

‘IN PERILS IN THE WILDERNESS’: CHINESE BANDITS AND CHINESE SOCIETY THROUGH THE EYES OF ‘FOREIGN TICKETS’

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A Reuters report from Peking dated the 12th, citing reliable Hankow sources, stated that Father Lundeen has been released by the bandits.

This brief despatch, carried in the December 13 1922 edition of the Shanghai newspaper *Minguo ribao* (民国日報) under the title, ‘Henan Bandits Release Reverend Lundeen’, signified that the last of the ‘foreign tickets’ held by the notorious bandits of China’s Henan province had finally escaped from the jaws of death. For most readers living in China during the 20’s and 30’s of this century, used to stories of bandit ‘outrages’, such a report would probably have been regarded with indifference; and present-day readers too might be afflicted with indifference of another kind as they contemplated a story too distant from their everyday experience to be comprehensible. The pages on which such reports were filed, some 75 years ago, have already yellowed with age, but it is from those reports that our story begins.

From the mid-19th century on, once foreign pressure made it no longer feasible for the Chinese authorities to sustain their traditional policy of exclusion, foreigners of various ranks and persuasions began jostling each other for admission to the interior, supplying China’s bandits

with both new targets and new parameters for their time-honoured practice of kidnapping victims for ransom. Eventually, the term 'foreign ticket' (*yang-piao* 洋票) would come to figure as one of the most familiar catch-words of Republican China (1911-1949). Amid the suffering the term implied, however, as these unlucky captives were yanked around from village to village before the eyes of astonished Chinese peasants, there was one consolation for those who wish to know more about this troubled episode in China's not-so-distant history. This was that some of those who managed to escape from their captors' clutches were ready to relive their painful memories by writing out their memoirs. Through actually listening to what the bandits themselves wanted to say, they were able to record in various degrees of detail the 'intimate' aspects of banditry so difficult to pin down through other sources—their captors' feelings about being bandits, their hopes for the future, the pattern of their everyday lives, and so on. The record of these captives' experiences, experiences beyond the imagination of most people, affords later generations the opportunity for a peep into an otherwise inaccessible area of Chinese life, and what they have left behind turns out to be far more than a mere record of their trials and tribulations.

Scattered amongst various libraries and archives in the West and no longer easy to find, these memoirs, some long, some short, have with one exception¹⁾ been largely ignored by historians of China. They have also never been translated into Chinese, despite offering a wealth of insights not only into the lives of bandits but also into socio-political conditions in China before 1949. It was this gap which persuaded the present authors to bring as many of the memoirs as possible together in

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Chinese translation, and to add a Preface setting out our reasons for considering them so important. The purpose of the present essay, adapted freely from the Chinese version, is to introduce the memoirs to Western readers, among whom they are equally unfamiliar.

The two volumes to which this essay forms the Preface, scheduled to appear in Chinese in late 1997,²⁾ bring together a total of 28 memoirs (see the Sources for details). They include those of the aforementioned Reverend Anton Lundeen, whose observant but harrowing book *In the Grip of Bandits And Yet in the Hands of God* brings home to us as clearly as any other the real meaning behind the terse press release cited in the opening lines. The authors include 19 Americans, 6 Englishmen, 1 Norwegian and 1 German. Among them are missionaries, travellers, and journalists, as well as a writer, a doctor, and an employee of a foreign company doing business in China. The dates of their capture range from 1920 to 1937, and the provinces where they were taken include Heilongjiang and Liaoning in what was then known as Manchuria, Shandong, Fujian, Guangdong, Hunan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Henan, Anhui, Suiyuan, and Hebei in China Proper, as well as Hong Kong and Macao.

A dip into the writings of these one-time 'foreign tickets' takes us into the very heart of the world of Chinese bandits, where we learn about the organization of their gangs as well as the nature of their activities; about their relations with the world about them; about the complex and delicate three-way relationship among the Chinese and foreign authorities and the bandits themselves that surrounded the negotiations for the release of a foreign captive; about the bandits' treatment of their

captives and their attitude towards Western civilization in general; and so on. Above and beyond all that, the experiences of these foreign captives and the detailed and unique observations which grew out of them provide us with a multitude of insights into the painful and problem-riddled world of early 20th-century rural China. If the voices that speak to us from the lines of those now yellowed pages are those of the once-mighty foreigner brought rudely to an awareness of human vulnerability, the cries that leap out at us from between those lines issue from the mouths of China's long-suffering poor peasants.

1

“The officials force the people to rebel.”

“We were forced to climb Mt. Liang.”

Foreign captives were quick to observe that behind the decision of most of their captors to ‘take to the greenwood’ was the action (or inaction) of some uncaring official. Many of them were surprised to find that the bandits, far from being without exception the ignorant ruffians they had expected them to be, included men (there were few women, both for physical reasons such as bound feet, and for less tangible reasons such as the culturally prescribed definition of ‘femininity’) who had received some considerable education before engaging in their present line of occupation, and even some with relatively illustrious pasts. There were the returned students, the former Beijing University student, the men who had attended advanced courses at officers’ training school, and the alumni of various missionary schools. There was the former government official, the former regular army officer, the former

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headmaster of a village school, as well as the many who had graduated to banditry from the ranks of the army. Among the last-named were some who had participated in the 1st World War in Europe, who were not only familiar with Western ways and languages but had sometimes even taken Western wives. And yet, when all was said and done, these outstanding and reputable individuals had sunk to the level of the much-despised bandit.

In the captives' view, this fall from grace was clearly the result of problems that transcended the individuals concerned: when an official lost his post, it was because he had fallen victim to corruption in high places; when former regular soldiers became bandits, it was because their unit had lost out in the struggle for power among their warlord superiors and they had become 'the unemployed'; when honest peasants turned to outlawry, it was because their whole family had been slaughtered in reprisal for some minor crime, or because they had fallen foul of some bully in their home village, and from what had been no more than the simple desire for revenge had finally come to play the part of professional outlaws. There were those who had been forced into a life beyond the law by false accusations of collusion for personal profit; there were also those who, at the height of a gang's raid, were offered the unenviable choice between death and joining its ranks. And then there were the vast majority of bandit recruits, for whom the struggle for survival in a cruel world had left them with no choice but to turn their backs on all that they considered good and respectable. The former village headmaster was a case in point: unable to make ends meet any other way, he had discarded that occupation that earned him respect in exchange for the life of a bandit which, while offering little in

terms of social esteem, at least furnished the prospect of living a little longer. The feelings which such life-stories incurred were apparent even to the 'foreign tickets' whose lives these men held in their hands.

Generally speaking, bandit activities were generated by economic factors and did not involve any substantial advance in social consciousness, but as the 20th century went by there was a noticeable transformation in bandits' social and political awareness. If foreign captives are to be believed, not a few of them had a philosophical standpoint of their own, being fully aware of the unprecedented ideas that had begun to find acceptance in China since the crumbling of the old Manchu autocracy in 1911. Men such as this were often thoroughly disillusioned with the traditional attitude which enjoined all to submit to being trampled upon as the will of Fate, and also with an appalling social system in which the unequal distribution of wealth masqueraded as Heavenly Justice. No longer satisfied with the traditional ideal of seeking enrolment in the ranks of the official army as proof of their upright nature, many of them held firm to their desire to be acknowledged as men of authority and respect on their own terms. The struggle which such men were engaged in was a once-and-for-all battle to make those dreams reality, and only through such a purifying struggle could the just and upright government they dreamed of come to pass and the nation be restored to peace and stability. As one of them put it, "The right Lord has not appeared yet..."³⁾ As an expression of bandits' political ideals, for all that it retains traces of traditional messianic ideas, such a statement is a far cry from the usual attitude of seeking to survive from day to day. From there it was a short step to the dream cherished by some stronger gangs of expanding their influence so as to set themselves up as local

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power-holders, and even of becoming the supreme arbiters of central authority. Since the majority of the foreign captives nursed the (albeit mistaken) belief that many of China's provincial power-holders had indeed clambered their way to the top in this way, such dreams did not appear to them entirely without foundation.

The internal structure of a gang together with its delegation of responsibilities were usually fairly clear cut, and this was another aspect that did not escape the notice of foreign captives. Only someone of outstanding qualities was eligible to reach the position of chief, for whom the most essential thing was to gain the rank and file's respect. Most chiefs not only had some quality that set them apart from the rest, they also had the quality of charisma that made other people take notice. While they possessed the right to distribute the gang's gains and direct military actions, and enjoyed greater material benefits than the rest, they also had the responsibility to maintain their followers' morale, to mediate disagreements and clashes within the gang, and, when necessary, to punish bandits who had offended against the gang's internal laws. For all that they had frequently taken a blood oath of solidarity before commencing their life of crime, the chiefs rarely trusted their subordinates all the way, especially when the gang was stopped to divide up the loot from their latest raid.

Be that as it may, whenever some major decision loomed, a complex gang made up of several component sections would frequently reach a decision upon a course of action only after holding a conference of its principal leaders. The heated debates that took place at these meetings, though a source of wonder (tempered by anxiety) for those who were

with the bandits against their will, testified to a surprising degree of democratic spirit. Those among the bandits who had received a modicum of education frequently acted as military advisors, as scribes, or as strategic planners. The older members of the gang, though most often charged with keeping the homefires burning while the gang was out on a raid, were nevertheless usually accorded a degree of veneration, and their rich experience sometimes meant that they enjoyed some influence when it came to making decisions. Bandits who were hurt or became sick were accorded preferential treatment. Guns were acquired either by stealing them from soldiers or, wonder of wonders again, through private transactions with those same soldiers.

There were various aspects of bandits' daily lives that foreign captives took particular note of, ranging from their fear of supernatural retribution to their treatment of female and child captives. The first thing bandits would do once they had set up camp, for example, was often to hold a memorial ceremony for those they had killed, lest their malevolent spirits should subsequently come seeking revenge. Call it religious belief or superstitious ritual, there were many spheres of bandits' lives in which their inner fears—and also, perhaps, their innate sense of the indefensibility of the lives they were leading—were reflected in words or actions designed to banish those fears to the backs of their minds. In this respect, opium was also useful, though its value went far beyond its capacity for providing a quick trip to the realms of Lethe. To be sure, there were many bandits for whom opium was an addiction pure and simple, but in a world where hospitals were few and, unless run by good-hearted Western missionaries, unaffordable anyway, opium took the place of medicine. For those strong enough in

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both mind and body to require neither of these functions, the drug played yet another vital role: as a form of 'hard currency' which could be exchanged for guns and other needed commodities.

The tender sensibilities of the 'foreign tickets' (or what, from the point of view of the poor Chinese peasant, were perceived to be such) provided their captors with unlimited scope for fun. Playing mah-jongg all night long just to keep them awake, commenting on their bodies (including lewd jokes at their expense), setting dogs and cats against each other, and cracking obscene jokes in loud voices to test their reaction were only some of the ways in which the capture of a 'foreign ticket' brought the bandits more than the mere promise of a fat ransom.

These unwilling guests also furnished a perfect audience for those bandits who wanted to show off their martial or other skills, or engage in acts lost on an already jaded clientele. Whether it was for their benefit or not, heated discussions among the bandits of what each would do with his share of the ransom money brought the captives at least a smattering of hope that their release was being sought; in the meantime, they tell us, the long hours of awaiting the outcome of the usually convoluted, cat-and-mouse negotiations were whiled away by having the older bandits tell stories of their past exploits, or by persuading younger ones to sing songs, or (to the captives' astonishment) by reciting from memory passages from the classic books.

Like most other Chinese males, bandits (whose world, as already noted, was overwhelmingly a masculine one) had little sensitivity to spare for women. If they were treated with any respect at all, it was to

preserve their value as objects of sexual dalliance; otherwise, as their argot equivalent, 'earthly ticket' (地票; men, of course, were 'heavenly tickets' 天票) implied, women possessed little value at all, and those who were unlucky enough to be caught generally brought out the worst in the bandits. To the horror of the captives, who were often deliberately provided with a grandstand view of the proceedings, rape was common (though perhaps not as common as when a village was overrun by soldiers), and many bandit 'wives' were the daughters of respectable families carried off at gunpoint when their home was ransacked; needless to say, many of these 'wives' were dispatched forthwith when their bound feet made it hard to keep up with their captors on the march.

At any level of Chinese society, women were chattels who could be bought and sold at will, possession or non-possession of which could make all the difference to a man's social standing. For a man without the financial wherewithal to buy himself the wife that was so essential to his masculine self-esteem, as was the case with many a poor peasant, there was often no choice left but to avail himself by forcible means. The self-righteous denunciations by the foreign captives of the bandits' anti-social behaviour were often temporarily silenced when they found that many of their captors had become bandits precisely for reasons of social esteem. Meanwhile, at a deeper, more psychological level, there was a distinct strand of male chauvinism masquerading as sexual propriety that made it taboo for bandits to talk about the wives they had left at home or for female captives to reflect openly on their desire to see their own men-folk again. Whereas the same taboo led self-respecting male chiefs to pursue their sexual adventures out of sight of

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their rank-and-file followers, the small number of women who rose to the position of chief often revelled in their license, having already thrown away their status as 'respectable' women, to take multiple lovers. This had the additional bonus of allowing them to play one lover (usually the chief of a rival gang) off against another; the downside was, according to one of them who opened her heart to a foreign captive deemed to be a sympathetic listener, that it precluded the chances of finding a genuine love.

"When the wind is high, light a fire; when the night is dark, find a victim to kill".⁴ The old Chinese saying sums up what bandits were best at: almost all the 'foreign tickets' memoirs brim over with instances of fearful and violent behaviour taken to a degree that can only be described as demonic. And yet captives' accounts also reveal a sincere respect for religious authority of every kind—whether Buddhist, Christian, or that of the ancestral plaques found in most peasant homes—which seems to have furnished bandits with the spiritual satisfaction to make their lives tolerably liveable. Anything perceived to be irreverent or disrespectful toward the supreme Being, whatever the manifestation, came in for the sternest censure. Out of a respect, irreconcilable with the realities of their day-to-day existence, for a life beyond reproach, religious belief appears to have provided bandits with the veneer that papered over that contradiction.

This reverence for the spiritual life seems even to have been refracted in bandits' attitude toward the Christian subscribers among their captives, who, whether missionary or convert, often came in for surprisingly lenient treatment. Used to an officialdom which concerned itself

mainly with lining its own nest, the bandits could hardly fail to notice the strong bonds of respect and amity which joined most of the missionaries who worked in the interior to their flock. Missionaries, as the most visible as well as the most vulnerable representatives of the Western culture that was taking the blame for China's troubles, formed the majority of bandits' kidnap victims. At the same time, they also received widespread respect and trust for the way they sought to protect local villagers, whether Christian converts or not, from attack. It was the Christians among the Chinese, too, who stood up for the foreign captives most strongly, who were the first to extend a helping hand. This strength of belief was not lost on the bandits, many of whom even came to profess a belief in Christianity themselves, while many of their chiefs gave specific orders for churches and their congregations (including, on one occasion, a party of mission-school girls) to be protected.

Perhaps more surprising than anything else for foreign captives, convinced as they initially were of their captors' innately reprobate nature, was to find them agreeing whole-heartedly with all the criticisms levelled at them concerning the evil character of their profession. Many bandits yearned profoundly for a return to a life of tranquil normalcy and admitted that, if only the means were available, they would cheerfully "put down their knives and begin to live like saints".⁵⁾ For their own children, their only desire was that they should be able to live the lives of the offspring of those well-heeled families who so often became their victims. No doubt it was these contradictions, coupled with the all-round danger and insecurity of the lives they led, which encouraged the 'bandit nature' noticed by so many captives: a volatile state of mind characterized by acute suspicion, a fragile vanity, and a

tendency to fall rapidly into despair or to swerve violently between delight and anger.

2

"The bandits are all soldiers, and the soldiers are all bandits!"

"Bandits and soldiers are all cut from the same cloth!"

Expressions like these filled both the vernacular and the treaty-port press in the confused years of the Chinese Republic, and the first-hand experience of foreign captives generally proved their correctness. Their impression of the Chinese army was that the officers were all upstart ruffians and the other ranks a collection of shanghaied ne'er-do-wells. In the vocabulary of warlord politics, it was money which spoke loudest, and soldiers resentful at not receiving their pay for months on end were understandably only too ready to switch masters in favour of one with the wherewithal to pay them. They were just as likely, though, should it seem profitable, to go over fully-armed to a bandit outfit, which could subsequently outgrow both in manpower and in firepower many of the army units sent against it, making the work of bandit-suppression easier said than done. In any case, whether a particular armed band was an officially-designated military force or a mere bandit gang frequently depended merely upon whether the commander-in-chief had achieved the level of recognition he desired; self-advancement rather than self-sacrifice decided his ultimate behaviour.

Collusion, not confrontation thus became the order of the day as far as relations between soldiers (or police, for that matter) and bandits were

concerned, and more than one foreign captive has testified to the cordiality which existed between the two sides. When army contingent encountered bandit gang, the former (whether or not by prior arrangement), far from carrying out their ordained mission, would as often as not turn tail and flee. In extreme cases they might be alternating between both sides, collecting their pay and provisions from the army while taking a cut in the gang's proceeds too, the quid pro quo being that they passed on information about troop movements so that the gang was able to stay clear of less venal campmates. Soldiers sent to arrange the captives' release would often share a meal and an opium pipe with the bandits (many of whom had once marched alongside them) before getting down to the haggling over terms. When all was said and done, from the point of the view of the long-suffering peasants there was little to choose between the two, and the old woman turfed out of her house by the gang holding one foreign captive expressed the resignation that characterized the Chinese village of the 1920's: "If it's not bandits, it's soldiers — *mai yo fahze* ! [What hope do we stand ?]" ⁶⁾

As the constant forced marches endured by the foreign captives testified, the majority of reasonably established bandit gangs had their own slice of territory which they patrolled regularly to prevent incursions. Some even had whole villages or groups of villages under their sway, places which became unofficially known as 'bandit villages' where the word of the chief counted for far more than the tenets of the law. The peasants living there would be at the bandits' constant beck and call, providing them with the necessities of life and even, sometimes, regular financial 'contributions'. Like most disgruntled tax-payers, the peasants suffered their lot in silence: the exactions were no more than

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would have been required from officially-instituted authorities, while their cooperation also ensured (to a degree) that the area was immune to raids by gangs from outside the area (soldiers were another matter).

Chiefs with a particularly strong sense of mission might apply themselves to the performance of 'good works' like mending roads or repairing bridges, or even set themselves up as local judges (whose word, of course, was final). Even foreign companies operating in the area, as more than one captive has testified, were not exempt: those with an eye to the reality of the situation readily paid a regular fee to the bandits in return for being left alone; those lacking such perspicacity found themselves the objects of constant harassment until they either toed the line or moved elsewhere. Woe betide those which ignored these rules: their foreign employees, usually exempt as long as appearances were maintained, would be the scapegoats when things went awry. For the local Chinese too, the consequences of taking the gang's word lightly could be dire. Benign enough when treated with appropriate respect, a chief who felt slighted behaved like any other absolute potentate: razing a village to the ground along with its inhabitants proved an invaluable means of encouraging other villages to cooperate.

Relations between bandit gangs were pragmatic. If there were sometimes clashes of interest, there were also alliances of convenience, since it was to the benefit of each side to be prepared both against military incursions and against raids by rival gangs. When an outside gang sought to make inroads into a certain gang's territory, or, as often happened, to make off with the gang's invaluable foreign captive, there would be a fight to the death. It sometimes happened, though, that

another gang was able to offer enough to convince the original holders of the captive to consider a sale. This was a business negotiation pure and simple, and relations between the two gangs remained amicable for the duration. Captives, foreign as well as Chinese, could thus change hands several times, the price growing at each transaction and the prospects of ransom dwindling accordingly.

Relations between bandits and the common people were often paradoxical, as more than one bemused captive observed. Without a doubt, the villagers' basic emotion was fear, for bandits were capable of explosions of wrath, sometimes arbitrary, sometimes (in their own eyes, at least) deserved. When a gang's rage was at its height, there were few who could doubt that the world was enduring its final tortured moments. Country people, used to having their villages commandeered as billets at a moment's notice and their food consumed down to the last grain of millet (even if they were lucky enough not to have their womenfolk commandeered too), spoke of bandits in the same breath that they discussed wars, famines and pestilence; just the mention of the word was enough to make most of them change colour. Except in the 'bandit kingdoms' where anyone with a modicum of self-respect spent at least a period of time in the 'University of the Greenwood', those who joined a predatory gang found themselves pariahs in their own families, liable to be stabbed in the back by their own former acquaintances should they return to the village.

Yet there was also another side to the story. Naturally it was in the peasants' best interest to avoid trouble by acquiescing to the bandits' demands, and the more readily and cheerfully they did so the better

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things were likely to be. By paying lip-service to the gang's corporate ego, they could keep it from raiding too close to home; hope for its cooperation when friction arose with a neighbouring village; and even on occasion look forward to a share in the proceeds from its raids elsewhere. It worked both ways: a gang which was heedless of a community's efforts to keep it happy found itself walking on much shakier ground than if it gave credit where credit was due. Like the rabbit in the old Chinese proverb, which avoided eating the grass around its own nest lest its bolt-hole be exposed to view, a gang with a modicum of intelligent leadership protected itself against the unexpected by avoiding alienating all and sundry. The bottom line was whether or not the peasants could hope for protection from the regular quarters, which in many cases they could not. In the 'bandit kingdoms' like that of south-western Henan province, where government authority held no sway and peasants rarely saw an official from one year to the next, this sort of relationship between people and bandits was the rule rather than the exception.

Another aspect of bandits' relations with the outside world was the complex and delicate triad formed when they sat around the negotiating table with representatives of the Chinese government and the foreign government concerned to discuss a captive's release. Pride was at stake on every side, and most captives have testified to the tension surrounding the last few days of their confinement. Most revealing of all was the relationship between the bandits and their own government.

With warlords constantly struggling among themselves for power, with central authority more form than substance, and with the spectre of

foreign intervention constantly hanging over the country, both the will and the ability at each level of government to maintain control over its own sphere of jurisdiction declined with every passing day of the early Chinese Republic. This was something the bandits understood well. They were not averse to killing a captive when it came to it, but a 'foreign ticket' was the ace up their sleeve when it came to negotiations, and so they could stretch out the process for as long as they liked, knowing that the diplomatic authorities would not look lightly on a botched rescue attempt by the Chinese government that ended in the death of one of their nationals. Suppression of the bandits came second to the release unscathed of the foreign captives, and that could only be guaranteed by resort to Chinese methods. The primary consideration here was face, both the bandit chief's and that of the military commander, and although the bandits were constantly worried about a double-cross, the upshot was usually their enrolment in the ranks of the regular army, with the chief and his subchiefs given officer status commensurate to the strength of the gang. If there was to be an official double-cross, it would be only after the captives were released.

Bandits' relations with the non-Chinese authorities — diplomatic representatives, Church bodies, the press, and members of the treaty-port elite — also contained levels of complexity that spoke volumes. Because of their abiding distrust of the Chinese government's ability to keep its word, the foreign community would usually send its own representatives along to the negotiations, often in the guise of mediators or 'guarantors', to make sure that things went as they should. Ironically, given the circumstances that had given rise to the situation in the first place, it was also these foreign 'observers' whom the bandits ultimately

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trusted, rather than their own government, to see that agreements were carried out as promised.

The ransom itself raised another dilemma for the foreign authorities. To pay exactly what the bandits wanted would indeed help ensure the rapid release of the captives, but it would also undoubtedly encourage others to follow in the gang's footsteps. There was, of course, the option of sending in their own troops to solve the problem, as had been done during the 'Boxer' disturbances at the turn of the century, but the times were no longer what they were then and the option was one that was rarely employed. Hence the need to reconcile themselves to allowing the Chinese to settle things their own way.

What was 'face-preserving' for the Chinese side, however, was usually 'face-destroying' for the foreigners, since it reminded them only too well that a familiar world, the world of reliance on gunboat diplomacy, was slipping away from them. It was thus far less painful if the problem could be eliminated altogether. With more and more foreign companies investing in China, with vulnerable employees working in the interior or ships plying the coastal routes, the pressure from those companies to ensure their safety from attack or harassment by bandits or pirates was relentless. Caught between a rock and a hard place, more than one foreign government found means whereby one-time predators could be quietly transformed into semi-official protection squads. Such subtle methods usually not only paid off much better for the companies concerned, but also served a gang's interests best. A simple contract with a local bandit or pirate gang guaranteeing that they refrain from attacking the company's interests, or even recruiting them as a formal

security force, in return for a regular financial payment, usually ensured that things remained quiet enough for business to continue as usual. It suited the bandits, since they trusted the foreigners' word far more than that of their own government, and it allowed the foreign authorities to avoid being caught like fish on a gaff.

Finally, there was the relationship between the Chinese authorities and those of the countries whose unfortunate nationals had become the bandits' 'tickets'. Seemingly straightforward enough on the surface, this relationship too had its hidden levels. There were, of course, diplomatic representations to ensure that the Chinese civil and military authorities did their utmost to expedite a successful conclusion to the affair, and it was this aspect of the relationship that figured most prominently in the media. Less conspicuous were the intermediaries sent to directly participate in and even supervise the negotiations for the captives' release, as happened after the notorious May 1923 Lincheng Incident. Given the parlous state of Chinese politics at the time, where warlord rivals frequently allowed bandit incidents to escalate unchecked in the interests of unseating an opponent, such a direct approach to securing a fellow-expatriate's release was perhaps understandable. But even the laws of extraterritoriality did not permit foreign nationals to take a hand in the settling of a crime where the perpetrators were themselves Chinese, and the inability of the local Chinese authorities to refuse to admit these foreign intermediaries was a telling illustration not only of China's lack of international stature at this time, but also, more important, of the almost total breakdown in national self-esteem which the warlord period engendered.

"If you want to ride in a palanquin, go looking for people to kidnap."

There were numerous reasons why bandits should prefer to kidnap foreigners to Chinese, all of which, as most foreign captives realized, amounted to a striking change not only in the status of 'The Foreigner in China', but also in the level of political consciousness of the bandits themselves. First, of course, was the pure financial value of a 'foreign ticket': Chinese families could rarely be expected to pay the sums available to foreign governments. Then, whereas the life of a Chinese, however rich and influential, was no more than an issue of humanitarian feeling, that of a foreigner involved something which in the context of the times loomed much larger: politics. Kidnapping a foreigner was a sure way to get the higher authorities involved in the case, who were then beholden to solve it by political means. Foreigners were also an invaluable bargaining chip for bandits when it came to negotiating the terms of their enrolment into the army. Letters from them to their families or to the authorities, describing their living conditions or stating the bandits' terms, had a persuasive power all of their own. Even before that, however, the foreign captives provided the gang with an impregnable shield against military attack since, as we have seen, the Chinese authorities feared nothing more than sparking off another diplomatic crisis and possible foreign intervention. Again, having these precious foreign lives dangling from a string enabled the bandits to insure themselves against one of the Chinese authorities' favourite tricks, which was to arrest their relatives and hold them against the gang's

surrender. No wonder that bandits referred to their foreign captives as their “golden eggs” !

There was another side to kidnapping foreigners, however, one which contemporary Western observers, irate at the besmirching of their carefully cultivated pride, could be forgiven for not noticing. Even as bandits danced for joy at the luck which their ‘foreign ticket’ seemed to have brought them, they were at the same time helping to set in motion a process which would eventually turn China on its head and transform their new get-rich-quick occupation into a relic of the past. For both sides, captors and captured, as well as for the people of the villages that this strange group passed through, there was a learning experience at work which meant that none of them would ever be quite the same again. The memoirs gathered here reveal this process perhaps more starkly than any other kind of source material.

For desperately-poor Chinese villagers to whom ‘overseas’ had been equivalent to one of the Nine Levels of Heaven, the psychological impact of seeing the once-powerful foreigner, now reduced to a bedraggled and exhausted spectre, being paraded before them by a gang of despised local bandits must have been enormous. Just as some delegation of interplanetary visitors might take the first humans they encountered as representative of the species as a whole, so the sorry spectacle of humanity which the foreign captives presented must have seemed to these hitherto isolated villagers no less than the plight of modern Western civilization itself drawn small. Seeing their own ragged appearance mirrored in that of these unexpected guests, and seeing how equally vulnerable they both were to the whims of bandits, they could hardly fail to begin

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to redraw the line between 'us' and 'them' which had until then been so clearly demarcated. To imagine anything similar, one would have to go back to the effect of those initial 'Strangers at the Gate', whose appearance off the Eastern shoreline a century or so before had first set in motion the process of Chinese cultural reassessment.⁷⁾ Unlike their predecessors, however, having concluded that these were not gods but frail specimens of humanity like themselves, these peasants' hearts more often than not went out to them in the form of a thousand small kindnesses — a bowl of noodles here, a dirty blanket there — much as they would a generation later to the children of Japanese settlers abandoned by their army in the aftermath of World War II.

As for the 'foreign tickets', they were among the few Westerners privileged, if that be the right word, to observe the underside of rural Chinese society at first hand, and for most it was a chastening experience. For every one of them who came away with their assumptions about innate Chinese barbarity reconfirmed, there were more who had been able to perceive the taut-stretched strings of frustrated humanity among their bandit captors; to realize that here were no mere denizens of the jungle, no mere proof that 'Orientals' were the 'Missing Link' between apes and humans, but a backwater of society subsisting within a system weighted impossibly against them. For genteel Westerners, to whom rural Chinese were hardly to be considered within the sphere of humanity at all, there could have been nothing more humbling than to be thrown upon the mercies of such people, and to find them as human as themselves.

Needless to say, captives' accounts reveal most about the bandits them-

selves. Above all, we learn that the preoccupation with the 'higher existence' exemplified by the lifestyles of the expatriate community was not confined to the comprador class of Shanghai. Previously no more than the objects of some vaguely-formulated mystique, the foreigners who fell into the bandits' hands gave form to all the inchoate yearnings for a better and fairer life that had brought these men into banditry in the first place. If they could only make it to the 'land of opportunity' that was America, they would not be bandits any more but would become respected citizens of a democracy. With all the fine clothes they 'borrowed' from the captives, they would at last be able to cut a dash among their fellow-villagers, and give proof to all who cared to see that they had once been 'friends' with the much-vaunted foreigner. Now that they had 'made a relationship' with the foreigner who had passed so much time in their midst, they would be sure to look him up in the future in the expectation of a steady job in return for having sent him back into the world....

The gulf between the bandits' everyday lives and those of even the poorest of white refugees was such that any article with the stamp of 'foreignness', whatever its purpose or value, became an object of almost superstitious regard: brassieres became bandoliers, fountain pens opium pipes, all equally hard to relinquish since they were icons of that mysterious world so far away that even their imaginations could not bridge the gap. "... Finland. She wanted to know where that country was—in America? How far was it from Canton? A two, three day sailing—with a fair wind?"⁸⁾ Such was the world-view of one female pirate chief who held sway over Bias Bay near Hong Kong during the early decades of this century. She had long heard stories of a 'beautiful

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country' called 'America', and had once come across pictures in an old newspaper of a strange city with curious and many-storied buildings which seemed to fit perfectly what she had heard about 'America'. It had become the country of her dreams, and her cherished hope was that her son would some day become a rice merchant pulling off great deals with his counterparts in 'America'. Could he but come to live in one of those houses she had seen in that old newspaper, her happiness would be complete. When she heard from her captive of the existence of another country known as 'Finland', she simply fitted it into her existing conception of the world beyond China which revolved around 'America' as its hub.

It was more than merely the material trappings of the West that drew bandits out of their beleaguered rural mindset and gave them cause to re-examine their own ways of thinking and behaviour. The obviously sincere religious beliefs shown even by those captives who were not missionaries; their social relationships, such as their treatment of women and their care for each other's welfare; their level of education; and even their physical attributes — all these were sources of continuing delight and wonder. Meanwhile, the Bible's exhortations to abandon evil for good; the Christian teachings of equality and altruism; the strange sensation of peace conveyed by the haunting rhythms of hymns; the overwhelming sense of solemnity and of the sacred that pervaded the prayers and services conducted by missionary captives; and the easy way that these men of the cloth got on with their Chinese parishioners — all these, too, reminded the bandits of the spiritual and emotional barrenness that characterized not only their external relationships but also, Robin-Hood ideals notwithstanding, their lives within the gang.

They also found much to admire even as they wondered: one female captive's recollections provided a perfect example. The level of education which allowed her not only to write as well as a man but also to work as a medical nurse; the fact that she was adept at Chinese as well as her native English; and her excellent singing and dancing skills made her the object of no little respect. Perhaps the most enlightening point of all, though, came when an overnight stay in a small village gave her the opportunity to take a bath: a surreptitious peep through the slats revealed that from head to toe, with the exception of her great unbound feet, she was no different from any Chinese woman! If this revelation was a source of wonder for the bandits, the fact that the men, too, apart from their beards and chest-hair, were also the same as themselves was only marginally less so.

If the contrasting cultural backgrounds were the cause of ceaseless friction and misunderstanding between the 'foreign tickets' and their captors, they were also a bridge to new understandings. The fact that a woman could publicly wash her feet in a river and speak openly of missing her husband to them were unheard-of moral lapses, while another who proudly wore a school badge on her pocket gave food for thought. The common-enough Western habits of kissing and shaking hands were the source of ribald jeers and laughter. For people to whom Westerners seemed the symbols of all that was immoral, indulging cheerfully, as rumour had it, in such rites as group marriage, the revelation that one husband/one wife was the norm left them dead in their tracks. Ignorant of the fact that in Chinese culture tortoises and rabbits were symbols of cuckoldry and illicit sex, a captive caused a mighty uproar when she sought to amuse herself by innocently drawing pic-

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tures on a wall; the wrath of the bandits came down upon her particularly hard because it reminded many of them that they had left behind their own wives when they took to the hills.

Chinese who fell into bandit hands for the most part either cringed before their tormentors or resigned themselves to a death that would hopefully come sooner rather than later. The contrast with the behaviour of foreigners was one arch of the bridge that was thrown across the chasm that divided the different cultures. As men among men (by their own reckoning, at least), bandits despised anyone who cringed, and those who did were usually killed out of disgust rather than anger. The apparent courage and strength of character shown by these proud foreigners, who refused to bow their heads but merely commended themselves to their God, far from provoking the bandits to still greater displays of wrath, seem to have impressed them: most of the 'foreign tickets', insofar as circumstances allowed, received relatively humane treatment, and at least one was actually invited to become the gang's chief! Within the many examples of foreign captives' memoirs that have come down to us, we also find bandits singing hymns, learning English, shaking hands with and opening doors for one another—a far cry from their prevalent image as brutal fiends whose natural habitat was the abattoir! Is it too much to suggest that the contact with their 'foreign tickets' brought out in these bandits the aspirations toward a better and more uplifting life that lay concealed deep in the hearts of all those simple villagers from whom they had sprung? Whatever, through the many small dramas involving the kidnapping of foreigners for ransom that were played out during the 1920s and 1930s, bandits may be seen to have played their own humble part in raising the consciousness of

rural Chinese, and in narrowing the once-unbridgeable psychological gulf between Chinese and foreigners.

4

“I had thought of [bandits] as more or less mythical beings....[Now] I comprehended that I was dealing with human beings not unlike those with whom I had been meeting all my life.”⁹⁾

Even while the ‘foreign tickets’ were learning something about the basic humanity of the people among whom they had been forced to spend a portion of their lives, many of them were at the same time making sweeping generalizations about the nature of the civilization that had allowed things to come to such a pass, and opining that banditry was nothing less than a microcosm of the society at large. “To understand bandits is to understand China!”¹⁰⁾ observed one (in this case, Japanese) writer, and his sentiments would have been readily echoed by those Westerners who had been unlucky enough to fall into bandit hands. Their experiences were fodder to those who liked to pontificate on China’s problems.

Since the Revolution of 1911 (which had overthrown the monarchy only to inaugurate an era of militarism and confusion), went the familiar refrain, China had come to the brink of the greatest crisis it had ever faced: not only had it failed to develop socially since then, it had even abandoned its own time-tested principles of government. The country was being manipulated by politicians, who had picked up half-baked ideas about government during sojourns abroad but whose one abiding

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concern was how to join forces to enrich themselves without the slightest concern for the people's welfare; and by militarists: China had the largest standing military in the world, but its soldiers were no more than the private armies of numerous warlords whose fortunes depended on having more men to call upon than their rivals.

It was this combination, the refrain continued, characterized by self-seeking and a lack of will to run the country effectively, that had brought China to its present state, allowing bandits to run amok and reducing the people's life-security to rock-bottom levels. As one recently-released foreign captive put it, "China is a house divided against itself if ever there was one."¹¹ Bandits were the evidence that China was incapable of governing itself; indeed, the whole country had degenerated into the status of 'bandit kingdom', and the solution, seriously put about in treaty-port quarters, was for the country to be taken over by a coalition of Western powers who would apply their rich knowledge of statecraft and their superior military ability to put it back on its feet. "China cannot put the 'ban' in banditry", went a typical joke of the times, "until she has put the 'try'."¹² If China would not try, then those with vital personal and financial stakes in its stability would. The 'foreign tickets' would have agreed heartily with such a judgement, not from the arrogant pride that fuelled the bluster of many of their compatriots, but from an informed sympathy for the people they had observed as a result of their travails. Any nation hoping for a genuine rebirth must endure a period of suffering and bloodshed, noted one of them, and if there were no other solution to the problems which beset those long-suffering people, why then their prayers would be for a responsible government whatever its stripe.

As the direct victims of the banditry that plagued China's chaotic transition to modernity, the foreign captives were not averse to making some generalizations of their own based on their experiences. There had always been bandits in China, they pointed out, but in recent years both their objectives and their scale had undergone considerable transformation. In the first place, where their activities in the past had been aimed at no more than making ends meet or staying alive, those of contemporary bandits were on a quite different dimension, one which involved the attainment of some specific political objective. In the second place, banditry had reached the point where, in some parts of China, almost everywhere beyond the protecting walls of the cities was a violent jungle where one ventured at one's peril. In this 'brigands' paradise', bandits were the supreme rulers who carried all before them, keeping the common people in thrall by all the most barbaric means at their disposal, and reducing the land around to a wilderness whose quiet bespoke the silence of death.

And yet, even while offering this stark portrayal of the state to which much of China had been reduced, many of these victims of China's 'banditization' nursed no protracted hatred for the authors of their suffering; on the contrary, they seem to have regarded them with pity, even with a lingering affection, mixed with a hope that they would one day have the opportunity to return to the path of rectitude. They had had a chance to penetrate the inner workings of their captors' minds, and thus to understand the real causes of their resort to banditry — the desire to survive, the yearning to be free, the craving for a life of dignity. Such tolerant and sympathetic attitudes, which set the 'foreign tickets' apart from the broad mass of their compatriots, were a

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direct result of the unique opportunity which had been accorded them to observe China's under-belly at first hand.

A natural environment cruelly oblivious to the basic needs of human life, houses collapsed beyond repair, villages left ruined and never rebuilt, fields become wildernesses littered with corpses, pestilence raging beyond control, and, to break the monotony, only the sharp colours of the opium poppy or, ultimately, the tramp-tramp that heralded the heavy-shod approach of the Imperial Japanese Army — this was the scene which met the eyes of the 'foreign tickets' on their journeys through the heart of rural China. The lacklustre gaze of the peasants in the villages, and the tears that betrayed a weariness of all this earthly life had to offer brought home to these reluctant visitors another fact of life: that those whose job it was to care for these people — the government and its security forces — had absolved themselves of all responsibility for this state of affairs. Far from ensuring the prosperity of all by protecting home and hearth against those who would disturb it, on the contrary, these 'defenders of the public good' were jostling among themselves for power, inflicting upon all who stood in their way evils in no way different from those worked by bandits, and earning for themselves in the process a reputation for ferocity which at times even excelled that of bandits. What appeared still more remarkable in the eyes of these foreign captives was that government representatives were so afraid of the bandits that they would ride abroad only when they had the presence of foreigners to protect them; and that their soldiers, even when under orders to escort foreign dignitaries through hostile territory, would do so only after receiving suitable sums of money in bribes.

During the relatively short period of time that the foreign captives spent together with their Chinese peasant hosts, rubbing shoulders with them from morn till night, the attitudes on both sides were often transformed, from those of mutually uninformed strangers to those of long-term acquaintances. At first sight, the villagers who stood gaping in awe at the apparition that had suddenly appeared in their midst must, with reason, have seemed to the captives like the roughest of country bumpkins, as far divorced from all that was civilized and modern as could be imagined, the poverty and hardship of their lives beyond belief. It is clear from most accounts that, faced with this vision of a world so obviously backward in all material respects from their own, the captives slipped naturally into a complex attitude of curiosity mixed with condescending disapproval. Yet, with the passage of time, the evident sympathy of these villagers, for whom the foreigners were, after all, their fellow-victims, together with their natural kind-heartedness and readiness for hard work rarely failed to leave the captives genuinely moved. When we add to this their growing awareness of the fundamental reasons for the backwardness of China's villages, we can say that these foreign captives surely had a more all-round perspective on the 20th-century Chinese countryside and its problems than their apparently more fortunate compatriots.

In the same way, Chinese villagers, face to face for the first time with foreigners, overcame their initial feelings of amused curiosity at this species of humanity of which they had hitherto heard none but the most distant rumours, and through them learned of a world of which they would otherwise have remained ignorant. Such fresh knowledge not only broadened the horizons of their otherwise impoverished

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spiritual world, but also provided hope where previously there had been only despair, suggested a dream where previously there had been only the barrenness of their lives. In these extraordinary and never-to-be-repeated circumstances, 'foreign tickets' and Chinese villagers found themselves the mutual victims of the bandits' desperate struggle for survival. Out of that common adversity they were able to weave a web of friendship and mutual cooperation that has been only too little understood.

5

The memoirs of the 'foreign tickets' furnish such a fascinating human and historical record that it is hard to believe that they have been ignored so thoroughly up to now. By throwing a new and unexpected light on the tragic and turbulent years of China's birth as a modern nation, they furnish a wealth of material of interest to scholars, and historians of all inclinations could learn from them: social historians from the everyday record of captivity; military historians from the evidence of army collusion; diplomatic historians from the circumstances surrounding the captives' release; and so on. Above all, they provide moving and accurate first-hand evidence by participant observers of what it was like to live the lives of hunted and despised bandits. Like it or not, the experiences of the 'foreign tickets' were an aspect of a particular historical reality toward which none of us can remain indifferent. In the absence of materials from the bandits' own hands (most gang members having been illiterate), they are social documents of extraordinary value.

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- 12) *China Weekly Review*, 16 June, 1923.

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Note: although the items by Howard and Johnson have been included in this Bibliography for convenience, their contents will be considered in more detail in the preface to the second translated volume (see Footnote 2), which will be incorporated into a revised version of this essay due to be published late in 1997.

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‘IN PERILS IN THE WILDERNESS’

‘IN PERILS IN THE WILDERNESS’ :
CHINESE BANDITS & CHINESE SOCIETY
THROUGH THE EYES OF ‘FOREIGN TICKETS’

Philip Billingsley and Xu Youwei

ABSTRACT

From the mid-19th century onwards, China was obliged under the pressure of unequal treaties with Western powers to permit the free movement of non-Chinese nationals such as missionaries, travellers, and employees of overseas companies in the country's interior. At the same time, political unrest and economic decline were making China's rural areas more and more unstable, and those foreigners became the natural targets of the bandits that were created by those unsettled conditions.

While the sufferings of those ‘foreign tickets’ were not inconsiderable, there was one consolation for those who wish to know more about the lives of bandits and of the people who lived through this ‘Dark Night’ of Chinese history. This was that some of the former captives were ready to relive their experiences by writing out their memoirs. Having actually listened to what the bandits wanted to say, they were able to record the ‘intimate’ aspects of banditry; at the same time, having lived among the poor peasants of China's countryside, they were able to gain a perspective on Chinese conditions that was not available to

the foreigners who formed a privileged elite in the treaty ports like Shanghai.

A glance through the writings of these former bandit captives reveals a world quite inaccessible to the scholar who relies on official sources. We learn what it was like to live the lives of hunted and despised bandits; we learn of the strange relationship of curiosity and mutual sympathy that sprang up between the captives and the villagers, who were equally the bandits' victims; and we discover the existence of a delicate three-way relationship between the bandits, the Chinese authorities, and the captives' diplomatic representatives.

Although the voices that speak to us from the lines of these memoirs are those of the once-mighty foreigner, the cries that leap out from between those lines are from the mouths of the long-ignored Chinese peasant, making these materials a precious source for historians of rural China.