

Conclusion

In 1935, Shaanbei was China's last remaining soviet. The rural revolution did not begin there. Long before Liu Zhidan organized his first guerilla bands along the Shaanxi-Gansu border, Mao Zedong was building his revolutionary movement in southern Jiangxi. At its greatest extent in 1933, the Jiangxi soviet was larger, richer, and more populous than Shaan-Gan-Ning, even at its final size. Important aspects of the Communist revolutionary strategy—land reform, class struggle, guerilla warfare, the mass line—were first developed in Jiangxi.¹ In addition to Mao's Central Soviet, there were several smaller soviets in the hills of the Yangzi valley. But all these soviets failed while the Shaanbei soviet survived. Moreover, the Central Soviet in Jiangxi was not uniquely linked to Mao's leadership. After 1931, Mao Zedong was often in eclipse—his leadership in Jiangxi replaced by the party's Moscow-trained "Internationalist" wing. Mao returned to a leading position during the Long March, and by the time Edgar Snow interviewed him in Bao'an, he was clearly recognized as the leader of the party. Later, in Yan'an, Mao wrote the major essays of Mao Zedong Thought, worked out the strategy of the united front, successfully combined patriotic resistance to Japan with a class-based program to mobilize the poor, promoted self-sufficient development of a backward economy, and developed a model of party rectification that could discipline party members without destroying individual initiative. The Mao era began in Yan'an.

Only an accident of history made Shaanbei, and eventually Yan'an, the end point of the Long March and the wartime Communist Center. When the Red Army set out from Jiangxi, its destination was one of the other soviets to the west. Only after it failed to reach He Long's base in western Hunan and then broke with Zhang Guotao in Sichuan did Mao's column continue north with the intent of reaching the Soviet border to recuperate and receive assistance from the Communist International. The chance discovery of a newspaper report on Liu Zhidan's soviet in Shaanbei rerouted the march in that direction. The historian embarks at some peril on counter-factual considerations of "if history," but it is important to

acknowledge that there would have been no “Yan’an era” and the course of history would have been quite different if Mao had continued to the Soviet border.

As we know, Mao did not reach the Soviet (or Mongolian) border, and he did find refuge in the soviet that Liu Zhidan and his colleagues had so painfully built in Shaanbei. How that soviet was established is the subject of this book. We began our inquiry with a *longue durée* examination of the local history and geography of Shaanbei. An important theme was the manner in which local social structures were transformed by events whose origin lay elsewhere. This is a reminder that local history must not focus exclusively on the local: microhistory sometimes requires a macro lens. During the Ming dynasty, the court’s decision to construct and garrison the Great Wall across Shaanbei imposed significant burdens on the local economy and was one factor sparking the rebellions that led Shaanbei’s Li Zicheng to topple the dynasty in Beijing. That act brought the Manchus into the fray, and their Qing dynasty added Mongols to the ruling coalition, eliminating the need for the wall and introducing an era in which trade with Inner Mongolia in hides, fur, and horses brought two centuries of border peace to Shaanbei. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Sino-Muslim (Hui) Uprising began in the Wei River valley but was itself sparked by an incursion of Taiping rebels from the south. When the Hui were driven west into Gansu, they repeatedly sought to return to their homeland, bringing warfare and devastation to Shaanbei, especially along the Shaanxi-Gansu border and the region west and south of Yan’an. The result was a new socio-economic structure in Shaanbei with a more stable, developed political and cultural center in the northeast and a sparsely populated, migrant-settled, bandit-ridden, and militarized region along the Shaanxi-Gansu border and south of Yan’an. As a result of the Muslim Rebellion and the natural disasters that followed, Shaanbei entered the twentieth century with a new and highly unstable social ecology. The schools of the northeast nourished the early Communist Party, and the bandit-ridden Shaan-Gan border provided fertile grounds for a guerrilla movement.

After the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, political and economic conditions in the Northwest continued to deteriorate. Zuo Zongtang’s suppression of the Muslim Rebellion in the 1870s brought an army full of the Society of Brothers (Gelaohui). From that point forward, the Brothers were a powerful force in Shaanxi society, especially in its military. When the 1911 Revolution toppled the Qing, the Society of Brothers took the lead in Shaanxi, massacring Manchus in Xi’an and expanding their influence in many Shaanbei counties. Most observers attribute the spread of petty warlords and the rise of banditry to the influence of the Society of Brothers in 1911 and the new Republic’s vast expansion of the military. There was also a larger process. As Kenneth Pomeranz has argued, the modernizing state concentrated attention and resources in the coastal regions where the return on state and private investment was greatest. As a result, interior regions with underdeveloped transport were left behind and a new hinterland was created.² Shaanxi

was unquestionably such a region. While Xi'an had been China's capital and Guanzhong its cultural center in the ancient period, modern-day Shaanxi was a backwater.

As elsewhere in China, Shaanxi's Communist Party was founded by intellectuals. Its first members studied in the political and cultural center of Beijing, attracted by the New Culture movement's opposition to Confucian society's patriarchal strictures, which fed their hopes for a future of freedom and democracy. They participated in the patriotic May 4 demonstrations against the Versailles Treaty and its acquiescence to the Japanese occupation in Shandong. While inspired by new intellectual and cultural trends in the coastal cities, they were dismayed by the "backward" warlord-dominated and bandit-ridden state of their native province. They conceived their mission as a movement of enlightened teachers and students struggling against the "armed class" whose internecine warfare obstructed the modernization of their homeland. Gradually some of these radical intellectuals coalesced to form a local Communist branch, which was little more than a loose group of teachers and students until the united front with the Nationalist Party linked their efforts to Sun Yat-sen's national revolutionary agenda. Even then, their movement was largely school based until the "Christian general" Feng Yuxiang returned from Moscow with Soviet arms, advisers, and military support for the Nationalist cause. In 1927, a brief flurry of radical activity and student-led peasant organizing came to a sudden halt when Chiang Kai-shek turned against the Communists, and Feng Yuxiang joined Chiang's new regime. In Shaanxi, however, Feng never followed Chiang's policy of mass executions, instead escorting Communists from the province. Some of his officers retained warm memories of the united front and welcomed their former comrades' return during the War of Resistance against Japan.

Following the collapse of the 1924–27 united front, there were two faces of the Communist Party in Shaanxi. One by one, the senior Beijing-trained intellectuals who had led the party were arrested, killed, or expelled for the "right opportunist" error of collaborating with the Guomindang. They were replaced in the Xi'an provincial committee by a new breed of young Bolsheviks whose financial dependence on the party Center made them loyal followers of the Communist International's left line. They sought to build a proletarian party in Shaanxi's tiny working class and to promote land reform in the surrounding countryside. While Bolsheviks dominated the party apparatus, the real work of revolution was done by guerrilla bands led by two men, Liu Zhidan from Bao'an on the Gansu border and Xie Zichang from Anding in the northeast, who both cooperated and competed to make revolution in the north. Liu Zhidan in particular built his guerrilla army from bandits, ex-soldiers, members of the Society of Brothers, and militia members—rootless young men willing to fight in the rough conditions of the northern hills. At times, their actions were little different from banditry: kidnapping for ransom, dividing the loot, attacking weak and isolated targets, and refusing to give up their opium addiction.

As the guerrilla forces grew in strength, the Bolsheviks in Xi'an intensified their efforts to bring them under party discipline. The Shanghai Center pressed the local party to lead the guerrillas out of the hills, carry out land reform, and build a rural soviet on the rich and densely populated plains north of the Wei River. When the guerrillas resisted these impractical policies, the Center accused the Shaanxi party of succumbing to a theory of "northern backwardness" that saw land reform and rural soviets appropriate only in the more developed south. Briefly in 1933, the party established a base in the hills north of Sanyuan. It was led by elite families who had joined the party during the united front, but the fractious strongmen who provided the military muscle soon fell out with the party's leftist leaders, and the whole effort collapsed. This failure was quickly followed by other setbacks. The Xi'an Bolsheviks dispatched Liu Zhidan's guerrillas, now organized as the Twenty-Sixth Army, to disastrous defeat in unfamiliar territory south of the Wei. Then the Guomindang authorities arrested the leaders of the party apparatus and through a combination of torture and enticement induced them to defect, then dismantled the party in and around Xi'an. It was a major loss for the Communists, but it liberated the guerrillas from impractical party direction.

With the Bolsheviks and the provincial committee temporarily out of the picture, Liu Zhidan's guerrilla movement was free to chart its own course, unconstrained by party dogma. Liu recruited widely among bandits, ex-soldiers, and local military units and sought contacts with sympathetic members of the provincial administration and leftists in Xi'an. In building his movement, he paid little attention to land reform or party-building but appealed to the growing patriotic resistance to Japanese aggression. When Japan occupied Northeast China (Manchuria) in 1931, the Communist Party treated the aggression as a threat to the socialist motherland and called for the "armed defense of the Soviet Union." It regarded anti-Japanese agitation as a distraction from the larger goal of anti-imperialism targeting all capitalist powers. As a result, in the early 1930s, the party gained little from the growing anti-Japanese movement. By 1934, however, Liu Zhidan was able to appeal to anti-Japanese sentiment in the military, and several units joined his movement as Anti-Japanese Volunteers.

Liu's new strategy did not go unchallenged. In December 1933, Xie Zichang returned to revive the guerrilla movement in Anding, his home county in north-eastern Shaanxi. The northeast had the most developed education system in Shaanbei, and the Communists had established a party network based in rural schools—a clear contrast to Liu's guerrilla-based revolution in the west. Xie also came with the imprimatur of the party apparatus, and the party representatives who joined him carried letters from the party Center critical of Liu's "right opportunism," "peasant consciousness," and error of fleeing to the hills rather than establishing and defending a soviet regime. These criticisms reflected an ongoing conflict between the "Shaan-Gan" and "Shaanbei" wings of the north Shaanxi party, a conflict that combined personal rivalry of the two leaders, the fact that

“Shaan-Gan” reported to Xi’an while “Shaanbei” reported to Beijing, and, perhaps most importantly, the guerrilla-based approach of Liu Zhidan versus the school-based party of the northeast.

Despite these differences, the two wings of the party were able to establish a joint command in the summer of 1934, and much more effective cooperation after Xie was mortally wounded in the fall. As Xie Zichang clung to life in the winter of 1934, Liu Zhidan shifted his operations to the east, where he had the support of a strong rural apparatus in Communist-dominated villages. When Xie died in February 1935, Liu was able to combine his military power with a rural party organization to launch an unprecedented string of military assaults in the summer of 1935 in which six counties briefly fell to his Twenty-Sixth Army. Before 1935, Liu’s guerrillas had targeted only rural strongmen, local militia, or weakly defended towns. Now he was able to take county seats and seize their munitions and treasure. Inevitably, his success attracted the central government’s attention. By this time, Chiang Kai-shek had driven the Communists from their bases in the Yangzi valley and was able to send reinforcements to Shaanbei. But these troops were unaccustomed to guerrilla warfare in the hills of Shaanxi and suffered defeat with significant loss of weapons to the enemy. More forces were dispatched from neighboring Shanxi with the same result.

As happened so often in the course of the Shaanbei revolution, success was rewarded with self-inflicted wounds. Soon after Liu Zhidan’s string of military victories, his forces were joined by Xu Haidong’s Twenty-Fifth Army from the failed Hubei-Henan-Anhui Soviet. That soviet had been the site of a bloody purge of alleged counter-revolutionaries, and the same men who had led this *sufan* campaign in the south brought their techniques to Shaanbei. There they aligned with representatives from the party Center to target Liu Zhidan and his deputies. The campaign was delayed long enough for one final battle against the Guomindang forces, a battle in which Xu Haidong, now in command, put Liu’s army on the front line, where it suffered serious casualties. Immediately after this battle, Liu and dozens of his top deputies were imprisoned, including the later Politburo member Gao Gang and Xi Zhongxun, father of China’s current president and CCP general secretary, Xi Jinping. The purge soon spread to the localities, where two hundred allegedly died, provoking a reaction to Communist rule in which peasants in Liu’s homeland turned against the party. The whole episode was brought to a close only when Mao’s column of the Red Army arrived in Shaanbei and called an end to the purge.

When Mao headed north from Sichuan, his objective was not the Shaanbei soviet. Mao intended to fight his way to the Soviet border to recuperate and receive assistance from its Red Army. It was only when he learned of Liu Zhidan’s soviet in Shaanbei that the Long March was pointed in that direction. Upon arrival in Shaanbei, Mao was bitterly disappointed. The area’s poverty and sparse population convinced him that it could not support a large army, and preparations began immediately to move on. When this foray eastward through Shanxi was

blocked, the defeated force retreated to Bao'an to prepare a second approach to the Mongolian border through Ningxia. When this too proved impossible, the Red Army was forced to stay in Shaanbei. The Yan'an era, consequently, was the product of historical exigency, not any design of Mao or the party Center.

Even before the advance into Shanxi, the Center received an emissary from Moscow, bringing word of the Comintern's new united front policy. From that point forward, Mao embarked on a multi-stranded search for allies to protect his army from attack and bring together a united front against Japan. He reached out to both Chiang Kai-shek and his rivals in the Guomindang and had the greatest success with the Northeast Army of Zhang Xueliang, many of whose officers preferred to fight the Japanese occupiers of their homeland rather than the Communists in the hills of Shaanbei. Through Edgar Snow, who interviewed Mao at length in Bao'an, he addressed an international audience and also reached young Chinese who read translated copies of Snow's interviews and his upbeat account of the Red areas. In the end, only the overtures to Zhang Xueliang and to Yang Hucheng's Northwest Army proved effective, resulting in the kidnapping of Chiang Kai-shek in the December 1936 Xi'an Incident. This ended Chiang's military offensive against the Communists and brought crucial financial assistance for the Red Army, but it hardly settled the status of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region.

The Xi'an Incident represented a turning point in Communist-Guomindang relations, but tough negotiations remained to establish the terms of the united front. The Communists had expected Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng to stay in charge in Shaanxi and protect them from a hostile Nanjing regime. But Zhang Xueliang left Xi'an for a lifetime of house arrest, and Yang Hucheng was quickly deprived of command and sent abroad. Chiang Kai-shek's appointees took charge in Xi'an, and the Communists were now more isolated than ever. Still, Chiang held to his promise to halt the civil war, and in the negotiations that followed, the key sticking point was the degree of independence of the Red Army (soon to be incorporated into the national armed forces as the Eighth Route Army) and the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region. Even the July 1937 outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan failed to break the stalemate, and final agreement was not reached until the fall. By that time, Chiang's forces had been driven from their capital in Nanjing (followed by a horrific massacre), had suffered major defeats in the Lower Yangzi and retreated to the Central China city of Wuhan. On the positive side, Chiang's government reached agreement with Moscow on a Sino-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty, which was soon followed by a package of military aid that made the Soviet Union China's most reliable ally in the early years of the war. With Stalin now firmly committed to the wartime legitimacy of the Guomindang government, the two Chinese parties came to agreement on the incorporation of the Communist forces into the national army and the acceptance of a separate Communist regime in Yan'an—though the national government never officially ratified the autonomy of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region.

Through the early years of the war, both the size and the status of Shaan-Gan-Ning remained undetermined. Though the Guomindang withdrew its military forces, most of the areas in eastern Gansu and along the Yellow River in the east were designated garrison areas and recruitment zones for the Eighth Route Army. They were not yet part of the border region. In these areas, and also in Yan'an and other towns, the Guomindang still appointed magistrates, dispersed relief funds, surveyed education, and maintained at least a shadow regime. To enhance the legitimacy of their border region, the Communists held carefully controlled elections at the village, district, and county levels in which the party inevitably emerged victorious but was able to claim the democratic support of the people. At the same time, security forces were deployed to eliminate "bandits," a category that included both the habitual bandits that had long plagued the region and local strongmen and militia leaders who challenged the Communists' monopoly of "the legitimate use of physical force."³

By 1939, the Communists were making significant advances to expand their influence behind Japanese lines in the east. In response, the Guomindang took firm measures to check its Communist rivals. In the Northwest, that involved asserting central government authority, both fiscal and military, in contested regions along the Shaan-Gan-Ning borders. "Friction" between Communist and Guomindang forces flared up until the Guomindang launched a major operation to recover lost territory in Gansu and the southwestern section of the region. The Communists responded by withdrawing sixteen thousand troops from Shanxi to drive off the Guomindang commissioner in Suide and incorporate the garrison and recruitment zone in the northeast into the border region. With this exchange, the final boundaries of Shaan-Gan-Ning were established. The Guomindang constructed a blockade line that isolated the region from the rest of the country but allowed the Communists to intensify their control within. There was, however, one final socio-political consequence of the exchange. For the first time, the Communists gained control of the better-educated, landlord-dominated, settled villages of the northeast. At first, the new regime had difficulty convincing local cadres to cooperate with better-educated and well-respected gentry colleagues in a united front regime. But the experience was useful in developing the techniques for expanding the revolution to similar areas in Shanxi and on the North China plain.

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What does this history tell us about the larger process of the Chinese Revolution? First, for all the attention that local history must pay to parochial economic, political, and social structures, and to the individual actors and historical events of the area studied, a credible local history can never be entirely local. The Shaanbei revolution cannot be understood without recognizing the fundamental difference between the Shaanxi-Gansu border in the west and "Shaanbei" in the east—areas that produced two endlessly competing branches of the party. Yet that difference

was created by the incursions of the Muslim Rebellion of the nineteenth century, a rebellion whose origins must be traced well beyond northern Shaanxi. In the early stages of Shaanxi's Communist movement, guerrilla forces in the north struggled endlessly under the dogmatic dictates of party authorities answering to policies set by the Communist International. Finally, Chiang Kai-shek's acceptance of the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region's autonomy must be understood in the context of the war with Japan and the Soviet Union's promise of substantial military assistance. Again and again, local, regional, national, and international events interacted to shape the course of history. Microhistory and macrohistory must be combined as historians narrow and broaden their lenses to analyze these intersecting influences.

In this interaction of local, regional, national, and international, the specific role of local actors must be acknowledged. Wherever the Chinese Communist Party established a foothold, local actors were critical: teachers, students, "secret society" members, bandits, workers, miners, or peasants.⁴ In Shaanbei, the role of Liu Zhidan was particularly important. He had local status and connections; he had military training and experience; and he had the intimate knowledge of local geography necessary for a guerrilla leader. Inevitably, despite later hagiographic accounts, Liu's role in the revolution was problematic. His success was contingent upon escaping the unrealistic and dogmatic dictates of the provincial party committee. This escape was in turn enabled by the fact that Liu was a military man uninterested in party-building or Marxist-Leninist theory. However, the full success of the revolutionary movement in Shaanbei came only when Liu combined his military forces with the rural party apparatus of the rival "Shaanbei" faction in the east. Finally, and most importantly, after the party Center arrived in the fall of 1935, Liu Zhidan and his entire group of lieutenants were sidelined by the new central leadership.⁵

This pattern of local leadership building a revolutionary foundation and then being sidelined after a Communist regime is established is by no means unique to Shaanbei. The same process happened, often with great violence, in the Futian Incident that rocked the Jiangxi-Fujian base and in the *sufan* movement of the Hubei-Henan-Anhui Soviet.⁶ Similarly, after the revolution was complete and the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, "cadres sent south" (*nanxia ganbu* 南下干部) sidelined local revolutionaries in Guangdong and on Hainan island.⁷ The process and the logic were common and understandable: local revolutionaries had the local knowledge and connections necessary to build the initial base, but those same connections entangled them in webs of influence that could compete with higher party authorities and complicate the revolutionary agenda. Liu Zhidan built a broad coalition of bandits, Brothers, ex-soldiers, and militia leaders to establish a soviet in Shaanbei, but those same people had interests and affiliations that could obstruct the process of land reform and challenge the authority of the party. In this sense, the *sufan* campaign launched by Xu Haidong's

Twenty-Fifth Army both threatened Liu's regime and served a larger revolutionary purpose. While it imprisoned such future party leaders as Gao Gang and Xi Zhongxun, aroused discontent and some desertions in Liu's army, and provoked outright counter-revolution from some of Liu's militia allies, it also eliminated local elite elements of questionable commitment to the party's larger goals. Most importantly, albeit fortuitously, the party Center arrived just in time to stop the campaign, allowing Mao to take credit for limiting its excesses while benefiting from its purge of the revolutionary ranks.

A second theme that must be acknowledged is the role of violence in the revolutionary process. As Mao famously stated in his report on the peasant movement in Hunan, "A revolution is not like inviting people to dinner, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery. . . . A revolution is an uprising, an act of violence whereby one class overthrows the power of another."⁸ The party never shrank from answering the enemy's "White Terror" with "Red Terror." Their guerrilla movement was built on kidnapping wealthy targets and executing them when appropriate. In the most intense period of social violence, the conflict could descend into "indiscriminate arson and executions."⁹ In Shaanbei, the era of extreme violence was also the period of greatest party recruitment. The new recruits were often rootless young men—orphans, younger sons with problems at home, men for whom the guerrilla bands were an alternate family, indeed a brotherhood. Above all they were young. When the captured engineer Eliassen met the Twenty-Sixth Army, he found "mostly boys of fifteen or sixteen," poorly armed but full of excitement.¹⁰ Edgar Snow was told that the average age was nineteen.¹¹ These young men became the willing executioners of revolutionary violence, as studies of the revolution elsewhere have shown.¹²

After the Communist regime was established, indiscriminate violence was checked, but the new authorities continued a harsh suppression of "bandits." As the new order was secured, violence diminished. The message had been conveyed: opposition would be met with deadly force. It is notable that even the highly coercive Rectification Campaign of 1942–43 was marked by imprisonment, forced confessions, even torture, but very few deaths. Despite all the excesses of rectification, it was qualitatively different from the mass executions of the Futian Incident of 1930. Mao Zedong seems to have learned the negative consequences of earlier instances of excessive violence and established the new mantra to "cure the disease but save the patient" (*zhibing jiuren* 治病救人).¹³ The negative example of Stalin's purges may also have influenced the new policy. In any case, by this time, critics of party policy had learned their lesson; threats of violence plus the example of a few carefully chosen targets were enough to compel compliance. Still, as land reform in the 1940s and the suppression of counter-revolutionaries in the early PRC would show, when the revolution moved into new areas, the party was prepared to resort to extreme revolutionary violence to establish its authority.

This book ends with the establishment of Shaan-Gan-Ning within its final borders. That watershed reflects a third theme: the new regime was not the product of fundamental social change; on the contrary, such social transformation was premised on the firm establishment of party control. Until that control was established, mobilization for fundamental social reform was impossible. Countless examples demonstrate that peasants were unwilling to support land reform and risk the revenge of landlord elites unless they were convinced that the Red Army was able to protect them.¹⁴ Once the Xi'an Incident halted Guomindang military operations against the border region, the Communists immediately classified the remaining pockets of militia resistance as "bandits" and launched operations to eliminate them. Full control would come only when Guomindang magistrates were expelled, the northeastern counties were incorporated, and the final borders of the border region were settled. In effect, the establishment of the Communist regime was largely a military process, and much of this account is an effort to explain how the poorly armed guerrillas emerged victorious. After 1940, the national government surrounded the territory with a tight blockade line; movement in and out of Shaan-Gan-Ning was dramatically reduced, and a truly autonomous regime was established.¹⁵ News from outside was reduced to a trickle, and the Communist press told its own story of the Eighth Route and New Fourth Armies' glorious battles against Japan and the Soviet Union's victories on the European front. Then came the Rectification Campaign and its insistence on each student and cadre's acceptance of the party's creed. With regime control came information control, and from that point forward the party would be the sole arbiter of truth.

The firm establishment of a revolutionary base had another important consequence: it permitted a crucial degree of independence of Moscow. Until the mid-1930s, the Communist International determined which Communists were the official party and which were renegades or "Trotskyites." The Sixth Party Congress of 1928 was held in Moscow, and its members were the official party leaders until the Seventh Congress in 1945. The Bolsheviks in Xi'an, like the entire underground party apparatus, were dependent on the CCP's Comintern-dominated Center in Shanghai for financial support and diligently parroted the International line. Indeed, with their own focus on urban struggle, the guerrilla movement mostly served to supply loot to support the party apparatus. In Jiangxi, while Mao was briefly sidelined, it was the "Internationalist" faction that took control, supported by the Comintern military representative, Otto Braun. We should not, however, accept the conventional wisdom that the growing independence of the CCP was simply the product of Mao's rise and his own rural roots. On the final stage of the Long March, Mao argued for an approach to the Soviet border on the grounds that "we are a branch of the International."¹⁶ Even in Shaanbei, he still sought military and financial support from the Soviet Union, and he dutifully accepted the Comintern's intervention to protect Chiang Kai-shek during the Xi'an Incident. Only after the war with Japan began, as Soviet military assistance flowed to

the Guomindang and not to the CCP, did the prospect of Soviet assistance fade. From 1937 to 1940, the national government offered substantial support for Shaan-Gan-Ning and the Communist armies, and there was a small amount of wartime aid from the Soviet Union.¹⁷ After that point, it was the base areas, not Moscow, that supported the party.

The full development of this process is beyond the scope of this study. There is little doubt that during China's 1946–49 civil war, Mao was willing and able to ignore Stalin's advice that the Communist armies should stop at the Yangzi River and accept a divided China. It is also common knowledge that the independence of the CCP grew in the post-Stalin era and finally resulted in the Sino-Soviet split. I would argue that this growing independence was precisely the product of the establishment and gradual expansion of a stable domestic political base. Ideologically, Mao continued to repeat Stalinist dogma, and indeed the rectification documents of 1942–43 were full of Stalinist tracts. At the same time, Mao was attacking the "dogmatism" of Wang Ming and the party's Internationalist faction and advocating the Sinification of Marxism. With his early essays on dialectics and "On Practice," Mao had established sufficient theoretical bona fides to lay down his own ideological line, and his astute use of a Chinese-style dialectical reasoning allowed him to creatively adopt Marxism but more importantly, to justify repeated changes in the party line. With a base of his own, Mao no longer needed to hew strictly to Comintern dictates; he could make necessary adjustments to ever-changing local conditions.

The fourth and final element of this story was the propagation of an ideology that promised victory for the revolution and nourished a commitment to that cause. It is worth recalling the Qing dynasty official who urged arming local militia because peasants could not be expected a fight to the death but could perhaps scare off rebels by firing from a safe distance and then fleeing (see chapter 1). Imperial officials recognized that peasants wished mostly to defend their villages and families and would not sacrifice their lives for the dynasty. Even Liu Zhidan's guerrillas were often fighting only for steady pay and a share of the loot and were accustomed to brief ambushes or dawn attacks that lasted only a few hours. They were not yet committed soldiers ready to die for the revolution. When Xu Haidong's Twenty-Fifth Army forced them into a protracted battle with major casualties at Laoshan, those who survived the battle resented the losses, and many abandoned the cause. The survivors of the Long March had seen plenty of death on their long retreat north; now, far from home, they had little choice but to continue fighting for the revolution. The Red Army was now their family, and only the success of the revolution gave meaning to their lives. But how was this revolutionary commitment conveyed to the peasants of Shaanbei?

Eugen Weber's classic study *Peasants into Frenchmen* highlights the role of the army and education in creating a new national consciousness.¹⁸ The Communists amplified this process by militarizing education once they had secure control

of the border region. We have seen that many peasant families resisted the new regime's educational initiatives when they perceived that the party sought to turn their children into "the state's people" (*gongjiaren*). They correctly understood that the new curriculum was most useful for those who became cadres or members of the army. The chairman of the border region was explicit that the purpose of the educational system was to "strengthen the people's national self-confidence and self-respect so that they will voluntarily and actively fight for the War of Resistance and national construction."¹⁹ The mandates for primary schools began with directives for the militarization of education: "In addition to strengthening the usual guerrilla warfare physical education, schools should practice guerrilla tactics. . . . First their activities should be militarized, not necessarily confining instruction to the classroom. . . . Second, they should practice mountain warfare, climbing the hills every day."²⁰ Peasant families could reasonably assume that the new regime was preparing their children for service in the army.

It was also necessary to convince young people that victory was inevitable and thus worth dying for. This was a longer and far more difficult process. The constant need to round up and return AWOL soldiers to the army indicates that many still longed for the security of family life in their native village. The party needed to give meaning to the revolution and instill confidence in its success. Mao Zedong's recognition of this need is indicated by his 1939 essay "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," in which he linked China's socialist revolution to Sun Yat-sen's democratic revolution: "The democratic revolution is the *inevitable* [*biran* 必然] preparation for the socialist revolution, and the socialist revolution is the *inevitable* trend of the democratic revolution. . . . Except for the Communist Party, no political party . . . is capable of assuming the task of leading China's two great revolutions."²¹ Just days after completing this essay on the inevitability of the Chinese Revolution, he drafted his famous essay on behalf of the "spirit of absolute selflessness" represented by Norman Bethune's death for the revolution.²² Several years later, he would return to this theme in his equally famous essay on "serving the people." Memorializing a Chinese martyr of the revolution, he wrote that "wherever there is struggle there is sacrifice, and death is a common occurrence," but claimed that those who died for the revolution died an especially worthy death and should be celebrated.²³

Any revolutionary movement requires a dedicated cadre to carry out the administrative and military imperatives of its mission. This is particularly necessary in a revolution as protracted as the Chinese. In its early stages the revolution could rely on students, bandits, and the rural riffraff that Mao highlighted in his report on the Hunan peasant movement. Once the CCP established a relatively stable regime in Shaanbei, it needed a reliable organization to spread and strengthen its revolutionary agenda. Among the revolutionary elite, the Rectification Campaign performed this function, forcing intellectuals to purge the personal "bourgeois" origins of their doubts and replace them with an unwavering

commitment to the party. For intellectuals, this commitment to the party was aided by the widely shared Marxist belief that socialism was the inevitable result of the progressive tide of history.²⁴ But for others, it was more easily linked to the rise of China and the message of the popular revolutionary anthem: “Without the Communist Party, there can be no New China.”²⁵ Building a New China was a cause that many were willing to die for, and it remains a widely shared commitment to this day.

The belief that the Communist Party was riding to power on the tide of history may well have served to motivate its members, just as Islamic fundamentalism does for ISIS or Al Qaeda. This is the function of ideology. This book, however, is a challenge to such determinist views of history. The alternative to determinism and notions of historical inevitability is the importance of what I have called “accidental” factors. It is essential to stipulate that “accidental” does not mean random or lacking knowable causes. Accidents have causes. Police investigate the cause of an automobile accident; states establish regulations to reduce the causes of industrial accidents. As noted above, however, big events like the Chinese Revolution do not necessarily have big causes. In Isaiah Berlin’s classic essay on the hedgehog and the fox, I side resolutely with the fox who knows many things, rather than the hedgehog who knows one big thing.²⁶ That being said, I also sympathize with those who argue that we must continue to pay attention to those big events that fundamentally transformed modern society—and in the Chinese case, that means understanding the nature and roots of the Chinese Revolution.²⁷

As we seek to analyze the Chinese Revolution, the old models of peasant revolution, peasant nationalism, Communist organization, or united front policies are helpful to understand broad comparative trends, but they are insufficient to unravel the complex fabric of history. The challenge of Western imperialism was undoubtedly greater than the antiquated structures of the imperial order could endure. The 1911 Revolution that ended the last empire may not have been inevitable, but it established a precedent that captivated Chinese elites for much of the twentieth century: revolution was the process through which Chinese wealth and power would be established.²⁸ The Guomindang, the Communist Party, and most political elites subscribed to this faith in revolutionary transformation. In this sense, the inevitability of some Chinese Revolution is plausible. But the form that the revolution took was the product of a vast array of local, national, and international contingencies that can be unraveled only through precise attention to the details and indeed the accidents of history. To the extent that the Yan’an era set the parameters of the Maoist regime, we must remind ourselves that Mao never wanted to be in Yan’an and that the Yan’an era was itself an accident of history—the product of precise causes but by no means foreordained.

Similarly, though the Yan’an era established certain patterns and precedents that influenced the future development of the Chinese Revolution, it did not *determine* that course. The anti-rightist movement of 1957, the Great Leap Forward,

and the Cultural Revolution were all products of concrete conditions of their own time, and not some inevitable logic that flowed inexorably from Yan'an. This book on the origins of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region was enabled by the relatively complete documentary record on Shaanxi's early revolutionary movement. I was forced to abandon plans to examine the transformation of the region after 1940 precisely because the archival record of the internal deliberations and concrete effects of the party's policies was unavailable. When I conducted fieldwork and read documents in Shaanbei's local archives in 1989, one explicitly closed area was documents on "important meetings." Throughout the entire Mao and post-Mao era of Communist rule in China, we have almost no contemporary records of the party's internal deliberations, only memoir accounts with all of the limitations that such retrospective records entail.²⁹ Stephen Kotkin's superb multivolume biography of Stalin shows what is possible if one has access to the letters, notes, meeting transcripts, and original memoranda of the supreme party leader of a totalitarian state.³⁰ We have no similar records for China, which makes it impossible to determine with any precision the full range of considerations—personal, psychological, social, ideological, political, economic, military, and diplomatic—that shaped the choices of key actors in the drama of the Chinese Revolution. This surely does not mean that we should abandon research on the recent history of China, but it does mean that we should be cautious in asserting continuities across long eras in which the larger political context was demonstrably changing.

China is a country that has always treasured its history. The oldest classic is a collection of ancient and imagined documents often called the "Book of History." Confucius allegedly edited the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to record the lessons of the past, and Sima Qian wrote the first true history in the second century BCE, leaving an account of past events and heroes that has been cited, used, and abused by scholars and statesmen to the present day. Throughout the imperial era, each dynasty compiled the history of its predecessor to establish an official record of the past; and China remains a nation with an almost religious devotion to its past. The *People's Daily* has long featured a regular section devoted to history; the nation is littered with museums that popularize the regime's official version of its history; and China's current president is fond of invoking "the tide of history" or "the law of history."³¹ We should remember, however, that officials do not, and *must not*, monopolize the use of the past. Dynastic rebels, dissident intellectuals, modern revolutionaries, and contemporary protesters have also appealed to past measures of justice, or such memorable repertoires of dissent as the May Fourth Movement. History, then, has been a powerful resource used by states, rebels, and dissidents to pursue their own purposes.

We must, however, distinguish the use of history from the practice of historiography. There is a price that the historian pays for this distinction. If the course of history is determined by the decisions people make in the unique spatial and temporal context of their time, then the ceaseless transformation of that context

makes the past a poor predictor of the future. The broad contours of the present world were produced by the gradual accretion of multiple lesser developments of the past. Pundits who argue for grand narratives of the triumph of socialism, People's War, totalitarian rule, the China model, or a Thucydides Trap may provoke useful debate, but unless they pay close attention to the concrete conditions that governed those processes in the past, they mislead even as they provoke us. The same holds true for those who wrest from their historical context events like Yan'an's Rectification Campaign, the Cultural Revolution, or the Tiananmen protests in order to assert some resonance in the present day. History does not repeat itself; it does not even rhyme. If history is to help us to understand the present, it will not be through easy analogies or magical metaphors. The most important lesson of history is that things are complicated. Local context matters. National affairs matter. Global developments matter. Organization and discipline matter. The political choices of key leaders matter a great deal; and so does the personal agency of ordinary individuals—even the “backward” and “ignorant” peasants of Shaanbei.