

# “Listen to What the Bandits Have to Say!”: Voices from the Post-“Liberation” Suppression Campaign in Guangxi

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One of the principal claims to legitimacy of the post-1949 Communist Party of China (CPC) regime was its elimination of the ubiquitous bandit gangs that had come to characterize the country, particularly since the breakdown of central authority following the revolution of 1911. With the conclusion of the nationwide suppression (剿匪) campaigns in 1952-53 — the date varied according to province and region — bandits (土匪) became the epitome of evil, one of the many symbols of the “bad old days” that were constantly hauled out to justify the CPC’s ruthless grip on power.<sup>1)</sup>

Buffeted by incessant political campaigns during the 1950s and early 1960s, most Chinese people did not have a lot of time to spare for the subject of old China’s bandits. To ensure that they did not forget entirely, cultural products such as the popular 1958 propaganda movie ‘Heroes with the Hearts of Tigers’

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(英雄虎胆), the story of a heroic People's Liberation Army (PLA) detachment that successfully pursued and killed a particularly rapacious gang which had been terrorizing the residents of one Guangxi mountain region, were churned out to remind them.<sup>2)</sup> In the mid-1960s, with the outbreak of the "Cultural Revolution", the Party's legacy of bandit suppression received a new lease on life. One of Jiang Qing (江青)'s so-called "revolutionary operas", 'Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy' (智取威虎山),<sup>3)</sup> sought to use the pre-1949 anti-bandit campaigns to reinforce the regime's political legitimacy. Based on Qu Bo (曲波)'s widely-acclaimed 1957 novel *Lin hai xue yuan* (林海雪原),<sup>4)</sup> it told the romanticized story of a CPC activist in Northeast China in the 1940s who put his life on the line by going single-handedly into a bandit lair and killing the gang's leader.

For most Chinese people who had reached maturity in the 1960s, Jiang Qing's opera was their first encounter with bandits, and at the same time a formative experience that clearly demarked bandits as villains in stark contrast to the purity of the revolutionary hero. By depicting the bandits as stereotyped "baddies" and denying them a voice of their own with which to defend their actions (a hallmark of reports on bandit activity under any political regime), both the opera and the novel it was derived from had the effect of making the CPC activists sent to eliminate the bandits appear all the more heroic. Many young people educated after 1949, in the thralls of post-revolutionary "victors' justice", evidently learned by heart the words of the aria sung by the hero as he plunged into the bandits' lair: "Friends! We are soldiers of the worker-peasant army who have come into the depths of these mountains in order to exterminate the reactionary forces and create a brand-new world!" Bandits, that is, for young Chinese of the post-1960 generation,

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were not individuals but the anonymous targets of military suppression campaigns, foils for the revolutionary heroism of communist activists. If many an impressionable young Chinese shed a tear when they heard these words, it was for the bravery of these activists, not for the fate of their bandit adversaries.

A similar though less dramatic effect was achieved by the numerous volumes of reportage describing the post-1949 bandit suppression campaigns in different parts of China that began to appear after the mid-1990s.<sup>5)</sup> Despite the appearance of a swift-moving revolutionary campaign culminating in the victory of 1949, in fact more than three years passed before the CPC achieved unchallenged control over China. One of the principal threats to its hegemony was the continuing nuisance posed by bandits who, despite the regime’s claims to have eliminated them, remained a potent force in many parts of southern and southwestern China thanks largely to instigation by old-regime diehards left behind following the Nationalist government’s removal to Taiwan. “Bandit suppression” thus became a major concern of the new regime, but, apart from a few serious incidents that made the national headlines, the truth about these campaigns was swept under the carpet for more than forty years until, for reasons of its own, the post-Tiananmen regime decided to make certain details of the campaigns public. In essence, however, the reportage that resulted from the Party’s decision was cast in the same vein as the heroic movies and revolutionary operas referred to above, describing an epic struggle between the forces of good (the Party) and evil (bandits) in which the fate of China itself lay in the balance.

Usually drawing on authentic contemporary PLA and local government documents, and often painstakingly detailed about the number of gangs

suppressed and the effort required to suppress them, the post-1990 suppression reports gave no voice to the “bandits” who were the target of the campaigns.<sup>6)</sup> While we learn much about the regime’s own anxieties, and about the considerable difficulties required before the campaigns could be carried to a successful conclusion, understanding of the “bandits” themselves is not something that can be gleaned from these materials. The omission is not surprising, since their primary objective was to paint an uncomplicated black and white picture of the suppression campaigns’ legitimacy. Anything suggesting that the people being so ruthlessly suppressed might have had a different viewpoint on what was happening would have made matters impossibly complicated. (For military commanders on the ground, the issue was naturally not a top priority anyway.)

Meanwhile, as the post-Tiananmen CPC and PLA struggled to reaffirm their revolutionary credentials, the history of pre-1949 bandit suppression was again called upon lest people forget the fact that the PLA had once been a band of heroes dedicated to creating a new China instead of merely a military force with the ability to crush those who opposed the regime’s interests. ‘Chronicle of Bandit Suppression in West Hunan’ (湘西剿匪記) was a two-part film first shown in 1987 that became known as a classic of 1980s Chinese cinema. It told the story of yet another heroic band of PLA soldiers who succeeded, against all odds and despite great sacrifices, in suppressing the notorious bandits of West Hunan, an impregnable bandit lair since at least the Song period. Here too the emphasis was on the self-sacrificing bravery of the suppression force, with the bandits depicted as stereotyped villains. Though bandit-related books (many of them piratical) enjoyed a brief publishing vogue in the 1990s,<sup>7)</sup> it needs to be pointed out that Chinese people’s image of

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bandits had been forged on the anvil of “bandit suppression”. Bandits had become the epitome of counter-revolutionary iniquity: like crime audiences anywhere, Chinese readers were simultaneously thrilled by the audaciousness and rapacity of the bandits they read about but relieved by the inevitable victory of the forces of law and order.

As publishing conditions in China improved around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new wave of post-1949 suppression campaign histories appeared, beginning with a multi-volume documentary collection entitled ‘The Bandit Suppression Struggle’ (剿匪斗争).<sup>8)</sup> More recently, the meticulously researched and elegantly produced 6-volume set ‘Compendium of Bandit-Suppression Records from New China’ (新中国剿匪纪实丛书) has also appeared from the same publisher.<sup>9)</sup> As well as the usual military accounts, these new materials include personal memoirs from soldiers and other people involved in the campaigns, and the editors have managed to ferret out large quantities of detail from previously inaccessible journals in newly-opened archives throughout China. Paper quality and general presentation have also improved, adding to their persuasive power. Yet, for all the attention to local detail and stress on locating the campaigns within the contemporary political situation,<sup>10)</sup> even these new accounts continued to share a similar failing with their predecessors, that of having been researched, documented and written from the standpoint of the suppressor, not from that of the people being suppressed. As such they are ultimately unsatisfactory as social history, even if they add to our understanding of the socio-political crisis that faced China in the early years following the CPC’s conquest of power.

The easiest way to make history is to write it yourself, and this axiom was certainly true of the campaigns to eliminate China’s vast population of

bandits. In the jargon of the day, “bandits” was a generic term encompassing a multitude of armed groups. First there were the traditional-style bandits, desperate people who, lacking the means of making a regular livelihood, had taken the traditional route of holing up in the mountains and relying on extra-legal, generally violent methods to survive. In 1949-50, following the transfer of state power, the term also potentially encompassed every grouping, armed or otherwise, beyond the control of the CPC: former regular army units of both the Nationalist government and local warlord cliques, secret society forces, even vocational groups such as transport workers’ guilds that had developed their own exclusive (and sometimes armed) organizations.<sup>11)</sup> While some of the traditional type of bandits may have forged alliances of convenience with the regular troops of the old regime that had taken refuge in the same mountains, many more so-called “bandits” were former peasants or hired hands merely seeking to survive amid increasingly perilous socio-political conditions. Whether they were anti-government organizations, armed self-defence groups, or simply predatory gangs, all of these forces were subsumed under the label “bandit”, which was also a convenient way of obscuring any political or social objectives that they might have had.

In this way, when accounts of the post-1949 suppression campaigns mention “bandits” they conveniently fail to make clear the true nature of the people they are referring to; all are assumed to have been, either consciously or unconsciously, “counter-revolutionary forces”.<sup>12)</sup> Recently released materials, however, make clear that many of those labelled “bandits” were in fact farmers who were seeking to resist the new government’s onerous grain tax policy.<sup>13)</sup> All in all, the image of a China coming smoothly under the communist government’s control was a myth. The southwestern provinces, where the

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communists had no experience of governing, came under Beijing’s control much sooner than they had anticipated due to the crumbling of the Nationalist government’s resistance, and presented the new regime with problems that proved difficult to solve through military methods alone. For a time, Brown has suggested, resistance all across southwest China to the extension of communist control was “shockingly successful”,<sup>14)</sup> and the much-vaunted “liberation of the southwest” could more accurately be called a “campaign of terror”.

Against this background, contrary to all reasonable expectations, a highly unusual book has appeared in China that throws a very different light on one of the post-1949 bandit suppression campaigns. Huang Jishu’s ‘Defeated Soldiers Become Bandits: a History of the 1949–1952 Suppression Campaign’ (敗兵成匪：1949到1952年的剿匪往事)<sup>15)</sup> is based largely on interviews conducted with former “bandits” or their surviving family members from the 1960s to the 1990s. Instead of simply expounding at length on the military aspects of the campaigns, the book seeks equally to tell the story through the eyes of the campaigns’ targets. In stark red letters against a black background, the cover blurb informs us that “Only now, after more than 60 years, can the story of this bandit suppression campaign be revealed”. For once the claim is rather more than just publisher’s hyperbole.

Huang Jishu’s book deals with the bandit suppression campaign in one province, the southwestern province of Guangxi, in the years immediately following “Liberation” in 1949. After more than ten years of all-out war and twenty years of national fragmentation prior to that, by 1949 there was hardly a province in China that did not have a bandit problem. Pacification, as noted above, became a top priority for the central government in Beijing, and has

been characterized as a continuation of the struggle against the Guomintang government's regular army,<sup>16)</sup> even as a "second Liberation War".<sup>17)</sup> In few places was the residual bandit problem more pressing than in Guangxi, for reasons that were both domestic and international.

Until the 1990s, the only information available on the campaigns in Guangxi, apart from a number of fragmentary memoirs scattered in various archives throughout the province, had been the posthumously published memoirs of the former PLA General Li Tianyou (李天佑), titled 'Springtime Comes to Yaoshan: a Memoir of the Bandit Suppression Struggle in Guangxi' (瑤山的春天 廣西剿匪鬪爭回憶錄).<sup>18)</sup> Li had personally commanded one wing of the suppression campaign that focused on the national minority area of Yaoshan and was thus familiar with the local situation. Moved by the sacrifices made by his troops and by local people participating in the campaign, Li Tianyou wrote in the Afterword to his book, he resolved to set down his memoirs to preserve their memory.<sup>19)</sup> While unusual in having been written by a top PLA commander, Li's brief memoir, like the volumes referred to above, stresses the valiant efforts of the people conducting the suppression campaign, and pays no heed to the motives and circumstances of those against whom the campaign was directed. (A creature of its time, it also suffers from its tendency to pay excessive obeisance to Chairman Mao.)

From the 1990s onwards, a number of books on the Guangxi suppression campaigns began to appear, some of them straightforward histories, others documentary collections. Representative among these were the 1991 volume 'Bandit Suppression in Guangxi' (廣西剿匪) and the 2008 'History of Bandit Suppression in Guangxi' (廣西剿匪史).<sup>20)</sup> While they are valuable in their own way for having filled in a number of gaps in our knowledge of the post-1949



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events in Guangxi, these official publications continued in the tradition of writing history from the viewpoint of the victors. The voices of those on the other side of the divide, those labelled as “bandits”, can be heard but faintly if at all. Significantly, they seem not to have been considered important by either of the two volumes’ editors.

Pre-1949 Guangxi’s situation was unique for a number of reasons. For twenty years or so prior to 1949 it had been to all intents and purposes the private fiefdom of the so-called “New Guangxi Clique” (新桂系) headed by two local militarists named Bai Chongxi (白崇禧) and Li Zongren (李宗仁). While nominally allied to the central government of Jiang Jieshi, these two had not only established their own independent military command but had also set up a formidable province-wide militia network based on the principle known as the “three selfs”: self-defence, self-government, and self-sufficiency. Control of these militias, however, was in the hands of local landlords and rich powerholders, naturally not inclined to welcome the advent of a new government that was bent (ostensibly, at least) on leveling social classes. The militia thus became natural recruits for the anti-communist resistance and another source of candidates for the generic label “bandit”.

In October 1949, the Guangxi Clique’s regular army divisions received a drubbing at the hands of crack field units of the PLA led by Lin Biao and retreated wholesale inside the provincial boundaries, where they were joined by more defeated troops of the central government. While Li and Bai fled to the USA and Taiwan, respectively, the province they left behind them was transformed into a hornets’ nest. The combination of unpaid, leaderless troops and a well-armed local militia commanded by landlords loyal to the province’s former rulers was a deadly combination, adding to and diversifying the vast

number of bandits for which Guangxi was already famous (several hundred thousand were said to be hiding out in the province even after the establishment of the CPC regime). Incited by clandestine Nationalist operatives ordered to lay the ground for the impending return of the old regime, for the following three years these desperate men helped to make Guangxi a thorn in the side of the fledgling regime in Beijing.<sup>21)</sup> They were aided by Guangxi's natural karst scenery, where a local saying had it that "there is no place without a mountain, no mountain without a cave, and no cave without its bandit gang".<sup>22)</sup> These "political bandits" (政治土匪), it should be said, were bandits only because the communists labeled them so for their audacity in not downing arms when ordered, but the label proved convenient as a way of denying the existence of significant local opposition to the CPC's assumption of control.

The effective pacification of this restive province was vital to the new regime's stability. In the space of six months from late 1950 to May 1951, Mao Zedong himself, busy as he was with, among other things, the prosecution of the "War to Aid Korea and Resist America",<sup>23)</sup> had time to send numerous angry telegrams ordering the PLA's Guangxi commanders to get on with their job. The most famous among them was undoubtedly the November 14 1950 message in which Mao admonished them: "The achievements of the Guangxi suppression campaign lag far behind those of all the other provinces. The reason is that the suppression methods employed by the commanders there suffer from serious failings." First Secretary of the South China Military Section (華南分局) Ye Jianying (叶劍英) and Chairman of the Central-South Military Region's (中南軍区) Political Department Tao Zhu (陶铸) were immediately transferred to Guangxi with orders to oversee the campaign

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there. They were warned not to return until the bandits’ elimination was complete.<sup>24)</sup>

Mao’s anxiety was understandable given China’s political situation at the time. For at least two years after the achievement of “national victory” in 1949, attacks by Guomindang-sponsored operatives on transport arteries, air raids (even on major cities like Shanghai), and assassinations of local CPC officials (sometimes in a horrendous manner) had continued throughout the country. Hardly ever reported in the mainstream media, these attacks gave the new government ample cause for worry.<sup>25)</sup> An even greater concern was Jiang Jieshi’s continuing threat, from his bastion on Taiwan, to take back the mainland by force. If it ever materialized, the threat would almost certainly be launched primarily via landings along the Guangdong coast, and the Guangxi bandit gangs holed up across the provincial border could be relied upon to rise up in response.<sup>26)</sup> (Many of them were in fact Nationalist government guerillas and political activists who had been planted there for precisely that purpose before the government decamped for Taiwan.) In order for an attempted Guomindang landing in Guangdong to be repelled successfully, Mao was convinced that it was necessary both to successfully carry out land reform in Guangdong so as to prevent disgruntled local peasants from supporting the invading armies, and to eliminate the military threat posed by the “political bandits” of Guangxi.

The outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula in June 1950 and China’s intervention the following October increased tensions even further, and was undoubtedly one factor affecting Mao’s growing nervousness. Indeed, the regime began to draw a clear connection between bandit suppression in China and resisting America in Korea. A local Guizhou newspaper quoted by Jeremy

Brown pointed out: “Our provincial victory over bandits is inseparable from China’s peace enterprise and opposing the American invasion. Bandit suppression has greatly strengthened our interior, rooted out the claws and teeth of the American invaders, overthrown the evil reactionary regime, and expanded and strengthened our national power... in the course of the Resist America Aid Korea Protect Home and Country Campaign, bandit suppression is still an important practical action.”<sup>27)</sup>

The effect of Mao’s frankly expressed anxiety and veiled threats of retribution was to bring the upper and lower echelons of Guangxi’s suppression command together. By the end of 1952, after a campaign lasting more than three years — roughly equivalent to the length of the post-war liberation struggle itself — and the extermination of more than 500,000 (the official figure was 512,917<sup>28)</sup>) “bandits” — roughly equivalent to the number of Guomintang troops eliminated in the course of the 1948 Huaihai Campaign (淮海戰役) — “bandit suppression” in Guangxi — what should really be called the subjection of an entire province to legal terror — was finally brought to a victorious conclusion.

At first sight, Huang Jishu’s book, lacking either source references or a bibliography, appears little different from its predecessors. While casual readers might not be bothered by such omissions, specialist historians justifiably feel suspicious. Reading through the text, however, one realizes the reason for this characteristic, for the book owes little to written sources and everything to a combination of strenuous legwork and patient fact-finding spread over a period of some 40 years. A Guangxi resident and former PLA soldier himself, Huang Jishu’s original intention, he told the authors in an email, had been to write no more than the usual documented story of how the

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PLA had valiantly resolved Guangxi’s “bandit calamity”. However, the numerous official suppression histories that appeared after the 1990s convinced him that such stories were no more than “history from above”, second-hand accounts telling only half of the story that needed to be told — the official perspective — while ignoring the remaining half — the feelings of the people caught up in what must surely have been a nightmare: not only for the “bandits” themselves but also for the people they lived among. He thereupon resolved to take a new perspective on the history of the Guangxi suppression campaigns, and to write the kind of book that could not have been written from an official standpoint. Rather than relying on written accounts, he would actually go out to meet the people that everyone else had ignored, for it was only in the hearts of these people that the true facts of social history could be discerned.<sup>29)</sup> In a word, he vowed to “listen to what the bandits had to say”.

It was easier said than done. While a number of Li Zongren’s officers — “bandit chiefs” in the parlance of the time — had surrendered to the communists in the final weeks of 1949 and been successfully pacified, others had either escaped to Hong Kong or Taiwan or else had disappeared without trace. Some of the former were fortunately still living at the time of Huang Jishu’s fact-finding tours, including Feng Huang (冯璜) and Wei Ruilin (韦瑞林) (see below), and he was able to interview them for his book. Valuable witnesses as these people were, however, they were not participants in the fresh outburst of resistance that had erupted in 1950 and therefore could provide only limited information. On the other hand, most of those who had taken part in that eruption had either been killed in the struggle or executed following their surrender. (Many more had been ruthlessly eliminated by local

communist authorities despite guarantees of pardon, as we shall see — one reason why this story has remained under wraps for so long.)<sup>30)</sup> For Huang Jishu, this was just one of the obstacles he confronted in his attempt to write the true story of post-1949 Guangxi:

I thus was unable to meet up with and interview any of the great “bandit chiefs” that I write about in my book — they had all been killed! And yet I had to write about them: where they came from, their life histories, how they became bandits, what their gangs were like and how they behaved, how they were eliminated, and so on. My only hope was to seek information indirectly from people who had known them, for the scattered written information available was generally in the form of either official PLA suppression reports or lists of those chiefs’ “great crimes” that were preserved in the *Zhengxie* (政協)’s historical archives<sup>31)</sup>. While such materials might offer a few meagre hints as to what really happened, that was it.

The “bandit chiefs” themselves had all been eliminated, but to kill all the people who had known them was an impossible task. The focus of my fact-finding interviews thus became how to locate those people and effectively acquire the information I wanted. First of all I had to put myself on an equal standing with them, which meant, of course, that I could not ask local officials to accompany me. To do so would have certainly caused people to fear that they were once again about to be persecuted for crimes committed in the distant past (“historical problems”, they would have been called). Naturally they would not have dared to tell me anything! Most of these people, for no more than the crime of having once been acquainted with someone once condemned as a “bandit chief”, had already been subject to

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numerous political and economic constraints since “Liberation” and had suffered many hardships. When I went to interview them, therefore, I made a point of taking with me small gifts like biscuits and instant noodles...<sup>32)</sup>

Huang’s book is without doubt the most vividly written treatment of the post-1949 suppression campaigns to have appeared to date. Expecting no more than the usual descriptions of military campaigns and revolutionary self-sacrifice, readers are likely to find themselves unable to put the book down, so unusual is it in its focus on the victims rather the victors. Although it deals primarily with the so-called “political bandits” who possessed ties of various degrees of strength to the previous regime, the book offers profound insight into the Guangxi “bandits” daily lives. More than any other account of the post-1949 suppression campaigns, its 300+ pages of text not only reveal much about the way PLA troops operated, but also enable us to encounter the “bandits” as people and to gain a grandstand view of how they, their families and their fellow-villagers experienced the PLA’s onslaught.

There is a basic pattern to the stories we find in the standard accounts of the post-1949 suppression campaigns, as if the same story had been “cloned” and regurgitated in volume after volume. On a moonless night when the wind is high, the Guomindang-affiliated “bandits”, knowing no limits to their evil, venture out to kill and burn, causing their impotent victims to bristle with anger. Into the breach rides the valiant PLA detachment, its victory guaranteed but only at the climax of a bitter struggle, after which it returns to base enabling the thankful villagers to live in peace once more. In Huang Jishu’s telling, however, the last days of the Guangxi “bandits” come across as a rather more complex story. By way of illustration, let us take two examples from his book.

The first story is that of Chen Shanwen (陳善文), an officer in the splendidly-titled “Guangxi People’s Anti-Communist National Salvation Force” (廣西人民反共救國軍), whose capture by government troops led to a surprising rebirth. Though he was no more than a “bandit” from the point of view of the suppression forces, Chen’s life story entailed much more than that label suggests.

Before joining the anti-communist resistance, Chen Shanwen had been a doctor known far and wide for his healing powers, in particular for a cure for bone injuries passed down through generations of his family which he had used to treat countless numbers of local people. After his home town of Yulin (玉林) fell to the PLA forces, Chen Shanwen felt instinctively that the life he had known was gone, never to return. When an old friend urged him to throw in his lot with the resistance, Chen made up his mind. Carrying no more than a small bag crammed with medicinal cures and a few personal possessions, he set off on what he knew could only be a one-way trip to the life of a “bandit”, eventually rising to the rank of major-general and deputy commander in the Guangxi People’s Anti-Communist National Salvation Force. His fellow-“bandits” — more than 200 villages in Yulin County alone had rebelled against the communists — regarded Chen respectfully as the “Hua Tuo [華佗] of the National Salvation Force”,<sup>33)</sup> saying that “as long as they had their Hua Tuo, they had nothing to fear from the communists’ bomber planes”. On the basis of his healing skills Chen Shanwen also became head of the Salvation Force’s medical corps, but when disaster struck he had no way to protect the other men from the aerial bombs of the forces come to eliminate them, and he was captured along with those of his comrades who had not been killed in the PLA’s advance.



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When news came of Chen Shanwen's capture, official documents tell us, the cadres and “masses” of Yulin howled for revenge, insisting that “blood should be repaid with blood”. Since Chen had been a highly respected doctor in his local community, these claims should be taken with a pinch of salt, yet Chen himself was resigned to his imminent execution as an accused former “bandit chief”. Then, just as the Yulin public security office was deliberating his fate, an order came from Tao Zhu, Chairman of the South-Central Military District's Political Office, transmitting a memorandum from the Communist Party's Central Committee: “Concerning those criminals who possess certain particular skills, provided that they are ready to confess their wrongdoings, you may offer them the chance to redeem themselves through meritorious deeds.” Thanks to this fortuitous bolt from the blue, Chen Shanwen's sentence was a mere seven years' imprisonment.

When he received the news of his lenient sentence, Chen Shanwen was so overcome with emotion that he fell to his knees, his face covered in tears. After commencing his imprisonment he revealed to his captors the means to produce some of his family's in-house medical prescriptions for curing bruised and broken bones. Many of them went into mass production, first being sent to the battlefields of Korea for the treatment of wounded Chinese volunteer soldiers there, later, as traditional Chinese medicine, being exported all over the world. Chen Shanwen was also called upon to treat the illnesses of top communist leaders like Dong Biwu (董必武), Nie Rongzhen (聶榮臻), Luo Ronghuan (羅榮桓) and He Long (賀龍). Following his early release in 1956, Chen opened a small clinic in his hometown of Yulin and continued to win renown for his medical skills. He was later elected a special representative to the Guangxi *Zhengxie*. Although replaced by other remedies and no longer

produced in China, medicines derived from his family's traditional prescriptions were for a long time used all over the world under the "Yulin" brand name, though few if any of the people who used it were aware that this medicine had been brought into the world by a one-time "bandit" officer of China's anti-communist resistance!<sup>34)</sup>

"Those who ought to have died survived, while those whose life had been vouched for died." This refrain is reflected in the second story which, though very different from that of Chen Shanwen, is equally instructive. Zhong Zupei (鐘祖培) was a classmate of Li Zongren who had studied alongside the future provincial leader from elementary school right up to their graduation from middle school. After graduation the two men's association continued, as Zhong rose to become a lieutenant-general and deputy corps commander in Li's Seventh Army Corps. When his patron was transferred out of the province in 1937 following the July 7 Incident and the outbreak of war with Japan, Zhong Zupei, left high and dry, was forced to return to his hometown of Gongcheng (恭城) where he lived the life of a country recluse. At the same time, he took on the posts of local militia commander and delegate to the National Assembly (国民大会), becoming the image of the country gentleman and gaining a local reputation as an upright official who could be relied upon to deal with affairs fairly and firmly.

Following Gongcheng's "Liberation" in December 1949, the newly-established People's Government followed the usual pattern of calling for all privately-held guns and ammunition to be handed in. Zhong Zupei's arsenal by this time included several hundred rifles as well as thousands of rounds of ammunition, making him something of a "greenwoods chieftain" (草頭王) and inclined to put up a fight. On January 25, 1950 Zhong Zupei rebelled at the

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head of more than 4000 men, forming the “Gongcheng People’s Anti-Communist National Salvation Army” (恭城人民反共救国軍) and helping to set off a fresh round of province-wide resistance. Over a period of no more than a couple of days, in what became known as the province-shaking “Gongcheng Revolt” (恭城暴動), Zhong’s forces, supplemented by dozens of bandit gangs from surrounding counties,<sup>35</sup> smashed the county’s newly-installed local government and set up their own independent regime. Retribution was not long in coming: under the relentless onslaught of PLA units the “National Salvation Army” was forced onto the back foot. In the end, however, a major factor in persuading Zhong Zupei to give in to the besieging suppression force was the latter’s recruitment of his daughter to call out across Gongcheng’s city walls for him to abandon his “futile” rebellion.

Finally, having received a guarantee from the local Party Committee’s security chief that his life would be spared, Zhong Zupei hoisted the white flag and opened the city’s gates. In reward for his cooperative attitude, he was given the post of chairman of Gongcheng’s Pacification Committee (恭城招撫委员会) and played a large part in persuading hundreds of his former followers still hiding in the surrounding mountains to surrender to the new authorities. In this way Zhong Zupei came to play a not inconsiderable role in restoring peace to the Gongcheng area. Despite this happy resolution, orders came soon after from the Guangxi People’s Committee that Zhong Zupei be taken to Guilin under escort for punishment. Guarantees of safety notwithstanding, on February 27, 1951 he was publicly shot, along with his secretary. In subsequent years, particularly during the years of the Cultural Revolution, not only members of Zhong Zupei’s family but many other people in Gongcheng with any connection to Zhong lived in constant fear for their

lives.<sup>36)</sup>

Almost half a century later, in the year 2000, Huang Jishu paid a visit to the home of the same security chief who had guaranteed Zhong Zupei's life in return for his surrender. Though a very old man, he recalled the episode clearly, speaking of it in bitter tones: "The arrangement was that his life and safety would be spared — how could I go back on such a promise! But severe methods are required to keep control in times of upheaval, so no doubt those in authority at the time felt that they had to consider the larger picture, not just the situation on the ground..."<sup>37)</sup>

Individual life-stories like these are conspicuous by their absence from the traditional bandit-suppression accounts. How was Huang Jishu able to hunt down such stories and include them in his account of the Guangxi suppression campaigns? In a number of private communications to the authors, he told us something about his life and about how he came to write his book.

From 1962 to 1968 I served with [the PLA's] Guangxi Military District, first as a soldier and later in the District Office, working in the District Headquarters and later in the political section. My first encounter with the history of bandit suppression in Guangxi came at this time, when I encountered officers and men who had served in the campaigns. . . . After visiting several places deep in the mountains of Yaoshan [once a major site of resistance to the CPC regime] searching for materials on the suppression campaigns, I first conceived the idea of putting together a comprehensive history of the bandit suppression campaigns that followed the establishment of the new government. For various reasons, however, I was unable to put my plan into action.

In 1980, by which time I had become a part-time writer, I took part in a

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creative writing study group organized by the Guangxi chapter of the Writers' Guild (作家協會), and the experience rekindled my idea of writing about the post-Liberation suppression campaigns. That autumn, with the approval of the Guild, I plunged into the mountains of the Dayaoshan armed with no more than a small knapsack. In the course of a month spent climbing mountains and fording rivers, I had collected a large amount of first-hand material on the suppression campaigns in that part of Guangxi. After my return, unfortunately, I was so busy with the writing of my two historical novels, 'The First President' (第一個總統) and 'Annals of the Guangxi Clique' (桂系演義),<sup>38)</sup> that I once again had no time to think about bandit suppression.

In the early 1990s I was elected a member of the Guangxi Zhuang Self-Governing Area's *Zhengxie*, and also found myself on that body's Historical Archives committee helping to put out its journal *Wenshi chunqiu* (文史春秋)... During this time I came across many more materials on the suppression campaign, including some reports which showed clearly how the former Guomindang government had been paying bandits to cause trouble. In particular, I came to be aware of a number of vivid memoirs written by former gang leaders among the “political bandits” who, as a result of the pacification campaigns, had surrendered and been granted amnesty (招安), later coming to work for the *Zhengxie*. Wei Ruilin, for example, had served under the prominent bandit chief Li Meimei (李妹妹) prior to the latter's pacification and had later come to be vice-chairman of the Guangxi *Zhengxie*, while Feng Huang, former commander of the Guomindang's “Anti-Communist 19<sup>th</sup> National Salvation Army”, had been appointed a permanent committee member. On the basis of these materials

I was able to track these men down and they proved to be a precious source of information. Once again I began to feel a strong need to actually get down to writing my own account of the suppression campaigns.

In May 1994, with the encouragement of the Guangxi Historical Archives Committee, *Wenshi chungiu*, and the Qinzhou (钦州) City *Zhengxie*, I travelled to Guitai Township (贵台乡) in the hinterland of what had historically been one of old Guangxi's greatest bandit lairs, the Shiwan dashan (十万大山), to visit the birthplace of Wei Xiuying (韦秀英), one-time Commander of the "Guangdong-Guangxi Border Region Anti-Communist National Salvation Army" (粤桂边区反共救国军) and Guangxi's most famous female bandit chief. With the help of an informal discussion meeting I called, I was able to inquire after people who might have knowledge of the events of those years, inspect some of the battlegrounds, and also acquire a lot more first-hand materials. ... In the course of my visits to most of the best-known bandit strongholds of pre-Liberation Guangxi, I even began to feel as if some of the "bandit spirit" (匪气) had rubbed off on me!<sup>39)</sup>

Huang Jishu's book focuses on the "small picture", where unknown people become unsung heroes, rather than the "big picture" which calls among other things for the execution of men like Zhong Zupei. Following the suppression of the "great bandit revolt" of spring 1950 in Guangxi, many of the "bandit" chiefs were killed, while many others surrendered and made various kinds of contribution to the new People's Government only, in most cases, to find themselves in front of a firing squad. However much history seeks to obscure these unpleasant episodes, it is impossible to eliminate all those who know about them. Through his repeated fact-finding visits to the mountains of

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Guangxi, Huang Jishu successfully opened up new lines of communication with these “people in the know”, making it possible for him to write the kind of book that he wrote.

He had some surprises, too. As already noted, many of those who had succeeded in slipping through the bandit-suppression net had made their way to Taiwan, others to Hong Kong or Macau or even over the border into Vietnam. Following the loosening of social controls in China after the commencement of “Reform & Opening”, particularly after the warming of cross-Strait relations, those among them who were still alive began returning home one by one to seek out their families.<sup>40)</sup> These “overseas visitors” proved to be yet another source of intimate and little-known detail on the situation in post-1949 Guangxi that cannot be found anywhere outside the writings of Huang Jishu.<sup>41)</sup>

Huang’s research also threw new light on some of the indirect effects of Guangxi’s violent “bandit suppression” years. The majority of men who emerged as “bandit chiefs” during those years were leaders of the “village gentry”. While some may have been examples of the “local bullies” depicted in communist propaganda, most were highly respected men in their locality who, as well as being responsible for governing local affairs, were well-versed in the traditional Confucian canon and, whether by opening schools or by merely living a life beyond reproach, took seriously their role as purveyors of basic morality for local inhabitants. When men like Zhong Zupei took it upon themselves, in the name of “National Salvation”, to defend the values they espoused from the armed inroads of a new regime that promised to turn their world upside down, who among them could have imagined that, at one swing of the political pendulum, they would be hunted down and shot as “bandit

chiefs”, the reverse of all they had stood for? By eliminating this class of village-level educator-managers, the side-effect of the CPC’s “bandit suppression” campaign was to thrust rural Guangxi, formerly among the top five producers of “No. 1 scholars” (狀元) under the old examination system, into a cultural Dark Age from which it has barely begun to recover.<sup>42)</sup>

It is this kind of information that makes Huang Jishu’s book unlike any other account of bandit suppression in Guangxi (or anywhere else). Because he is a writer not an academic, he is not bound by the customary rules of historical scholarship. Since his book is a work of reportage, we find no precise record of the dates of his fact-finding visits, the places he visited or the people he interviewed, only the information that Huang chose to impart in the pages of his book. As a historical document, therefore, at least from an academic point of view, the book has some shortcomings. On the other hand, it is a vivid record of some of the tragic and complex events that accompanied the advent of communist power in one province of China.

#### NOTES

1) This essay first appeared in Chinese in the review column of the Shanghai morning paper *Oriental Morning Post* (東方早報; August 7, 2011, page 6). See Xu Youwei 2011. For this English version, the original text has been expanded and amended.

For an overall treatment of bandits in China, see Billingsley 1988.

2) Filmed in monochrome, the movie was a smash hit in its time but had little appeal to increasingly sophisticated young people growing up under the Reform & Opening regime of the 1990s. In 2007, the story was reissued in the form of a 23-episode television drama with improved characterization, more visually-attractive sets, and, of course, using colour photography. Clearly, the government has not forgotten the propaganda appeal of bandit-suppression



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adventures.

- 3) The opera was later made into a popular movie said to have been the most-watched movie of all time.
- 4) Qu Bo 1957. The book was translated into English by Sydney Shapiro and published in 1978 by Foreign Languages Press under the title *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*.
- 5) The first of these to appear was Deng Lifeng 1996.
- 6) Another problem with most of these volumes was that they gave no sources for the facts they claimed. This was partly because it would have been “inconvenient” to list the names of military units and so on, partly because, in Chinese scholarship of the time, it was not deemed necessary for scholars to back up their claims with documentation. In combination with the lurid (and not always appropriate) covers evidently considered by publishers to increase a book’s selling power, the effect was to make these suppression accounts (including Deng Lifeng’s work cited above) appear less than reliable from a scholarly point of view. In point of fact, most of them were indeed based on documentation that, if one-sided, was at least authentic. (See Xu Youwei 2011 for details.)
- 7) See Xu Youwei and Philip Billingsley 2002.
- 8) 中國人民解放軍歷史資料叢書編審委員會主持 2001-2006.
- 9) Each volume, written by one or more respected local researchers, deals with a separate military district, namely Northwest China, North China, East China, Southwest China, Northeast China and Central-South China.
- 10) See the General Preface (出版說明), included in each volume, for a statement of the series’ rationale.
- 11) See Asano 1993: 11.
- 12) Outside China, scholarly accounts of this topic are few and far between. In English, Brown 2007 considers the case of Guizhou province. For a Japanese assessment, see Asano 1993.
- 13) Brown 2007: 122.
- 14) Brown 2007: 105.

- 15) Huang Jishu 2011.
- 16) Deng Lifeng 1996, II: 630.
- 17) Preface to 『廣西剿匪紀實』 (Record of bandit suppression in Guangxi), cited in Huang Jishu 2011: 281.
- 18) Li Tianyou 1978. Though completed in 1964, Li's manuscript remained unpublished during his lifetime (he died in 1970), and was finally published posthumously.
- 19) Li Tianyou 1978: 104.
- 20) See, respectively, 廣西軍區政治部, 中共廣西壯族自治區黨史辦合編 1991, and 中共廣西壯族自治區黨史研究室 2008.
- 21) Huang Jishu 2011: 25-26.
- 22) 「無處不有山、無山不有洞、無洞不有匪」, quoted in 中共廣西壯族自治區黨史研究室2008: 14.

A similar situation had been created throughout much of China in the 1920s, when discharged or defeated warlord soldiers fled to the nearest mountains with their weapons and joined the regular bandits already ensconced there. For more information on these “soldier-bandits” (兵匪), see Billingsley 1988: chapter 8.

- 23) Brown's research has shown that many of Guizhou's suppressed “bandits” were subsequently sent to serve on the Korean front. (It was the American forces' interrogation of those who were captured that provided Brown with his primary data on the situation in Guizhou.) Whether the original intention was to create cannon fodder for the battlefield is not clear, but it may be assumed that the same fate befell many of the suppressed Guangxi “bandits”.

Interestingly enough, the traditional prejudice against bandits continued on the battlefield. Brown cites a case in which former bandit units, scorned by other soldiers as “redesignated bandit ragtag troops” (土匪改變過來的雜牌軍), were given coarse grains to eat rather than rice. (Brown 2007: 127)

- 24) 中央文獻研究室編 1987-1998, I: 659, 666, cited in He Chengxue 1997: 50-55, 61. See also Fan Dongfang 1996: 24-26. Taken together, these two articles show clearly the seriousness with which Mao viewed the situation in Guangxi. Deng Lifeng 1996 (II: 420-436) also has a separate section on the effects of

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Mao's intervention in the campaign. Reports of assassination plots by Guomindang agents against Mao and other top CPC leaders may well have fuelled Mao's anxiety. See Asano 1993: 5.

- 25) See Asano 1993: 5-6, 21.
- 26) See also Ibid: 6.
- 27) 『新貴州日報』, cited in Brown 2007: 126.
- 28) Huang Jishu 2011: 1. However, figures on the total number of “bandits” exterminated tend to differ from source to source.
- 29) Huang Jishu, private communications, 25 July, 2011 and March 14, 2012.
- 30) Ibid.
- 31) *Zhengxie*: short for *Quanguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang hui* (全国人民政治協商會; Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference). While the organization's political role is ostensibly that of an advisory body to the CPC government, one of its many offshoots is the Committee for Cultural and Historical Data (文史資料委員會), which maintains archives in each province to collect and preserve materials on provincial and local affairs.
- 32) Huang Jishu, private communications, 25 July, 2011 and March 14, 2012.
- 33) Hua Tuo ((華佗); 145-c. 208) was a Han dynasty physician celebrated as the first person to use anaesthesia to treat injuries.
- 34) Huang Jishu 2011: 95-97.
- 35) Huang Jishu, private communication, March 14, 2012.
- 36) Ibid.
- 37) Huang Jishu 2011: 54-70. Mao Zedong had explicitly called for state terror to quieten the opposition. “Kill all who should be killed” (應殺者、均殺之), Mao had written on one report he received of bandit-suppression work in early February 1951, and he subsequently defended the killing of “bandit leaders and habitual bandits” as necessary for the consolidation of power. (『建国以来毛沢東文稿』1988, 2: 112, 124) Deng Xiaoping, in charge of security for southwest China, also called for “resolutely” killing enemies without “appeasing and hesitating”. (Brown 2007: 123, 129)

Zhong Zupei's daughter, feeling responsible for her father's death, left China

- at the first opportunity and settled in the USA. Her resentment at the communists for breaking their promise to spare Zhong Zupei's life continued until the day she died. (Huang Jishu, private communication, March 12, 2012.)
- 38) See, respectively, Huang Jishu, Zhao Yuanling, Su Lili 1984 and Huang Jishu 2007. While the latter volume provides more details on Zhong Zupei, it takes his story only up to December 1949 and therefore does not deal with the 1950 “bandit revolt” in which Zhong played such a pivotal role.
- 39) Huang Jishu, private communication, 22 July, 2011.
- 40) Ibid, 25 July, 2011.
- 41) According to a recent communication received by the authors from Huang Jishu, the appearance of his book appears to have opened the floodgates on the topic of post-1949 “bandit suppression” in Guangxi. Gongcheng County, for example, has established a special team to collect documents related to Zhong Zupei's rebellion and its aftermath, and plans to issue a collection of those documents in the near future. Based on oral interviews with people in the know, much of the information contained in those documents had still been under wraps when Huang Jishu did his own research, and they evidently contain revelations that shocked even Huang himself. Other Guangxi counties have also begun compiling documents. (Huang Jishu, private communication, 15 September, 2012)
- 42) Ibid, March 12, 2012. From the CPC's standpoint, needless to say, this side-effect was highly desirable.

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“Listen to What the Bandits Have to Say!”

**“Listen to What the Bandits Have to Say!”:  
Voices from the Post-“Liberation”  
Suppression Campaign in Guangxi**

XU Youwei

Philip BILLINGSLEY

One of the principal claims to legitimacy of the post-1949 Communist Party of China (CPC) regime was its elimination of the country’s bandit gangs. More than three years passed before the CPC achieved unchallenged control over China, largely because of the continuing nuisance posed by “bandits”, many of whom were being instigated by agents of the Nationalist government on Taiwan. “Bandit suppression” campaigns became a constant feature of the new regime’s early years, but the truth about these campaigns was swept under the carpet for more than 40 years.

Since the mid-1990s, numerous volumes of reportage describing the post-1949 bandit suppression campaigns have appeared. While they provided details of the number of gangs suppressed, these reports gave no voice to the “bandits” themselves. We learn much about the regime’s anxieties, but no understanding of the “bandits”’ reasons for existence.

A new book has now appeared that throws a very different light on the post-1949 campaigns. Huang Jishu’s ‘Defeated Soldiers become Bandits: a History of the 1949-1952 Suppression Campaign’ (敗兵成匪：1949到1952年的剿匪往事), about the “bandit suppression” campaign in Guangxi province, is based largely on interviews with former “bandits” or with their surviving family members. As well as describing the military campaigns, the book also tells the story through the eyes of the campaigns’ targets. This essay seeks to give a more accurate picture of the post-1949 situation in one part of China by focusing on Huang Jishu’s book.