

**Bandits, Neighbours, Japanese Soldiers:  
Security Threats and Survival Strategies in Taishan and  
Kaiping Villages, 1937–1949**

by  
**Anna Oi Yan Fong**

B.Sc., Simon Fraser University, 1996

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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**Name:** Anna Oi Yan Fong

**Degree:** Master of Arts

**Thesis title:** Bandits, Neighbours, Japanese Soldiers: Security Threats and Survival Strategies in Taishan and Kaiping Villages, 1937–1949

**Committee:** **Chair:** Andrea Geiger  
Professor, History

**Jeremy Brown**  
Supervisor  
Associate Professor, History

**Timothy Cheek**  
Committee Member  
Professor, History  
University of British Columbia

**Weiting Guo**  
Committee Member  
Limited Term Assistant Professor, History

**Shelly Chan**  
Examiner  
Associate Professor, History  
University of California, Santa Cruz

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## **Abstract**

To say that the familial and cultural ties that bound Chinese society were severed or weakened and that “patriotism transcended regionalism, localism, and familism” during the Resistance War, as Diana Lary claims in *The Chinese People at War*, is too general. Nationalism and patriotism might have been priorities for urban intellectuals and elites, but such priorities were not necessarily shared by everyone. People at the rural grassroots in southern Guangdong did not share them. This thesis argues that Siyi villagers’ survival tactics against security threats between 1937 and 1949 were borne out of self-preservation and localism, not nationalism. Based on oral interviews conducted in Hong Kong, Vancouver, and Burnaby of seniors who lived in Taishan or Kaiping villages between 1932 and 1949, this project examines the villagers’ survival tactics and motives when faced with changing security threats during the prewar, wartime, and postwar periods. Village feuds, bandits, the Japanese armed forces, food scarcity, and traditional gender roles were the most dangerous threats facing villagers. The villagers’ survival tactics reveal a pattern of independence from state institutions while relying on local and familial connections. Nationalism and patriotism did not impact Taishan and Kaiping villagers as much as localism did.

**Keywords:** rural security threats; localism; nationalism; Taishan and Kaiping; lineage and clans; the Resistance War

## **Dedication**

To my parents, my inspirations for the thesis.

To my Cyan, my motivation to complete the thesis.

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I thank those who supported me as well as those whom I originally viewed as hindrances during this process of enlightenment. Everyone had an important role to play and contributed to this thesis.

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Thank you to my father and mother, who are always kind and patient with me. Even though you worried about me and I cannot assuage your concerns, you nevertheless loved and believed in me unconditionally. My eldest sister, whom I may not share the same perspectives in many things, thank you for your calm unreserved support and love.

To the person who nudged me to begin my MA but almost derailed me from completing it, I acknowledge you. You catalyzed this MA process. I realized that your initiation was not an obligation to the successful completion of my journey. It is up to me to stay the course.

To the person who attacked the validity of my work, I acknowledge you. You compelled me to reflect on my work and defend my position with so much more conviction.

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## Introduction

In 1942, Mrs. Wong convinced her husband that it was better to sell their seven-year-old son instead of their nine-year-old daughter, Wong LS. The couple lived in Changsa village, Kaiping, with their three sons and a daughter. The family became destitute after Mr. Wong gambled away the family's fortune: a tofu skin factory, two cows, and land. Mr. Wong's health declined and without any means of providing for the family, the parents planned to sell one of their children. Mr. Wong received an offer of nine *tam* (擔)<sup>1</sup> of grain for Wong LS as a servant girl to a family in the adjacent county of Enping. However, Mrs. Wong argued that sold girls would have harder lives as servants whereas sold boys would have easier lives and could fetch more.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of the son carrying on the family name assigned a higher value to boys. Wealthy rural families without sons commonly bought boys in this tradition. Wong LS's parents sold her seven-year-old younger brother to a distant village for forty *daiyang* (大洋) or Minguo silver dollars.<sup>3</sup> Forty *daiyang* could buy the family forty *tam* of grain which was over four times what Wong LS could fetch.

The Wongs' story showed that at the height of the Resistance War against Japan between 1937 and 1945, struggling to overcome destitution and survive starvation were common priorities for poor families in the Siyi villages. When it came to survival, grassroots families considered many factors. Patriotism was not one of them. Grassroots wartime experiences like the Wongs' differed from those of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) produced gazetteers and *wenshi ziliao* that focused on villagers' heroic efforts in resisting Japanese invaders for the love of their country. For example, the Taishan gazetteer produced by a CCP-affiliated research office in 1995 has a dedicated section on village braves' valiant resistance that resulted in death and injuries to Japanese troops.<sup>4</sup> The gazetteer recorded instances of citizens killed and maimed by

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<sup>1</sup> 1 *tam* = 133½ lb.

<sup>2</sup> Interview. Wong LS, August 9, 2019, March 15, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Minguo silver dollar bought 1 *tam* of grain at the end of the Republican era. [Purchasing power of a daiyang in the 1940s.](#)

<sup>4</sup> Huang Jianyun and Li Xianhua, eds., 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer) (Taishan shi: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1995), 223.

Japanese armed forces, but did not mention how the villagers survived the Resistance War years. Between the extremes of resisting and being killed or maimed by Japanese troops, how did the villagers survive wartime?

Historian Diana Lary surveys the social sufferings of a wide range of Chinese people from different social economic classes and various regions during the war. Lary argues that the familial and cultural ties that bound Chinese society were severed or weakened and that “patriotism transcended regionalism, localism, and familism”<sup>5</sup> during the war. This is too general and does not necessarily apply to the Taishan and Kaiping counties of southern Guangdong. Taishan and Kaiping interviewees’ stories revealed consistently strong localism and familial ties before, during, and after the war.

Priorities for urban elites differ from those of people at the rural grassroots. Patriotism and nationalism were prevalent among urban intellectuals since the turn of the twentieth century and were especially heightened during the Resistance War. Patriotism was a priority among wartime urban elites as discussed in work by such scholars as Frederic Wakeman,<sup>6</sup> Poshek Fu, and Timothy Brook.<sup>7</sup> Fu examines wartime literature to show how urban writers and intellectuals faced the moral dilemma of choosing between family survival and patriotism in occupied Shanghai.<sup>8</sup> All the intellectuals claimed to be patriotic, yet some chose passivity, resistance, or collaboration. All had justifications for their choices. Urban elites’ nationalism was not necessarily shared by other social economic groups. Urban elites might have struggled between patriotism and survival, and went to great lengths to justify their choices; however, patriotism and nationalism were not priorities for lower-class women surviving wartime Beijing, as demonstrated in Zhao Ma’s research.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime, 1937–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Poshek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Ma, *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

Zhao Ma uses court documents to construct how lower-class urban women survived economic insecurity in wartime Beijing. Although destitute, these women resourcefully used their community connections and a wide variety of means, including bigamy and adultery, to navigate an environment hostile to their gender and class. Their survival tactics trumped traditional morals and legal constraints. Patriotism was not a factor for these destitute women. Likewise, people at the rural grassroots in southern Guangdong might not have considered patriotism when surviving security threats. Unlike Ma's narrow examination on a singular group and one security threat, I look at the bigger picture of how different social economic and gender groups survived different security threats in rural Southern Guangdong.

Timothy Brook focuses on wartime local elites' collaboration and resistance in the lower Yangtze Valley, Shanghai, and Nanjing. He rejects the postwar nationalistic framework of distinct moralistic binary categories of wartime collaborators and resisters, but instead urges historians to examine people's wartime actions based on their motives and the actions' resulting consequences.<sup>10</sup> This is a good point. Brook's work inspires me to examine rural Siyi grassroots residents' survival tactics against security threats to determine their motivations. To better learn what motivated them, I look beyond the wartime to include prewar and postwar periods to compare continuities and changes in their coping strategies.

Different scholars have different approaches to study how urban women, military elites, and urban intellectuals survived the Resistance War; however, very little work has been done on ordinary people in rural areas. This dearth is especially true when it comes to southern China. Urban elites' grappling with nationalism is a common theme in wartime research, but nationalism was not necessarily embraced by everyone or always embraced for patriotic reasons. Glen Peterson demonstrated how overseas Chinese merchants adopted a nationalist discourse to pursue business interest in their native villages at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Sherman Cochran documented one elite family's survival strategy in post-1949 Shanghai. Their outward

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Brook, *Collaboration*.

<sup>11</sup> Glen Peterson, "Overseas Chinese and Merchant Philanthropy in China: From Culturalism to Nationalism," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1 (May 2005): 104.

embrace of nationalism and patriotism towards the CCP's China seemed calculated, conflicted, and sometimes forced.<sup>12</sup>

I argue that Siyi villagers' survival tactics against security threats between 1937 and 1949 were borne out of self-preservation and localism, not nationalism. Siyi protective strategies were similar to Huaibei peasants in Elizabeth Perry's research. Perry argued that collective violence such as banditry and rebellions in North China's Huaibei from 1845 to 1945 were direct survival responses to local ecological and societal features rather than a purposeful direct challenge to the state authority.<sup>13</sup> Siyi local ties were strong. Even overseas men who worked far away from their home villages would be considered locals. Historians who specialize in overseas Chinese such as Philip Kuhn, Madeline Hsu, and Glen Peterson demonstrated the strong connections and impact overseas men had on their home communities even though they were far away.<sup>14</sup> Hsu highlighted how through Gold Mountain firms (金山莊) and overseas Chinese magazines (僑刊), Taishanese Americans maintained financial and emotional ties with families left behind despite decades of separation.<sup>15</sup> To support my argument, I compare the consistency and changes of security threats as well as villagers' survival tactics before, during, and after the Resistance War to determine villagers' motivation. I examine the characteristics of Siyi villages and security threats that affected villagers the most.

My argument relies mainly on the primary sources of oral history interviews, Taishan and Kaiping gazetteers, as well as *wenshi ziliao* (文史资料). *Wenshi ziliao* contain detailed local oral historical records; however, they were collected by government officials with party agendas. Information was edited to suit CCP political narratives at the time of publication. All wartime stories I came across have strong nationalistic narratives, showing anti-KMT (Kuomintang)

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<sup>12</sup> Sherman Cochran, "Capitalists Choosing Communist China: The Liu Family of Shanghai, 1948–56," in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 359.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, "Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-Versa," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 2, no. 2 (November 2006). Glen Peterson, "House Divided: Transnational Families in the Early Years of the People's Republic of China," *Asian Studies Review* 31 (March 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 34, 124.

sentiments and county citizens' vigorous resistance against the Japanese army.<sup>16</sup> For example, a sentence like "KMT's failure in fighting the Japanese led to the county citizens' heroic resistance and sacrifices to protect our homes and country" appears in almost every wartime story published in the first five issues of *Kaiping wenshi*. Surely, some people did not resist. What were their survival tactics and motives? The CCP's nationalistic narratives do not reflect rural grassroots reality. Although official records do not reveal the whole truth, they provide good starting points for further investigation of historical events.

I interviewed sixteen seniors in Hong Kong, Vancouver, and Burnaby who lived in Taishan or Kaiping villages between 1932 and 1949. My interviewees came from a variety of backgrounds. Differences in gender, age, and family wealth levels yielded different stories. Perhaps due to gender roles and sensibilities, the grandmothers' stories revealed detailed dynamics inside the households, while the grandfathers' stories were about events outside the households.<sup>17</sup> These seniors' ages ranged from their seventies to eighties. They were children or young adults between 1937 to 1949, so they did not make active decisions in surviving their environment, their parents did. The interviewees were witnesses and passive receivers of their parents' decisions. We can get a sense of their memory and perception of security threats and their environment during that time. My interviewees' family wealth ranged from well off families who never experienced hunger, to poor families who sold their children to survive. Wealthy and poor families faced different security threats and deployed different survival tactics. I examine villagers' survival tactics against different threats at a village and household level. Villagers' tactics did not always guarantee safety for all family members. Not every family member survived unscathed. For example, the Wong family's destitution was temporarily alleviated at a cost, selling the youngest son. At times, longstanding family strategies such as receiving regular overseas remittances could imperil the villagers. For example, the villagers

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<sup>16</sup> Peng Qiupin, 开平民众抗日武装活跃在江会前 (Kaiping civilian anti-Japanese armed forces active on the frontline of Jianghui) *Kaiping wenshi* 1 (December 1981): 4; Seto Lim and Tse Junbi, "七士守南楼, 英勇抗日寇" (Seven martyrs guarding the southern tower, bravely resisting the Japanese invaders), *Kaiping wenshi* 2 (August 1982): 46; Peng Qiupin, 从三失台城到三失苍城始末 (From losing Taicheng thrice to losing Cangcheng thrice) *Kaiping wenshi* 2 (August 1982): 54; Guan Wenzhou, 奋起抗日保卫家乡—记魁冈之战 (Rise up to resist Japan and defend the hometown – battle of Kuigang) *Kaiping wenshi* 3 (December 1982): 84.

<sup>17</sup> Grandmothers were vocally expressive and easily shared many detailed stories while grandfathers required more prompts to talk about their experiences.

became reliant on remittances to buy food instead of growing their own, thus reducing their grain reserves, which jeopardized them in times of famine.

I am aware that my interviewees may have embellished their stories to validate themselves like the women in wartime Beijing who concealed, manipulated, overstated, or sensationalized their lives when testifying before the judge in Zhao Ma's work.<sup>18</sup> For example, Ng S's mother abandoned her when she was nine years old because of traditional gender roles and folk beliefs. Still harbouring bitterness towards her mother, Ng played up her victimhood for sympathy by emphasizing her mother's foolishness and cruelty, which she saw as being caused by superstition. When I present Ng's stories, I make an effort to extract the events from her moral judgements and emotional subjectivity. Memories can be fluid and easily reconstructed or may be conveyed through constantly changing interpretations. For example, Chow TW commented that the cooperation between his village and another village to combat against the Japanese invading troops was nationalistic. However, their cooperation at the time might very well have been mutual aid for the survival of both villages. Chow TW was educated in postwar China and his interpretation of the events might have been influenced by the postwar KMT and CCP's hypernationalistic narratives. Chow's remembered motivation is reminiscent of Gail Hershatter's study of rural women's memory of past events, which were shaped, explained and justified by current events.<sup>19</sup> The KMT and CCP both adopted strong nationalistic postwar narratives in their efforts to rebuild and define the country. Dongyoun Hwang shows that the CCP and KMT saw the purge and trials of wartime collaborators as a necessary step in building or defining a postwar China.<sup>20</sup> Resistance is the ultimate demonstration of patriotism and "collaboration is the vilest of moral crime" in the postwar nationalistic framework, as Prasenjit Duara puts it.<sup>21</sup> Interviewees may assume the nationalistic stance because no one wants to appear traitorous to their mother country.

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<sup>18</sup> Ma, *Runaway Wives*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Dongyoun Hwang, "Wartime Collaboration in Question: An Examination of the Postwar Trials of the Chinese Collaborators," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 93. See also Leo Ching, *Anti-Japan: The Politics of Sentiment in Postcolonial East Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Prasenjit Duara, "Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites In Wartime China," *The China Journal*, no. 59 (January 2008): 142.

Mutual aid societies helped connect me with interviewees, thus accessing their stories. Some scholars frame mutual aid organizations as criminal gangs or political secret societies.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes, mutual aid organizations could be the cause of disputes, but I did not come across any such stories in the past or present from the organizations I visited or from interviewees.<sup>23</sup> The mutual aid associations I visited in Vancouver and Hong Kong did not seem to be secret societies or criminal enterprises. It was easy for me to connect and access the mutual aid associations because my roots were from the same Siyi region as them or have ancestors of the same surnames. They treated me as one of their kin. When I asked for help in my research, most members were eager to offer assistance.

Modest associations attended by seniors were enthusiastic to help and make connections. Financially successful associations like the Hong Kong Siyi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (香港四邑商工總會), established in 1909,<sup>24</sup> and Hong Kong Toi Shan Chamber of Commerce (香港台山商會), established in 1876, manned by younger employees with no connections in surnames or regionality to the associations were less accessible. I attended Hong Kong Kwan Clan's Association's (香港關氏宗親總會) monthly meeting and witnessed some simple rituals. Sharing the same surname as Kwan-kung, he is their patron deity. They had an altar with his painting, fruits, flowers, incense, wine, and other offerings. All members recited some short respectful words toward the altar before commencing their meeting. The subsequent meeting was about mundane organization business regarding group trips back to Kaiping and follow-up of status on the previous month's project. There were two women and about seven men in the meeting. Most of them were between their fifties and sixties years old. One was in his nineties and one was in her thirties. The members were not threatening at all but quite helpful to me in supplying their stories. Although the mutual aid societies' demonstration of rituals and kin

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<sup>22</sup> Dian Murray and Qin Baoqi, *The Origins of the Tiandihui: The Chinese Triads in Legend and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Jean Chesneaux and Lucien Bianco, *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> 溫哥華開平會館 (Vancouver Hoi Ping Benevolent Association), 香港開平同鄉會 (Hong Kong Kaiping Common Village Association), 香港四邑商工總會 (Hong Kong Siyi Chamber of Commerce and Industry), 香港司徒氏宗親會 (Hong Kong Szeto Clan's Association), 香港關氏宗親總會 (Hong Kong Kwan Clan's Association)

<sup>24</sup> 香港四邑商工總會：一百周年會慶特刊 (Hong Kong Siyi chamber of commerce and industry: centennial celebration special issue), 2009, 83.



assistance in 2019 could not be used as evidence of their behaviour in the 1930s and 1940s, their objective to help their kin and clan seemed consistent since the turn of the twentieth century. As a recipient of their goodwill, I am grateful and want to reciprocate.

This thesis has six chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the background history of Taishan and Kaiping's village characteristics and the counties' public security situation. The villages' public security environment is important to understand the constraints and deficiencies that shaped villagers' responses to threats. The government did not fully control the countryside, which resulted in the villages' self-reliance. The villages' characteristics explain the motivations behind the villages' survival tactics against different security threats from 1937 to 1949. Many villages were mainly inhabited by wives, the elderly, and young children which determined how they responded to security threats. The men worked abroad and sent money back to home villages to support their families. Although the men were far away, they had strong connections with their home villages and had much influence over home village matters like security issues.

Chapters 2 to 6 cover five security threats that were priorities for the counties' villagers. They were village feuds, bandits, the Japanese armed forces, food scarcity, and traditional gender roles. Each threat's changes and continuities are examined from prewar, wartime and postwar. I will also discuss the villagers' survival tactics and their motivations. Village feuds illustrate the interconnectivity between villages and local actors, as well as how the villagers dealt with violent conflicts. Bandits consistently endangered the villages from before to after the Resistance War. We see a pattern of the villagers' independence from government institutions but dependence on overseas kins and clansmen. The villagers' responses to the Japanese aggression contradicted the nationalistic framework of Diana Lary and CCP-affiliated literature. The Resistance War exacerbated the desperation of food scarcity when the villagers' connection to their usual provider and protector, overseas kins and clansmen, was disrupted. Traditional gender roles were a critical security threat that endangered women and children but did not fit into the nationalistic framework. The government had no impact on this issue, but overseas connections did.

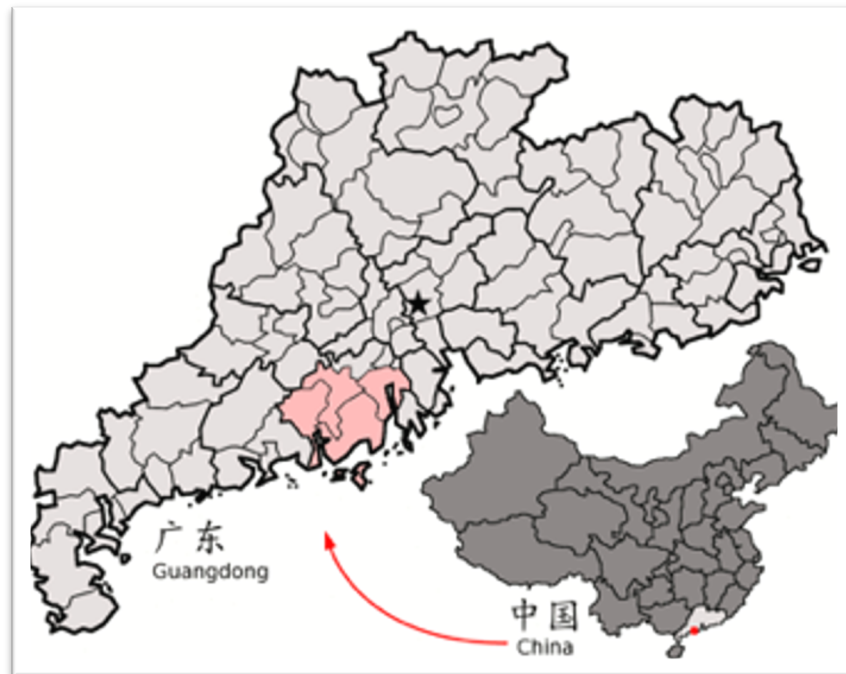
I had intended to illustrate all or parts of my thesis because I want my work to be accessible to a broader audience like youths. By presenting my research through illustration, I hope to motivate young adults to learn about and explore Chinese history as well as to see its

value. I have included an illustrated short story based on this thesis in the Appendix with the hope of developing it into a full graphic novel in the near future.

# Chapter 1. Background

## Taishan and Kaiping Village Characteristics

Taishan and Kaiping were two of the four counties called Siyi (四邑), which have many overseas villages. See Figure 1 and Figure 2. These two counties' rural grassroots populations ranged from poor landless villagers with no overseas connections to wealthy families supported by overseas money who owned land, houses, and businesses in nearby market towns. A large population were wealthy and had overseas ties. By 1949, as many as one in five Guangdong residents belonged to overseas families.<sup>25</sup> Overseas families made up overseas villages. Overseas villages' characteristics were not conducive to resisting Japanese aggression. They consisted of mostly wives, the elderly, and young children.



**Figure 1. Location of Siyi in Guangdong relative to China.**

Map found in <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

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<sup>25</sup> Shelly Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 107.



**Figure 2. Counties in Siyi.**

Overseas villages were formed from their family survival strategy of men making money overseas and sending remittances home to support family members. This family strategy emerged from the mid-1700s<sup>26</sup> to survive wars, famines, and competition for limited resources and opportunities.<sup>27</sup> By the 1920s, this family strategy was very successful as many family members who stayed behind prospered and lived comfortable lives. Before 1928, Taishan County received an annual remittance of over US \$10 million, which is one-eighth of China's total remittances. By 1930, the amount increased to US \$30 million and it was one-third of the nation's total.<sup>28</sup> Similarly in Kaiping between 1912 and 1929, overseas men remitted over \$33

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<sup>26</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, "Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-Versa," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 2, no. 2 (November 2006): 166.

<sup>28</sup> Mei Weiqiang and Zhang Guoxiong, 五邑华侨华人史 (Wuyi overseas Chinese history), 365, 349. Cited in Chao Longqi, "民国广东四邑侨乡匪患与华侨护乡 (Republican Guangdong Siyi overseas village banditry problems and overseas Chinese protection of home villages)," *Huaqiao huaren lishi yanjiu*, no. 1 (March 2013): 2.

million (provincial currency) annually to their families.<sup>29</sup> Usually, the stay-at-home wives converted the remittance into investments in houses, land, and rental property.<sup>30</sup> Many overseas families did not toil in the fields to grow their food but opted to purchase imported rice. The overseas-remittance strategy's success motivated and pressured more men to leave the counties to seek out fortunes abroad. In 1922, the US and Canada had a total of 110,000 overseas Chinese, 11,000 of whom came from Kaiping County.<sup>31</sup> In 1948, Taishanese living overseas reached 93,413.<sup>32</sup> Young able-bodied men who remained in the village and not working abroad were scoffed at.<sup>33</sup>

Overseas Chinese money was the main force in social and economic construction in Siyi hometowns. They ranged from building homes to building bridges and roads, to establishing villages and ports, investing in factories, and establishing cultural and educational undertakings.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the remittances were vital in alleviating hardships during war, famine, and banditry. The villagers relied on their overseas kin and clansmen for protection and livelihood even though they were far apart.

## Public Security of Taishan and Kaiping

In pre-1949 Siyi villages, the public security situation remained consistent since imperial times but threats shifted from one form to another. The Qing and Republican central governments in Beijing, Nanjing, and Chongqing, or even the provincial government, never fully controlled rural Guangdong. Both central administrations lacked the resources to rule over their vast domains, relying instead on local gentries to help govern and maintain social order below

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<sup>29</sup> Liu Zhenggang, “试论侨乡士人的女性观—以民国[开平县志·列女]为例” (Overseas villages' scholarly views of women, based on Republican Kaiping gazetteer, exemplar women scroll), *Wuyi daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 14, no. 4 (November 2012): 32.

<sup>30</sup> Peterson, “House Divided,” 26.

<sup>31</sup> Liu, “试论侨乡士人的女性观” (Overseas villages' scholarly views of women), 32.

<sup>32</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 136.

<sup>33</sup> Interview. Ng S, August 15, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Chao, “民国广东四邑侨乡匪患与华侨护乡” (Republican Guangdong Siyi overseas village banditry problems and overseas Chinese protection of home villages), 2.

the county level.<sup>35</sup> Imperial County officials appointed local gentries, unofficial authorities with civil service examination credentials and good community reputations, to run rural self-government organizations (公局), such as police offices, administration offices, militia, and civil corps. 公局 was the public office that administered the covenant (公約) between the state and local communities.<sup>36</sup>

After the civil service examination was abolished in 1905, rural ruling leaders' characteristics changed; anyone with ambitions and military capital could assume leadership in the rural self-government organizations. Edward McCord explained how lowly peasants who salvaged firearms from battlefields and were charismatic enough to attract a following to form bandit gangs could negotiate their way to become local warlords.<sup>37</sup> These leaders could be gentries, merchants, former officials, retired army officers, poor peasants, or even bandits. The social and political instability of the Republican period presented opportunities for social climbers and armed entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds.<sup>38</sup> Although ruling gentries during imperial times were susceptible to corruption, leaders of the 1930s and 1940s were relatively more concerned with personal political and economic gains and cared less about the public good. As Qiu Jie and Wang Yi'na noted, Republican rural leaders in Guangdong collected land taxes from the peasants in the name of the state but pocketed most of it. The elites were ineffective in implementing state policies of economic, political, and educational modernization.<sup>39</sup> These rural leaders disregarded national laws and occasionally conflicted with state armies.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, rural leaders were consistently middlemen between the state and peasants. They maintained local influence and held military power, thus achieving some autonomy from the state. This autonomy

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<sup>35</sup> Hsiao-Tung Fei, "Peasantry and Gentry: An Interpretation of Chinese Social Structure and Its Changes," *American Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 1 (July 1946): 8–9.

<sup>36</sup> Qiu Jie and Wang Yi'na, "Grassroots Authority in Rural Guangdong During Late Qing and Early Republican Times," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 8, no. 2 (2014): 153.

<sup>37</sup> Edward A. McCord, *Military Force and Elite Power in the Formation of Modern China* (London: Routledge, 2014), 88.

<sup>38</sup> McCord, *Military Force and Elite Power*, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Qiu and Wang, "Grassroots Authority in Rural Guangdong During Late Qing and Early Republican Times," 167.

<sup>40</sup> Qiu Jie, "民国初年广东乡村的基层权力机构" (Grassroots authority of early Republican rural Guangdong), *Shixue yuekan* 5 (2003): 89.

allowed them to either be an obstacle or an agent of state penetration, depending on what might benefit them the most.<sup>41</sup> It was under this separation from the state authorities and dealing with self-serving rural leaders that villagers developed and retained their self-reliance and reliance on local actors against threats.

Disputes among villages were mostly resolved through negotiations between clan leaders. For significant crises like deadly bandit attacks, villagers could ask the county magistrate for military help from government provincial and county troops. However, military help was not provided readily or freely. Villages needed to petition the magistrate and have the money to oil the military machinery. More often, villagers had to be self-sufficient in solving their insecurity problems and fended for themselves. The following were their tactics against security threats: some villages formed their own militias, armed themselves with heavy weapons and artillery, hired guards and watchmen, joined mutual aid associations, and allied with friendly neighbouring villages and clans. These defense tactics, when shrewdly managed by a local ambitious and charismatic individual, could make him a rural leader or even a regional strongman, as described in McCord's study of Hunan military leadership.<sup>42</sup> My interviewees, however, did not mention any local strongmen or prominent leaders.

When leadership and financial resources were available, Taishan and Kaiping villages relied on self-organized militias called *mintuan* (民團) or village corps (鄉團) for defence. These *mintuan* consisted of young village men. Smaller and weaker villages might pool their young men together and create a multi-village *mintuan*. Kaiping's Longkou Li was an overseas village that banded together with eight to ten neighbouring villages to form a *mintuan*. Each village either pitched in money to hire men or volunteered its young male villagers to the *mintuan*.<sup>43</sup> They were trained by hired masters in guns and martial arts. The training usually took place during downtime from agricultural work around the lunar New Year.<sup>44</sup> It is unclear when the village alliances were formed but similar villages' local militarization existed as a defence against various security threats like rebellions and the British armed forces since the late Qing, as

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<sup>41</sup> McCord, *Military Force and Elite Power*, 102.

<sup>42</sup> McCord, *Military Force and Elite Power*.

<sup>43</sup> Interview. Wong XY, July 30, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Interview. Ng S, August 15, 2019.

discussed by Philip Kuhn. Kuhn further explained that village alliances were based on personal acquaintance and a history of customary cooperation among the village elites.<sup>45</sup> Alliances of course existed so long as benefits outweighed the disadvantages. Long historic rival lineages such as the Kwans and Setos in Kaiping allied for mutual interests from 1854 to 1867 during the Hakka-Punti War and Red Turban Rebellion.<sup>46</sup>

Villages were equipped with machine guns, rifles and handguns, as well as such traditional weapons as six feet long poles and big knives. Before the war, some *mintuan* were so heavily armed that they seemed to be going into battles against armies. It was understandable because many bandits were decommissioned or deserted army corps.<sup>47</sup> In the 1920s, some *mintuan* even had powerful weapons including modern cannons, machine guns, steamboats, and searchlights to guard against bandits.<sup>48</sup> By the time the Resistance War began in the late 1930s and 1940s, resources were so stretched that most of the villages' weapons were outdated, in disrepair, or sold off.<sup>49</sup> During the war, Fong C's family pawned off their revolver to buy food. As a child, Ng S used to peek at her family's rusted revolvers stored in empty ceramic rice pots. However, some families kept their firearms. Fong C saw his neighbour carrying a machine gun while fleeing the raiding Japanese troops. During village raids, the Japanese troops were only interested in raiding food; they ignored villagers' weapons. The Japanese weapons were so much more advanced than the villagers' antiquated and rusted weapons that they were not worth the trouble. The villagers' weapons might have been ineffective against the Japanese troops during the war, but villagers felt they were essential for self-defence. After the war ended in 1945 and overseas remittances resumed, Fong C's family purchased a new pistol for the household for peace of mind. Siyi villages were well armed until after 1949 when the CCP systemically

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<sup>45</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796–1864* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 66–69, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Yuen-fong Woon, *Social Organization in South China, 1911–1949: The Case of the Kuan Lineage of K'ai-P'ing County* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1984), 40.

<sup>47</sup> Phil Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 79–80.

<sup>48</sup> Qiu Jie and Wang Yi'na, "Grassroots Authority in Rural Guangdong During Late Qing and Early Republican Times," 166.

<sup>49</sup> Interview. Ng S, July 5, 2019.



confiscated all firearms from the villages.<sup>50</sup> Laws on gun confiscation appeared in Villages Law and Order Regulations on August 12, 1950.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to *mintuan*, villages also hired guards or watchmen for protection. For instance, Qilongma village hired two watchmen to guard the village. Each was stationed at the entrance and exit watchtowers of the village. They lived in their respective watchtowers. Qilongma was a small, new village and was not involved with *mintuan* from other villages. Its watchmen only served the village and had no relationship with other *mintuan*. The village gave each watchman two to three *mu* of fields to grow their food as payment for their work. *Mintuan* and watchmen were more useful for guarding against crop theft and minor burglars. They were ineffective against large bands of bandits or Japanese troops. In violent conflicts between villages and bandits, *mintuan* only served in a supporting role as guides for the county troops. As the villages fled approaching raiding Japanese troops, the watchmen and *mintuan* fled with them.<sup>52</sup>

Overseas villages maintained connections with and sought assistance from kins and clansmen working abroad through mutual aid associations.<sup>53</sup> These mutual aid associations included ones of common surnames or clan (宗親會), such as The Hall of Tracing One's Origin (溯源堂);<sup>54</sup> common regions (同鄉會), such as the American Kaiping Common Village Association (美國開平同鄉總會);<sup>55</sup> and common region plus specialty like commerce (地方商

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> 公安手冊 (Public security manual), 1 (Zhejiang sheng renmin zhengfu gongan ting yin, 1950), 115–116.

<sup>52</sup> Interview. Fong C, August 15, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Overseas Chinese maintained financial and emotional connections with home communities through Gold Mountain firms, Overseas magazines, and mutual aid associations. See Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> 溯源堂, an international mutual aid association, has branches in the United States, Canada, Cuba, Mexico, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Fiji, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Myanmar (Burma), (Taishan) China, and Hong Kong. See [International Sooyuen branches](#). The association could have been established in the mid 1800s. The Vancouver branch was established in the 1880s. See [Vancouver Sooyuen](#).

<sup>55</sup> Established 1911. See Jiangmen shi renmin zhengfu, “[世界各地开平同乡会列表](#)” (International Kaiping common village association chart).

會), such as the Hong Kong Hoi Ping Chamber of Commerce (香港開平商會).<sup>56</sup> Overseas mutual aid associations were normally located at points of departure such as Hong Kong and Macau, as well as at migrants' destinations. They served as a conduit between Chinese abroad and their home communities. Many emigrants joined mutual aid associations for help with business connections, settlement abroad,<sup>57</sup> overseas remittances to home villages, and transport of the bones of deceased Chinese back to home villages. These associations played a pivotal role in fundraising to help home communities deal with droughts, floods, famines, bandit suppression, building schools, and war efforts.

Unlike other scholars who framed mutual aid organizations as criminal gangs or political secret societies with the objective of overthrowing administrations, David Ownby examined mutual aid associations with an emphasis on religious traditions and social context, not from a political or ethnic perspective. Although mutual aid associations could embrace politics and criminality for self-interest, that was not necessarily their main mode of operation.<sup>58</sup>

Allying with the right villages could be a matter of life and death. Villages could seek assistance from neighbouring clans to mediate intervillage conflicts. Respected village elders commonly mediated conflicts for neighbouring villages.<sup>59</sup> Although feuds were prevalent between Siyi villages in pre-1949 times, so were cooperation and alliances. Alliances with more powerful villages provided protection against predation from hostile villages and against a common enemy like the Japanese troops. Support from and alliances with neighbouring villages and clans were important survival tactics for Siyi villages.

During the onset of the war between 1938 and 1939, the KMT and CCP coordinated to thwart Japanese aggression in the counties, but their effort focused on the townships and did not

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<sup>56</sup> Yu Qimou, 開平縣志 (Kaiping gazetteer) (Hong Kong: Minsheng yinshuju, 1933), scroll 22, 26. 香港開平商會 was established in 1911. The official name uses Cantonese pronunciation. Kaiping is pronounced Hoi Ping in Cantonese. See Jiangmen shi renmin zhengfu, “[世界各地开平同乡会列表](#)” (International Kaiping common village association chart).

<sup>57</sup> David Ownby, “Introduction: Secret Societies Reconsidered,” in *Secret Societies Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Early Modern South China and Southeast Asia*, ed. David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (New York: Routledge, 2016 [1994]), 17–20; Philip A. Kuhn, “Why China Historians Should Study the Chinese Diaspora, and Vice-Versa,” 167–169.

<sup>58</sup> Ownby, “Introduction: Secret Societies Reconsidered,” 21–22.

<sup>59</sup> Woon, *Social Organization in South China*, 37. Conflict mediation through neighbouring village elders was common elsewhere like Wenzhou as well.

extend to the villages. Under the KMT government's support and the CCP's organization, they created defence corps such as Taishan County Youth Resist the Japanese Vanguard Troops.<sup>60</sup> However, these defence corps only defended towns, not villages. My interviewees who lived in villages during the war never heard of any defence organizations or saw them in action. Although my interviewees were children during that time and might not have known about the defence corps, but they would have heard from the adults about resistance activities or seen the defence corps in action during the many Japanese raids they experienced. One interviewee recounted in detail the story of his village and a neighbouring village's *mintuan* resisting the Japanese troops, but did not mention any defence corps.<sup>61</sup>

The consistent lack of state intervention in public security of the Siyi villages resulted in the villagers relying on themselves to survive threats however they could in pre-1949 times. In times of need or life and death situations, the villagers counted on family, neighbours, friendly neighbouring villages or clansmen, and mutual aid societies, not official state authorities or even unofficial authorities like the self-government organizations (公局). It was logical for Siyi villagers to invest their effort and emotion locally rather than nationally. Thus, localism was more important than nationalism.<sup>62</sup>

## Threats

In 1944, Chow TW was deeply distraught about his twelve-year-old neighbour. The girl's impoverished family had recently sold her off, and the buyers came to collect her on that memorable day. She refused to leave with the strangers and clung on to the metal gate in front of

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<sup>60</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 12.

<sup>61</sup> Interview. Chow TW, July 31, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Surprisingly, Prasenjit Duara observed similar strong grassroots localism in Northern China's Hebei and Shandong villages even though characteristics differ between his northern and my southern villages. For example, during imperial times, northern rural authorities were village headmen and their network of associates. Their legitimacy was based on strong religious and lineage traditions. Local bullies replaced them in the 1930s. Southern rural authorities were gentries with civil examination credentials and a good reputation during imperial times. Anyone with military strength replaced them in the 1930s. Although the rural leadership characteristics were different, they shared the same motivation, opportunistic self-gain. See Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 159, 251.

her. Seeing her wailing and the commotion attracted a large crowd of neighbours, the girl's mother grabbed a rock off the ground and smashed it on the girl's hands. The girl finally let go and was carried off by the buyers. Chow TW vividly remembered this scene for seventy-five years.<sup>63</sup> Being trafficked by parents was just one of the many dangers my interviewees faced. They dealt with danger from Japanese troops, bandits, village feuds, food scarcity, parental neglect and abandonment, kidnapping, and murder. The following five chapters examine these threats. These security threats were not always self-contained or independent. They were complicated, often overlapped, and interconnected with each other. While some threats were external and temporary, others had been continuous since imperial times.

Bandits, Japanese armed forces, and violent village feuds were immediate threats the villagers faced between 1937 and 1949. Village feuds endangered villagers before and after the war. Bandits terrorized the rural grassroots before, during, and after the war. The Japanese armed forces were a temporary but devastating security threat to the villagers. Famine and starvation was not limited to a specific period of time but their conditions were exacerbated by the Japanese invasion and when remittances were cut off from abroad. Traditional gender roles created danger for children and hardship for women. This threat was not often covered in government produced literature but was impactful to overseas households who were composed of mainly women and children. Examining the threats' relationship with the local region, their consequences, and how villagers dealt with them allow us to understand the villagers' priorities. Their experiences explain how they made sense of what was happening and how they came to choose the survival strategies that they did. Patriotism was not one of their motivations.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview. Chow TW, July 31, 2019.

## Chapter 2. Village Feuds and Rivalries

In pre-1949 times, intervillage competition and rivalry for land, grazing grounds and other resources were a security threat to Siyi villagers. Frequent conflicts between villages, between clans, within clans, or even between clan and government were recorded in local magazines like Taishan's *Sunning Magazine* (新寧雜誌).<sup>64</sup> Moreover, my interviewees revealed vivid accounts of their village feuds.<sup>65</sup> In late 1920s Kaiping, a land dispute between the Fongs and the Kwans highlighted overlapping security threats and their complicated relationship with the community. This land dispute story illustrates the success of the overseas family survival strategy as wealth poured into the villages. Remittances triggered the creation of new villages and intervillage conflicts. Villagers dealt with conflicts through negotiations, bandits, mutual aid groups, county troops, *mintuan*, and watchmen.

By 1927, the overseas-remittance family strategy was well established and successful at generating wealth for home villages. Some Fongs from the Gouweiyao (狗尾搖) overseas village had more than enough remittances to sustain their basic living necessities and sought to build a newer and better village. With their money from overseas, they bought some plots of agricultural land from individual Kwans, members of a local powerful elite lineage that had lots of land and monopolized businesses in Kaiping.<sup>66</sup> Although the Fongs had not yet acquired all the connected plots, twenty households proceeded to build new houses and established their new village, Qilongma. They hoped that the other Kwans would eventually sell them the remainder of the plots.

The establishment of Qilongma did not spur other Kwans to sell their remaining plots to the Fongs. Instead, the Kwans changed their minds about selling their land to the Fongs

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<sup>64</sup> Tung-Yiu Stan Lai and Weijen Wang, "From Resistance to Participation: Clanship and Urban Modernization in the Wuyi Rural Market Towns During the Republican Era," *The IAFOR Journal of Arts and Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2014): 7. *Sunning Magazine*, a countywide civilian magazine in Taishan founded in 1909, issued three times a month in the Republican era.

<sup>65</sup> Interviews. Fong C, July 10, 2019; Ng S, July 5, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Woon, *Social Organization in South China*, 37. Interviews. Kwan X, June 13, 2019; Fong C, July 10, 2019; Seto H, June 22, 2019.

altogether. A source said that some Kwans felt indignant that sale price was too low.<sup>67</sup> My interviewee said the Kwans were jealous of the Fongs for discovering a lucky location for a village and wanted the land back to create their own village.<sup>68</sup> A Feng Shui master surveyed the village location, proclaimed it auspicious, and said that it would prosper descendants.<sup>69</sup> Folk beliefs such as a property's Feng Shui had been a common reason for intervillage and interclan feuds since imperial times across China from Qing Taiwan to Sichuan. Court cases about geomancy disputes were common because Feng Shui was an integral characteristic of property rights, kinship strategies, legal territoriality, and community negotiation.<sup>70</sup> As discussed in Weiting Guo's research, feuding clans often desecrated opponents' ancestral graves to steal the endowed blessing of the gravesites by discarding opponents' ancestral remains and burying their own relative's corpse in the site instead.<sup>71</sup> Although gravesite destruction was illegal, local state officials avoided intervening in geomancy disputes and left them for community members and stakeholders to mediate and resolve. The Kwans likely saw the sudden erection of the Fong's village as a sign of encroachment into their land and fortune, and felt threatened. The Kwans wanted the Fongs out of their land and created many obstacles for them. The Kwans, a more rich and powerful clan in Kaiping's Tankou township, demanded a protection fee of 60,000 daiyang from the Fongs to ensure the safe construction of their village. The Fongs obliged. However, the Fongs' situation did not improve after the construction of their houses. Some Kwans directed local thugs to burn down a small Kwan house, accused the Fongs of arson, and demanded compensation. Some Fongs avoided confrontations with the Kwans by moving back to their old village. Some did not dare to stay in the village in the daytime and only slept in their Qilongma houses at night. Eventually, the Fongs attempted to placate the Kwans by offering the Kwans

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<sup>67</sup> Liu Hua, “火烧‘骑龙马’—开平华侨血泪史话 (Burning of Qilongma — Kaiping overseas Chinese history of blood and tears),” *Kaiping wenshi* 10 (March 1985): 277.

<sup>68</sup> Interview. Fong C, July 10, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> The village was named Qilongma Cun which literally means “Straddling-the-Dragon-Vein Village.” The word “vein” and the word “horse” sounded similar so the village name was commonly known as “Dragon-Straddling Horse Village.”

<sup>70</sup> Tristan G. Brown, “The Veins of the Earth: Property, Environment, and Cosmology in Nanbu County, 1865–1942” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2017), 16.

<sup>71</sup> Weiting Guo, “Social Practice and Judicial Politics in ‘Grave Destruction’ Cases in Qing Taiwan, 1683–1895,” in *Chinese Law: Knowledge, Practice and Transformation, 1530s to 1950s*, ed. Li Chen and Madeleine Zelin (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 88, 114.

more money. The Fongs got the support of other prominent clans in Tankou marketplace such as the Chow, Li, and Tse clans in negotiation with the Kwans, but to no avail.<sup>72</sup> Neighbouring clans commonly help diffuse and mediate conflicts. The Fongs tried to mitigate land disputes with the Kwans by allying with neighbouring clans but were not successful in this instance.

Shortly after the Fongs purchased the Kwans land in 1927, the Kwans' new village headman, Kwan KC, had recently returned from the US. He made his fortune from owning and operating ranches. He spurned the sales of the Kwans' land and spearheaded the mission to reclaim it from the Fongs. The Kwans began building houses too, right next to the Fongs' houses in Qilongma Cun. Kwan KC also built a house there. His house, a grand *diaolo*, took up three times the space of a normal house. See Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Fongs' *Diaolo* in Qilongma circa 1936.**  
Kwan KC's *diaolo* would be thrice its size.

Conflicts escalated between the two antagonistic clans when they lived in close proximity to each other.

In June 1928, a gang of over eighty bandits attacked the Fongs in Qilongma village. They kidnapped over twenty villagers, killed more than ten, and burned twenty-three houses. *Mintuan* from neighbouring Lis and Tams gave chase to save the hostages but returned unsuccessful.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, even though the Kwans' houses were right next to the Fongs', their people and

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<sup>72</sup> Liu, “火烧‘骑龙马’” (Burning of Qilongma), 277.

<sup>73</sup> Yu, 開平縣志 (Kaiping gazetteer), scroll 23, 6.

properties were left unscathed. Upon the bandits' attack on the Fongs, the Kwans were openly gleeful. When people questioned the bandits' precise and selective attacks on the Fongs, the Kwans in Qilongma village hastily packed up, burned their own houses down, and left. However, they did not go far. They established a village close by, three fields away from Qilongma village.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, the kidnapped victims were held in mountainous "lairs" for about six months while the victims' families raised ransom money from overseas relatives. These lairs were normal villages. Bandit villagers were hosting the hostages while their people negotiated with the hostages' families. A four-year-old hostage even mingled with the bandit villagers and learned their work songs.<sup>75</sup> Although some families could raise ransom money in a relatively timely manner of six months and secured the release of their loved ones, many families could not. One family paid three thousand silver dollars for the return of three loved ones. The cost of building an average two-storied *diaolo* was around two thousand daiyang.

While negotiating with the bandits, the victims' families also solicited military help from the Jiangmen prefecture authority for a rescue mission through an overseas mutual aid association called Overseas Hong Kong Public Safety Association (僑港治安會).<sup>76</sup> Overseas Chinese money founded this association, which specialized in providing safety and security to the Kaiping villagers, specifically in bandit suppression. A mutual aid association had more influence and financial power than individuals in persuading the prefecture government to send soldiers to fight the bandits. Although villagers could technically access prefecture military help for protection against threats, not every villager could afford it or was literate enough to write petitions to the county magistrate. Military protection for the villagers was not directly accessible. Siyi villagers who had relatives overseas relied on the collective power of mutual aid associations to access prefecture military help.

The prefecture troops, guided by local village corps or *xiangtuan*, stormed the lairs. The bandits moved the hostages to different lairs and gunfights ensued as the troops gave chase. Most of the victims were saved. During the gunfights, five villagers, four prefecture soldiers, and one

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<sup>74</sup> Interview. Fong C, July 10, 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Fong C's older sister was the four-year-old hostage.

<sup>76</sup> Yu, 開平縣志 (Kaiping gazetteer), scroll 23, 6.



commander were killed. While two bandit leaders and eighty or so bandits were killed in the rescue mission, a few other leaders and bandits escaped. The prefecture troops seized two horses, fifty rifles, and two machine guns from the bandits. The mutual aid society paid almost fifty thousand daiyang for hiring the prefecture troops and compensation for the death and injury of soldiers. Additionally, they bought ten thousand daiyang worth of firearms for the county troops.<sup>77</sup> Dealing with government troops seemed just as costly as fending off bandits, if not more so.

The bandit leaders were later caught. They revealed that the Kwans were collaborating with their gang to attack the Fongs in Qilongma village. In the late 1920s and early 1930s when bandits were rampant, it was not unusual for competing villages to work with bandits to eliminate their rivals. Both Bill Billingsley and He Wenping provide examples of village elites existing symbiotically with bandits in North and South China respectively. Many North China bandit chiefs mixed freely with local elites, treating them as social equals and inviting them to marriage feasts and other festive occasions.<sup>78</sup> South Guangdong village elites used bandits to collect harvest taxes from villagers during harvesting season.<sup>79</sup> Philip Kuhn and Elizabeth Perry also discuss the interchangeability between elites and bandits.<sup>80</sup> The Kwans' village headman, Kwan KC, escaped to Hong Kong but was later arrested and extradited to Jiangmen to be put on trial for murder and other crimes against the Fongs of Qilongma. Fong C's grandmother was one of the kidnapped victims and stood in court to give her testimony. See Figure 4. Kwan KC and the bandit leaders were found guilty and executed by a firing squad. The Fongs were compensated with the Kwans' land, leading to the completion of Qilongma village. The Kwans were ordered to never set foot in Qilongma village again and the Fongs had the right to kill any Kwan who disobeyed. The Kwans' abandoned houses were eventually mined for their quality building stones and bricks, which were used to build the village wall and roads.<sup>81</sup> The Fongs got

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<sup>77</sup> Yu, 開平縣志 (Kaiping gazetteer), scroll 23, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China*, 158.

<sup>79</sup> He Wenping, “民国初年广东的盗匪与地方社会 - 一种‘非法’武力权势的形成” (Early Republican Guangdong bandits and local communities - the formation of an “illegal” military power), *Xueshu yanjiu*, no. 5 (2011): 112.

<sup>80</sup> Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies*, 180; Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China*, 72–73.

<sup>81</sup> Interview. Fong C, July 10, 2019.

their village but at a price of about thirty clan members' lives and 120,000 daiyang. Creating their village was bloody pricey.

The government did not intervene in the initial land dispute between the Kwans and the Fongs. While the Kwans allied with bandits to get rid of their rivals, the Fongs counted on clansmen, friendly neighbouring villages, and mutual aid societies for assistance. The government was able to give the Fongs justice at the end, but it was not the first point of contact. Villagers sought local solutions before turning to the government.



**Figure 4. Fong Family Photo circa 1933.**

From left to right: sister, mother, grandmother, Fong C, father, brother.

The animosity between the Qilongma Fongs and the nearby Kwans persisted into the Resistance War period and little skirmishes flared up, but nothing major occurred. In one instance, the Kwans' cows ventured into Qilongma's pastures. The Fongs' children, protective of their property, threw stones at the cows to scare them away. The Kwans' children saw the mistreatment of their animals and alerted adults. Incensed by a new slight on top of old grudges, the Kwan villagers gathered pitchforks and sickles<sup>82</sup> and prepared to storm Qilongma. From the watchtower by the village entrance, the Fongs' watchman fired off warning rifle shots and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. During the Resistance War, families often pawned off their firearms for food; thereby reducing their weapons to farming tools.

seemingly woke the Kwan villagers from their rage. Startled, the Kwans dispersed. A potentially violent clash between the Fongs and the Kwans was averted.

During the Resistance War, major rivalry and conflicts between the villages seemed abated. Neither gazetteers nor my interviewees mentioned any big clashes. Instead, interviewees talked a lot about fleeing the Japanese troops and hunger. Most villagers were too busy staying safe and surviving food shortages to engage in intervillage feuds.

Although intervillage rivalries and feuds subsided during the war, they were difficult to forget. And they returned after the war. Dormant feuds could reawaken to become security threats when the opportunity arose. For example, the villagers of a southern Guangdong village, Chen village, held memories of a pre-1949 feud with an adjacent village well into the 1960s. The memory of the feud almost ignited a violent clash during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>83</sup> In the 1980s and even as recent as 2019, there were instances when pre-1949 feuding clans such as the Kwans and Fongs, or Setos and Kwans, were hesitant to have their children intermarry.<sup>84</sup> Despite the CCP's drive to stamp out localism (地方主義) and promote cooperation amongst the masses after 1949, bad blood between villages was difficult to resolve.<sup>85</sup>

In autumn 1946, the Ngs of Chengchang village in Taishan were preparing to exact revenge on the predatory Dongning village.<sup>86</sup> On the eve of a seemingly imminent battle, villagers gathered rifles, machine guns, grenades, kerosene, and cotton quilts at the village's ancestral hall. Five-year-old Ng S watched as the women in her household lit lamps and incense, and prayed to gods and ancestors throughout the night.

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<sup>83</sup> Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village: Revolution to Globalization*, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 134.

<sup>84</sup> Interview. Seto H, June 22, 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Zhonggong Guangdong shengwei dangshi yanjiushi, “关于征研广东反‘地方主义’问题的情况汇报” (Report on research on Guangdong anti-localism issues), *Zhonggong zhongyao lishi wenxian ziliao huibian*, 81 (January 2000), 9: Shortly after 1949, Mao Zedong criticized Guangdong's localism and kickstarted anti-localism campaigns in 1952 and followed up in 1953.

<sup>86</sup> My interviewee said that stronger and bigger villages preyed on smaller and weaker villages for their location, assets, and or resources by force. I call the aggressive and weaker villages predatory and prey villages respectively. Predatory villages could burn the prey villages down, kill the prey villagers, or take over the whole prey village. Small overseas villages consisting of women, children, and the elderly would be likely targets of predatory villages.

The reason for Chengchang village's engagement in this battle was that Dongning village recently razed a small neighbouring overseas village, Hekeng. Some speculated that Dongning wanted the Hekeng village site. Others claimed that Dongning villagers were targeting Hekeng villagers' remittances. Hekeng, a small overseas village with only about ten households and only inhabited by women and children because all their men had migrated overseas, was easy prey for Dongning. Two households survived the attack and were later adopted by Chengchang village. Those two households later changed their family name to become Ngs. Changing one's family name is not a light decision. In other instances, keeping the tradition of carrying on the family name was so critical that boys were bought and sold and many families broken. As a bigger village with over two hundred households, Chengchang felt either compassion for the survivors<sup>87</sup> or threatened by an attack too close to home. For self-preservation, it decided to display its strength against Dongning village. There must have been some negotiations because the anticipated clash did not transpire. Dongning village did not take over the razed village site. Chengchang village's show of force likely constrained Dongning village's ambition and deterred future encroachments.

Before the Communists' systematic overhauling of village structures,<sup>88</sup> villages in Taishan and Kaiping solved their conflicts without too much government intervention. The war against Japan impacted the counties temporarily but not systematically. Therefore, when the pressures of war lifted, life resumed as before. The government did not maintain law and order in the villages. It only intervened in such "serious" matters as the conflict between the Kwans and the Fong. It got involved in such situations as the deaths of villagers, arson, banditry, and huge sums of money. Also, petitions from a wealthy mutual aid society with overseas connections and remittances motivated the government to act. Individual villagers with no connections or wealth probably could not solicit military help from the government. Military troops were like guns for hire. It was costly to deal with bandits and government troops alike.

Villages coped with conflicts by navigating the power structure in their local communities. The clan or villages with the most land and money had the power. Lesser clans or villages like the Fongs who wanted to expand had to appease the powerful Kwans, as seen in

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<sup>87</sup> Interview. Ng S. August 15, 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Chan, Madsen, and Unger, *Chen Village*, 56.

their acquiescence to the Kwans' extortion and even voluntary offers of more money later. Lesser clans could ally themselves with similar clans for strength in negotiations, as with the Fongs seeking solidarity with the neighbouring Li, Tse, and Hui clans. Lesser villages could also ally themselves with bigger villages for protection as in the case of Hekeng. They even changed their family names and got adopted by the bigger clan. For self-preservation, bigger villages needed to maintain their influential status among other villages by taking on the protectorate role of weaker ones. The show of force also deterred competitors' from encroaching. Rivalries and predatory behaviours might have abated during the Resistance War, but resumed when the external security threat exited the community.

Villagers consistently counted on clansmen, friendly neighbouring villages, and overseas Chinese funds through mutual aid societies for assistance in mitigating immediate direct danger from intervillage conflicts. Only when the conflict escalated to violent feuds that involved arsons, deaths, bandits, and large amounts of money did the government get involved.

### Chapter 3. Bandits

Bandits were a major direct security threat to Kaiping and Taishan villages before the Resistance War, seemingly disappeared during the war, and returned after the war. Interviewees lumped burglars, thieves, robbers, and bandits together as *zei* (賊). A robber is someone who unlawfully takes property from others by force or threat of force.<sup>89</sup> A thief is a person who steals, especially secretly or without open force. A burglar is someone who enters a building illegally in order to steal. Bandits who threatened Taishan and Kaiping counties displayed all the characteristics of robbers, thieves, and burglars. Additionally, these rural bandits pillaged, kidnapped, killed, burned and razed villages in gangs numbering from a dozen to several hundred people. Gangs of bandits were led by chiefs who had political aspirations, although mostly self-serving ones. Their opportunistic nature complemented the rural power structure in which local elites had symbiotic relationships with bandits for mutual benefits, as seen in the Kwan-Fong conflict.

Pre-1949 gazetteers, *wenshi ziliao*, and my interviewees all described rampant large-scale bandit attacks before the war. Village attacks ranged from two to sixteen per year between 1921 and 1930 in Kaiping.<sup>90</sup> According to incomplete historical statistics, between 1918 to 1927, in Taishan County's Haidi region, bandits robbed 105 villages and towns, burned down 1,114 houses and 25 *diaolo*, kidnapped over 1,100 residents and killed countless.<sup>91</sup> In 1926, Guangdong had about one hundred thousand bandits.<sup>92</sup> To counter the bandit attacks, villagers built *diaolo*, western-influenced, fortified, multi-storied brick buildings where they could hide and guard their valuables. *Diaolo* were constructed with steel rebars and cement, doors and windows had metal

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<sup>89</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines robbery as the action or practice of unlawfully taking property belonging to another, especially by force or threat of force.

<sup>90</sup> Yu, 開平縣志 (Kaiping gazetteer), scroll 22-23.

<sup>91</sup> Zhu Zhaoguang, “台山賊患史話” (History of Taishan banditry), *Taishan wenshi* 6 (1986), 34.

<sup>92</sup> Kuchiki Kanzo, *Bazoku Senki: Kohinata Hakuro to Manshu* (A Record of Mounted Bandit Wars: Kohinata Hakuro and Manchuria) (Tokyo, 1966), 436. Cited in Phil Billingsley, “Bandits, Bosses, and Bare Sticks: Beneath the Surface of Local Control in Early Republican China,” *Modern China* 7, no. 3 (1981): 236.

gates,<sup>93</sup> and murder holes<sup>94</sup> above the front entrance.<sup>95</sup> Villagers grew spiky bamboo around the village perimeter walls. Villagers invested in boats, searchlights, and weaponry for their *mintuan*.

The large scale banditry of the 1920s or 1930s was absent during the war. Gazetteers and *wenshi ziliao* did not mention any banditry and none of my interviewees witnessed any bandit attacks. How was it that the bandits that terrorized the Siyi countryside before the war seemed to have disappeared during the Resistance War?

The bandits' self-serving and opportunistic nature before the war explains their sudden disappearance during the Japanese invasion of the counties. Bandit collaboration with county officials, village elites, revolutionaries, and secret societies were well documented by such scholars as Billingsley, Perry, and He.<sup>96</sup> Bandits collaborated with local elites and were a part of the power structure in the countryside, as shown in the case of the Fong-Kwan conflict. Bandits allied themselves with any powerful group for survival, social advancement, and political aspirations before the war; therefore, it is highly plausible that they collaborated with the new elites during the war, the Japanese invaders. Power contenders like the Japanese, KMT, and CCP viewed large groups of bandits as a cheap military reserve and as ideal army recruits.<sup>97</sup> However, because the bandits were self-serving, they often switched allegiances depending on which side benefitted them most. The Japanese were their best option at that time. They were the dominant armed forces in Guangdong, aided by the province's collaborationist government administered by Wang Jingwei's wife, Chen Bijun.<sup>98</sup> The KMT in Guangdong was subservient to the occupying Japanese and the CCP had little influence. Although much of Guangdong's

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<sup>93</sup> “二区均和里发生械劫案” (Armed robbery in Junheli, second district), *Siyi qiao bao*, 1947, scroll 1, no. 6, 33. Cited in Chao, “民国广东四邑侨乡匪患与华侨护乡” (Republican Guangdong Siyi overseas village banditry problems and overseas Chinese protection of home villages), 2.

<sup>94</sup> According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology, a murder hole is an opening in the ceiling of an enclosed gateway or the parapet of a wallwalk through which missiles or burning oil could be thrown onto attackers below.

<sup>95</sup> Interview. Fong C, August 15, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China*, 154, 177; Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China*, 225; “恩開新之三点會盛行” (Prevalence of Sandianhui in Enping, Kaiping, and Xinhui), *Guangdong ribao*, June 21, 1910. Cited in He, 盜匪与地方社会 (Bandits and local communities), 25.

<sup>97</sup> Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China*, 194.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph K. S. Yick, “‘Self-Serving Collaboration’: The Political Legacy of ‘Madame Wang’ in Guangdong Province, 1940–1945,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21, no. 2 (October 2014): 217.

countryside was unoccupied,<sup>99</sup> the CCP could not establish effective guerrilla mobilization in the region because there was no political anarchy.<sup>100</sup> Bandits did not disappear after the Japanese invaded the counties, they operated under the Japanese armed forces. Chinese collaborationist armed forces, also known by their pejorative label *wei Rijun* (偽日軍) or counterfeit Japanese army,<sup>101</sup> behaved similarly to bandits. For example, collaborationist troops captured Taishan's county seat of Taicheng on March 3, 1941. That day, soldiers killed 282 people, burned down 534 shops and houses, and pillaged over 3.6 million daiyang worth of valuables.<sup>102</sup> The following is an interviewee's account of how collaborators terrorized a Taishan village, Chengchangcun. Lin Y remembered her old infirm neighbour who could not flee the raiding Japanese soldiers. The senior stayed behind as all the other villagers fled. After the troops departed and the villagers returned, the neighbours found her nailed to her wooden door in a crucifix pose. The senior revealed that she encountered the troops and a collaborator interrogated her about why she did not run away. She replied she was too old and wanted to watch over her home. The soldiers then offered to assist by nailing her to her door. The senior died from her injuries a few days later.<sup>103</sup> *Wei Rijun* participated in atrocities similar to those of bandits of prewar periods. Evidence strongly suggests that bandits were *wei Rijun* during the war. As various scholars have noted, the categories of bandits and soldiers were fluid.<sup>104</sup> *Wei Rijun* was no different. Local armed forces easily switched between categories depending on opportunities and benefits. They had fluid identities and allegiance.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Gordon Yiu Ming Chan, "The Communist Resistance Movement in War-Torn Guangdong, China, 1937–1945" (PhD diss., University of London, 2001), 2.

<sup>101</sup> The literal translation of 偽 is counterfeit, but "puppet" is the usual English term used in translating *wei Rijun* (偽日軍). "Counterfeit," a more accurate translation, commonly found in CCP produced gazetteers, shows contempt for collaborators who worked for and mimicked the national enemy. This black and white distinction of loyalty and traitorous positions is consistent with the CCP narrative.

<sup>102</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 13.

<sup>103</sup> Conversation. Lin Y, 2005.

<sup>104</sup> Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China*, 154. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China*, 94–95; He, "盗匪与地方社会" (Bandits and local communities), 110–111; Weiting Guo, "The Speed of Justice: Summary Execution and Legal Culture in Qing Dynasty China, 1644–1912" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2016), 6.



During the Resistance War, the invading Japanese soldiers and their collaborationist troops endangered the villagers. Contrary to gazetteers and *wenshi ziliao*'s depiction of locals' valiant resistance, my interviewees fled the aggressors and tried to survive starvation and destitution. Interviewees did not mention any government intervention.

After the Japanese exited Taishan and Kaiping, banditry returned. The end of the war did not necessarily mean better lives for the villagers, there were just different sets of challenges. After the Japanese surrender at the end of 1945, mail services resumed between China and overseas. The influx of overseas money and goods into the counties changed the dynamics within community groups. When wealth is not distributed evenly in a community, conflict and crime arise between the haves and have nots. Sociologists Judith R. Blau and Peter M. Blau argue that economic inequalities generally increases rates of criminal violence.<sup>105</sup> This was the case in Kaiping and Taishan after the war. Overseas households suddenly got relief thanks to remittances, but non-overseas households and other impoverished villagers did not. The have-nots wanted access to money to alleviate their poverty, too. The most direct way was to take it from the haves.

Interviewees witnessed an increase in banditry, robberies, and burglaries. Bandits in groups of twenty to thirty targeted shops in markets. For example, interviewees from different villages and at separate occasions experienced school lockdowns because bandits were robbing gold shops and gunfights were unfolding outside their schools. After the commotions died down, they could leave their schools and they saw corpses of bandits and townpeople in the aftermath.<sup>106</sup> In another example, an interviewee recalled an instance of robbers snatching gold jewelry from a marriage procession passing through the market place.<sup>107</sup> Shortly after the war, a wealthy overseas returnee went back to Kaiping to get married. He paid the bride's family handsomely. On the wedding day, the bride attached her gold jewelry to the marriage sedan cover to display her wealth. As the procession wound through the market place, a gang of robbers ripped off the sedan cover with all the gold jewelry and ran off. Siyi counties were notorious for hosting extravagant weddings because of their rich remittances before the war. In

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<sup>105</sup> Judith R. Blau and Peter M. Blau, "The Cost of Inequality: Metropolitan Structure and Violent Crime," *American Sociological Review* 47, no. 1 (February 1982): 114–29.

<sup>106</sup> Interview. Chow TW, July 31, 2019. Wong XY, July 30, August 2, 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Interview. Chow TW, July 31, 2019.

1909, families would spend from five hundred to two thousand daiyang<sup>108</sup> for a wedding.<sup>109</sup> However, this flagrant display of wealth at a time when many were still impoverished attracted a robbery. Bandits targeted easy prey such as market shops and people displaying wealth. They also targeted overseas remittances. The following story show how an interviewee helped her mother fight off a burglar at night when he caught wind they received a remittance earlier that day.

Wong B's mother was closing up the home's windows for the night when a burglar grabbed her arm from outside the window.<sup>110</sup> The mother, startled but still retaining her wits, yelled out to her daughter to bring over a cleaver to chop off the intruder's hand. The three struggled and created a lot of commotion. Their next door neighbour heard it all, fired a couple of shots in the sky with a pistol, and scared off the burglar. It was later discovered that during the day, someone was asking around if Wong B's family received remittances. Unfortunately, Wong B's relative, who was not very bright, said they received a large amount, which led the burglar to their home that night. In this instance, the mother, daughter, and the neighbour drove off the burglar. When I asked Wong B if she reported the instance to the police at the time, she dismissed my apparently ridiculous question and said there was no such thing as police in the village. Villagers looked out for themselves. Another interviewee told me that police did not exist in villages or even in marketplaces. Police were stationed in bigger commercial county towns like Chikhan. State public security institutions did not reach rural Taishan and Kaiping and did not impact villagers' lives after the war.

The rural leaders were supposed to rule over villagers and provide them security protection via the public office (公局) with its militia.<sup>111</sup> That might have been possible before the war; however, during the war, the Japanese army easily overpowered the local militia. Many rural ruling elites fled and abandoned the peasants. The ones who remained either voluntarily or

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<sup>108</sup> The construction of a two-storied *diaolo* cost two thousand daiyang in the 1920s according to Fong C. Interview. September 15, 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Ran Yanjie, “乡村‘文明结婚’:民国时期广东台山婚礼的变化” (Village “civilized marriages”: Changes in early Republican Guangdong Taishan weddings), *Wuyi daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 19, no. 1 (February 2017): 15.

<sup>110</sup> Interview. Wong B, August 9, 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Qiu, “民国初年广东乡村的基层权力机构” (Grassroots authority of early Republican rural Guangdong), 89.

involuntarily collaborated with the invaders by supplying them girls for military brothels and young men for slave labour.<sup>112</sup> The grassroots mistrusted the elites after the war because of the elites' wartime abandonment and collaboration with the Japanese.

Villagers might not have turned to state officials or rural leaders to solve their security problems but they consistently turned to overseas Chinese. Local magazines and newspaper like *Xinning Magazine* (新寧雜誌), *Taishan Magazine* (台山雜誌) and *Siyi Overseas Newspaper* (四邑僑報) published many articles about increased violent bandit attacks on and kidnappings of overseas families after the war.<sup>113</sup> These articles, written for the purpose of asking for money from overseas Chinese working in the US and Canada for bandit suppression in the counties, appealed to the emigrants' home village connections, often used the phrase "love and protection of home village." The use of "love of country" appeared after 1946 but still was not as frequent as "love and protection of home village." Instead of depending on government authorities for assistance in law enforcement, the families appealed to overseas Chinese to fundraise for bandit suppression. Funds were used to hire soldiers and purchase weaponry. Villagers sent letters, local newspapers, magazines, as well as official gentries and elites to lobby for money from overseas Chinese working in Hong Kong and abroad.<sup>114</sup> Reliance on overseas Chinese and not on government authorities to deal with bandits was a continuity since imperial times. Home villages put more importance on their overseas clansmen than on the government.

Bandits shifted from a major threat before the war, to what appeared to be an abrupt disappearance during the war, then returned after the war. When the Japanese invaded the counties, bandits did not disappear. Their self-serving characteristics strongly suggest that they worked under the Japanese armed forces as collaborationist troops. Postwar bandits could have been decommissioned *wei Rijun* after the Japanese left the counties. Villagers rarely depended on the government for assistance. They relied on themselves, neighbours, clansmen, overseas Chinese, and mutual aid societies when dealing with bandits. Villagers turned to overseas Chinese, people with local roots, for help in fighting the bandits.

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<sup>112</sup> Lary, *Chinese People at War*, 197.

<sup>113</sup> Chao, "民国广东四邑侨乡匪患与华侨护乡" (Republican Guangdong Siyi overseas village banditry problems and overseas Chinese protection of home villages), 3; Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 124–155.

<sup>114</sup> Chao, "民国广东四邑侨乡匪患与华侨护乡" (Republican Guangdong Siyi overseas village banditry problems and overseas Chinese protection of home villages), 2.

## Chapter 4. Japanese Aggression and Collaborators

The Japanese invaded Taishan in December 1937 and Kaiping in 1938<sup>115</sup> and remained in the counties for the duration of the war. Troops were stationed in Taishan's Shangchuan island and Kaiping's countryside.<sup>116</sup> The invading Japanese armed forces dominated resistance and replaced local armed groups as the main direct immediate danger for Kaiping and Taishan villagers for the eight years of Resistance War. Diana Lary's talk of China's brutal and humiliating defeats in the war galvanizing people's nationalism and patriotism was not apparent in Siyi villages.<sup>117</sup> Interviewees mainly described enduring destitution, surviving starvation, and fleeing the Japanese armed forces. Their responses also contradicted postwar CCP literature like gazetteers and *wenshi ziliao* which emphasize villagers' resistance and heroic deeds during this period. Unlike Poshek Fu's urban intellectuals who struggled between patriotism and passivity or collaboration for family survival, the Siyi rural grassroots did not display the same dilemma. The counties had some government-organized resistance groups but they were not active in the villages. Under the external threat of Japanese aggression and no internal government protection, the villagers' responses ranged from resistance, avoidance, acquiescence, and collaboration.

The Japanese troops bombed, murdered, raped, maimed, burned and pillaged the counties.<sup>118</sup> Japanese planes bombed Taishan almost every month between October 1937 to February 1943, killing civilians and destroying properties.<sup>119</sup> Their atrocities committed in the counties were similar to the ones committed in Nanjing.<sup>120</sup> Chinese collaborationist armed forces or *wei Rijun* were also involved. Villagers, young, old, male and female were at risk in the presence of the Japanese and collaborationist troops. Male villagers were injured or killed.

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<sup>115</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 12. Seto Xing, 开平县志 (Kaiping gazetteer) (Beijing: Beijing zhonghua shuju, 2002), <https://baike.baidu.com/item/开平县志>.

<sup>116</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 13. Japanese troops were also stationed on a nearby hill next to Fong C's home village Kaiping. Interview. Fong C, May 26, 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Lary, *Chinese People at War*, 20.

<sup>118</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 225–226.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Shushi Hsü, "Documents of the Nanking Safety Zone," *Political and Economic Studies* 7 (1939): 9–11, 28–48, 54–56, 61–65.

Gazetteers recorded that young girls from twelve to grandmothers of seventy were raped and killed. Mothers with babies were not spared.<sup>121</sup> Japanese armed forces did not discriminate when attacking the counties' residents.

After raids, people were forced to be coolies to carry loot to the troops' destinations. After Taicheng fell on March 3, 1941, the Japanese troops forced over a thousand people to transport loot a great distance to their army boats.<sup>122</sup> These forced porters were not limited to young fit people. Grandmothers were at risk too. During a raid in Qilongma village in Kaiping, two old grandmothers hid in the long grass by the edge of the fields. They waited for some time. Then one who was hard of hearing asked her companion loudly if the troops had left. Unfortunately, her blaring questions gave away their location and they were "recruited" to carry sacks of rice for the soldiers.<sup>123</sup> After the grandmothers loaded the rice onto boats docked along the nearby river, they were allowed to leave. The grandmothers were forced to be coolies but they were not killed or maimed. Like most stories shared by other interviewees, their encounters were not usually gruesome or violent compared with gazetteer records or Lary's account of the Japanese armed forces behaving with awful brutality.<sup>124</sup> The grandmothers were lucky that they were not in the path of an atrocity-inflicting mission. The Japanese armed forces likely unleashed atrocities when they deemed them strategically beneficial. Extreme brutality was used initially to ensure acquiescence from the locals, as seen in the fall of Taicheng. The Japanese army's brutal reputation preceded them and the news of their approach triggered evacuations of entire villages. Overseas villages consisting of mostly women, the elderly, and young children preferred evasion over resistance against the Japanese raiding army.

Fleeing the Japanese was a regular activity during the war. The Siyi locals had a specific term for it: *zou Riben* (走日本). Villagers hid in the mountains or fields at the news of their approach. Some villagers who had the money and connections fled further. They migrated to Macau or Hong Kong when the Japanese first invaded the counties in 1937. However, when

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<sup>121</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 224–225.

<sup>122</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 225.

<sup>123</sup> Interview. Fong C, May 26, 2019. Fong C's grandmother was the one with the good hearing.

<sup>124</sup> Lary, *Chinese People at War*, 46.

Hong Kong fell in 1942, many villagers rushed back to the counties.<sup>125</sup> Some older interviewees had multiple *zou Riben* experiences. The following story illustrates how *zou Riben* was psychologically, physically, and financially exhausting.

Fong C and his village, Qilongma, fled the Japanese four times; however, the troops raided their homes only once. The villagers' anxiety stemmed from the proximity of the Japanese army. A small division was stationed on Wok Lid Hill (鑊蓋山), across the river from the village. The villagers fled at the news that the Japanese troops were on the move. During their first *zou Riben*, Fong C and his family trekked through mountains to stay with relatives some distance away near Four Nine marketplace (四九墟).<sup>126</sup> The family left their home in the morning and returned by nightfall. Their home was not raided this time but the experience disturbed the villagers nevertheless.

After their first *zou Riben*, seven-year-old Fong C and his family left Kaiping on a multi-day boat ride to Macau and then Hong Kong to evade the Japanese in 1939. Fong C's paternal grandmother stayed behind in Qilongma to watch over the family property. Deliberate and inadvertent separation of family members were distressing and common in my interviewees' *zou Riben* stories. He, his mother, and two siblings left their comfortable two-storied *diaolo* in Kaiping to rent a one-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong for three years. The move was disruptive and financially costly. They settled in Hong Kong with the help of relatives and clansmen. Fong C and his family attempted a normal life. He and his siblings went to schools while living in Hong Kong. When Hong Kong fell in 1942, his family uprooted again and returned to Kaiping. They fled the Japanese two more times after their return between 1943 to 1945. Each time was a whole village event. During the third *zou Riben*, Fong C and his family went to their relatives near Four Nine marketplace again but found the relatives' village was being raided by the Japanese, too. By this time, the villagers had *zou Riben* fatigue. Escaping the Japanese seemed futile and they decided not to venture too far from their homes anymore. During the fourth *zou Riben*, the Japanese troops indeed raided Qilongma village. While troops

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<sup>125</sup> Seto Xing, 开平县志 (Kaiping gazetteer).

<sup>126</sup> The four and nine in the 四九墟 marketplace denotes that the market opened on the fourth and ninth day of each lunar month. See Woon, *Social Organization in South China*. See G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China: Part I," *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (November 1964).

plundered their homes, villagers stayed in the nearby Tangkou marketplace and monitored the troops' activity in their village. They waited until the Japanese troops' departure before returning home.

Fong C and his village did not resist the Japanese aggressors but fled multiple times. Fong C's story is not unique. All my interviewees shared similar *zou Riben* stories. Survival was the villagers' priority, not resisting foreign invaders for the love of the country. The Government did not assist villagers in their times of need. Based on the government's past non-engagement, the villagers would not have expected any assistance. However, the villagers relied on themselves and could count on their relatives and clansmen. Patriotism, nationalism, and loving the country was not a priority.

Although villagers preferred fleeing the Japanese troops, there were some instances of resistance. A powerful external security threat like the Japanese army could galvanize cooperation between villages to resist. Intervillage cooperation against the Japanese at the time did not arise out of nationalism but from local loyalty. CCP-produced *wenshi ziliao* often imposed nationalistic narratives on local history. For example, the popular local history of seven brave militiamen from different villages who perished in defence of Kaiping against the Japanese troops was framed with strong nationalism. "Their selfless deaths induced the county people's love for their home and love for their country."<sup>127</sup> The villagers' desire to love and protect their immediate homes is understandable, but they might not have felt the same way about their country. During the war years, a resist-the-Japanese song, "On the Songhua River" (松花江上),<sup>128</sup> was taught in elementary schools in Taishan and Kaiping. This song made quite an impression on some interviewees after seventy years as some of them can still sing parts of the chorus today! In 1939, Fong C was singing Upon the Songhua River in his grade one elementary school. He remembered that his teacher talked a lot about "strike down the Japanese invaders," but did not mention anything about patriotism.<sup>129</sup> School children were taught to resist and protect one's home against foreign threats. Nationalist indoctrination would come later.

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<sup>127</sup> Seto and Tse, "七士守南楼" (Seven martyrs guarding the southern tower), 46.

<sup>128</sup> [On the Songhua River \(松花江上\)](#)

<sup>129</sup> Interview. Fong C, August 15, 2020.

Every interviewee shared *zou Riben* stories but only one had a resistance story. Chow TW recalled his village militia joining forces with a Wong village across the river to resist Japanese soldiers. Prior to the war, the Chow and Wong villages were neither friendly nor hostile toward each other. However, the war united them to fight against a common security threat. The militias set up antiquated cannons, stuffed miscellaneous items in them, and fired at the Japanese boats travelling down their river. The Japanese boats stopped and soldiers scampered on land to hide in nearby bamboo groves. Firing at the Japanese boats with no coherent follow-up moves was not a good idea. The unamused Japanese soldiers killed one of the militia members and searched for more. Their search led them into the Chows' village, Gaoqi (高溪), where they pillaged. The villagers dispersed and fled as the soldiers approached. They hid in the mountainous graveyards that night to avoid Japanese retaliation. This incident shows that villagers had the urgency to defend their homes in any ways they could, but they lacked coordination or plans. Their effort did not receive support from any political parties or government authorities. Furthermore, continuing the trend of localized and self-reliant defence, the villages' cooperative resistance with previously non-collaborative groups was not necessarily for nationalistic reasons as argued by Diana Lary, but for the basic self-preservation against a common external threat at a local level.

Besides resisting or fleeing, villagers could collaborate with the Japanese aggressors as a survival tactic. Collaborationist soldiers were active in raiding the villages. There were many instances of village braves battling collaborationist soldiers. Records show that on October 10, 1943, about seven hundred collaborationist troops were about to raid Baishui township but were ambushed by its militia. A fierce battle ensued. With the reinforcement of KMT soldiers, the collaborationist troop was beaten and retreated. In that battle, two Japanese officers and about forty collaborationist soldiers were killed.<sup>130</sup> The *wei Rijun* also mutilated villagers during raids. Japanese soldiers and collaborationist troops in groups of three to five often raped and pillaged the locals.<sup>131</sup> Chinese collaborationist soldiers were just as dangerous to the Siyi villagers as the Japanese soldiers.

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<sup>130</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 223–224.

<sup>131</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 225.



Official records show many collaboration activities in the counties; however, my interviewees did not offer any information about their families or their neighbours' involvement with the Japanese occupiers. Admittedly, Japanese armed forces mostly occupied major urban centres and railway lines;<sup>132</sup> therefore, urbanites had more opportunities for intimate and blatant collaboration with the occupiers compared with rural grassroots. Nevertheless, there must have been different degrees of collaboration because the counties' citizens lived through over eight years of Japanese occupation and under the Chen Bijun collaborator government.<sup>133</sup> Collaboration could range from passive adherence to the occupiers' rules to outright working for them to oppress the local population. Obvious wartime collaborationists or traitors were hunted down then jailed or executed postwar.<sup>134</sup> Those labeled as traitors and collaborators were scorned in the postwar nationalistic narrative by both KMT and CCP. As Dongyoung Hwang puts it, "Punishing the collaborators was a necessary step to re-establish national discipline and dignity, and finally to build a new nation."<sup>135</sup> My interviewees who lived through both administrations, understandably would not have admitted it even if they or their kin had collaborated. Most of their experiences demonstrated passive adherence to the Japanese occupation. They did not view their actions as collaboration.

The Japanese armed forces strategically used local collaborationist troops (偽日軍), and a collaborationist government (偽政府) to maintain local control. However, collaborators were not always loyal. On April 16, 1942, collaborationist troops stationed in Shangchuan, Taishan staged a coup and overtook the Japanese command headquarters. The mutinied collaborationist troops surrendered to the resistance side with their weapons and were welcomed.<sup>136</sup> There was no official explanation why the collaborators switched sides. Certainly, the collaborators did not show any nationalism when they helped the invading Japanese and committed atrocities against the locals. Their non-committal nature suggested self-serving reasons. Collaborators' actions resembled those of opportunistic bandits of the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>132</sup> Lary, *Chinese People at War*, 46.

<sup>133</sup> Yick, "Self-Serving Collaboration," 217.

<sup>134</sup> Dongyoun Hwang, "Wartime Collaboration in Question: An Examination of the Postwar Trials of the Chinese Collaborators," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005).

<sup>135</sup> Hwang, "Wartime Collaboration in Question," 75.

<sup>136</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 13.

*Wenshi ziliao* war stories were collected from victors and victims of the war and framed with a nationalistic narrative. In these stories, collaborators were viewed as one-dimensional evil traitors committing crimes against the counties' people, homes and the country. They were not viewed as a part of the citizenry who were surviving the war. Collaborators ended up on the losing side of the war. If the Japanese had won the war, they would be presented in a different way.

CCP-affiliated literature may emphasize villagers' valiant nationalistic effort in resisting the Japanese armed forces; however, the villagers' responses did not fit neatly into this nationalistic framework. Although there was some resistance, most villagers fled and some likely collaborated. The villagers' priority was to survive during the war.

## Chapter 5. Famine and Starvation

Surviving starvation was another priority for villagers during the war. County residents faced massive food shortages in the counties at this time. Their coping strategies did not involve government interventions. The shortage was caused by drought, constant Japanese food requisition, as well as a trade and mail blockade. Wealthy and poor families had different survival tactics. To cope with food scarcity, interviewees revealed survival tactics like selling their valuables, reducing the number of mouths to feed in the household by sending away servants, abandoning or selling children, theft, and perhaps even cannibalism.

Interviewees talked of many county residents who starved to death because of the Japanese invasion.<sup>137</sup> In 1938, Taishan had a population of 885,300. In 1943, the famine killed or drove out 150,000 or one-fifth of Taishan's population.<sup>138</sup> Villagers' food supplies were significantly reduced by the Japanese troops' regular plundering. Japanese forces demanded daily rice and weekly livestock submissions from townships near their command stations like the county capital Taicheng. When nearby food resources were depleted, they raided more villages in groups of forty to sixty. The Japanese troops pillaged food like rice, chickens, pigs and valuables.<sup>139</sup> Interviewees fled their homes at the news of approaching raiding troops and upon their return, they reported missing food and valuable items, destroyed front doors and properties.<sup>140</sup> Food imports and overseas remittances were blocked during the Resistance War. Overseas families who relied on remittances to buy food had neither to sustain themselves. Many overseas villagers had little to no food reserves due to their habit of buying food and not growing it. The sudden influx of returning residents from Hong Kong after it fell to the Japanese in 1942 and the subsequent massive drought in 1943 exacerbated the famine. After Hong Kong fell to Japan in 1942, over ten thousand former residents rushed back to Kaiping, straining the already food-scarce county. The drought in 1943 pushed Kaiping to purchase grains from neighbouring

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<sup>137</sup> Seto Xing, 开平县志 (Kaiping gazetteer).

<sup>138</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 129.

<sup>139</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 13.

<sup>140</sup> Interviews. Fong C, August 15, 2019. Chow TW, July 31, 2019.

counties and set up congee stations to relieve the famine in townships.<sup>141</sup> However, these congee stations did not seem to have benefited villages. My interviewees, who were children at the time, never heard of them. Instead they remembered picking herbs like Large Chipped Bowl (礮大碗) and Old River Roots (老江根) off hillsides and field edges to supplement their meals.<sup>142</sup> Villages were left to fend for themselves.

Wealthier overseas families sold anything of value for food. Fong C recalled his mother selling her fancy clothes and eventually their family firearms to buy food. Finally, they sent their chattel maidservant back home to reduce the number of hungry people in the household. Wealthier families did not abandon or sell their children in times of food scarcity.

Poorer families who did not have many valuables to begin with resorted to theft, abandoning or selling their children. Food scarcity led to impoverished conditions which brought out many social problems that threatened the safety and security of the poor and the young. For instance, watchmen were hired to protect the villages and guard against crop theft, but they were not necessarily reliable performing their duties. In wartime when food was scarce, they could become crop thieves themselves.

One of the Qilongma village watchmen, Fong ZL, was young and his wife lived with him in the watchtower. They were originally from a nearby Fong village in the region. As the saying goes, people sharing the same last name are three parts related (同姓三分親). His shared last name with Qilongma villagers offered a bond of trust and kinship. This helped get him hired. His two to three *mu* of field did not produce enough food for him and his family. Fong ZL and his wife made what must have been the difficult decision to abandon their nursing infant. They left the baby at a fork road leading to the Tangkou market one morning. In the afternoon, the baby was gone. No one in the village knew what happened to the baby but everyone knew of the incident. To make ends meet, Fong ZL resorted to stealing the villagers' crops. One night, he was caught stealing a villager's yams in the field. He was quickly dismissed from the watchman post and returned to his old village with his wife.

The young watchman's story illustrates how food scarcity deteriorated public security and the sense of security even within one's family. A guard who was supposed to guard against

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<sup>141</sup> Seto Xing, 开平县志 (Kaiping gazetteer).

<sup>142</sup> Interviews. Wong XY, July 30, 2019; Wong BX, August 9, 2019; Wong LS, August 9, 2019.

theft became a thief. A child who was supposed to be protected and nurtured by his or her parents was abandoned. As well, the story shows how poor people coped with food scarcity. The coping options of thievery and child abandonment were not uncommon. Many poor villagers abandoned or sold their children or risked starvation. My interviewees witnessed many abandoned children in temples and along market streets during the war. In February 1945, Taishan's Siyi International Relief Association (四邑國際救濟會) took in numerous begging children in the counties.<sup>143</sup> Orphaned begging children were not all caused by parental abandonment, they were also orphaned because their parents perished during the war. Overseas Chinese from the Americas actively funded and established relief associations, sometimes with provincial authorities, to assist suffering Siyi villagers during the war. However, relief funds raised by overseas Chinese did not always reach their intended audience and were lost during transfers between government departments.<sup>144</sup> While overseas Chinese tried to help their home villages, corrupt or incompetent government authorities were an obstacle to the villagers in need of receiving aid. To the Taishan and Kaiping villagers, kin and clansmen were reliable and the government was not.

People heard of cannibalism during famines and extreme food shortages, but no interviewees admitted to participating in it. With the ongoing war, the occasional droughts, and subsequent famine, cannibalism stories were not uncommon according to interviewees. Although many interviewees claimed to have heard of cannibalism stories, they never admitted to eating any human flesh. As children, they may not have realized what type of meat they ate if their parents or adult caregivers never told them. Chow TW of Gaoqi village, Kaiping recounted a familiar childhood story. One day a husband brought home some supposed “dog” meat. The wife cooked it. As they ate, she commented on how good it tasted. He said, “Of course it is delicious, it was a rice eater.” A rice eater implied a person. It was unclear who these rice eaters were, but one can assume they could be corpses or easy prey like children.

While living in Japanese occupied Hong Kong and under food shortage, Seto H's mother warned him not to play on the streets because little children would be killed in back alleys, and

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<sup>143</sup> Huang and Li, 台山县志 (Taishan gazetteer), 13.

<sup>144</sup> 华侨华人历史文献档案馆 (Overseas Chinese historical document archives), <http://www.zghqwx.com/zjxs.asp?whichpage=355>.

their meat would be harvested and sold for food. Although this story took place in Hong Kong, a city far from Siyi, children were known to disappear in Kaiping and Taishan markets. Villagers assumed they were kidnapped. No one knew where the children went. They could be sold into servitude, brothels, begging troupes, or performance troupes.<sup>145</sup> Or they might have been sold as food in times of extreme food shortage. Cannibalistic stories served as cautionary tales to keep children safe. Their circulation reflected the population's general fear for the children's safety at this time.

Famine and starvation devastated the rural population during the war. People's desperation reduced them to abandoning their children and stealing or killing for food. The Resistance War's mail and trade blockade isolated the villagers. The connection to their usual provider and protector, their kin and clansmen abroad, was shut down. The consequences of this disruption drove the villagers to desperate survival tactics. Food was the major concern for the rural population. Resistance and patriotism during wartime were not applicable to the Taishan and Kaiping rural population when they were starving.

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<sup>145</sup> Joanna S. Ransmeier, *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 141–44.

## Chapter 6. Traditional Gender Roles

In 1949, nine-year-old Ng S was left behind alone in her village home while her pregnant mother went to Guangzhou City to give birth to her fourth child and to live with Ng S's father. Ng S was abandoned because a fortune teller claimed her birthdate overpowered her brothers' survivability. Having lost two sons already, the mother distanced herself from Ng S as her fourth child's due date approached. She moved 133 kilometres away to Guangzhou until Ng S married and left the village house, some ten years later. The tradition of the sons carrying on the family name generated far-reaching consequences such as kin rivalries that tormented adults, especially the women, and endangered boys and girls.

Threats posed by traditional gender roles were important in overseas villages composed of mainly women and children. Boys were more valued because they could carry on the surnames of any family, including families into which they were not born. Girls, on the other hand, were more dispensable and played supporting roles to the males in their families. Danger within the home caused by this tradition between 1937 and 1949 did not fit neatly into the government's nationalistic narrative and therefore did not get coverage from official documents like gazetteers and were not mentioned in *wenshi ziliao*. The tradition of boys carrying on the family name, gender, and the family's wealth level created different vulnerability for children before during prewar, wartime, and postwar. Children could be abandoned, sold, or killed for various reasons.

In Kaiping and Taishan counties, sold boys commanded higher prices than sold girls because boys had the monumental role of propagating the lineage whereas girls were typically sold into servitude or prostitution for their lesser-valued labour.<sup>146</sup> Fong C's male cousin, Fong Y, was purchased into the Fong family as a boy and subsequently established a big family. Fong Y's branch of the family enjoyed the same remittance benefits and privileges as any biological Fong son. Wealthy families without any male heirs often bought boys to be their sons to carry on their family names, thus establishing the families' places in the ancestral hall. Buying boys was common in overseas villages where productive men were abroad and not available to make babies. Families with sons could light their family lamps in the ancestral hall every first and fifteenth of the month and received ritual pork during the Spring and Autumn Rites and other

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<sup>146</sup> Including child brides. Ransmeier, *Sold People*, 139, 253.

festivities.<sup>147</sup> Families with more sons received more pork. This rule also applied to inheritances and remittances. Families with no sons, especially the wives, were stigmatized and often felt pressured to produce male heirs. Sons equaled social acceptance and status. The social pressure of birthing a son, especially when the husband was around to procreate, and ensuring the son's survivability drove Ng S's mother to abandon her at the age of nine.<sup>148</sup>

Ng S had an older and a younger brother but they all died when she was six years old in 1947. Her firstborn older brother died in 1936 when he was only one month old. He was the unfortunate target of sibling rivalry between her father and his older brother. Sibling rivalries amongst brothers can become deadly in wealthy households when adult brothers compete over family assets like land, houses, servants and remittances. On her older brother's one month celebration,<sup>149</sup> Ng S's uncle, Ng YB, under the pretence of enhancing the celebratory mood, fired a revolver toward the sky while standing near the baby. The tremendous noise shocked and killed the baby. Ng S's mother was devastated but she had no recourse against the uncle. Ng YB was not only a bully in the family but also a bully in the village. Because Ng YB was the older son, he controlled much of the family assets, seized all the fertile fields, servants, and nice houses, leaving the less desirable ones to his younger brother, Ng S's father. When Ng S's mother first married into the household, Ng YB demonstrated his higher rank by slapping her in the face in public. He could humiliate his younger brother's wife just because he was the older brother. With his wealth, Ng YB manipulated the village bidding process to monopolize the right to raise fish in the village pond. He had a lecherous reputation and new brides to the village complained about his voyeurism at the outhouses. The villagers feared and hated Ng YB but were not able to even the score until the Land Reform of 1952 when they took his land and broke his legs. Like intervillage feuds that did not dissipate with time, oppression from the village bully was not easily forgotten. The tradition of sons continuing the lineage also did not easily disappear from the villagers' collective consciousness. The Resistance War was only a distraction. Unless there

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<sup>147</sup> Woon, *Social Organization in South China*, 25. This fact was also confirmed by Fong CK of Kaiping. Interview. Oct. 16, 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Ng S's mother did not buy sons because the father did not go overseas to work and remained in and around the village.

<sup>149</sup> The month celebration is the debut of a child which involves shaving his head and announcing his name to relatives and friends followed by a banquet. It is an important and big celebration.



was a fundamental eradication of a tradition either through people's conscious abandonment or state sponsorship with the people's buy-in, the old ways resumed after the distraction passed.

After the Resistance War, the traditional importance placed on sons prevailed. Daughters continued being relegated to supporting roles. Sons were nurtured at a cost to the daughters' well-being. In 1946, Ng S stopped her first-grade schooling because her younger brother was born and she had to stay home to care for him. However, the younger brother died of a childhood disease a year later. Ng S's mother was again devastated. Since the sons' death, the mother's sadness was often exacerbated after attending ancestral hall festivities and rituals. Her mother's quest to ensure that the next son would survive drove her to have Ng S's fortune examined by a fortuneteller. The fortuneteller revealed that Ng S's birthdate was incompatible with any of her brothers, and her mere existence would harm future ones. She had a *touding jiao cai* (頭頂腳踩) birthdate against her brothers. *Touding jiao cai* means that she would push against brothers who preceded her and would stomp on the ones who followed. After learning this revelation and fearful of losing another possible son, the mother avoided Ng S like the plague while pregnant with her fourth child. She left Ng S alone in the village home at the age of nine while she moved to the city of Guangzhou with her husband. She delivered a baby girl in the city. It was another five years before she finally birthed a son. Ng S's younger siblings had their parents' care and attention while she remained alone in the village. Ng S especially missed her mother when she was ill and scared of the dark when her devious neighbour frightened her with ghost stories living in her house. The neighbour sold the house to Ng S's mother to pay for a gambling debt and wanted to reclaim it ever since. The mother visited Ng S occasionally over the years in the village. Ng S learned to fend for herself at a young age but showed apparent negative effects of childhood abandonment like depression, anxiety, lack of trust in others, and a strong need for self-validation. She never forgave her mother and had a very cold relationship with her.

Ng S's mother was not an uncaring parent. The mother carried the then three-year-old Ng S on her back as they fled invading Japanese troops in 1944. Ng S was not one of the numerous abandoned children during the war. She was cared for by her mother at that time. Unlike poor families, Ng S's wealthy family abandoned her not out of destitution but for social reasons and based on folk beliefs. Ng S's mother was a victim of the social pressure of the time; however, her actions to pursue conformity victimized her daughter. Ng S's mother might have believed the only way to ensure her son's viability was to avoid Ng S; however, it was at the cost of her eldest

daughter's emotional and mental well-being. Furthermore, from the mother's perspective, Ng S was left behind to guard the village family home, a traditional role for women in overseas villages. Women were to stay behind in the village to guard over the family assets while men inherited the family property and propagated the family names. From Ng S's perspective, she was abandoned at an especially young age. Ng S's story demonstrates that family dynamics in wealthy households were fraught with sibling hierarchy, rivalries, and traditionally designated gender roles.

Women could be victims under the oppressive social construct of gender roles, but some demonstrated agency and leadership within their constrained roles. Ng S's mother was a victim of her social expectations, but she was also a shrewd resource manager. With the remittances, she hired labourers to farm the family land, invested in houses and land, and maintained food in the household even at times of famine. Ng S never experienced hunger in her childhood.<sup>150</sup> Historians and interviewees reported left-behind wives in Kaiping as de facto heads of their households.<sup>151</sup> Left-behind wives were not passive and dependent on their husbands abroad. In addition to managing family resources, they also pursued personal welfare as seen in adultery cases described in Shelly Chan's research.<sup>152</sup>

Boys and girls in poor families faced different security risks from those of wealthier families. Their well-being depended on how their mothers navigated their social environment. A wealthy mother's survival tactics differed from those of a poor mother. While Ng S's mother chose to abandon her because of social pressure and folk beliefs, Wong LS's mother chose to sell a son after careful calculation to benefit the whole family. The Wong family got more money selling the son instead of the daughter, which allowed them to survive destitution. Another plausible motivation for the mother to sell a son was that the family already had two other sons to carry on the Wongs family name. With three sons and only one daughter, perhaps she could part with a boy. The mother's decision to sell the younger son was calculated and not only caused by poverty. According to police reports, court filings, and gazetteer accounts, the

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<sup>150</sup> Interview. Ng S, July 5, 2019.

<sup>151</sup> Woon, *Social Organization in South China*; Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*. Fong C's grandmother was the matriarch in his household. Interview. Fong C, July 10, 2019.

<sup>152</sup> Chan, *Diaspora's Homeland*, 125, 129, 131.

commonly-cited justification of crimes was a lack of choices due to destitution.<sup>153</sup> However, Wong LS's mother demonstrated that poor families had options within the limitations of poverty. She weighed her children's best possible well-being as well as maximizing the value of the transaction for the family. Compared with abandoning a child, selling a child could be a calculated strategy that benefited the whole family, including the sold child. Wong LS was grateful for her mother's decision not to sell her and developed a strong bond with her mother. Amazingly, the Wong family kept in contact with the younger brother all along. Today, Wong LS lives in Vancouver and her younger brother lives in Toronto. But, Ng S did not forgive her mother, even after the mother's death.

The desperation of Ng S's mother to acquire a son was shared by other overseas village women as well. Overseas village women often could not have children because their absent husbands were working overseas and sometimes never returned. Overseas village women often bought sons from poorer families to carry on the family names. After the war, when travel restrictions ended and remittances resumed in the counties, many overseas village women had passed their childbearing age. With their disposable income, the women must have had a shopping spree. An interviewee recalled suddenly having many newly purchased boys as neighbours in his village.

Chow TW lived in Gaoqi, an overseas village with most men working overseas and sending money to their families. His father went abroad before he was born, so he had never met him. Shortly after the war in 1946, the thirteen-year-old Chow TW noticed many of his neighbours had newly purchased sons. Because he had never met his father, he asked his mother if he was also purchased. His aunt quickly rectified his unfilial thoughts with a thorough scolding and pointed out his carbon copy likeness to his mother. Chow TW was one of the lucky children who was not sold, abandoned, neglected, starved to death, or eaten during the war.

Compared to adults, many village children of rich and poor families during the war and postwar lived precarious lives. Children did not have any agency in dealing with security threats in their environment. Girls were not as valued and were subjected to abandonment or neglect. Boys may have been valued but their safety was not guaranteed. Ng S's older brother was an example of how boys were seen as threats in sibling rivalry within wealthy families and targeted

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<sup>153</sup> Ma, *Runway Wives*. Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China*.

for elimination. Sold girls had tougher lives as servants or prostitutes. Sold boys in Siyi villages lived better lives. The same fate could not be said for boys trafficked to the cities.<sup>154</sup> The combinations of the tradition of sons carrying on the family name, the absence of males created by overseas households' survival strategy, and the effect of the Resistance War sustained the trafficking of boys in the Siyi villages. Adults had control over their security. Children did not. Boys and girls faced different security threats but boys generally had easier lives than girls.

The government did not interfere with village affairs too much, let alone with family issues such as traditional gender roles. On the other hand, the absence of men and the overseas remittances directly affected Siyi villagers' family composition. Traditional gender roles and how villagers coped with the consequences of this tradition shows that overseas connections were more impactful than the government and country.

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<sup>154</sup> In 1910s Beijing, boys were trafficked into opera or beggar troupes. When the children did not collect enough money from begging or through opera performances, they received harsh beatings from their handlers or masters. See Ransmeier, *Sold People*, 141–44.

## Conclusion

Taishan and Kaiping villagers displayed strong localism and not nationalism between 1937 and 1949. Their reliance on and connections with local actors were evident through their survival tactics in the face of various security threats during the prewar, wartime, and postwar periods.

In spite of the May Fourth movement in 1919 when intellectuals and revolutionaries advocated nationalism, the concept of loving China as a country was not yet widely apparent in the southern Guangdong countryside in the 1940s. Rural Guangdong did not have a history of attachment to the central government. The central administration did not engage with rural Guangdong and had relied on local elites to govern since imperial times. Although Chen Bijun established a collaborationist government in Guangzhou during the Resistance War, the Japanese did not fully control rural Guangdong, either.<sup>155</sup> During the Resistance War and the subsequent Civil War between the CCP and KMT between 1937 and 1949, the rural Guangdong population did not have strong ties to the country but valued local alliances. Faced with conflicts and security threats, villages did not engage too much with government authorities but relied on local connections for assistance. Particularly, villagers relied on overseas Chinese and their remittances for help in many ways. Overseas Chinese were important to Siyi villagers because of their financial support for social and economic development as well as assisting them in mitigating threats. The mail blockade during the war really devastated the counties because remittances had been their source of livelihood and protection. Overseas Chinese had local roots, were so connected to, and so actively participated in local issues that they should be considered local actors. Villagers' connections with local actors like neighbours, clansmen, allied villages, and overseas Chinese were stronger than their ties to the government and nation. The government organized resistance and hunger relief programs in county capitals and larger towns, but they did not reach the rural countryside to affect villagers' lives. The villagers' sense of localism was potent before 1949 and endured through various political movements after 1949.

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<sup>155</sup> Yick, "Self-Serving Collaboration," 228.

Even as recently as 2019, interviewees retained memories of pre-1949 feuds and displayed hesitancy about intermarriages between previously feuding clans.

The CCP selected stories that fit its nationalistic narrative, or imposed its nationalistic narrative onto historical events or people. For example, *wenshi ziliao* highlighted patriots who helped in the war effort and committed to rebuilding the postwar country. These people were often overseas merchants who might have some patriotism. However, patriotism may not have been their only motivation. Glen Peterson showed how overseas Chinese merchants' embrace of the nationalist discourse was a strategy to pursue profit in their native villages at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>156</sup> They also provided public works, disaster relief, and support for local education to exert political influence and establish control over public resources in native villages. Overseas merchants had strong motivations to claim patriotism. The grassroots rural population did not. Interviewees revealed that resisting the Japanese troops was not their priority during the war. Their priorities were to escape the Japanese troops and to survive food scarcity and danger posed by traditions during that time. According to the postwar nationalistic framework about the Resistance War, resisting was the ultimate patriotism and collaborating was the ultimate betrayal.<sup>157</sup> Because the villagers hardly resisted and mainly fled the invaders, they cannot be considered patriotic or nationalistic. However, the moral distinction of collaboration and resistance is an ahistorical concept that should not apply to rural Siyi villagers or anyone at the time. The villagers were just surviving as they had before, during, and after the Resistance War.

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<sup>156</sup> Peterson, "Overseas Chinese and Merchant Philanthropy in China," 104.

<sup>157</sup> Brook, *Collaboration*.

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## **Appendix. Illustrated Short Story**

The following short story illustrates the choices made by people of different socioeconomic levels in different locations during the Resistance War.

# CHOICES

Anna O. Fong - 2020

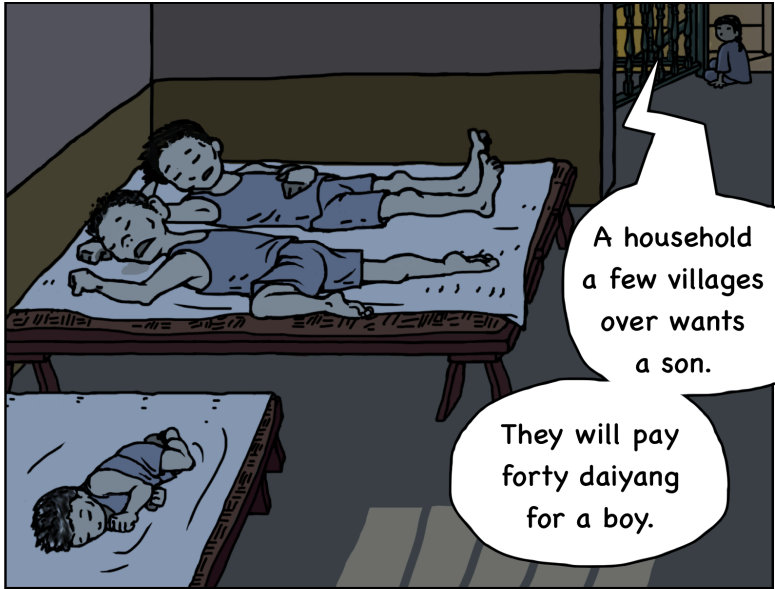


Changsha village, Kaiping. 1942.



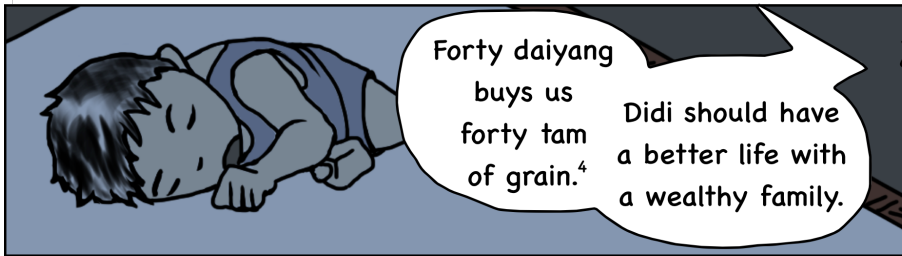


Servant girls have difficult lives.  
Selling didi may be better.



A household a few villages over wants a son.

They will pay forty daiyang for a boy.



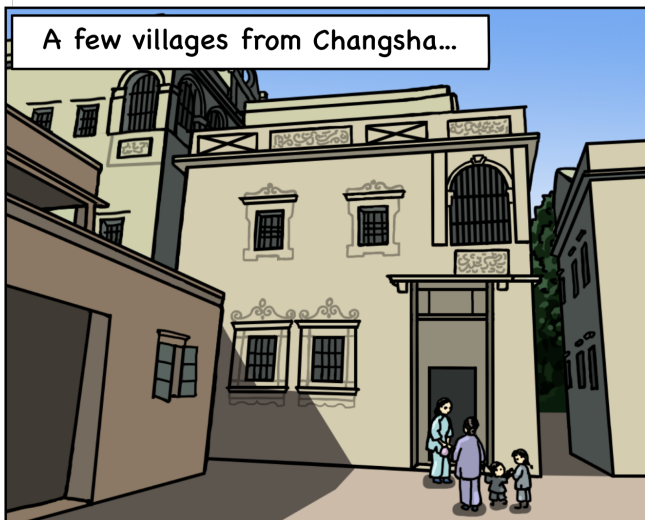
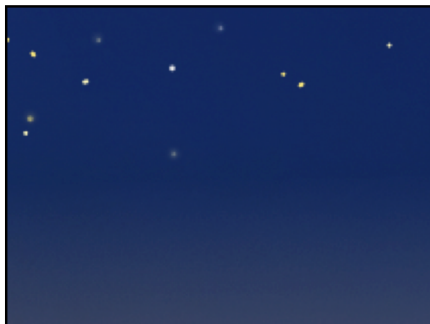
Forty daiyang buys us forty tam of grain.<sup>4</sup> Didi should have a better life with a wealthy family.



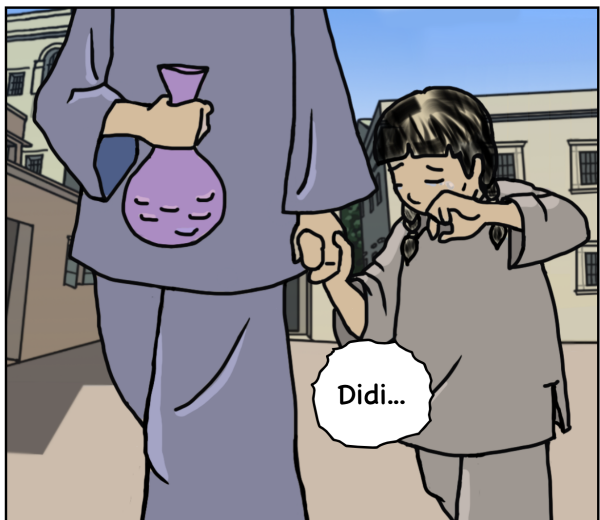
Cough!  
Cough!



Hmph!



A few villages from Changsha...



Didi...

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Poshek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 126.

<sup>2</sup> 1 tam = 133 $\frac{1}{3}$  lb.

<sup>3</sup> Interview. Wong LS, August 9, 2019, March 15, 2020. Wong LS was the nine-year-old mei mei in 1942.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Minguo silver dollar bought 1 tam of grain at the end of the Republican era. [Purchasing power of a daiyang in the 1940s.](#)