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RURAL WANDERING MARTIAL ARTS NETWORKS AND INVULNERABILITY RITUALS IN MODERN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The flourishing of rural martial arts groups in modern China was largely facilitated by popular beliefs in invulnerability rituals. Invulnerability rituals, defined as the ability to defend oneself from physical harms through religious rituals, played a significant role in uniting martial arts groups during the Boxer Uprising, which was well-known for targeting Christian missionaries. Through the teachings of cross-regional networks of wandering martial arts masters, invulnerability rituals were initially used for defending rural communities against bandits. After learning invulnerability rituals, people could tame demonic power by summoning the presence of martial gods. Those wandering martial arts masters were careerist teachers who first promoted the use of protective martial arts against bandits and then expanded the use of invulnerability rituals in resolving all local disputes such as lineage conflicts and competition for natural resources. These martial arts groups then became one of the most destabilizing social actors, threatening the security of people's livelihood. Eventually, during the early People's Republic, martial arts groups and invulnerability rituals disappeared as a result of the Communist Party's nationwide campaigns against alleged counterrevolutionaries.

INTRODUCTION

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in 1949, it immediately launched a nationwide campaign against the alleged 'counterrevolutionaries' (*fan geming*). A significant portion of these counterrevolutionaries were leaders and active participants of local martial arts groups in rural China. The presence of local martial arts groups can be found almost everywhere in Chinese archives and gazetteers. Some of these communities and their predecessors were the leading groups in peasant rebellions and social unrest during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Both the Nationalist Party and the CCP in the twentieth century viewed them with suspicion and labeled them as one of the most dangerous actors in the governance of rural society.

In this paper I focus on a case study of rural martial arts groups in Poyang County of Jiangxi Province in Southern China to understand the origin and development of these communities. Poyang County, neighboring the Poyang Lake (China's largest freshwater lake), was a trading center of both agricultural and commercial goods in the mid-Yangtze River region. Its prosperity also led to serious social instability because of bandit activities and competition for material interests among different local groups. Based on archival sources, I argue that the emergence of martial arts groups in rural China was a protective survival strategy against endemic bandit threats. When the martial arts groups grew stronger, however, they also became a significant destabilizing force within local governance.

THE BANDIT PROBLEM

Banditry was one of the most enduring and endemic threats to people's livelihoods in rural China before the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949. Rural residents were living in an environment that suffered constantly from capital and human losses as a consequence of bandit raids.

In his influential book, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Eric Hobsbawm argues that banditry was a form of peasant protest against exploitation and oppression. He names this bandit tradition the 'social banditry' [Hobsbawm 1965: 5]. Hobsbawm has a romanticized view of banditry and he believes local society regarded social bandits as non-criminal and honorable. By relying on the resources and protection offered by the locals, bandits became a crucial channel whereby peasants could fight against landlordism and other forms of oppression. In Hobsbawm's extended and refined study on banditry, he defines social bandits as:

peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regarded as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.
[Hobsbawm 2000: 20]

Although Hobsbawm's theory correctly reminds scholars of the complex social power dynamics in rural communities between the powerful and the exploited, as well as various forms of peasant struggles against oppression, his social bandit theory hardly applies to the Chinese context. The relationship between bandits and the society in China was rarely as harmonious as Hobsbawm romanticizes.

In late imperial and modern China, banditry was predominantly a product of poverty and social unrest. In his study on disorder and crime in Southern China from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, historian Robert Antony studies the class composition and the internal power structure of bandits. Building on the assumption that the mid-Qing witnessed the breakdown of the early social equilibrium that had finally led to the violent confrontation between the state and the local society, internal unrest became a defining feature of the empire. Bandits, according to Antony, were mostly predacious. Contrary to Hobsbawm's romanticized view of social banditry, that their action was a platform against the powerful and oppression, Antony notices that bandits were primarily composed of the working poor who were in many ways living on the fringes of society. He points out that bandits were, by nature, mobile and not tied to any specific communities. The two most commonly shared features of bandits were poverty and mobility [Antony 2016: 137]. Moreover, most were only occasional bandits instead of professional lawbreakers [Antony 2016: 140]. People became bandits for survival rather than as a protest against any specific classes or power structure.

With the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911 and the subsequent power vacuum in China, bandit activities became even more omnipresent and ferocious. The Republican Era (1912-1949) witnessed the structural transformation of bandit activities, a dramatic increase in the number of bandits and even more intense militarization of the society than in the late imperial period. The first half of the twentieth century was a period of 'banditization' [Tiedemann 1982: 400]. After the death of autocrat Yuan Shikai in 1916, a unified power structure in China gave way to the warlords whose power bases varied fundamentally in size. None of the warlords was powerful enough to defeat his rivals, and the power and territories controlled by the warlords changed constantly over time. In order to maintain and expand the warlords' territories, China became a highly militarized society.

As historian Phil Billingsley points out, warlordism led to a vicious cycle: on the one hand, joining the army was an attractive career that provided people with food and clothing; on the other hand, such absorption of the rural labor force further debased the productivity of rural society and finally the bankruptcy of peasant economy [Billingsley 1988: 25]. During the time of constant warfare, when the demand for food was unbearable for the rural population, joining the bandits was a rational choice for rural people who needed to make a living.

Unable to reach a stable equilibrium among the power of the warlords, constant changes in the size of the warlords' armies also produced a large number of deserted soldiers deprived of their military status. For survival, many former soldiers had no choice but to become bandits [Tai 1985: 25]. In Poyang County, a large number of bandits came from the former Sichuan Provincial Army that was stationed in Jiangxi Province. After many lost their jobs, they stayed in Jiangxi as bandits rather than going back to their homes in Sichuan [PCG12 1949: Lineage]. Their military background helped these soldier bandits, and non-soldier bandits in the future, to become equipped with modern weaponry. Soldier bandits differed dramatically from the traditional bandits before the Republican Era – instead of attacking carefully selected targets, they adopted an indiscriminate predatory attitude towards their targets, often raiding the entire rural society and destroying their targets completely. The brutalization of bandit activities made banditry an even more formidable element of everyday life in rural China [Tiedemann 1982: 422].

Although a romanticized 'Robin Hood' style of social banditry, akin to that described by Hobsbawm, did exist in Republican China (such as the case of the White Wolf (*Bailang*)), banditry in most cases was a temporary survival strategy [Perry 1983]. Except for the case of soldier bandits who became outlaws after losing employment, bandit groups were primarily composed of poor peasants, similar to the pattern Robert Antony described in his study on the Qing Dynasty. Poverty was undoubtedly a determinant factor behind the prosperity of banditry. Billingsley's case study on Henan Province shows that the fertile northern and central counties in Henan were much more immune from banditry than the poor southwestern regions in Henan [Billingsley 1988: 41]. Even within the same county, banditry was more endemic in the mountainous regions, swamps, and the less prosperous border areas where people took less care than elsewhere [Billingsley 1981: 237-38]. In Poyang County, even though the land was fertile and the Poyang Lake was agriculturally so productive, bandits remained active in the less developed regions, especially the mountainous and bushy areas, and near the provincial borders [PCG14 1949: How Bandit Leader Cao Mapi Accepted Amnesty].

Hundreds of bandit gangs raided the Poyang region regularly during the Republican Era. Among them, Cao Mapi was the most notorious figure who generated countless myths and memories among the locals. From 1939 to 1941, Cao Mapi's gang raided the Poyang area many times, including the most notorious attack on the Town of Fenggang in May of 1941 when Cao Mapi sent out more than five hundred bandit soldiers. The trophy of this raid was marvelous to the bandits: twenty thousand kilograms of cloth, one thousand kilograms of jewelry, ten rifles, ten pistols, two horses, more than ten oxen, as well as the kidnapping of three housewives and a township official [Jiangxi Historical Materials 1993: 9-14]. During China's bloody first half of the twentieth century, soldiers within formal military units could turn to banditry for various reasons (as discussed above). A substantial part of Cao Mapi's bandit force came from the military. The military also provided the bandits with a number of modern weapons.

The Nationalist Government's suppression of banditry in Poyang proved to be pro forma. Its military forces did occasionally respond to banditry problems located near where they were stationed when the outlaws became too strong. Yet the fact that bandit gangs frequently changed their targets and moved their bases of operation made it extremely difficult to wipe them out. In cases in which the Nationalist armies could not locate the bandit nests, to avoid being blamed by their higher authority, officers often commanded their soldiers to arrest innocent peasants and label them as traitors who had cooperated and helped to hide bandits. In the eyes of rural residents, the Nationalist armies were as bad as bandits. The job of protecting lives and homes fell to the rural residents themselves. To do this they established their own self-defense martial arts groups.

SELF-DEFENSE AND WANDERING MARTIAL ARTS NETWORKS

Historians came to know rural martial arts groups predominantly through the lens of peasant rebellions and social unrest in late imperial China. When introducing the history of martial arts groups, the Republican-edition Poyang County Gazetteer says that they were originally secret religious societies born from the White Lotus in the Qing Dynasty [PCG12 1949: Secret Societies]. The White Lotus Sect (*Bailianjiao*) was initially a lay Buddhist movement led by Monk Huiyuan of Lushan in the early fifth century [Zürcher 1972: 219-23]. According to religious scholar B. J. Ter Haar, the name 'White Lotus' was used by non-elites as an autonym for lay Buddhist gatherings before the mid-fourteenth century [Ter Haar 1999: 165]. From the sixteenth century on, 'White Lotus' was more and more frequently used by the government and finally became a generic label for all potentially

rebellious groups. Ter Haar further points out that by the late Ming Dynasty, Christianity, Millenarian teachings, lay Buddhist, and even sexual techniques were all labeled 'White Lotus' [Ter Haar 1999: 245]. But people within such groups never called themselves 'White Lotus'. This label existed only in official propaganda. The alleged White Lotus Sects organized some of the most large-scale peasant rebellions in the Qing Dynasty and historians often point to them as a symbol of the Qing Government's failure to control local society.

Modern martial arts groups differed from the earlier forms of White Lotus Sects significantly. They were no longer primarily religious associations; instead, they used violence more often for practical needs, such as self-defense against banditry, rather than forming a millenarian religious perception of the world. There were hundreds of different types of martial arts groups, among which the most famous were the Big Sword Society (*Dadaohui*) and the Red Spear Society (*Hongqianghui*) in rural North China. The Big Sword Society was a leading martial arts group that participated in the Boxer Uprising at the end of the nineteenth century. Well-known for its Armor of the Golden Bell (*jinzhong zhao*), a martial arts technique of invulnerability, the Big Sword Society was an influential quasi-military association in the Shandong-Jiangsu border region against rebellious forces and bandits. The local authorities also tolerated the existence of the Big Sword because they helped organize self-defense against bandits. The Big Sword Society flourished in the 1890s and was a major local military force preceding the Boxer Uprising [Esherick 1988]. Evolved from the Big Sword Society, the Red Spear Society was also a martial arts group that adopted similar invulnerability rituals. In her classic book *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945*, Elizabeth Perry uses the Red Spear Society as an exemplary case of a protective strategy adopted by the peasants as a form of collective violence against predatory threats, among which banditry was a primary concern [Perry 1980]. The Red Spear later became the mother model of many similar martial arts groups in rural China that adopted different names and slight modifications in their rituals [Tai 1985].

In Poyang County, the most widespread and powerful local martial arts groups were the Yellow Crane Society (*Huanghehui*) and the Big Sword Society. The Republican-edition Poyang County Gazetteer claims that both groups evolved from the Boxer Uprising. The gazetteer suggests that both the Yellow Crane and the Big Sword came from the border region of Shandong, Henan, and Anhui Provinces [PCG12 1949: Secret Societies]. Certainly, both the Yellow Crane and the Big Sword groups were well-known for their invulnerability rituals that could protect them from being harmed. Such rituals, as we will see, played a crucial role in encouraging and organizing the local people against bandits. There was even a female martial arts group called the 'Flower

Basket Society' (*Hualanhui*). The Flower Basket Society also adopted the invulnerability technique: the female members carried magical flower baskets with them and used them as shields when confronting threats. They believed that the basket could protect them from all weapons, including modern artillery [PCG12 1949: Secret Societies].

The emergence of the Yellow Crane Society in Poyang was a consequence of both bandit threats and cross-regional martial arts networks. According to the gazetteer, in 1934, bandits constantly raided Poyang County. A traveler from Anhui Province noticed the situation and told the people of Poyang that he knew the rituals of invulnerability. The local people tried slicing him with a sword, and he was not injured at all. After that, a lot of young peasants began to learn the technique and established the Yellow Crane Society [PCG12 1949: Secret Societies].

During the 1950s, after interviewing a large number of former Yellow Crane Society participants during the CCP's Anti-Bandit Campaigns, the Public Security Bureau's investigatory reports told a more nuanced story of the Yellow Crane's origin in Poyang. In 1934, banditry was a severe problem in Poyang. To defend rural communities against bandits, a local lineage leader Wang Guowen went to Mount Jiulong of Nanjing in Jiangsu Province and invited seven martial arts masters to Poyang. Among them was the Grand Master Xiong Xinzhai, who was also known as Mr. Xiong Xueshan. Mr. Xiong established the very first Yellow Crane assembly hall in Poyang's District 11 with a banner 'Protect Homes against Bandits (*baojia yufei*)'. Mr. Xiong's assembly hall attracted more than one hundred local people to join instantly. Among the first group of students was Jin Deshan, who was originally from Anhui Province. Jin was chosen as the leader of Mr. Xiong's disciples. In 1936, two of the seven masters died, including the Grand Master Xiong Xinzhai. Jin Deshan became the new leader of the Yellow Crane in Poyang; assisting him was the Xiong Xinzhai's nephew known as 'the Lame'. Under the new leadership, the Yellow Crane developed rapidly in the entire Poyang County [PPSA Z2-1-87 1953; PPSA Z2-1-134 1959].

It is noteworthy that the seven masters and the subsequent new leader, Jin Deshan, were all non-locals. Little is known about the background of the seven masters, but the fact that Wang Guowen invited them from a mountain in Nanjing (Nanjing is about 500 km from Poyang) indicates that they were well-known among certain groups of people. It is probable that the seven masters were full-time martial arts specialists. In China, renowned martial arts schools were often affiliated with famous mountains, most notably the Shaolin School on Mount Songshan in Henan Province and the Wudang School on Mount Wudang in Hubei Province. Students went to these famous mountains

to learn martial arts techniques. Some of them stayed on the mountain teaching new students, while most of them left the mountain and became wandering martial arts teachers wherever people needed them.

In premodern China, many wandering martial arts teachers played important roles in organizing uprisings against the government; or, they might join the unruly forces such as bandits. Historian Meir Shahar's case study of the Shaolin Monastery shows that the Qing government was profoundly suspicious of the Shaolin School martial arts in Henan Province. Emperors from Yongzheng (1722-35) onward all feared that the Shaolin School might become the origin of rebellious forces or hide criminals during the government's crackdown against rebellion. They strictly forbade the use of fighting monks from the Shaolin Monastery in training Qing military forces [Shahar 2008: 189-95]. The wandering martial arts specialists were also associated with the Boxer Uprising in the 1890s. Joseph Esherick's study on the Boxer Uprising shows that the invulnerability rituals were not local practices and were brought to southwest Shandong by an outsider, possibly a 'wandering Daoist priest' [Esherick 1988: 104-5]. It was through this group of wandering martial artists that various types of boxing techniques and invulnerability rituals reached to a large portion of China's hinterland.

To some poor people, learning and teaching martial arts techniques was an alluring career during times of social unrest. Jin Deshan was such a person. Born in 1894 to a poor peasant family in Anhui Province, Jin spent his childhood doing farm work as an adopted son at his uncle's place. When he was nine, his uncle passed away. Jin's mother took him to his grandfather's home in rural Jiangsu Province. In 1934, when there was a massive drought in Jiangsu, Jin had no choice but to leave with another four people heading for Jiangxi Province. On their way to Poyang, all the other four died. Once arrived in Poyang, Jin immediately joined the Yellow Crane Society and became a full-time martial arts teacher [PPSA Z1-2-1058 1951]. It was through the Yellow Crane Society that Jin finally settled down and earned his reputation as a martial arts specialist.

Jin Deshan and the Lama proved to be charismatic and actionable leaders. Each Yellow Crane unit was known as an assembly hall (*tang*). From 1934 to 1949, the Yellow Crane Society spread to seven districts in Poyang County with at least twenty-eight assembly halls [PPSA Z2-1-87 1953]. The highest-ranking leader of the Yellow Crane was called the Grand Master (*diandao shi*). Below him was a Preaching Master (*chuandao shi*). Within each assembly hall, there was one schoolmaster (*xuezhang*) and one vice-schoolmaster (*fu xuezhang*). These two were the highest leaders within each assembly hall, responsible for teaching fighting techniques and administrative affairs. Below them were one

hall master (*tangzhang*) and one vice-hall master (*fu tangzhang*). They took care of religious worship in the hall and all the logistical issues [PPSA Z2-1-134 1959]. The Grand Master usually stayed only for a short period teaching the martial arts techniques and the invulnerability rituals. Then he would train and appoint new leaders as his replacement and leave. In Poyang, the first Grand Master was Xiong Xinzhai from Nanjing. After his death in 1936, Jin Deshan became the new Grand Master [PPSA Z1-4-234 1953].

The history of the Big Sword Society in the Republican-edition Poyang County Gazetteer was almost identical to the Yellow Crane. In 1946, bandits under the leadership of Gui Changqing raided the Hengyongxiang area in Poyang frequently. Unable to bear the bandit threats, local residents went to Anhui Province and invited the Big Sword teachers to Poyang [PCG12 1949: Secret Societies]. The CCP's investigatory report in 1953 provides more details about the Big Sword Society's origin. In 1946, to solve the bandit problem of the Hengyouxiang area in District 12, a gentry leader Wang Zhenbo from the Xigang Village organized a meeting with the surrounding villages. They decided to go to the neighboring Zhide County in Anhui Province and invited three Big Sword masters. The three masters established the very first Big Sword assembly hall (*tang*) in Xigang Village. They claimed that learning the Big Sword techniques would make people invulnerable to all the weapons on the battlefield. All the people from Xigang joined the Big Sword Society [PPSA Z2-1-93 1953]. The notorious bandit leader Cao Mapi was ambushed and killed by the Big Sword Society in Zhide County. The incident took place right after the three masters from Zhide established the first Big Sword unit in Xigang Village [PPSA Z2-1-93 1953]. After that the name of the Big Sword Society spread across Poyang County.

To many people, the Big Sword's techniques were mythical. Many bandits were also afraid to raid the rural communities with the presence of the Big Sword Society and called the Big Sword 'the tiger' [PCG12 1949: Secret Societies]. The Big Sword networks developed rapidly. In May of 1947, it established units in District 2, District 3, and District 4. During the second half of the same year, the Big Sword reached to District 10, District 11, and District 14.

The associational structure of the Big Sword Society differed slightly from the Yellow Crane. Each Big Sword unit was also called an assembly hall. There was one hall master (*tangzhang*) who oversaw all the affairs within the unit. Below him was a hall lord (*tangzhu*) taking care of the candles and incense used for religious rituals. The members within a Big Sword assembly hall were organized into squads (*ban*) with ten people in each squad. There was one squad commander (*banzhang*) within each squad [PPSA Z2-1-93 1953]. Compared to the Yellow

Crane, the structure of the Big Sword was more like a fighting unit with clearly numbered units. The Yellow Crane, on the contrary, was more hierarchical, highlighting the importance of discipleship like a traditional martial arts school.

INVULNERABILITY RITUALS

Choosing to join a martial arts group meant responding to the banditry problem through violence. But how was violence understood? Ter Haar suggests that the belief in demons as the source of persistent danger to human beings was a basic notion in the religious culture of traditional China. People worshiped different deities when confronting various demonic threats, such as the deities of bridges and the deities of health. Even bandits often adopted nicknames related to demonic forces, believing that such a connection would equip them with the power of demons so that they became legitimated as killers. Ter Haar further points out that when people understood real-life enemies as of demonic origins, they would fight against them not only with physical force but also through exorcizing these demonic powers. Such beliefs permeated the entire Boxer Uprising and most martial arts groups in the Republican era with religious rituals against injury [Ter Haar 2002].

Building on Ter Haar's Chinese 'demonological paradigm' [Ter Haar 2002], historian William Rowe concludes that the existence of this most basic and ubiquitous demonic threat 'made violence into a fundamental imperative of human existence [...] The gruesome violence threatened by these demons must be met with an equally determined response bent on bloody and complete extermination' [Rowe 2007: 8]. Supernatural responses to demonic power were also popular, such as summoning spirit armies against demonic forces, in Daoism and local cults [Meulenbeld 2015]. This was also true for both the Yellow Crane and the Big Sword in Poyang. Fighting bandits was not only a physical war relying on might and weapons but also a demonic war that required strict regulation of all the participants' moral behavior along with gaining power from the spiritual realm.

Invulnerability rituals, the magical martial techniques that were believed to prevent the approach of weapons or to help human bodies withstand physical harms, were considered the most crucial body of teaching within both the Yellow Crane and the Big Sword groups. The invulnerability rituals were a complex system involving everything from chanting spells and practicing spirit possession during the learning process to wearing and carrying specific clothes and weapons during the battles. Failure to follow these requirements could undermine the effectiveness of the rituals and lead to injuries and even death.

Although invulnerability rituals never represented the mainstream martial arts practices in China, they came to be widely known to the public as well as the Western world through the practices of the Armor of the Golden-Bell (*jinzhong zhao*) and the Iron-Cloth Shirt (*tiebu shan*) during the Boxer Uprising of 1899-1901. The Boxer Uprising was well-known in the West as a violent anti-foreign movement against Westerners and Christians in China. The Boxers practiced various forms of invulnerability rituals during the uprising. Esherick points out that the invulnerability rituals were certainly not a unified martial arts school; instead, they were simply popular self-defense techniques in Chinese popular culture [Esherick 1988: 53-58]. In tracing the historical origin of the invulnerability practice in Chinese martial arts, Shahar suggests that they were introduced from Tantric Buddhism in India through the concept of the 'diamond body' [Shahar 2012].

The Yellow Crane Society required a forty-nine-day learning period for the invulnerability rituals. During the forty-nine days, all the students had to sit in meditation three times a day. During each meditation session, the students needed to light joss sticks, burn yellow papers, worship the Bodhisattvas, and chant spells.¹ The spells began by listing the many deities they worshiped, ranging from the Duke of Zhong (*Zhougong*) to regional deities. One such spell was:

Our gods send peace to us and protect us,
Iron helmet and iron armor all come from the heaven,
I shall put on the iron clothes, iron armor, and iron helmet,
Guns, cannons, and firearms will stay away from me,
All the nine flood dragons will gather and protect us,
Guns, cannons, and firearms will stay away from me,
The Six Ding and Six Jia will gather and support us,²
Swords and axes will stay away from me.

This spell ended with the listing of another group of deities and repeating that all the weapons will stay away from us. There were various forms of spells for different fighting techniques. When fighting in real battles, they must worship the Bodhisattvas first, then put on a specific set of headgear, waist belt, bottles (hanging on the waist belt), and straw sandals for ritual use. Then they would carry a pair of swords in their hands and march forward slowly. When marching forward, they would chant 'we [disciples] truthfully invite the merciful

1 'Worshipping the Bodhisattvas (**baifo**)' was a generic term in Chinese popular culture for being religious and participating in religious rituals. The 'Bodhisattvas' here do not refer to any specific deities.

2 The 'Six Ding and Six Jia' are a group of martial gods in Daoism.

Guanyin Bodhisattva to come protect our bodies from injuries'. The schoolmaster would lead in the front with a huge umbrella. Once the schoolmaster opened the umbrella (when enemies were approaching), all the Yellow Crane members would become invulnerable to weapons [PPSA Z2-1-87 1953].

The invulnerability rituals of the Big Sword Society were similar but more straightforward in relation to the use of force and weapons. The Big Sword's invulnerability rituals required a learning period of ten nights. During these ten nights, the teachers would first teach the students how to avoid being hurt by placing heavy stones on the students' bellies, then slicing the students' bellies and backs with swords. Then the teachers would teach them how to use swords. When fighting in real battles, everyone would wear a bamboo rain hat, carry big swords on their right hands, and chant spells such as:

**The Jade Emperor of Heaven and Earth,
Founder of our martial school,
Buddha of Seven Spirits,
Eternal Mother the Guanyin Bodhisattva,
Eternal Mother of the Lishan Mountain,
One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten.**

At that point Big Sword members would become invulnerable to injuries during the battle [PPSA Z2-1-93 1953]. People would chant different spells under different circumstances. Each set of spells was usually associated with a specific technique in fighting, such as the spell of Blocking the Spears (*Duqiang fa*) and Hiding My Body (*Yanshen fa*). To transmit the spells, the teachers would tie a piece of yellow paper with the spells on it onto the skin of the students, and then slice the students with swords [PPSA Z1-9-8 1958].

Participants in the Yellow Crane and the Big Sword Society did take the invulnerability rituals seriously. The leaders of the martial arts groups often advertised their teachings only as the technique of invulnerability. Becoming invulnerable against the bandits was the primary driving force when people decided to join the martial arts schools. For many of those who lived under the constant threat of bandits, joining martial arts groups was simply about protecting themselves from the harms of the bandits through learning invulnerability rituals. Solving the bandit problem completely by wiping them out in the region was not their concern.

People also used invulnerability rituals in a practical way to reach specific goals in real life. Zheng Laichao, who was a member of the Zheng lineage, decided to learn and teach the invulnerability rituals of the Yellow Crane Society to his own lineage people because the

Zheng lineage had serious conflicts with the Xiong lineage. In 1948, the Xiong lineage members first invited a Big Sword martial master and organized their own Big Sword Society. In April of 1948, during a feud (*xiedou*) between the two lineages, the Xiong lineage Big Sword Society killed two people from the Zheng lineage. Zheng Laichao then invited a Yellow Crane martial master to teach his lineage the rituals of invulnerability. Zheng Laichao also became a vice-schoolmaster. More than ten days later, in May, during the following feud between the two lineages, the Zheng lineage killed seven people from the Xiong lineage. The Zheng lineage were all amazed by the effectiveness of the invulnerability rituals of the Yellow Crane. More and more people joined the Yellow Crane after that (which will be discussed in the next section) [PPSA Z1-9-105 1958].

In another case, Zhang Yintang joined the Big Sword Society because he hoped it could bring him good fortune. Zhang was jobless and heavily addicted to gambling until he met a Big Sword teacher at his grandfather's home in 1944. Zhang learned the invulnerability rituals from the teacher and wished to go to the Sino-Japanese War battlefield and fight against the Japanese. 'If I could master the invulnerability rituals and go to the anti-Japanese frontline, becoming a [military] commander would be as easy as eating desserts and drinking tea' [PPSA Z3-1-180 1957].

Failure of the invulnerability rituals would definitely undermine the credibility of the martial arts groups in people's minds. In Zheng Laichao's case, four months after the feud in May when the Zheng lineage killed seven people of the Xiong lineage, another feud broke out. This time, the result of the feud was quite disappointing to the Zheng lineage. The schoolmaster Zheng Wenxiang was killed in the battle, the rest of his people ran away immediately. After the death of Zheng Wenxiang, people were more and more reluctant to join the Yellow Crane [PPSA Z1-9-105 1958].

During the Chinese Civil War (1945-49) when the martial arts groups in Poyang resisted the CCP's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949, the failure of the invulnerability rituals led to the rapid disbanding of most martial arts groups in Poyang. Cheng Hong, who was a leader of the Big Sword Society and participated in a fight against the PLA, recalled later that the Big Sword forces were clearly not comparable to the PLA's modern weapons. His people were soon smashed into disorder, and all fled away [PPSA Z1-1-105 1950].

DESTABILIZING LOCAL SOCIETY

Local martial arts groups emerged in Poyang as a protective survival strategy against widespread predatory bandit activities. But it is wrong to assume that these local groups were necessarily protective against outside threats all the time. On the contrary, once these martial arts groups gained power in Poyang and became an integral part of people's everyday life, they began engaging in local conflicts through the use of violence, coercion, or even predatory strategies. In official archives, the intervention of martial arts groups in local violence was often labeled as '*xiedou*'.

'*Xiedou*', the most commonly used abbreviation of '*chixie xiangdou*' (to seize weapons and fight one another), was a widespread form of violence in rural China. In the Western scholarship on China, '*xiedou*' is often translated as 'feud' or 'lineage feud', highlighting such a phenomenon as a form of collective violence based on the boundary of kinship and bloodline.

Since the late imperial period, rural residents had been equally familiar with the enduring and endemic problems of banditry and feuding. Although feud seemed to be a natural product of traditional Chinese society that was largely built on lineage organizations, it also showed the weakness of China's bureaucratic system which was not able to rule the local society effectively. During the Qing Dynasty, according to historian Harry Lamley, the government considered feuding a form of private conflict that differed fundamentally from other types of social unrest such as banditry and rebellion [Lamley 1977: 1]. Therefore, local officials intentionally avoided intervening in the private sphere or reporting the cases to higher authorities. Moreover, lineage leaders involved in feuding often bribed the local officials in order to avoid turning their conflicts into formal criminal cases. Thus, under such a condition of lax management from the government, feuding often led to terrible physical and mental consequences for the parties involved [Lamley 1990: 36]. Historian Lucien Bianco argues that feuding in the first half of the twentieth century showed considerable continuity from the late imperial time, including the state's inability to respond to local disputes effectively. What was new in the twentieth century, according to Bianco, was only 'the demographic surge and the resulting increase in density' [Bianco 2001: 180].

Technological advancement gradually introduced modern weapons into feuding. Even during the Qing Dynasty, professional mercenaries with firearms were widely hired to participate in feuding [Lamley 1990: 49]. Feuding was not necessarily a single round of armed conflicts between lineages. In many cases, suspicion and hatred produced in one feud often developed into a vicious cycle of revenge between lineages that

could potentially last for decades or even centuries. 'Subsequent disputes were apt to revive old controversies, rekindle familiar patterns of revenge, and thus give rise to new feud cycles' [Lamley 1977: 7].

In Poyang County, most of the feuding cases resulted from conflicts between lineages over material stakes. Among the most dominant material causes of feuding were ownership disputes of water properties, competition for natural resources, and lineage conflicts. What was unconventional but not surprising in the feuding cases in Poyang was the active participation of martial arts groups that were initially organized to defend the communities against bandits. Local martial arts teachers became martial arts careerists who promoted the use of violence whenever local conflicts occurred.

During February of 1937, a feud broke out between the Peng lineage and the Hong lineage because of ownership disputes over the polder land [PPSA Z1-1-53 1950]. Twenty-four people were killed in the first feud between the two sides in February [PPSA Z1-4-233 1953]. Leaders within the Peng lineage decided to militarize their lineage and invited martial arts masters to teach them boxing techniques and invulnerability rituals. The Peng lineage invited Jin Deshan, who had just become the new grand master of the Yellow Crane Society in 1936, to help the Peng lineage build their Yellow Crane Society. Jin Deshan set up the first Yellow Crane assembly hall in the Peng lineage and trained twenty-six students as the first group of disciples. During the following year in 1938, Jin Deshan came again and established two more Yellow Crane assembly halls with more than thirty disciples in the Peng lineage. In 1939, the second feud caused by the polder land conflict broke out between the two lineages. At least one person from the Peng lineage was killed. Jin Deshan visited the Peng lineage for the last time in 1944 and taught some twenty more students within the two 1938 assembly halls [PPSA Z1-1-53 1950].

'Blood debt' resulting from feuds appeared to be a driving motivation for people to join the martial arts groups. Peng Jiamao from the Peng lineage joined the Yellow Crane Society as one of the first group of students. His father was killed in the first feud between the two lineages. Although Peng Jiamao had no formal appointment within the Yellow Crane Society, he was one of the most enthusiastic students [PPSA Z1-4-233 1953]. Peng Jiawang also joined the Yellow Crane Society in 1938 after his father was killed in the first feud. He admitted that his motivation was simply hatred and revenge [PPSA Z1-4-234 1953]. Although there were only two feuds between the Peng and Hong clans in total, several males in the Peng lineage considered joining the Yellow Crane Society and protecting the Peng family from other groups as part of their lineage culture.

The adoption of the Yellow Crane Society by the Peng lineage led to a contagion effect where many neighboring lineages sought to learn the Yellow Crane invulnerability rituals. Peng Guixiang, who joined the Yellow Crane Society in 1937 following the first feud between the Peng lineage and Hong lineage, was appointed as the schoolmaster of the first Peng assembly hall. From 1938 to 1949, Peng Guixiang introduced Jin Deshan and the Lame to over eleven nearby villages and lineages. Jin and the Lame taught the Yellow Crane invulnerability rituals at these communities and helped them establish their own Yellow Crane organizations.

Material incentives played an essential role in Peng Guixiang's 'advertising' the Yellow Crane techniques. When Jin Deshan and the Lame went to one community and taught the Yellow Crane techniques, they often received fifty kilograms of grain as an honorarium. Those who introduced Jin and the Lame would usually get one-third of the payment and share it with the members within their own assembly halls [PPSA Z1-1-53 1950]. In another case, Peng Wanggui from the Peng lineage joined the Yellow Crane Society in 1938. He fought during the second feud between the Peng and Hong lineages. Then, in 1948, at the invitation of the Zheng lineage, Peng Wanggui led his own Yellow Crane Society in a feud against the Xiong lineage, claiming five or six fatalities [PPSA Z1-2-162 1951-53; PPSA Z1-9-105 1958]. Although it is unknown whether Peng Wanggui received any material compensation from the Zheng lineage, local martial arts groups indeed became 'professional mercenaries' and dominant actors in feuding conflicts between lineages in Poyang County.

In 1948, another lineage conflict broke out between the Zheng lineage and the Xiong lineage because of disputes over taxation and conscription. The Xiong family immediately invited a few Big Sword Society masters to their village and established their own assembly halls, killing two Zheng lineage members during a feud. Being outraged, the Zheng lineage invited several Yellow Crane martial arts teachers, including the Lame, to build their Yellow Crane organizations. During the following seven days, seven Yellow Crane teachers taught the Zheng lineage people how to create charms, worship deities, practice invulnerability rituals, as well as fighting techniques [PPSA Z1-2-162 1951-53; PPSA Z1-9-105 1958].

During June of 1948, more than eighty Zheng lineage Yellow Crane Society members, and over one hundred and fifty non-members, marched to the Xiong Village with weapons and shields, firmly believing in the effectiveness of the Yellow Crane invulnerability rituals that they had just learned. They strictly followed the rituals of the Yellow Crane Society and fought bravely against the Xiong lineage. The feud began around eight o'clock in the morning and lasted for three hours. Seven people from the Xiong lineage alliance were

killed while the Zheng lineage lost three people in the battle. In 1948, there were three instances of large-scale feuds between the two sides, but smaller scale conflicts broke out more than ten times. The Zheng lineage even used a machine gun during two feuds in September of 1948 and burnt several houses in the Xiong Village. However, one Zheng lineage schoolmaster, Zheng Wenxiang, was killed in the feud during September, which terribly discouraged the people's belief in the Yellow Crane Society's invulnerability rituals. People from the Zheng lineage gradually lost interest in the Yellow Crane Society [PPSA Z1-9-105 1958].

Although both feuding cases above were directly caused by competition over material interests, the participation of the Yellow Crane Society and the Big Sword Society intensified the level of violence and vitalized the enthusiasm of the feuding participants. In these cases, we can see a clear network of wandering martial arts teachers that initially began their careers resisting bandits but later turned to supporting other forms of violent internal conflict. The job of a martial arts teacher, such as Jin Deshan and the Lame, was by nature not associated with any moral obligation in maintaining peace within the community. Most martial arts teachers were careerists who relied on their unique skills to make a living and expand their economic interests. Consequently, whenever there was a need for professional training in martial arts, there was the presence of wandering martial arts teachers.

After the death of the first Yellow Crane grandmaster Xiong Xinzhai in 1936, the new leaders Jin Deshan and the Lame became more active and expansive than their predecessors. Jin Deshan participated in building all the Yellow Crane assembly halls in the Peng lineage. The 1945 new assembly hall established by Jin Deshan in Sanmiaoqian, for example, was also constructed for the purpose of feuding. The Sanmiaoqian and Yinjiagou Villages were competing for the grassland that could be used for feeding oxen. After an initial feud broke out in 1943, people from Sanmiaoqian invited Jin Deshan and established their own Yellow Crane Society to fight against the Yinjiagou Village [PPSA Z1-4-347 1953].

Besides the martial arts groups established by local well-known teachers like Jin Deshan and the Lame, other poor people also chose the path of becoming martial arts teachers and made a living from it. Such was the case of Dong Bakui. Born in 1917, Dong was from a poor peasant family. Similar to many poor people in rural China, Dong joined a pirate gang in 1940 and robbed several ships on the Poyang Lake in the following years. In June of 1946, Dong quit his bandit career and joined the Big Sword Society. Five months later, in November, the Jiang lineage invited Dong's Big Sword Society to participate in a feud against the Zhang lineage. Dong killed one person from the Zhang lineage in the feud. In 1947, Dong spent the whole year as a wandering Big Society

teacher in Poyang, teaching martial arts. Dong was also a leading Big Sword teacher in the feuds between the Zheng lineage and the Xiong lineage in 1948 [PPSA Z1-6-463 1955].

Although feuding was nothing new in rural society in China, the proliferation of the martial arts groups and invulnerability rituals significantly intensified these conflicts and made them a significant destabilizing social problem. During the 1950s, when people talked about the feuds between the Zheng and Xiong lineages, sometimes they referred to it as the feuds between the Yellow Crane Society and the Big Sword Society. Feuding lineages and the martial arts groups entered symbiotic relations: participants in feuds needed the martial arts groups to improve their power, while the martial arts teachers needed feuding to promote their careers. Such reciprocal 'benefits' turned violence into a legitimate channel for accumulating power in rural society. Under a society with little state intervention at the local level, it was the use of violence through martial arts groups that established the equilibrium between competing interest groups.

CONCLUSION

Rural martial groups, well-known for their invulnerability rituals, must be understood in the context of social insecurity in China during both the late imperial and modern times. Rebellions, regime changes, warlordism, and many other social problems had made rural China a horrible place during the Republican era. Among these threats, banditry was a prevalent issue. In order to protect their homes, local leaders invited wandering martial arts teachers from outside to teach them invulnerability rituals and organize self-defense groups. The emergence of rural martial arts groups was protective in nature. Once settled down, however, martial arts teachers and their groups took advantage of the existing internal conflicts and became careerists who promoted the use of violence in resolving local disputes. Rural martial arts groups were both the local protectors and trouble-makers.

When the CCP came into power after 1949, the elimination of bandits and existing rural power structures completely destroyed the roots which supported the existence of rural martial arts groups. Invulnerability rituals and legendary wandering martial arts masters are now just myths in martial arts literature.

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