shaanxi is the most backward province in China; and Shaanbei is the most backward part of the province. It is completely a small peasant economy. The large-scale production of modern industry is something that Shaanbei people have yet to even dream about."¹²⁹ The committee doubted the political maturity of the Shaanbei Communists and wanted the mutinous soldiers to continue south to link up with more politicized troops in the Wei River valley. On Tang's return, his efforts to enforce political orthodoxy quickly sparked conflict with Li Xiangjiu, who preferred to make a deal with other Shaanbei militarists. Soon there was wavering, then opposition and defections among the troops, who had joined the mutiny to avenge their local commander and certainly preferred to remain with their families in Shaanbei rather than follow a stranger to an uncertain fate in Guanzhong. Tang Shu, an outsider and a Whampoa military man, paid little heed to these concerns, or to the local party's desire to mobilize peasant support. His exclusive focus on military tactics proved ill advised. The Yan'an garrison was sent to suppress the revolt, and by January most of the rebels had surrendered. Tang Shu fled south to fight again, Li Xiangjiu abandoned the party's revolutionary movement, and Xie Zichang led a small band to continue guerrilla operations in Shaanbei.¹³⁰

A much larger uprising broke out in early 1928 in the eastern Guanzhong counties of Weinan and Hua-xian. The Wei-Hua Uprising involved both local students and peasants and an army unit under effective Communist control. During the united front period, Communists dominated the Sun Yat-sen Military Academy, with Soviet advisers and Communist instructors. Its cadets, augmented by new recruits, formed a brigade under the academy's commandant, Shi Kexuan. Shi led his troops out of Xi'an with the intent to link up with the Communist-led units in Shaanbei. But Shi was assassinated in July 1927,¹³¹ and soon afterward the effort to lead the Qingjian rebels south to join his army failed as well. Another Communist,

Xu Quanzhong, assumed command. At this time, the Shaanxi party was still trying to put together a coalition of local warlords to oppose Feng Yuxiang.¹³² With this in mind, Xu led his brigade to join the army of a warlord from his native county in southeastern Shaanxi. In the spring of 1928, that force was sent to Shaanxi's eastern border to block the return of Feng's allies. By this time, Xu's army had been joined by Tang Shu, Liu Zhidan, and Xie Zichang, fresh from the failed Qingjian Uprising. They came as representatives of the provincial committee and shared the party's growing skepticism toward Xu's willingness to work with local warlords.¹³³

By early 1928, the party was moving in an increasingly leftist direction. In January, the Center admonished the provincial party that the peasant movement must "change from a peaceful petition movement relying on political influence to fierce direct action against landlords and warlords."¹³⁴ The students in the Weinan-Hua-xian party had been organizing peasants since 1925; there were over five hundred Communists in the region in the fall of 1927; and the party claimed over one thousand in March 1928, of whom 75–80 percent were peasants—"the largest number and the best composition of all branches in the province."¹³⁵ The party was based in the schools, and in a pattern reminiscent of conflicts elsewhere, the education system was marked by competition between conservative and progressive factions.¹³⁶ When the school year opened after the Chinese New Year holiday, a violent dispute broke out in a village outside of Weinan. There, in a converted temple that had been shared by schools of the two factions, the conservatives—emboldened by the collapse of the united front—closed the Communist-run school, fired the teachers, and forced the students to join their school or go home. Fortuitously, the provincial party leaders were just then passing through the county on the way to Shanghai for instructions. On their advice, the local party mobilized older students and teachers from the local middle school to escalate the conflict. A major theme of the National Revolution of the 1920s had been opposition to local strongmen and evil gentry (*tuhao lieshen*); now the Wei-Hua activists proclaimed that "all landowners are strongmen and all gentry are evil."¹³⁷ They attacked the conservative educators, killing two and badly injuring others, one of whom was thrown into a well.¹³⁸ By their own account, the local activists' purpose was to

1. Eliminate the pernicious vestiges of opportunism through extraordinary actions,
2. Cause all comrades to leave party offices and enter the villages,
3. Learn violent action through practice,
4. Through limited action promote a general uprising in all of Weinan.¹³⁹

A sharp government response closed most of the Communist-run schools, but Communist organizing, tax resistance, and a large May Day demonstration kept the movement alive. Despite the local party's determined efforts to mobilize peasants, the origins of the movement and the identity of the key organizers show that



FIGURE 3. Wei-Hua Uprising of May 1928. The center of the photo is filled with children—students at the local school. Their teachers are on the right, in long gowns. (Photo by author from Nanliang Revolutionary Memorial Hall.)

the local party was still a school-based operation. A photo from the time shows mostly students and teachers in long gowns (see figure 3).

With a popular uprising brewing in Wei-Hua, Tang Shu, Liu Zhidan, and Xie Zichang led a force of seven to eight hundred soldiers away from Xu Quanzhong's brigade, which had just suffered a serious defeat from Feng Yuxiang's army advancing from Henan. They proclaimed their band to be the Northwest Worker-Peasant Revolutionary Army (西北工农革命军) and marched to join the Wei-Hua party in a military uprising. Together with the local party, they attacked local elites, killing as many as sixty, and announced their intention to establish a soviet. But night attacks on local elites were not popular; the uprising's timing in the midst of the wheat harvest was ill chosen; and Wei-Hua, at the eastern end of the Guanzhong plain, was on a motor road and close to the regime's center of political and military power. After a month, both the uprising and the local party were crushed with the help of local militia and Red Spears, who, contrary to the Center's expectations, proved to be enemies, not allies, of the revolution. Tang Shu was killed; Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang fled to Xi'an and then Shaanbei to fight another day.¹⁴⁰

The Qingjian and Wei-Hua Uprisings have been given inflated prominence in official histories of the Shaanxi revolution, in part because of the participation of Xie Zichang and Liu Zhidan, the two heroes and martyrs of that revolution.¹⁴¹ Both of these uprisings were hastily and poorly organized efforts, responses to unrealistic calls from the party Center for armed uprisings and the formation of rural soviets. The Communist leaders quarreled over strategy and tactics, and their troops had no particular commitment to a soviet revolution. The local

Communists had established their reputations as progressives on cultural issues and as able defenders of Sun Yat-sen's nationalist revolution, men who had worked together with local military officers and progressive members of the local elite.¹⁴² Transforming their movement into a disciplined Communist Party would still take some doing.

TOWARD A LENINIST PARTY

The Shaanxi-Gansu Provincial Party Committee was only formed in July 1927. It was led by intellectuals from the Society for Common Progress, and its secretary was the Peking University graduate Geng Bingguang. Geng shared the same skepticism toward radical peasant revolution for which Li Zizhou had been criticized in Wuhan, insisting that "Shaanbei peasants truly are backward." He had not been supportive of the radical uprisings and was soon attacked by the aggressive head of the youth league, a future alleged "Trotskyite" whom Geng found "truly obnoxious."¹⁴³ The youth league radicals were more in tune with the party Center, and by early 1928, Geng was replaced as party secretary and expelled from the party.¹⁴⁴ The new leftist leadership vigorously rejected the notion of a "backward Northwest" and endorsed a program of "Red Terror" to combat the Guomindang's White Terror. Under the new policy, the party vowed to "oppose all large and small warlords, arouse war between the masses and the warlords, kill all local strongmen, landlords, and official functionaries, carry out a thorough land revolution, and establish a congress of workers and peasants."¹⁴⁵

This was the line that supported the radical actions of Wei-Hua, and the result was disastrous. In February 1928, the Shaanxi party claimed 2,900 members, two-thirds in the Wei-Hua and Sanyuan areas, where student-organized peasant associations had been most successful.¹⁴⁶ By the spring of 1929, membership had fallen to 1,300, most now in Shaanbei. The Guanzhong party had been decimated, only a dozen or so remaining in Xi'an, a similar number in Hua-xian, and Weinan the strongest branch with 120 members.¹⁴⁷ Defectors informed on their former comrades or enticed them to join the left Guomindang or such now-forgotten progressive groups as the New Party (Xindang 新党) or the Evolution Society (Jinhuashe 进化社). The provincial leadership was forced to hide in gentry-style mansions, divorcing itself from the masses.¹⁴⁸ In late 1928 and again in early 1929, the leadership organs were exposed by defectors, leading to widespread arrests, the second of which captured Li Zizhou, who died in prison in June 1929.¹⁴⁹ Following Wei Yechou's death in 1928 and Geng Bingguang's expulsion from the party, Li Zizhou's demise brought to a close the era of Beijing-trained Society for Common Progress progressives in the Shaanxi party organization. Their policies of cooperation with local elites and leftist members of the Guomindang were no longer welcome, and a new generation of leaders emerged to carry out the line of the party Center and the Communist International.

The old policy of working within the Nationalist Party was condemned as a “parasite policy” (*jisheng zhengce* 寄生政策).¹⁵⁰ “In the past, the Shaanxi party lived completely within the Guomindang. Because everything they did was for the Guomindang, they lacked any independent proletarian political standpoint or mass base. Even now, some party members are nostalgic for their time within the Guomindang and do not want to leave.”¹⁵¹ The new leadership would permit no such collaboration. They even banned membership in the Society for Common Progress, thus losing their front organization and abandoning the progressive public sphere to the opposition.¹⁵² The party would be exclusive, cohesive, and above all disciplined. The new provincial committee complained that before its founding, “We paid too little attention to discipline. There was only individual action, not party action.” Now, with a renewed emphasis on discipline, members regarded as unreliable were expelled.¹⁵³ Some were assassinated, leading to lasting grudges against the perpetrators.¹⁵⁴ Unfortunately, the expulsion or defection of wavering members made the rest of the party vulnerable to arrest following identification by former comrades, and then the choice of death or an extended jail sentence—or they could themselves defect, and many did. As the White Terror threatened party operatives, security and secrecy became a paramount concern. During the united front period, the party could communicate by registered mail.¹⁵⁵ Now they wrote on the back or between the lines of innocuous-looking letters, using a secret disappearing ink provided by the Center in Shanghai.¹⁵⁶ Couriers carried reports and were enjoined to remember addresses and avoid writing them down.¹⁵⁷

The party was being transformed into a close-knit band of professional revolutionaries. This was, after all, a Leninist party, a branch of the Communist International. But the local operatives had been drawn to the party by webs of personal connections and the influence and prestige of progressive teachers. Now those personal webs were being sundered, replaced by organizational imperatives of a different sort. “Party organs are an organization of professional revolutionaries, an organization of proletarian science.”¹⁵⁸ In the fall of 1927, it was reported that 646 individuals—29 percent of Shaanxi’s total party membership—were party workers. The distribution, while surely reflecting the final stages of the united front period, is significant. Forty percent were directly involved in the party’s own operations. The peasant movement (19 percent), the youth movement (12 percent), and workers in the Guomindang (10 percent) got the next priority, with smaller numbers working in the army, government, and on workers’ and women’s issues. By the end of 1927, there should have been no more cadres working in the government or the Guomindang, and presumably most of the others suffered greatly from the purge, concentrating the remainder in communications, propaganda, and organizational work of the party itself (see table 1).

How were these party workers supported? Data on party finances represents one of the blank spots in the voluminous publications on party history. Presumably

TABLE 1 Distribution of Shaanxi Communist Party workers, September 1927

Type of work	Number	Percentage
Party work	254	40
Peasant movement	124	19
Workers' movement	28	4
Work in Guomindang	66	10
Youth work	77	12
Women's work	20	3
Political work in army	33	5
Work in government	10	2
Communist Youth League work	30	5
TOTAL	642	100

SOURCE: Report on party work to first enlarged meeting of provincial committee, September 26, 1927, in *SXGMWJ*, 2:114–17.

much of the data was lost or destroyed during government raids on party offices; but given the number of reports that survive, it is clear that archival custodians have chosen to keep most financial material confidential. This may have been to disguise revenue from illicit or politically suspect sources, but most probably it was to conceal local party organizations' heavy dependence on Central and ultimately Comintern financing. In the early years of party organizing in Shaanxi, we see repeated appeals to the Center for support but few references to specific amounts.¹⁵⁹ Under the united front, many party operatives had jobs in education, journalism, government, the army, or the Nationalist Party. They were presumably supported in this way, and any assistance from the party Center was probably funneled through the Guomindang or Feng Yuxiang's army with its substantial array of Soviet advisers.¹⁶⁰ Shaanbei's strongest branch, in Suide, had enough well-paid teachers that it was able to support its own operations and still send \$100 per month to the provincial party.¹⁶¹ The end of the united front brought this stage to a close, and once again party workers had to appeal to the Center for support. We have one detailed budget for August–October 1927 that is quite revealing. During this time, monthly support from the Center increased from \$123.00, to \$500.00, to \$877.30. The Center realized that the amount it was giving for living expenses was clearly inadequate, as the monthly stipend increased from four to seven to nine dollars per person. There were also rising expenses for local branches, subsidies for clothing and bedding, assistance to the Communist Youth League, printing and courier expenses, and expenses to establish and rent space for party offices, for room and board of visiting cadres, and for travel.¹⁶²

These figures are generally consistent with other scattered reports on financial matters. In his report to the Center in August 1927, Li Zizhou cited monthly expenses of over \$1,000 per month and requested a subsidy of \$900.¹⁶³ A 1929

report mentions a monthly subsidy of \$600.¹⁶⁴ These funds were never enough. Party cadres in local branches received only three to four dollars per month for living expenses, barely enough for food, much less clothes and housing.¹⁶⁵ Even at the provincial level, cadres were surviving on two bowls of sweet potatoes per day. Women were not getting enough to eat after childbirth, seriously endangering their health.¹⁶⁶ The Shaanxi party's financial crisis was made worse by the repeated raids on party offices. In January 1929, the party had just received \$1,000 from the Center when its offices were raided and the entire sum was lost.¹⁶⁷ One senses, in these reports, considerable frustration with the paltry support that basic-level cadres received from the Center. This was not without cause. The bulk of the funding from the Communist International supported the Center and its Shanghai operations; only 23 percent went to the provinces. Furthermore, district-level cadres in Shanghai received a monthly stipend of \$19 (the equivalent of an industrial worker's wage), while provincial cadres in Shaanxi received less than half that amount.¹⁶⁸ Party workers in the provinces often felt that they were doing the basic-level dirty work on starvation wages while cadres at the Center were living in luxury. Understandably, such complaints are not explicit in the party's internal communications, but they are prominent in the public declarations of defectors: "[Central Committee members] live in foreign-style homes, eat well, ride in automobiles, and even go to dance halls and movies. They have more ways of wasting money than the big capitalists. Meanwhile, the lower-level party workers live in conditions that are difficult to endure; working on an empty stomach is normal for them. If they make a little mistake, they are demoted, given a warning or even dismissed from the party."¹⁶⁹

Such criticism might well be voiced by defectors. Among those who remained in the party, the more common response was subservience to the Center and to the Communist International that funded its operations. In clear contrast to communications from the united front period, provincial reports from late 1927 tend to begin with declarations of servile obedience to the Center and the International. It is striking to compare Li Zizhou's frank report on confusing conditions in Shaanxi, dated the day before the August 7 emergency meeting, and the provincial committee's fawning declaration a month later that "the directive of the International is exceptionally correct!"¹⁷⁰ There is no denying that in a formal sense, the Chinese Communist Party was a branch of the Communist International. The Comintern had played a critical role in the party's founding and a decisive role in determining which of several rival Marxist groups would become the official Communist Party.¹⁷¹ But early party leaders like Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao were nationally prominent intellectuals with outstanding reputations in their own right and some ability to shape the decisions of the party. A similar state of affairs prevailed in the provinces. Such party leaders as Wei Yechou and Li Zizhou carried the prestige of higher education in Beijing and personal relations with party elders like Li Dazhao. With the party Center preoccupied managing complex relations with the

Guomindang leadership and Chiang Kai-shek's armies, the early Shaanxi party had some ability to chart its own course.

All that changed in 1927. The founders of the Shaanxi party would soon be dead. The new generation of leaders was younger, less educated, and less well known. Their local base was small and fast disappearing. Most importantly, they were entirely dependent on the party Center for their finances and indeed for their survival. It is hardly surprising that this new leadership would prove compliant to the Center's line, even as that line shifted from month to month. In the years ahead, a new direction would come not from the provincial leadership in Xi'an but from the unruly bands of guerrillas operating in the hills of northern Shaanxi.