

# Liu Zhidan and his “Bro’s in the ‘Hood”: Bandits and Communists in the Shaanbei Badlands (1)

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## Prologue

It is now generally acknowledged both outside China and, to an increasing extent, in Chinese academic circles too, that the early Chinese communist partisans could not have survived without the manpower and local ties of the bandit gangs they encountered whilst laying the basis for their Soviet movement. The names that come most easily to mind are those of Wang Zuo (王佐) and Yuan Wencai (袁文才), the Hakka bandit chieftains on Jinggangshan (井岡山) who took their followers over to the communist side and, until their unwarranted execution by Peng Dehuai (彭德懷) a few years later, were stalwarts of the fledgling revolutionary movement in Jiangxi. Long shrouded in a fog of propaganda-generated concealment, their cases have in recent years been elucidated by scholars in the West,<sup>1)</sup> in Japan,<sup>2)</sup> and also in China.<sup>3)</sup> For many years, comparatively little attention was paid to the problem of bandits in and around the base area that was later set up in northwest China, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Area (陝甘寧邊區; SGN).<sup>4)</sup> In China, this neglect was primarily the result of a concern not to sully the SGN’s semi-mythical status as the

crucible in which the communists forged their vision for a new China.<sup>5)</sup> Over and above such niceties, the complex social ramifications of the region's age-old bandit subculture resisted its easy assimilation by the communists.

Since the appearance of Edgar Snow's 1936 classic *Red Star Over China*, the achievements of local son Liu Zhidan (劉志丹) in blending revolutionary ideals with the destructive energy of north Shaanxi's bandit tradition have become relatively well known. Through repeated failures and recoveries, Liu Zhidan perceived, as Mao Zedong was coming to perceive at the other end of the country, that 20<sup>th</sup>-century China's ubiquitous violence left no alternative for the communists but to seek a military solution. The key to revolutionary success in China was an empowered peasantry fighting in the name of a shared ideal, and Liu Zhidan, again like Mao Zedong, recognized that in the remote areas in which the communists sought to "rest their buttocks", preexisting armed forces such as those of local bandits and brotherhoods – even, when circumstances demanded, those of local bullies and warlords – could not be ignored. How to win those forces over to the revolutionary cause, or, failing that, how to nullify and eventually eliminate them became a major strategic problem for Liu and Mao as well as for other early communist militants. Regularly condemned by an often-isolated Party Central as "capitulationists", "left-deviationists," or "right-opportunists" for their attention to such irregular fighters, both Mao Zedong and Liu Zhidan saw that, under the circumstances, they were all "Bro's in the 'Hood", and that the key to creating a successful revolutionary movement in China was to bring people together, not to isolate them.

Liu Zhidan's image has come down to us as that of a man able, like Mao, to speak to local fighters on their own terms, but just how he was

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able to do that has never been adequately examined. (Unlike Mao, Liu himself wrote nothing that would enlighten us substantially about his thinking.) In China, a desire to keep pristine his reputation as a “revolutionary martyr” – Liu was fortuitously killed in action in 1936 – brought about a torrent of hagiographic memoirs and quasi-historical treatments which, until quite recently, tended to omit all mention of Liu’s links to non-revolutionary (or pre-revolutionary) forces such as bandits. Conversely, among activists who had faced off with Liu Zhidan concerning his bandit policy, there has long been a tendency to play down his role in the revolutionary movement. As far as Western scholars are concerned, the limited value of many of the materials available appears to have discouraged them from seeking to examine Liu’s career more closely, despite his importance as a pioneer revolutionary organizer. While a number of scholars of the Shaanxi period<sup>6)</sup> have noted in passing the importance of Liu Zhidan’s role in negotiating alliances with local bandits and military figures, and also his confrontations with the Party authorities when they superciliously disparaged the significance of his achievements, lack of information has meant that the reasons for Liu’s success have never been thoroughly pursued. As a result, he has yet to be taken up by Western scholars as a primary focus of research.<sup>7)</sup>

Liu’s importance has been further overshadowed by the aura of the SGN that was set up soon after his death. Yet there is no doubt that the communists led by Mao Zedong who set about establishing their Anti-Japanese base area in northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei) at the conclusion of the Long March in October 1935 would have found the going a lot tougher had it not been for the groundwork laid by Liu Zhidan. Using his intimate local ties as a Shaanbei native, and on the basis of “allying with those who can be allied with, eliminating those who cannot”, Liu had not only created a

network of military alliances with local armed groups of all political shades, but also engendered a healthy respect for the communists' ability to discipline recalcitrants. By force of personality and skilful resort to family ties, not to mention a highly flexible attitude to the "rules" of revolution, Liu Zhidan fostered a powerful subcurrent of *ganqing* that enabled many of these local fighters to see the communists as kindred souls, together with a growing appreciation among them that the revolution, in those early years at least, was being fought by and on behalf of the poorest levels of Chinese society from which most of those rural fighters sprang.

The two parts of this paper, drawing among other things upon a host of fragmentary Chinese materials that are either newly published or previously ignored, will attempt a preliminary examination of Liu Zhidan's activities in Shaanbei from 1928-1932, particularly his contacts with bandits and other local power-holders, and seek to answer the question of just how he was able to convince many of them that the communist movement he espoused was, if not "a worthwhile cause to fight for", then at least a force to be reckoned with. It will suggest, among other things, that Liu Zhidan's celebrated policy of seeking to recruit bandits to the revolutionary movement was anything but plain sailing. Not surprisingly, bandit chiefs ran the gamut as far as personal predilections were concerned: while some were instinctively amenable to the revolutionary call, others became Liu Zhidan's worst enemies. At the same time, the resistance Liu encountered from his fellow-revolutionaries to his policy was fierce, even vitriolic, leading to purges and, ultimately, to what deserves to be termed judicial murder.

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The vast changes taking place in China since the introduction of the Reform & Opening Policy in 1978 have meant that most of the taboos

associated with Chinese revolutionary history have been broken or that they can be ignored with relative impunity. The following episode would seem to show, however, that an exception still has to be made for the role played by bandits in modern China’s revolutionary process.

In the second issue for 1993 of the journal *Shaanxi difangzhi* (陝西地方志), a short article by a scholar named Li Qingdong (李慶東) appeared under the title ‘The Bandit Calamity in Republican-Period Shaanxi’ (民國時期陝西匪患).<sup>8</sup> Li, an assistant professor in the Social Studies Department of the Shaanxi Provincial School of Administration (陝西省行政學院社會科學系), may or may not have realized the furor that his article was to unleash. Within days of the article’s appearance, the families of several former cadres of the SGN had lodged an official complaint with the Shaanxi provincial Communist Party Committee, alleging that the reputations of their family elders had been sullied.

Under severe pressure, the Party Committee and the provincial authorities launched their own investigation, summoning Li Qingdong for questioning and examining all relevant documents before finally concluding that Li had in fact committed what were said to be “serious crimes”, sufficiently serious in fact to be classified as belonging to Mao Zedong’s category of “contradictions between ourselves and the enemy” (*diwo maodun*). Not only was Li pressured to acknowledge the “mistakes” contained in his article; his employer, the Shaanxi Provincial School of Administration, was ordered to consider terminating Li’s Communist Party membership. The Party Committee further threatened to take the matter to the People’s Court if it was not resolved satisfactorily.

Li, however, refused to give in to the pressure, arguing forcefully that the information in his article was all drawn from contemporary reports and contained no “mistakes”. The affair dragged on for almost a year, and it

was not until June of 1994 that the Shaanxi Party Committee reached its face-saving decision: the editor of *Shaanxi difangzhi* was to be dismissed, and all copies of the issue containing Li's article were to be withdrawn and destroyed. No action was taken directly against Li Qingdong himself.<sup>9)</sup>

Li's "serious crime" had been to identify four one-time low-level cadres of the SGN – Zhao Bojing (赵伯经), Li Shihua (李世华), Zhang Kui (张奎) and Wang Lie (王烈) – as former bandits (土匪) who had been successfully "pacified" and won over to the revolution. The political tenor of the attack on his scholarship, including demands to expel him from the Party, was evidently due to the fact that the families concerned felt besmirched by the accusation that their elders, rather than being lifelong communists, had begun life as "common bandits". Interviewed by one of the present authors, Li himself opined that the reason why the families had been able to bring such pressure to bear on the Shaanxi Party Committee was that they had the backing of Wang Feng (汪鋒; 1910-1998), another long-time SGN cadre who at the time (1993) occupied the powerful position of National Committee Vice-Chairman of the Sixth Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC; 政協第六屆全國委員會副主席). Even in the 1990s, more than fifty years on from the events in question, such a combination was sufficient to ensure that Li Qingdong's article was consigned to the memory hole.<sup>10)</sup>

One-time bandits, it is clear, even "reformed bandits", continue to undermine the Chinese government's official policy of "seeking truth from facts". Because of the social opprobrium traditionally attached to them, bandits remain one of modern China's last taboos, still capable of raising revolutionary hackles two generations later, and the accepted "truth" about the communists' success in northwest China, at least as far as their relations with local bandits were concerned, seems to have been

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considerably remote from the facts.<sup>11)</sup> (The communists’ recently exposed reliance on the income from opium cultivation to keep the Shaanxi Soviet afloat is a parallel case.)<sup>12)</sup>

As the Li Qingdong case showed, the enmities engendered during the Shaanbei period over the question of how far bandits were eligible to be considered revolutionary materiel lingered long into the post-1949 period. While the bandits themselves may have been more or less eliminated from China by 1953,<sup>13)</sup> personal animosity among one-time revolutionaries died harder, and provided tinder for one of Maoist China’s interminable purges. As we will see later on in this article, when Li Jiantong’s (李建彤) trilogy *Liu Zhidan*, a novel based on Liu Zhidan’s life, became the target of Mao’s latest witch-hunt in 1962, it had been Yan Hongyan (閻紅顏), one of the bitterest opponents of Liu’s policy of recruiting bandits, who joined Mao Zedong henchman Kang Sheng (康生) in the harassment of people, especially people from the Shaanbei area, who had agreed to help Li Jiantong with her research.

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Characterized by 19<sup>th</sup>-century observers as “a nest of plunderers lost in a wilderness”,<sup>14)</sup> Shaanbei was traditionally a place where bandit gangs and semi-independent military outfits might share the area’s meager pluckings with the local elite. Bridging the gap between them was not easy, but Liu Zhidan, scion of a prestigious local family, was ideally situated to do just that. No one better embodied the twists and turns of the communist movement in Shaanbei than Liu Zhidan; and nothing better embodied the social and personal complexities that confronted that movement, faced as it was with the realities of a local bandit tradition stretching back centuries, than the fact that Liu, unorthodox and radically-minded scion of one of the area’s oldest lineages, had family ties not only to

one of the area's most hated "local tyrants" (惡霸), Zhang Tingzhi (張廷芝), but also to one of its most respected bandit chiefs, Zhao Erwa (趙二娃).

While Liu Zhidan was sanguinary about the potential of bandit gangs, with the right sort of guidance, to reform themselves and contribute to revolutionary change, he also had little alternative. Returning to Shaanxi from his studies at the Whampoa Military Academy in 1926, itching to set in place a process of revolutionary change in his native Shaanbei, he found himself hamstrung by two major difficulties: a lack of fellow-revolutionaries who could bring him moral support, and a lack of guns with which to add to their persuasive power. What Shaanbei did have was, first, an endless supply of armed bandits; second, a network of local tyrants who lorded it over their locality through their armed retainers (民團); and third, numerous independent or semi-independent militarists.<sup>15)</sup> (The line dividing the three was not always entirely clear.) Men like these, given Liu Zhidan's optimistic view of human potential, would provide the basic building blocks for his revolutionary movement.

In this respect, Liu's situation was very different from that of Mao Zedong in Jiangxi despite the two men's many similarities. In his dealings with the two local bandit chiefs Wang Zuo and Yuan Wencai, Mao had the Red Army to back him up, giving him both persuasive power and flexibility according to the situation's needs; in Shaanbei, Liu Zhidan had nothing beyond his admittedly powerful personal charisma. Mao could deal with Wang and Yuan as equals; Liu, if not cap in hand, was hardly in a position to negotiate from strength. Accordingly, it was not surprising that among the first people he turned to were two men related to him by blood: local tyrant Zhang Tingzhi and bandit leader Zhao Erwa. In the absence of a revolutionary army, bandits and disaffected militia recruits would fill the breach, and the supply of guns would be supplemented by infiltrating and



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taking over local militia groups or some local militarist's forces (or both) and taking what was needed (if possible, with their bearers attached). (Since warlords were always on the lookout to increase their manpower, they were usually willing and eager to absorb armed irregulars even when their reliability was in doubt.)<sup>16)</sup>

While the winning over of trained soldiers to the revolution's ranks had been a feature of revolutionary organizing in China since the earliest days, the use of bandits had presented more complex problems. Although their fighting skills and weapons made them highly attractive, their lack of discipline and limited vision often made them a liability.<sup>17)</sup> Liu Zhidan, however, was eminently practical. Bandits were a fact of life in Shaanbei, a way out for young men too poor or too proud to find dignity in a life of farming. Having been threatened countless times by a force of bandits stronger than his own, Liu had come to understand that the communist forces, as long as they were a minority, could not afford to isolate themselves by creating enemies willy-nilly. Bandits with bad political backgrounds beyond hope of reformation should be resolutely eliminated, but Liu emphasized to dubious listeners that the majority of bandits were once poor peasants who had suffered exploitation and oppression and who would support a revolution that promised to restore to them their lost dignity; the communists could not leave such people out of their calculations.<sup>18)</sup> And yet, in order to deal successfully with bandits, for whom vertical relations were supreme, it was first necessary to be able to negotiate from strength. Liu Zhidan's first act on returning to his native Baoan in April 1929 was to exploit his elite origins to oust the local magistrate and gain control of the county militia, eventually turning it into a revolutionary force.<sup>19)</sup> In 1930, when his fortunes were at a low ebb following further setbacks, his father presented him with a couple of old-

fashioned rifles acquired from a local warlord, and Liu Zhidan once more felt that he was ready to take on the world (with the aid of a few bandit chiefs, not to mention local tyrants).<sup>20)</sup>

Thus it was that, long before the First Red Army arrived in Shaanxi at the culmination of its Long March, Liu Zhidan set off on what Edgar Snow would later term a “kaleidoscope of defeats, failures, discouragements, escapades, adventure, and remarkable escapes from death, interspersed with periods of respectability as a reinstated officer.”<sup>21)</sup> Here we will take a brief look at two of the men with whom Liu Zhidan had dealings in the first few years of his revolutionary activity, Zhang Tingzhi and Zhao Erwa, before turning to consider in more detail the case of Zhao Erwa and the so-called “Sanjiayuan Incident” (三嘉原事件) of 1932 in which Zhao met his end.<sup>22)</sup> (Zhang Tingzhi will be taken up in more detail in the second part of this essay.) An examination of the relationship between these “Bro’s in the Hood” – Liu Zhidan, Zhang Tingzhi and Zhao Erwa – can reveal much about the conditions under which the early Shaanxi revolutionary movement was obliged to operate. The reason for focusing primarily on Zhao Erwa in the following pages is that his murder had ramifications far exceeding its apparent importance at the time, and continued to be a source of intra-Party rankling until well into the Reform & Opening period. Though the Sanjiayuan Incident has received but passing notice in histories of Northwest China’s communist movement, it bore similarities to the purge of October 1935 variously known in China as the “elimination of counter-revolutionaries” (肅反運動) or “the Northwest problem” (西北問題), not least in its having been swept under the carpet for so many years. It would be as late as 1985 before these two “historical problems” were, in the same official report, finally laid to rest.

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Dismissed in communist sources as a “notorious bandit chief”, Zhang Tingzhi (1908-1953), who was not finally suppressed until as late as 1951, was in fact an influential local landlord with his own private army (hence the “bandit” label) which he took at will in and out of the arms of both the Guomindang and local warlords and even, for a time, over to the Japanese invaders.<sup>23)</sup> He was, furthermore, although communist sources not surprisingly skirt the issue, Liu Zhidan’s older cousin (表哥).<sup>24)</sup> Even as children there had been no love lost between the two,<sup>25)</sup> and their mutual dislike grew in proportion to their age. In 1928, when Zhang was serving in the Ningxia provincial army, he agreed to allow Liu to serve as deputy-commander of one regiment (团) of his force, only to have him desert soon after and join another local warlord in east Gansu, naturally taking as many guns as he could carry along with a considerable number of men. For this double-cross, Zhang Tingzhi became Liu Zhidan’s implacable enemy, not only attacking Liu’s forces and inflicting considerable losses on them but even, despite the blood ties that linked the two men, sacking Liu Zhidan’s family grave.<sup>26)</sup>

Much more amenable to Liu Zhidan’s approaches was another of his cousins (姑表), Baoan native Zhao Erwa, also known as Zhao Lianbi (超連璧). Having lost his parents while he was still small, Zhao Erwa was raised by Liu Zhidan’s family, and he and Liu Zhidan became close friends. The cousins’ lives diverged temporarily in their early teens: while Zhao Erwa became a hired labourer, Liu Zhidan, with his privileged family background, attended the Yulin Middle School. He took an active part in political activities there, and subsequently threw himself into the nationwide communist movement before returning to Shaanxi in 1926 to begin organizing on the ground he knew best.<sup>27)</sup> By that time Zhao Erwa, like many other local young men with scant means of making a respectable

living, had already taken to the hills to become a prominent bandit chief.

As noted above, Liu Zhidan had become painfully aware that nothing was possible in warlord China without the military means of backing up one's dreams, and thus it was that the paths of Liu and Zhao Erwa converged once again. The large force of bandits that Zhao had gathered around him was impossible to ignore given Liu's temperament and practical situation. Eventually, following Liu Zhidan's patient (but not 100% successful) efforts to reform their ways, these men would become the backbone of the early Shaanxi guerilla movement.

### **Liu Zhidan, Zhao Erwa, and the 1932 Sanjiayuan Incident**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, 1932 (some sources give the 6<sup>th</sup> of February), in a remote area of Zhengning County (正寧縣) straddling the Shaanxi-Gansu border known as Sanjiayuan, Zhao Erwa, by this time in command of the Second Regiment of the Second Detachment of the Northwestern Anti-Imperialist Allied Army (西北反帝同盟軍第二支隊第二大隊) jointly commanded by Liu Zhidan and fellow-Shaanxi organizer Xie Zichang (謝子長; 1897-1935), was suddenly relieved of his weapons by followers of Xie Zichang. The next moment, in the face of Liu Zhidan's opposition, Zhao was summarily executed in front of the officers and fighters of the entire Army. The episode, which would have repercussions lasting down to the very recent past, came to be known as the "Sanjiayuan Incident". After examining the events that led up to the Incident, we will first indicate some of the contradictions surrounding it before tracing its impact on subsequent communist history.

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When Liu Zhidan returned to Shaanbei following the disastrous

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attempts to raise revolution in the Wei Valley, it was with a renewed understanding of the need not only to have enough troops to make an uprising feasible, but also to have a base to fall back upon when enemy pressure became overwhelming. By this time, Zhao Erwa had metamorphosed into a professional bandit operating with his gang in one of the traditional bandit lairs straddling the Shaanxi-Gansu border, and it was this region that would become the launching-ground for Shaanxi’s first communist guerilla movement.

According to the recollections of both Liu Zhidan’s bodyguard and his younger brother Liu Jingfan, Zhao Erwa was renowned among local villagers for his bravery and for being a crack shot with a rifle (神槍). Bandits operating in surrounding districts also had a healthy respect for his touchiness and martial skills, evidently referring to him as “Zhao Erye” (超二爷) or “Second Master Zhao”, while landlord militia groups were said to turn tail at the very sound of his name.<sup>26)</sup> In fact, though virtually unsung in the annals of the early Shaanxi communist movement, it was the presence of Zhao Erwa’s several hundred followers in the ranks of Liu’s guerrillas that sustained them through both misguided putsches and vicious government attacks,<sup>29)</sup> allowing Liu Zhidan to make repeated comebacks that defied all the laws of probability.

Nevertheless, the presence of Zhao’s bandits also appears to have been the reason why Party Central deemed it premature to grace the guerillas with the title of “Red Army”. Though it has never been specifically stated, it was very soon after Zhao Erwa’s engineered execution that the title “Red Army” was first deemed proper, suggesting that Zhao’s elimination, despite the fuss that ensued afterward, might have been the condition insisted upon by Party authorities to enable the creation of Northwest China’s first “Worker-Peasant Army”. In this section we will take a closer

look at Zhao Erwa's execution as a way of learning more about Liu Zhidan and the precarious position he carved out for himself in the early Shaanxi communist movement, and the enmities that his bandit policy engendered.

According to Liu Zhidan's bodyguard Zhang Zhanrong, Zhao Erwa was devoted to his cousin, despite their very different careers, exclaiming to all who wished to hear that "I dedicate my life to Zhidan, and in death too I will follow Zhidan."<sup>30)</sup> Indeed, through all the ups and downs of Liu's early military career, including the three major disasters that had decimated the Shaanxi communist movement in 1928-1931, Zhao Erwa and his followers remained at Liu's side despite a horrifying attrition rate.

At a historic meeting called in Heshui (合水), Gansu, in February 1931, Liu Zhidan brought together a number of local bandit outfits including Zhao's followers as a unified guerilla force with himself as supreme commander, only to be routed in a surprise attack by the Gansu warlord Chen Guizhang (陳珪璋) that inflicted heavy losses and forced the guerillas to scatter. Nevertheless, the following September the Shaanxi-Gansu Border Area (陝甘辺区) was formed, and Liu once again sought to rally his former bandit followers, now scattered amid the mountains of Heshui and nearby counties, summoning them to a meeting at Nanliang (南梁) on the Gansu border.

Where others chose to sniff which way the wind was blowing before taking any action, it was Zhao Erwa and his followers who responded to Liu Zhidan's call and who subsequently became the mainstay of the 300-strong Nanliang Guerilla Column (南梁遊撃隊) formed soon after with Liu Zhidan at its head.<sup>31)</sup> It is hard not to reach the conclusion that, traditional communist historiography notwithstanding, without his bandit cousin Zhao Erwa's devotion and manpower Liu Zhidan could never have been as successful as he was in laying the foundations for a guerilla movement in

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Shaanbei. Little wonder then that he was hardly inclined to listen to voices within the Party who increasingly urged him to abandon his policy of recruiting bandits to the revolution.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Shaanxi another guerilla column was emerging. In the spring of 1931, the West Shanxi Guerilla Column (晋西遊擊隊) had been organized to mobilize peasants in neighbouring Shanxi province. In the face of concerted suppression campaigns the Column, commanded by party activists including Shanxi native Yan Hongyan, had been forced to retreat back across the Yellow River into Shaanbei. There they came under the command of Xie Zichang, Liu Zhidan’s fellow agitator at the Yulin High School, who was already doing revolutionary work among local warlord soldiers. Within a few months this force had also come to number some 300 fighters, and it was renamed the North Shaanxi Guerilla Column (陝北遊擊隊) with Xie Zichang in supreme command and Yan Hongyan and others as Xie’s mid-level officers.<sup>32)</sup>

All this activity did not go unobserved. In mid-December 1931, an emissary from the Party’s Shaanxi provincial committee named Rong Ziqing (榮子青[卿]) arrived in Shaanbei bearing orders for the consolidation of the area’s guerilla forces. Following the previous year’s September 18 Incident in Northeast China, the Party had decided that a new tide of anti-imperialist feeling was rising throughout the country, and that northwest China should respond to the new situation by making its own anti-imperialist stance clear. At the same time, Liu Zhidan, who had spent some time that summer operating as a brigade commander (旅長) in the forces of his erstwhile nemesis warlord Chen Guizhang, was criticized both for his “over-reliance on the military option” (單純軍事投機) – meaning Liu’s belief in the need to merge with warlord forces from time to time so as to win over soldiers to their cause, what he called his 「兵運」 – and for

“merging with bandit forces” (与土匪混合) – another basic component of Liu’s Shaanbei-rooted strategy that he referred to as his 「匪運」. In a reversal of the Shaanxi Party Committee’s earlier stance, Liu was commanded to break his ties with local Guomindang (国民党) units and to take his army south, where they would be amalgamated with Xie Zichang’s North Shaanxi Guerilla Column into the Northwest Anti-Imperialist Allied Army.<sup>33)</sup>

It was from the start a recipe for disaster, though perhaps no one could have foreseen the extent of the fall-out. In addition to the need to consolidate the Shaanxi guerilla forces and present a united anti-imperialist front, it is likely that the Shaanxi Party committee saw the amalgamation of the two guerilla groups as a chance to reduce the influence of Liu Zhidan’s reliance on irregulars. Xie Zichang, though a Shaanbei native like Liu Zhidan, was much closer to Party orthodoxy and therefore disagreed fundamentally with Liu’s optimism regarding bandits’ revolutionary potential. To put the two men in joint command of the new guerilla force was to invite a showdown on the form that was most appropriate for the Shaanxi revolutionary movement, and that is exactly what happened.<sup>34)</sup>

The new force was formally launched in January 1932 in Zhengning County. Xie Zichang, being the older of the two by a few years and also Liu’s superior within the Party, was appointed overall commander of the new force, with Liu as his deputy. The Allied Army consisted of two detachments (支隊) together with a Guards Column (警衛隊), with Xie Zichang commanding the First Detachment, based on the West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Column, and Liu Zhidan the Second Detachment, based on the Nanliang Guerilla Column. Regarding the chain of authority within the four regiments (大隊) that comprised the Second Detachment, some accounts have suggested that only one of them was directly linked to



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Liu Zhidan, that led by Zhao Erwa, and that the remainder were all commanded by officers loyal to Xie Zichang with backgrounds in the former West Shanxi Guerilla Column.<sup>35)</sup> Other sources, however, insist that all four regiments were commanded by former bandit chiefs like Yang Peisheng (楊培勝; aka Yang Pisheng 楊丕勝) who had been won over to the revolution by Liu Zhidan.

Even with the influence of Liu Zhidan’s ex-bandit units reduced, the Shaanxi provincial committee (perhaps under the influence of delegates from Xie Zichang’s camp like Yan Hongyan) continued to voice its doubts about the Allied Army’s reliability. Its composition was criticized as being “far too mixed, with a preponderance of former bandits and hooligan elements of the lumpen proletariat. Because of their predilection for random shooting and burning wherever they go, they cannot be given the title of “Worker-Peasant Guerilla Column” (工農遊擊隊) or “Red Army” (紅軍). To do so would cause the newly-emerging political consciousness among the masses to come to nothing, and we would become divorced from the masses.”<sup>36)</sup> “The Second Detachment [under Liu Zhidan], in particular, is no more than a conglomeration of former bandits. Its Second Regiment travels with some eighty opium pipes. When they have opium they are delighted to be a part of our Communist Red Army [sic]; when their craving is triggered, they become like wild men.” The troops of this Second Regiment “constantly go out to rob people and rape women, and there is no distinction whatsoever between them and ordinary bandits.” “The situation requires that the bandit and hooligan elements in the Allied Army be mercilessly eliminated so that it can be thoroughly cleansed. It is a fantasy to imagine that this task can be achieved through piecemeal reforms.”<sup>37)</sup>

Against this political background, the events that would trigger the

Sanjiayuan Incident were steadily unfolding. Soon after the Allied Army arrived at Sanjiayuan, it was resolved to send Yan Hongyan, commander of the First Regiment of Xie Zichang's First Detachment, to Xi'an to report to the provincial committee there. Yan returned some time later bearing various Party documents as well as the provincial committee's directive concerning the creation of a Shaanxi-Gansu Guerilla Column under Party leadership. In response to the directive from Xi'an, the Allied Army's political committee once again took up the topic of their striking the red flag as soon as possible, and the discussion evidently developed into a heated argument.

Liu Zhidan refused to change his stance that their dire military situation demanded they first allow themselves to be temporarily absorbed by one of the warlords of eastern Shaanxi so as to try to win over as many as possible of his soldiers to the revolutionary cause. When Yan Hongyan and other members of the committee failed to win him over, it seems that Xie Zichang went personally to persuade his old comrade to relent, arguing that "since 1928 we have tried any number of times to engineer mutinies in the army, but without success. We both came close to losing our own lives in the process! We cannot allow ourselves to be drawn into the enemy's midst again. We have a responsibility to carry out the provincial committee's directive and formally establish a Red Army guerilla unit."

In the end, seeing that Liu was not going to come around, the political committee resolved to hold its final meeting on the question of whether or not to raise the red flag without inviting Liu or his followers to attend. With Liu Zhidan left out of the loop, the meeting passed a resolution, proposed by Xie Zichang, on the one hand to carry out the provincial Party committee's directive, and on the other to adopt "resolute measures" to cleanse the Allied Army including the disarmament of Zhao Erwa and his

followers. The red flag would then be raised, and the Shaanxi-Gansu Guerilla Column of the Chinese Worker and Peasant Red Army (中国工农红军陕甘游击队) could be formally established.<sup>38)</sup>

The litany of complaints that apparently was being levelled by the First Detachment against the former Nanliang guerillas including Zhao Erwa's followers was hard to ignore. (As we will see later, however, there is room for doubt as to whether this litany can be taken at face value.) "The Second Regiment under Zhao Erwa has only 15 Party members, and a majority of its personnel are former bandits. While we were camped at Sanjiayuan, Zhao's unit sent men out every night to rob, rape and pillage. Making no distinction between rich and poor, they would steal anything they laid their eyes on and rape any woman who came their way, leading the masses to complain bitterly. Their actions have created a gulf between the Red Army [sic] and the masses... The army's fighters also became furious at the behaviour of Zhao Erwa's bandit troops, and strongly demanded that they be purged so that army discipline could be restored."<sup>39)</sup> "More than half the soldiers of the Second Detachment are opium smokers who even go so far as to deal in opium themselves."<sup>40)</sup>

Xie Zichang himself is said to have pointed out on numerous occasions the serious problems of the communist forces' makeup: "Is an army really capable of carrying out a revolution when its soldiers go out to rob and rape at will?" he asked. "Zhao Erwa is a bandit, and he is tarnishing our reputation."<sup>41)</sup> In response to Xie's warning, Yan Hongyan and others called a mass meeting which decided to create a special Disciplinary Unit (執法隊) consisting of some 50-60 men, empowered to punish all officers or men found guilty of transgressions of mass discipline.<sup>42)</sup>

Zhao Erwa was not oblivious to the concerns of his fellow-commanders in the Allied Army. Some time before the Sanjiayuan Incident

took place, in response to the urging of his second-in-command, Liu Zhidan's younger cousin (堂弟) Liu Jingfan (刘景范), Zhao Erwa shrugged: "If Zhidan says reform the troops, so be it; there is nothing further for me to say." Zhao even voluntarily submitted a list of the men under his command deserving to be weeded out.<sup>43)</sup> Whatever steps he took were evidently not enough to satisfy his critics, however, and the hours remaining before his death ticked by remorselessly.

The mystery of Zhao Erwa's apparent failure to bring his troops under control even after so many years of fighting alongside Liu Zhidan is made deeper by Liu's own well-known insistence on the need for strict guerilla discipline. One – perhaps hagiographical – story relates an episode that took place while Liu's unit was encamped at Zhengning, Gansu. As the unit was preparing to leave, a groom attached to the unit's headquarters stole a cotton belt and a chicken from one of the local families, leading the locals to lodge a complaint with Liu Zhidan. The next day, as the guerillas marched through a small village, Liu called a public meeting of the entire column at which the groom was put on trial. Taking into account the fact that this was not the first time that the man had been found guilty of an infraction of discipline, the soldiers of the column resolved unanimously that he should be immediately shot.<sup>44)</sup> When it came to disciplining his cousin Zhao Erwa, however, these sources suggest that Liu declined to take steps, and so the events of February 1932 became inevitable. As has been noted above, on February 4, 1932 Zhao Erwa was disarmed and executed.

Following Zhao Erwa's execution, the Guards Unit also disarmed the soldiers of the Second Detachment – effectively, the men belonging to the Nanliang Guerilla Column – and announced the guerillas' new policy: "Those wishing to become a part of the Red Army may remain. Others are

free to leave, but they will not be permitted to return to banditry.” In principle, older fighters would be given money to help them on their way. Younger ones who wished to join the revolution would be allowed to remain but only after undergoing rigorous training; the rest would be allowed to leave. By the time the task of scrutinizing each fighter’s record was finished, the Second Detachment was left with some 70~80 men, 30~40 others having chosen to leave.<sup>45)</sup> In response to Liu Zhidan’s protest at the confiscation of the Second Regiment’s weapons, Xie Zichang responded: “We have relieved some bandits of their weapons; that is not the same as calling you a bandit.”<sup>46)</sup>

Thus ran the standard account of the events at Sanjiayuan, but Xie Zichang’s response to Liu Zhidan’s protest was highly disingenuous since what had happened was in fact the disarming of the entire former Nanliang Guerilla Column (including, it seems, Liu Zhidan himself). While the affair appeared on the surface to be no more than the disciplining of a recalcitrant bandit chief deemed incapable of living up to the ideals of the communist revolution, in fact it amounted to a showdown between two distinct factions. The Sanjiayuan Incident brought to a head simmering discontent within the revolutionary movement in the northwest, personified by Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang, and its repercussions were both profound and long-lasting. Recently published materials, including a biography of Shaanxi veteran Gao Gang, have confirmed that there was far more to the incident than met the eye.

### **Historical Ramifications of the Sanjiayuan Incident**

In the short run, as one historian of the Shaanxi-Gansu Border Area has suggested, the Sanjiayuan Incident “seriously weakened the

Northwestern Anti-Imperialist Allied Army”.<sup>47)</sup> Liu Zhidan, who had been forced to watch the disarming and execution of a cousin who, for all his faults, had supported him through thick and thin since he first took up the cause of the Shaanxi revolution, left as soon as he could to tell his version of the day’s events to the Shaanxi Party Committee in Xi’an. On the following day, Zhao Erwa’s deputy Liu Jingfan, together with munitions officer Ma Xiwu (馬錫五), resigned their commissions in the Second Regiment and returned to their native Baoan in protest at the treatment meted out to Zhao Erwa and at the forced requisitioning of the regiment’s weapons. Most of the fighters, those with bandit backgrounds as well as others from the Nanliang Guerilla Column, perhaps seeing the writing on the wall, also began to drift away. Some of them, it has been alleged, had even hatched a plan to assassinate both Xie Zichang and Yan Hongyan before they left.<sup>48)</sup>

Two months went by before Liu Zhidan returned to Shaanbei. In the meantime, the Allied Army’s ranks duly “purified”, it was reorganized as the Shaanxi-Gansu Guerilla Column of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army under the overall command of Xie Zichang, with Xie’s lieutenants, including Yan Hongyan, as regimental commanders.<sup>49)</sup>

While no record has been found of the discussions that took place during Liu Zhidan’s time in Xi’an, it would seem that the Shaanxi Provincial Committee (which had, after all, initially promoted not only the infiltration of warlord units but also the mobilization of Shaanbei’s bandits)<sup>50)</sup> took his side. At the end of February, after first sending Liu Zhidan on a mission to organize peasants in the Weibei area of southern Shaanxi, the Committee quietly dispatched Secretary Du Heng (杜衡) to Shaanbei on a “tour of inspection”. The newly-created guerilla force, now operating under Xie Zichang, had twice been repelled with considerable

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losses in its recent attempts to take a local town, and Du’s criticism was scathing: the Guerilla Column (遊擊隊; literally, “roving attack force”) was in fact “roving without attacking” (遊而不擊), and was having no more effect than mountain bandits (梢山主義). Citing these failed attacks, Du annulled Xie Zichang’s commission as commander in chief before returning to Xi’an to report to the Party Committee.<sup>51)</sup>

In the middle of April Du Heng returned to Shaanbei, this time accompanied by Liu Zhidan, to communicate the Provincial Committee’s decision. The Shaanxi-Gansu Guerilla Column would be reorganized into two detachments, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, with Liu Zhidan heading the former and Yan Hongyan the latter. Xie Zichang was dismissed and sent to Gansu to work among soldiers there. (He would return to Shaanbei later after things had quietened down.) On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April the Party Central Committee, confirming the decision, further decreed that the Shaanxi-Gansu Guerilla Column would become the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division of the 26<sup>th</sup> Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army (中国工农红军二十六军第四十二师). Finally, on May 10, overall command of the Column was handed over to Liu Zhidan.<sup>52)</sup>

The history of the communist movement in China is as much one of personal animosity as one of political struggle, and the Sanjiayuan Incident’s extended repercussions were a good example. At the root of the affair, as noted above, was a deep factional divide between Liu Zhidan’s Nanliang Guerilla Column and Xie Zichang’s West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Column over what kind of revolutionary movement was most appropriate to the conditions of Shaanbei. That rivalry had ramifications that persisted into the 1990s, creating yet another “winners vs. losers” divide in Chinese communist history – the very same circumstances that Li Qingdong would decry – and fuelling the appearance of opposing sets of memoirs in which one side sought to paint its own protagonist in

revolutionary colours while passing fleetingly over the achievements of the other. A careful look at two collections of revolutionary memoirs and oral interviews that appeared in the mid- to late 1990s is illuminating.

The first collection to appear, in 1995, was titled *The 26<sup>th</sup> Red Army and the Shaanxi-Gansu Soviet Area* (紅二十六軍与陝甘辺蘇区; hereafter HELJ),<sup>53)</sup> an extensive array of oral reminiscences by survivors of the Shaanxi guerilla years including veteran cadres of both the Nanliang Guerilla Column and the West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Column. Two years later, another set of reminiscences appeared bearing the title *The Shaanxi-Gansu Border Area Revolutionary Base* (陝甘辺革命根拠地; hereafter SGBG).<sup>54)</sup> Examining the two volumes, one is first struck by the comparative absence from the latter volume, SGBG, of any memoirs related by veterans of Liu Zhidan's Nanliang Guerilla Column, and subsequently by the fact that only the former volume, HELJ, has a section dealing specifically with the Sanjiayuan Incident. It is no coincidence that the litany of complaints against Zhao Erwa cited on the preceding pages were all from SGBG, while the suggestion that the events at Sanjiayuan dealt a serious blow to the Shaanxi revolutionary movement is from HELJ.

Regarding the accusations of continued bandit activity by Zhao Erwa's followers even after the formation of the Northwestern Anti-Imperialist Allied Army, again there is a divergence between the two texts. Those on Liu Zhidan's side of the argument insist that, following the Allied Army's formation, a purge of the Second Regiment's ranks had already weeded out numerous recalcitrant hooligan types. At the same time, they assert, the difficulty of making ends meet had caused the entire army to make a decision to go out to "attack a few local bullies" (打土豪), and Xie Zichang's men had been just as active in those activities as had those of Liu Zhidan. While Zhao Erwa's followers, under cover of these raids, had also helped



themselves to the pigs of ordinary peasants and sometimes pursued such requisitions “too enthusiastically” (太過火了),<sup>55)</sup> no one was entirely free from accusations of bandit-like behaviour. Yang Peisheng, another former bandit chief serving under Liu Zhidan who had ranked equally with Zhao Erwa, also pointed out in his reminiscences that Xie Zichang’s men had robbed and killed people just like anyone else: “How were they going to explain that away?” “Zhao Erwa”, Yang insisted, “was killed unjustly.”<sup>56)</sup> Pro-Liu Zhidan accounts further insisted that the Sanjiayuan Incident had been a case of one faction seeking to eliminate another, “an attempt to extinguish the revolutionary forces, a criminal action that aided the enemy, not our own side”.<sup>57)</sup> As Liu Jingfan put it to researchers who interviewed him shortly before his death in the 1980s, Xie Zichang himself had sometimes been “overly ‘left’” (「左」得很).<sup>58)</sup> (Not surprisingly, Xie Zichang’s official biography, written by two local Party historians, makes no mention of the Sanjiayuan affair whatsoever.)<sup>59)</sup>

Concerning the true nature of the events that transpired at Sanjiayuan, sources associated with Liu Zhidan, as cited in HELJ and elsewhere, also differ considerably from the version outlined in the previous pages. In contrast to the assertion that Liu himself was not disarmed by Xie Zichang’s men, participant Liu Jingfan, Liu Zhidan’s younger cousin, relates the story in dramatic detail:

“As soon as Xie [Zichang] shouted the password, ‘Some of us are hanging up sheep and selling dog-meat!’, commander of the Guards Division Bai Xilin (白锡林) pinioned Zhao Lianbi [Erwa]’s arms, whereupon Yao Hongyan took out his Mauser pistol and shot Zhao once in the temple, causing him to fall to the ground dead. Yan then turned to Liu Zhidan and snatched away his Mauser pistol while Wu Daifeng (吴岱峰) took mine. After this, the men of the Guards Division

opened fire on the Second Regiment, [killing or wounding several of its officers] before moving forward to take away the weapons of the entire Second Regiment.”<sup>60)</sup>

If Liu Jingfan's account of Liu Zhidan being relieved of his Mauser pistol immediately following Zhao Erwa's execution is true, it would account for Liu's apparent passivity as the events unfolded. More than one eyewitness has made reference to how he squatted wordlessly to one side, sunk in depression, his spirits low, the life seemingly gone out of him,<sup>61)</sup> Liu was even denied the right to speak to Liu Jingfan.<sup>62)</sup> All the evidence, that is, suggests that Sanjiayuan was in fact a classic coup d'état carried out by Xie Zichang, who had from the beginning been unable to share Liu Zhidan's enthusiasm for recruiting bandits.

Our examination of the two volumes of reminiscences revealed some further interesting points. On Zhao Erwa himself, for instance, reminiscences by cadres of the West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Column refer to him as a “bandit” (土匪),<sup>63)</sup> while those of the Nanliang Guerilla Column (notably Liu Jingfan and Yang Peisheng) take a much more charitable view of Zhao. On the events that took place at Sanjiayuan, the memoirs presented in SGBG of the four West Shanxi Guerilla Column veterans mentioned above, along with that of another West Shanxi veteran Ma Yunze, present highly detailed and self-justificatory accounts of the affair, while the Nanliang Guerilla Column is represented by only Liu Jingfan and Yang Peisheng, both of whom, particularly Yang Peisheng, skate relatively quickly over the events. (Ma Yunze's memoir even asserts that Zhao Erwa was executed for attempting an armed mutiny.)<sup>64)</sup> HELJ, on the other hand, is a rich assemblage of memoirs by individuals from each side of the factional divide.

As if the implications of these contrasts were not enough, the two

volumes also took differing approaches to the presentation of the data they assembled. While HELJ presented each interview transcript verbatim with no evidence of editorial interference, the texts assembled by SGBG all show signs of an editor’s hand. Again, while the interviewees represented in HELJ included both individuals who later fell away from the revolution and people who played no more than minor parts in the guerilla movement, the authors assembled in SGBG are without exception the “heroes” of the piece, people who became major players following “Liberation” in 1949. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the SGBG pieces had been hastily assembled as a reaction to the publication of HELJ two years before, with the primary objective of underwriting their own man’s – i.e. Xie Zichang’s – contribution to the Shaanxi revolution including a justification of the events at Sanjiayuan.

\* \* \*

It is no coincidence that memoirs by veterans of Liu Zhidan’s Nanliang Guerilla Column tend to be fewer in number than those representing Xie Zichang’s West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Column. In the first place, cadres who had served under Xie Zichang and who rose to occupy important posts after 1949 far outnumbered those who had formerly been followers of Liu Zhidan.<sup>65)</sup> Even more crucial was the far-reaching influence of the 1962 *Liu Zhidan* affair referred to at the beginning of this article.<sup>66)</sup> In 1956, established Party writer Li Jiantong had been requested to write a biography of her second cousin Liu Zhidan for a series designed to extol communist martyrs. Against the advice of her husband, Liu Jingfan, as well as of others who, from bitter experience, were wary of the shifting tides of opinion within the Party (particularly regarding its Shaanbei legacy), Li allowed herself to be persuaded to go ahead with the project, ultimately deciding that a novelistic format would be more suitable than a simple

biography.<sup>67)</sup>

Even before the text had been formally published, following the publication of a few excerpts in various newspapers, it ran into problems. When Yan Hongyan, a former stalwart of the West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Columns and staunch opponent of Liu Zhidan's bandit policy, happened to see a draft of the novel, he immediately contacted Party ideologist Kang Sheng, who in turn saw a way of ingratiating himself with Mao Zedong by suggesting that Li Jiantong's aim in reviving the memory of Liu Zhidan was to seek to overturn the 1954 guilty verdict against Liu's close confederate Gao Gang so as to split the Party against itself in the same way that the Shaanxi movement had once split.<sup>68)</sup> There was the further implication that she was trying to set Liu Zhidan's legacy up to rival that of Mao Zedong. (Lingering suspicions that Liu's death in action in 1936 was, in fact, engineered by a jealous Mao have refused to die.) Mao, more and more paranoid since the split with Peng Dehuai a few years before, agreed with Kang's analysis and bitterly criticized Li's manuscript as an "anti-Party novel" (反党小説). Subsequently, not only Li Jiantong herself and her husband Liu Jingfan, but all the veterans who had formerly been associated with the Liu Zhidan side and who had cooperated with her research for the novel suffered fierce recriminations, especially during the "Cultural Revolution" that followed soon after. By the time of the Cultural Revolution's conclusion in 1976, they had been reduced to a small minority among surviving Party cadres compared to Xie Zichang's former followers.

The facts of the *Liu Zhidan* affair have been admirably set out by David Holm and there is no need to reiterate them here.<sup>69)</sup> As Holm shows, the origins of the affair went back to the October 1935 "elimination of counter-revolutionaries" campaign, sometimes referred to as the "North-West problem", in which numerous leaders of the Shaanxi revolutionary

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movement including Liu Zhidan and Gao Gang had been stripped of their posts and imprisoned (and many more killed) following the arrival in the northwest of hardline communists critical of what was labelled their “rightwing deviationism”. Although these people were ordered to be released by Mao Zedong when he too arrived a few weeks later at the head of the First Red Army after completing the Long March, those responsible, far from being punished, remained in positions of authority in the Party and Soviet government in Yanan and even after 1949. Not surprisingly, the affair remained a persistent source of bad feeling among the communists in northwest China throughout the following years.<sup>70)</sup>

After 1949, lest they make the Communist Party appear less saintly than it wished to be seen, these “unsettled cases” (懸案) had been swept under the carpet.<sup>71)</sup> Li Jiantong’s crime had been in her having inadvertently brought them to the surface through her novel *Liu Zhidan*, thus treading on a large number of very powerful toes. The result was a purge that left very few survivors among those once associated with the “revolutionary hero” Liu Zhidan.

Though the two events were quite separate, the origins of the 1935 purge in turn harked back to the apparently insignificant 1932 Sanjiayuan Incident. On the face of it no more than the elimination of a troublesome former bandit, necessary in order to permit the raising of the red flag for the first time in northwest China, the Sanjiayuan Incident should rather be seen as the precursor of a chain of events rooted in personal and political animosities and rivalries among the Shaanxi communists that contributed in no small degree to the 1935 purge. Not least among those rivalries was that between followers of Xie Zichang and those of Liu Zhidan. Allegiances to one or other of the two factions were strong, and the clash between the two men over the viability of Shaanxi’s bandits in the province’s

revolutionary movement provided the spark that lit the fuse.

The division was probably broadened by social factors operating in the rural Shaanbei environment. The appeal of local leaders like Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang lay not merely in their organizing ability and revolutionary credentials, but also in their personal charisma and indigenous roots. In such an environment, loyalties tended to be personal rather than ideological. Naturally, each of the two men made full use of those qualities to create the conditions for revolution in their immediate surrounding area. The extraordinary setbacks and difficulties which the Party had to endure in order to maintain a foothold in Shaanbei made their local appeal especially strong. The result was the emergence of two quite distinct factions, each tied intimately to one or other of the two leaders: Liu Zhidan's Nanliang Guerilla Column and Xie Zichang's West Shanxi / North Shaanxi Guerilla Column. When a conflict arose between the two, as happened at Sanjiayuan, the stand-off, because of the nature of the relationship between leadership and followers, was likely to be both absolute and highly subjective, with the consequent likelihood of bloodshed. If the short-term result of Sanjiayuan was the murder of Zhao Erwa, the long-term result was the ossification of the two sides, reflected ultimately in the appearance of rival sets of memoirs, a legacy of mutual mistrust that lingered for more than half a century, and the throwing of a smokescreen over the complex legacy of Liu Zhidan.

It would be more than fifty years before the Communist Party finally managed to draw a line under the Sanjiayuan Incident. In 1983, free at last of Mao's control, Deng Xiaoping ordered the newly-formed Central Advisory Commission (中共中央顧問委員会) to assume responsibility for laying the "Northwest problem" (and, coincidentally, the Sanjiayuan Incident) to rest. Over the spring and summer of that year, surviving

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veterans of the Shaanbei revolutionary movement, including both the Nanliang and West Shanxi / North Shaanxi factions, were brought together in Beijing for a series of study meetings to discuss and reach a unanimous conclusion regarding this much-disputed historical problem. Under the circumstances, such a conclusion was not easily reached, and bitter arguments evidently broke out causing the talks to be abandoned. In September 1985, finally, under the coaxing of Party Secretary Hu Yaobang, a second series of meetings was called. In one of the few official Party documents to mention the Sanjiayuan Incident by name, the Commission’s “Report on the Discussion Meetings Concerning Some Historical Problems of the Red Army’s Struggle in the Northwest” (「關於西北紅軍戰爭歷史問題座談會的報告」), finally released in 1986, concluded:

Since the composition of the [Northwest China Anti-Imperialist Allied Army’s] ranks had been imperfect, its work-style (作風) and discipline poor, it was necessary to carry out a cleansing of the ranks in line with the Party’s principles for army-building (建軍原則). However, for one faction to adopt the method of commandeering the other faction’s weapons and even go so far as to take someone’s life, particularly when there was disagreement on the matter between the two principal leaders Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang, cannot be said to be a correct decision regardless of who made it. Fortunately, a number of the comrades in the [Allied Army], understanding the overall situation, steadfastly supported the revolution and made important contributions to the development of the revolution in the Northwest and of the Red Army. Outstanding among those comrades was Comrade Liu Zhidan. More than half a century has passed since those events, and most of the leading comrades of the time have already passed away. What is important right now is to conscientiously draw out the lessons of this

experience, not to seek to assign responsibility to any specific individual.<sup>72)</sup>

Thus did the echoes of the shots that ended an obscure former bandit's life reverberate almost into the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the significance of this document and the events it referred to, Wang Xiaozhong, a member of the Central Advisory Commission's secretariat who had taken part in the collating of the Commission's findings, reflected ruefully twenty years later:

“At numerous points in the history of the Chinese Communist Party, major disagreements have burst to the surface, all of them permeated by vicious and murderous fratricidal conflict. The cruelty revealed in these intra-Party struggles is equal to that shown in any life-and-death struggle with an external enemy. However, the damage caused by these struggles to the broad mass of the Party membership and to the Party itself is in fact greater than that caused by any external conflict.”<sup>73)</sup>

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Taken together, the Sanjiayuan Incident and the Li Qingdong affair show the Party's enduring sensitivity to its legacy of recruiting bandits to the revolution. While current circumstances may have demanded such a policy, and certain leaders like Liu Zhidan and Mao Zedong been highly sanguine regarding its potential, the opprobrium with which Chinese society regarded bandits made their recruitment to the revolution a far more complex issue than it first appeared. Consequently, the vast majority of materials on Liu Zhidan, particularly biographical materials, omit this aspect of his revolutionary strategy altogether. Part 2 of this essay, after introducing the way in which Liu's biographers have tiptoed around this important aspect of his Shaanbei heritage, will take up a number of other



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‘Bros in the ‘Hood’ whose connection to Liu Zhidan brought them face to face with the revolutionary movement in Shaanbei (with varying results).

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注

- 1) See Averill 2007, especially chapters 2-3. See also Polachek 1983: 805-829.
- 2) See 今井駿 1994; 孫江 2002; 小林一美 2005.
- 3) See 匡勝等 2006; 張永 2010.
- 4) Recent Chinese treatments include 超文 1999; 李雲峰·袁文衛 2007; and 袁文衛 2011. In Japanese, see 菊池一隆 1983; and in Korean see 朴尚洙 2004.
- 5) For a round-up of recent Chinese research on the SGN, see 黃正林, 「20世紀80年代以來國內陝·甘·寧辺区史研究綜述」(『抗日戰爭研究』2008: 1. 218-253).
- 6) See Selden 1966-67; Esherick 1998; Keating 1997.
- 7) For a round-up of Chinese research on Liu Zhidan, see 郭林 2003. The same volume containing Guo Lin’s essay also contains a chronology of Liu Zhidan’s career. See 郭林等編 2003: 249-270.

Just as this article was ready to go to press, a collection of short pieces written by Liu Zhidan, including poems, essays, letters and cables as well as conversations with Liu recalled by other Shaanxi veterans, was issued in Beijing by the People’s Publishing House. The chief editor is former Director of the Zhidan County Party History Research Institute of Shaanxi Province (中共陝西省志丹縣黨史研究室), Liu Zhixue (刘志学). While pages 90-123 of the volume constitute the most up-to-date chronology of Liu Zhidan’s life, they contain no reference whatsoever to the 1932 Sanjiayuan Incident. Presumably the editors chose to ignore the incident because of its delicate nature and the lack of a definitive assessment of its significance. See 刘志丹:『刘志丹文集』(北京:人民出版社, October 2012).

8) 李慶東 1993.

9) Suppression of the article appears to have been highly effective. A library

search by the authors failed to turn up copies of the issue containing Li's article either in China or overseas.

- 10) Information in the preceding paragraphs is taken from Xu Youwei's interview with Li Qingdong in Xi'an, March 3, 2008.

Later in 1993 Li's findings were the subject of a vitriolic attack accusing him of "serious political errors": namely, taking at face value reports of "bandit suppression" in Shaanxi carried in government-leaning newspapers like the Tianjin 大公報 and Nanjing 中央日報 during the 1930s and 1940s, all of which intentionally blurred the distinction between regular bandits and communist guerrillas. The author of the critique argued that the four men named were in fact either long-time communist party members or officially-recognized guerrillas. See 李德運 1993. Since this period coincided with the Nationalist government's anti-communist pacification campaigns, when it was seeking precisely to present the communists as no different from ordinary bandits, the accusation that Li Qingdong had been taken in by the government's propaganda would seem to be not without substance, yet the decision of the Shaanxi Provincial Committee to exonerate Li Qingdong from guilt suggests that there was more to this case than meets the eye.

- 11) In a subsequent communication with the authors, Li Qingdong vented his frustration with China's partisan academic world in which people seek only to defend their own kind while attacking others, exaggerating other people's errors to further their own interests, and manoeuvring to pull the rug from under other people's feet. "Whether those men should or should not have become bandits, whether it was correct for me to make reference to that period in their lives, are questions for academic discussion, and should not become political issues. Episodes like this are anathema to academic debate and freedom, and I hope that similar ones will not occur in future in China." (Letter to the authors, March 20, 2012) In the same letter, Li Qingdong revealed the machinations of a sub-editor at the 『陝西地方志』 who, anxious to supplant the position of the journal's chief editor, revealed the article's contents to his superiors in an effort to instigate trouble.

- 12) See, for example, Chen Yung-fa 1995.

- 13) See Xu Youwei & Philip Billingsley 2013 on the post-1949 bandit suppression campaigns.

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- 14) Keyte 1913: 227, cited in Selden 1966-67 1: 63.
- 15) 袁文衛 2011, 97-102; 習仲勛 1997: 244-45; 支水山 1979: 35-36.
- 16) Liu Zhidan was in fact ordered by the Shaanxi Party committee on at least two occasions (in the autumn of 1928 and again in April 1931) to infiltrate warlord units and seek to win over recruits to the revolutionary forces. See Liu Jingfan 2007: 258-59, 270-71.
- 17) On the role of bandits in the Chinese revolution, see Billingsley 1988: chapter 9.
- 18) 馬錫五 1997: 418.
- 19) 任學冷·康小懷 2008: 69-70.
- 20) 任愚公 1995: 2-3; 馬錫五 1959: 306; 劉景星等 2003. Liu Jingxing (劉景星) was Liu Zhidan’s younger brother.
- 21) Snow 1968: 210-211.
- 22) Although the characters given here are the most commonly found, there is no standard form for the characters used for “Sanjiayuan”, and usage varies from source to source.
- 23) 梁星亮等 2001: 144-146.
- 24) 王國楨 1986: 32.
- 25) 小麗 2009: 10-11.
- 26) 楊丕勝 1993: 346. Other sources allude to the episode without actually naming Zhang Tingzhi as the culprit. See 同桂榮 (Liu Zhidan’s widow) 1993: 444 and 劉力貞 (Liu Zhidan’s daughter) 1993: 446.
- 27) Selden 1966-67, 1: 65.
- 28) 侯占元 2003: 95-96; 劉景范 2007: 267.
- 29) See Selden 1966-67, 1: 67 ff. for details of Liu’s military career.
- 30) 張占榮 1995: 327; 劉景范 1986: 117.
- 31) 馬錫五 1993: 324; 梁懷德 1995: 341; 張占榮 1995: 327-28.
- 32) 閻紅彥 1997: 264-266; Holm 1992: 92. On the West Shanxi Guerilla Column, see 吳岱峰·馬佩勛·李維鈞 1981.
- 33) 中共陝西省委黨史研究室·中共甘肅省委黨史研究室編 1997b: 2-4.
- 34) Official Party histories, seeking to present the Shaanxi guerilla movement in the best light possible, remain silent regarding the differences between Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang. It is only from scattered remarks in veterans’ memoirs that we gain any hint as to the real nature of their relationship.

It is also possible, of course, that something along the lines of the Sanjiayuan

- Incident had been planned from the beginning, though there is as yet no evidence to support such a hypothesis. For more on the relationship between Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang, readers are referred to 温相 2008, especially Ch. 1 (「劉志丹与謝子長的真实關係」): 5-98.
- 35) 吳岱峰 1997: 423-425; 「關於西北紅軍戰爭歷史中的幾個問題」 1986: 3-4.
  - 36) 「中共陝西省委黨史研究室·中共甘肅省委黨史研究室編 1997c: 28.
  - 37) 「中國工農紅軍陝甘遊擊隊隊委 1932 年 3 月 20 日關於遊擊活動的報告」 1995: 130. The original version of this document, titled 「陝甘遊擊隊材料之六, 2 月 12 日 - 3 月 20 日工作報告」, is housed in the Shaanxi Provincial Archive (陝西省檔案館), with the classification 目錄 17 號案卷 159.
  - 38) 吳岱峰 1997: 423-425; 雷恩鈞 1995: 339-340.
  - 39) 李維鈞 1997: 490-492; 吳岱峰 1997: 423-425; 雷恩鈞 1997: 486-487; 劉約三 1997: 537.
  - 40) 李維鈞 1997: 490-492; see also 姜兆瑩 1995: 323.
  - 41) 馬佩勛 1997: 469-470.
  - 42) 李維鈞 1997: 490-492.
  - 43) 中共慶陽地委黨史資料征集辦公室 1986: 117 (interview with Liu Jingfan, 25 April, 1959).
  - 44) 張邦英 1986: 40.
  - 45) 吳岱峰 1997: 423-425.
  - 46) Ibid: 424. There are numerous versions of how the events at Sanjiayuan transpired, particularly with regard to the disarming of the Second Regiment. For details, see 温相 2008: 47-48.
  - 47) 任愚公 1995: 1, 16.
  - 48) 吳岱峰 1997: 423-425; 馬錫五 1993: 324. Like Liu Zhidan, Ma Xiwu had formerly been a member of the *Gelao hui* (哥老會), and had come over to the revolution at Liu's urging.
  - 49) 戴茂林·超曉光 2011: 31-2.
  - 50) For details, see 中央檔案館·陝西省檔案館 1992, 1927-1929: 190, 198-99, 221, 331, 404, 446, 472; 1930-1931: 35-36; 1932, vol. 2: 327-328.
  - 51) 戴茂林·超曉光 2011: 32.
  - 52) 李振民等 2001: 131; 戴茂林·超曉光 2011: 33-35.
  - 53) See 劉風閣等編 1995.
  - 54) See 中共陝西省委黨史研究室·中共甘肅省委黨史研究室編 1997a.

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- 55) 劉景范 1995: 316; 張占榮 1995: 329.
- 56) 楊丕勝 1995: 340-341.
- 57) 劉景范 2007: 272.
- 58) 劉景范 1995: 317.
- 59) See 劉風梅·王志厚 1994.
- 60) 劉景范 2007: 262. Other sources state that it was Bai Xilin who carried out Zhao Erwa’s execution. See 馬佩勛 1997: 470; 吳岱峰 1997: 424; 楊丕勝 1995: 341. Elsewhere, however, Yang Peisheng relates that he could not see clearly who actually fired the shot. See 楊丕勝 1997: 495-6.
- 61) 姜兆瑩 1995: 323; 張占榮 1995: 329. See also 戴茂林·趙曉光 2011: 31-2.
- 62) 劉景范 1995: 317.
- 63) See, for example, 雷恩鈞 1997: 486; 吳岱峰 1997: 424. According to Yang Peisheng, Xie Zichang also condemned Zhao as a “bandit” when addressing the army at Sanjiayuan. See 楊丕勝 1995a: 341. [Although Xie’s name is transcribed as “XXX” in this text, the context leaves no doubt as to the speaker’s identity.
- 64) 馬雲沢 1997: 481.
- 65) An examination of the list of contributors to SGBG, most of them supporters of Xie Zichang, reveals a large number of high-level cadres.
- 66) For a detailed English-language account of the affair, see Holm 1992.
- 67) Holm 1992: 80.
- 68) Gao Gang was another local son and fellow-student at the high school in Yulin where Liu Zhidan and Xie Zichang had cut their political teeth. Following Liu Zhidan’s death in 1936, Gao became the leader of the Shaanxi-Gansu Border Region faction and thus came to be on very bad terms with the former North Shaanxi faction people. In later years, following his purge in 1954 on the grounds of launching an “anti-Party conspiracy”, his role in the events made the legacy of Sanjiayuan still more acrimonious.
- 69) See Holm 1992. Li Jiantong’s novel was finally published in China between 1979 and 1985 by the Workers’ Publishing House (工人出版社; volume 1) and the Wenhua Yishu Publishing House (文化藝術出版社; vols. 2 and 3), but her critical account of her own experiences was still too hot for mainland publishers to handle even in the comparatively relaxed conditions of the Reform & Opening period, and it was finally published in Hong Kong. See 李建彤 2007.
- 70) Holm 1992: 80.

- 71) The only reference to the Sanjiayuan Incident, and an indirect one at that, had been a mildly critical comment included in an unpublished 32-page document prepared by the PLA's 39<sup>th</sup> Army, successor to the 26<sup>th</sup> Red Army, in 1957. Omitting all mention of what had actually transpired at Sanjiayuan, the document merely noted that some comrades had taken an “overly-simplistic” approach to the problem of bandits in the army's ranks while some “waverers” had deserted the revolution, resulting in a reduction of the army's manpower. See 中國人民解放軍第39軍司令部 1957: 10.
- 72) For the official version of their report, see 「關於西北紅軍戰爭歷史中的幾個問題」1986.
- 73) 王曉中 2011: 25. Wang Xiaozhong's conclusions have been challenged in a recent article in the same journal. See 宋金壽, 「我了解的西北革命根據地肅反」(『炎黃春秋』2012: 10, 47-55).

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HELJ: See 劉風閣等編 1995

SGBG: See 中共陝西省委黨史研究室·中共甘肅省委黨史研究室編 1997

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# Liu Zhidan and his “Bro’s in the ‘Hood”: Bandits and Communists in the Shaanbei Badlands (1)

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## ABSTRACT

Since the appearance of Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China*, the achievements of Liu Zhidan (劉志丹) in blending revolutionary ideals with the destructive energy of north Shaanxi’s bandit tradition have become well known. Through repeated failures and recoveries, Liu Zhidan perceived that 20<sup>th</sup>-century China’s ubiquitous violence left no alternative for the communists but to seek a military solution. The key to revolutionary success in China was an empowered peasantry fighting in the name of a shared ideal, and Liu Zhidan recognized that, in the remote areas in which the communists sought to “rest their buttocks”, armed forces such as those of local bandits and brotherhoods could not be ignored.

How to win those forces over to the revolutionary cause, or, failing that, how to nullify and eventually eliminate them became a major strategic problem for Liu and for other early communist militants. Regularly condemned for his attention to such irregular fighters, Liu Zhidan saw that, under the circumstances, they were all “Bro’s in the ‘Hood”, and that the key to creating a successful revolutionary movement in China was to bring people together, not to isolate them.

This paper will examine Liu Zhidan’s activities in “Shaanbei” from 1928

to 1932, particularly his contacts with bandits and other local power-holders. It will suggest, among other things, that Liu Zhidan's policy of recruiting bandits to the revolutionary movement was anything but plain sailing. While some bandit chiefs were instinctively amenable to the revolutionary call, others became Liu Zhidan's worst enemies. At the same time, the resistance Liu encountered from his fellow-revolutionaries was often fierce, leading to purges and, ultimately, to what deserves to be termed judicial murder.