

The Chinese Bandit Menace in 1930

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ABSTRACT: 1930 was a troublesome year for the United States and the entire world. The Great Depression troubled every economy and even highly industrialized countries struggled to stay afloat. This time was especially challenging for underdeveloped countries such as China. Because of China's underdeveloped economy, its government was, for the most part, unable to help the citizens starving in the countryside. Compounding this problem was the civil war to the north. The government pulled the majority of its troops to the north to help put down the rebellion. This left the south empty of military protection and ripe for bandit attacks. As the bandits' success grew, so did their numbers, as many of the once law-abiding citizens turned to banditry as a means of survival.

During the early part of the twentieth century, China endured extreme political and economic unrest. The newly-installed National People's Government struggled to control this geographically massive country during a period when depression rocked the the entire world. China, an underdeveloped agrarian nation, fared worse than more industrialized nations. When famine struck the countryside, many law-abiding citizens turned to banditry as a means of survival. Indeed, banditry became a widespread epidemic affecting mostly the southern portion of China. This paper will examine the political and economic causes of the increase in the number of bandits in China in the year 1930.

Banditry in 1930 reached astounding proportions. Some estimated that there were more than 500,000 people in these gangs.¹ Peasants and farmers alike joined these outlaw gangs in record numbers. The bandit gangs were not typical gangs. They were not just a few outlaws holding up merchants and villagers for money. Instead, the gangs were often very large and usually consisted of many former law-abiding citizens who were forced to make a choice between starvation and banditry. Controlling territories as expansive as a large United States county, the gangs ranged in size from 100 to 10,000 people.² Women also joined the bandit gangs, some even becoming leaders of these gangs.³

In an article in the *New York Times*, Rabbi Louis K. Levitsky of Temple Israel, who had witnessed the crisis in China firsthand, stated, "The military-political situation in China today is fundamentally caused by a nation-wide lack of food."⁴ By May of 1930 the price of rice had reached its highest price in years, and many Chinese citizens simply

could not afford to buy it anymore.⁵ In fact, only the wealthy could afford the exorbitant prices that this staple of Chinese life commanded. Many floods had ruined crops and left villagers without any other means of livelihood contributing to this dramatic price increase. Moreover, after farmers harvested the few crops that remained, the military often forcibly took the crops to feed the troop or they were stolen by bandits. Consequently, many farmers turned to banditry themselves in order to survive. Conditions became so serious in the Wei River district that reports of parents eating their children emerged.⁶ Faced with these conditions, gangs found recruiting new members an easy task. The choices available to many peasants were starvation, cannibalism, or banditry. Although people of all nations faced hard times during the Great Depression, countries with a more developed economic system fared better than those without. China still raised half of its revenue from custom duties, compared to the United States' one percent.⁷ China's lack of industrialization meant that the government could offer its citizens no help during the famine.

Hallett Abend of the *New York Times*, wrote in the July 13 issue of the paper, "In the Great Yangtse Valley thousands of bandits and communists, born of famine conditions and emboldened by absence of government troops in civil war, scourged towns along the river." Early in 1930, civil war broke out in China, and the government relocated many of its troops to combat the rebel forces in the north leaving the south empty of military protection. Bandits seized this opportunity and began to ravage the countryside. Gangs quickly overpowered what little military resistance existed and took control of many provinces. Reports catalogue the existence of bandit gangs in the provinces of Hunan, Kiangsi, Hupeh, Szechwan, Anwei, Kiangsu, Fukien, Kwangtung, and all areas south of the Yangste Valley. According to an article in the *New York Times*, government laws were all but abandoned in the affected areas.⁸ The provincial governments repeatedly asked for military assistance to combat the bandits, but none was forthcoming until the army had put down the disturbance in

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1. "500,000 Chinese Armed to Factional Armies," *New York Times*, 30 March 1930, Section 3, p. 8.

2. *Ibid*

3. "Keeps Novel Method of Curbing Banditry," *New York Times*, 23 February 1930, Section 3, p. 8.

4. "Bandits Swarming on the Wuhan Cities," *New York Times*, 25 May 1930, Section 1, p. 3.

5. "Food Riots in China: Banditry Unchecked," *New York Times*, 13 May 1930, Section 1, p. 10.

6. "Chang in No Haste to March on North," *New York Times*, 9 April 1930, Section 1, p. 11.

7. Carter Vaughn Findley and John Alexander Murray Rothney, *Twentieth-Century World*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1994), p. 223.

8. "Drive on Shantung Threatens Nanking," *New York Times*, 15 May 1930, Section 1, p. 9.

the north. In fact, it was not until the middle of November that the government developed plans to defeat the bandit gangs.⁹ By then, many had built strongholds in the provinces they controlled. Many peasants had joined the successful bandit ranks. Gangs often abducted missionaries working in their provinces and these religious persons received little or no help from the government. The government occasionally intervened by beheading a few of the bandit leaders in the hopes that other gang members would be scared into hiding.¹⁰ This approach was invariably ineffectual. Another government plan, initiated in early February, was to absorb the bandit forces into the government's ranks and then have the bandits become the rulers of the areas that they had previously terrorized.¹¹ The government implemented this plan in early 1930 but was still fighting the bandits at the end of the year. Reports of slain bandits and recaptured territory abounded, but just as many reports noted that the bandits still had the upper hand.

Bishop D.T. Hungting, of the American Church Mission and was one of the many missionaries who had spent time in China, stated in the *New York Times*, "the officials are doing nothing to help the people, reducing them to a state where banditry is the only means left to them to obtain a livelihood."¹² In a time when famine, depression, and banditry gripped the country, the peasants looked to the government for support, but the government was unable to help them. During this time of tribulation, Communism gained popularity in China.

Communism was not a new idea to China in 1930, but the trying conditions of the time and the perceived weakness of the government persuaded many to become supporters of Communism. For a time, it was believed that the Communist forces and the bandit gangs were separate entities. But on August 8, the *New York Times* reported that the Communists had begun enlisting bandits into their ranks.¹³ Even before this was known, the government had searched a building in Fukien and had found documents that proved it was the Communist headquarters for the bandits that had attacked the Fukien, Kiangsi, and Kwangtung Provinces.¹⁴ Many people of the time suspected that most of the bandits were Communists. A report in the May 19 issue of the *New York Times* supports this idea. The story stated, "it is now realized that [this] is no sporadic bandit attack but part of a well conceived plan by Communist elements to take advantage of the absence of troops."¹⁵ In fact, not all of the bandit gangs had communist ties, but it is possible that many did. With little help from the government during the economic and political troubles of the time, the people showed willingness to listen to anyone who would give them hope. According to a *New*

York Times article that appeared on August 4, "China's Communists have ceased to be merely roving bands of thieves and lawless soldiers. Instead they are genuine converts to Russia's [C]ommunism...poverty-stricken farmers by the thousands are joining China's [C]ommunist ranks . . . in the belief that by such a blood bath they will achieve social equality and material prosperity."¹⁶

More than giving people hope, the Communist movement also gave them someone to blame. The Communists tapped into the ancient Chinese feeling of superiority¹⁷ and laid the blame for the country's ills on foreigners and capitalists. A general dislike of foreigners and missionaries increased as food-stuffs declined. During an attack on the Yangtze River, the bandits actually waved a banner that read "Down with Imperialism, capitalism, foreigners, and religion!"¹⁸

This dislike of foreigners and missionaries explains many of the attacks by the bandits. During the aforementioned raid on the headquarters of Communist activity in Fukien province, documents later found supported the fact that the Communists, in order to raise money for their cause, had directed the attacks on foreigners and wealthy Chinese.¹⁹ Bandits often carried out these attacks. Bandits reigned over at least eight provinces in Southern China and quite possibly more. There were hundreds of villages attacked by bandits in the year 1930. The bandits raided and looted the villages killing many residents and abducted others. Often they burned down villages and left no traces of the communities existence. Reports of these attacks were frequent in the newspapers of the time.

The February 16 issue of the *New York Times* details how bandits overtook the village of Liyang. Apparently 500 of the bandits entered the city as farmers; and, after night fell, they overpowered the guards and let in the rest of the gang, which consisted of some 3,000 men. Nanking troops came and drove the bandits out, only to be driven out themselves a few days later by the bandits. The bandits then murdered and looted the villagers, leaving with an estimated \$3,000,000 in goods.²⁰ Similarly, 3,000 bandits attacked Szean in the northern Chekiang province. Before the looting began, however, the merchants of the town agreed to pay the bandits a tidy sum of \$50,000 to prevent the pillaging of their village. The bandits agreed to this settlement; but before it could become a reality, the provincial troops arrived and drove off the bandits.²¹

The Widow Chang, a notorious female bandit leader, and her 200 bandits reportedly attacked 500 villages in central Honan Province. In May of 1930 many of the villagers were either murdered or kidnapped.²² Also in May, bandits cap-

9. Hallett Abend, "China Adopts Plans to Ease Big Burden," *New York Times*, 17 November 1930, Section 1, p. 9.

10. Hallett Abend, "Moscow is Behind Drive on Changsha," *New York Times*, 12 September 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

11. "Keeps Novel Method of Curbing Banditry," *New York Times*, 23 February 1930, Section 3, p. 8.

12. "British Missionary is Slain in China," *New York Times*, 4 April 1930, Section 1, p. 10.

13. Hallett Abend, "Reds Push Activity North of Yangtze," *New York Times*, 8 August 1930, Section 1, p. 4.

14. "Hankow Forces Out to Check Bandits," *New York Times*, 17 May 1930, Section 2, p. 6.

15. "Nanking Gaining in War with North," *New York Times*, 9 May 1930, Section 1, p. 12.

16. "Foreigners in Flight Before Chinese Reds," *New York Times* 4 August 1930; section 1:1.

17. Carter Vaughn Findley and John Alexander Murray Rothney, *Twentieth-Century World*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1994), p. 219-220.

18. "Navy on Defensive on Yangtze River," *New York Times* 11 July 1930; section 1:8.

19. "Hankow Forces Out to Check Bandits," *New York Times* 17 May 1930; section 1:6.

20. "Bandit Gangs Ravage Chinese Provinces," *New York Times*, 16 February 1930, Section 3, p. 8.

21. "Many Slain in China in Raids by Bandits," *New York Times*, 26 April 1930, Section 1, p. 6.

22. "Civil War Raging in China on 170-Mile Battle Front; Nanking in Grave Peril," *New York Times*, 11 May 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

tured Simakow and Hanchwang. This gang then told the village of Tsaitien they had to pay a ransom of \$800,000 to avoid an attack.²³

A gang of bandits attacked the village of Lishsian following a month long siege. According to reports, 8,000 people were killed, which accounts for almost the entire population of this village except for the girls who the bandits carried off.²⁴ However, Lishsian was not the only village to endure such attacks. The province of Kiangsi was continually overrun by bandits. The southern part was attacked by 75,000 bandits, who looted and burned villages along their path.²⁵ On November 11, the *New York Times* reported that over the last two months, 2500 lost their lives, and 10,000 were held for ransom in this province.²⁶

The Chinese felt that they were superior to the foreigners and tried in every way to keep from becoming Westernized.²⁸ But after the Boxer Rebellion, it was evident that not even the Chinese could forestall the influence of outside cultures. Western culture was, in a sense, forced upon them. This is especially true in the case of missionaries. They came to China with the express desire to convert the Chinese from the age-old tradition of Confucianism to Christianity. By doing so, these missionaries also forced their culture on the Chinese. Many Chinese were resentful of this forced intrusion and lashed out at the missionaries. Also, foreign countries had more money than China did. As a result, those countries were more willing to pay ransoms for their citizens than China was. So, logically speaking, if any money was to be made from these attacks, it would have to come from the foreigners.

The village of Kanchow in Kiangsi province was besieged repeatedly by bandits during 1930 because this village was known to have missionaries residing there. By early December 1930, bandits had reportedly abducted and refused to release twenty-five missionaries in China.²⁹ Many more had been abducted but either escaped, had been released or killed. On February 3, 1930, three female Finnish missionaries were reported abducted, and unconfirmed reports claimed that they had been killed.³⁰ The confirmation came on April 11. The three women were Miss Cajander, age 66, Miss Ingman, age 56, and Miss Hedengren, age 49. It was believed that Miss Cajander had died of exhaustion and that the captors had shot the other two women.³¹

The bandits who captured the Finnish women struck again

in March. The Reverend and Mrs. R. W. Porteus and Miss N. E. Gemmel were captured in Kiangsi province. Their ransom was \$8,000 apiece.³² The bandits were offered \$500 for them, but the offer was refused and \$60,000 demanded instead.³³ Then, on April 28, Nina Gemmell was released from her captors.³⁴ On May 2, it was reported that Mr. and Mrs. Porteus were expected to be released soon.³⁵ After her release, Miss Gemmell was quoted as saying, "The Communist leader charged [that] we were capitalists taking people's money; that we were leading people astray with religious superstitions; that we were affecting a cultural invasion, and that we had taken the best land, leaving the people the worst."³⁶

The campaign against the foreigners continued throughout the year. On March 9, the *New York Times* reported yet another abduction, that of Mrs. Oscar Hellestead, kidnapped during a bandit raid of the village of Sinyeh in the Honan Province. She claimed that the bandits forced the 2,000 captives to walk across open country with their feet and hands tied together. Anyone who fell down or could not continue was either shot or left to die. Fortunately, the bandits released Mrs. Hellestead without any ransom being paid.³⁷

Mrs. Hellestead's case was an uncommon one. The bandits hardly ever released the captives without any sort of ransom being paid. Rather, the bandits typically demanded exorbitant amounts of money. However, the captors rarely received the amount that they had demanded. Often it was a substantial amount less than what had been requested if they received any money at all. Missionary headquarters frequently had a "no-pay" policy. The China Inland Mission Headquarters, for instance, stated that it would pay no ransoms to bandits, because acceding to the bandits' demands would only endanger the lives of all other missionaries.³⁸ Those at Headquarters reasoned that if the bandits could get ransom from one mission, then the bandits were likely to try to get the same results from another. By refusing to pay a ransom, this Headquarters hoped that the bandits would give up the attacks on missionaries as no longer profitable. The Maryknoll Seminary, which followed the same policy, reported that the number of abductions had decreased substantially.³⁹ Even with these policies in place, the fact remains that most of the many missionaries captured owed their lives to the ransoms their superiors paid. The bandits that did not receive the requested ransoms held the missionaries' fates in their hands.

One of the more disturbing cases was the abduction of

23. "Hankow Forces Out to Check Bandits," *New York Times*, 17 May 1930, Section 1, p. 6.

24. "Feng Still Puzzle in Chinese Conflict," *New York Times*, 2 October 1930, Section 1, p. 5.

25. "Yen Plans Fight on Nanking to End," *New York Times*, 9 October 1930, Section 1, p. 7.

26. "Americans Fleeing Red Drive in China," *New York Times*, 11 November 1930, Section 1, p. 8.

27. "Foreigners are Taxed to Suppress Bandits," *New York Times*, 14 December 1930, Section 3, p. 8.

28. Carter Vaughn Findley and John Alexander Murray Rothney, *Twentieth-Century World*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1994), p. 219-221.

29. "Chinese Reds Free 2 American Women," *New York Times*, 4 December 1930, Section 1, p. 11.

30. "Missionaries Safe. Our Consul is Told," *New York Times*, 28 March 1930, Section 1, p. 10.

31. "Hope Lost in China for Finnish Women," *New York Times*, 11 April 1930, Section 1, p. 8.

32. "3 More Missionaries Kidnaped in China," *New York Times*, 31 March 1930, Section 1, p. 10.

33. "Nanking Acts to Aid Missionaries Held," *New York Times*, 5 April 1930, Section 1, p. 9.

34. "Two More Missionaries Escape," *New York Times*, 28 April 1930, Section 1, p. 11.

35. "Reds Real Menace to Nanking's Rule," *New York Times*, 2 May 1930, Section 1, p. 7.

36. "Nanking Acts to Aid Missionaries Held," *New York Times*, 5 April 1930, Section 1, p. 9.

37. Hallett Abend, "Tells of Captivity of Chinese Bandits," *New York Times*, 9 March 1930, Section 3, p. 7.

38. "British Missionary is Slain in China," *New York Times*, 4 April 1930, Section 1, p. 10.

39. "'Red' Army in China Traps 11 Americans," *New York Times*, 22 March 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

Miss Eleanor June Harrison and Miss Edith Nettleton that occurred in July of 1930 at Chungan in the Fukien province. Their ransom was originally set at \$500,000.⁴⁰ When the ransom was not forthcoming, the bandits cut off one of Miss Nettleton's fingers and sent it along with the same ransom demand to the provincial authorities.⁴¹ The Church Missionary Society authorized a representative to pay \$10,000 in gold for the women's release.⁴² But the women's release was never realized. The report came that they had been killed on October 4.⁴³ Later reports mentioned that the killing resulted from a misunderstanding. The bandits actually had agreed to the ransom offered to them and they had received the money. But when provincial troops attacked the bandits headquarters; the outlaws, believing that they had been betrayed, beheaded the two missionaries.⁴⁴

Missionaries were not the only targets of these vicious attacks. The bandits also attacked their fellow Chinese citizens. Of course, the Chinese so abducted were not the common peasants that had joined the gangs of bandits. The targets usually were the wealthier Chinese, government officials, or the Chinese who worked for foreign companies. The wealthy Chinese were targets simply because they had the resources to pay the ransom. If the bandits had taken a peasant farmer, for instance, they ordinarily would not have received the ransom demanded. The peasants had a hard enough time keeping food on the table. The wealthy Chinese, on the other hand, could afford to pay the bandits. Also, these wealthy Chinese were usually capitalists, and thus repugnant to bandit gangs. By capturing these people, the bandits accomplished two objectives at once: the waging of war against Capitalism and the procuring of money to finance this war.

These peasants-turned-bandits attacked governmental officials for many of the same reasons. Once again, the officials had more money available to them than most people. The government would be more likely to pay a ransom to get back a general of its army than to save a peasant from a province far removed from the capital, especially during this time of civil war, when China needed every military man it could get. Also, the peasants were not too keen on the government at that time. The people were starving in the provinces and had resorted to banditry as a means of survival because there was no help from the government. Chinese who were employed by foreigners were attacked because they were profiting from capitalism and because they were directly related to the foreign invasion of the country. Such workers were profiting from what the bandits saw as a wrong and unjust practice. These were the people who could also better afford to pay the ransoms. In addition to these political and economic reasons,

it was reported on July 31 that the Communists had put a \$200 price on the head of every foreigner, Chinese official, or Chinese employed by a foreigner.⁴⁵ As a result, the attacks on these people proliferated.

One such attack came in early January 1930. Admiral Yang Shu-Chang, the Commander in Chief of the Chinese Navy, was abducted along with six Fukien provincial officers during a dinner. The bandits entered the hall, covered the guests with guns while confederates tied up the seven prisoners, and then escaped without any difficulties.⁴⁶ On February 9 came a report that bandits were looting the towns and abducting the magistrates (town officials) and the merchants (wealthy Chinese) and holding them for ransom.⁴⁷ On April 1 the village of Soochow was attacked; and fifty-seven wealthy Chinese were abducted. The bandits demanded ransoms and threatened to kill their captives if they were not received.⁴⁸ Then on May 10 came the report that Yungyang in the Honan province had been attacked. Fifteen thousand Chinese were killed by the 4,000 bandits, but 500 of the wealthier Chinese citizens were carried off for ransom.⁴⁹ Such bandits also attacked foreign companies that conducted business in China.

The Standard Oil Company of New York was attacked many times by bandits during the year of 1930. Its ships were often attacked on the Yangtse river by bandits on the shore with machine guns or trench mortars. But on June 1 there came a report that the Chinese agent of the Standard Oil Company at Changchow had been abducted. He was held for a ransom of \$7,500.⁵⁰ His release was not obtained in the year of 1930.

The number of bandits in China in 1930 was high due to the political and economic situation of the time. Citizens turned bandits were forced by these circumstances to prey upon unsuspecting foreigners and wealthy Chinese. Faced with hunger and the ever-increasing price of food, many peasants faced eminent starvation. They turned to the government for help but got none. The underdeveloped economy could not help the millions starving in the country. Added onto this horrible economic situation was a civil war waging in the northern part of the country. The south, empty of military protection soon became the target of bandit gangs. These bandit gangs stole food and money from the peasants with little to no resistance from the government. Many peasants, unable to cope with the problems facing them, saw banditry as the only solution to their dilemma. If they could not get food legally, then they would do it illegally. And so, due to economic and political problems facing the masses, the bandit gangs grew at alarming rates in 1930.

40. "Rebels Push Gains Nearer to Nanking," *New York Times*, 19 July 1930, Section 1, p. 4.

41. "Reds Executed 2,000 in Changsha Seizure," *New York Times*, 6 August 1930, Section 1, p. 6.

42. "Britain Dispatches Troops to Hankow," *New York Times*, 7 August 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

43. "Missionaries Slain by Chinese Bandits," *New York Times*, 4 October 1930, Section 1, p. 9.

44. "Error Led to Chinese Kill," *New York Times*, 7 October 1930, Section 1, p. 24.

45. "Reds in China Wound 5 American Sailors," *New York Times*, 31 July 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

46. "Chinese Naval Chief Abducted; Bandits Interrupt Banquet," *New York Times*, 9 January 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

47. "Bandits Terrorize Interior of China," *New York Times*, 9 February 1930, Section 1, p. 8.

48. "Bandits Menacing All of South China," *New York Times*, 1 April 1930, Section 1, p. 8.

49. "Bandits in China Slaughter 15,000," *New York Times*, 10 May 1930, Section 1, p. 10.

50. "Nanking Abandons Changsha to Rebels; Hankow is Menaced," *New York Times*, 1 June 1930, Section 1, p. 1.

Chinese Bandit Menace

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