BANDITS

in Republican China

USSR

HEILONGJIANG

MONGOLIA

JILIN

CHAHAR

REHE   FENGTIAN

SUIYUAN

NINGXIA

ZHILI   KOREA

SHANXI

SHANDONG

QINGHAI   GANSU

SHAANXI   HENAN   JIANGSU

ANHUI

XIZANG   SICHUAN   HUBEI

ZHEJIANG

JIANG-XI   FUJIAN

GUIZHOU   HUNAN

YUNNAN   GUANGXI   GUANGDONG

TAIWAN

INDO-CHINA

SIAM

Phil Billingsley

BANDITS
in Republican China

PHIL BILLINGSLEY

For Gonchan and Nonchan,
Whose share in the making of this book was greater
than they know.

And for T. H.,
Whose anger and affection played an equal part.

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK first saw the light of day as a Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Leeds in the summer of 1974. A number of people provided valuable assistance in the compilation of that dissertation, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge those debts here. For passing on his unflagging enthusiasm in the face of what many assured me was an "unresearchable" subject, my first thanks go to my supervisor Bill Jenner. Owen Lattimore, who oversaw the research for the first few months, was a constant source of firsthand information drawn from his own inimitable experiences along the Inner Asian Frontiers of China. Christopher Howe, as director of the Contemporary China Institute where I was employed as Research Fellow from 1972 to 1973, read sections of the draft for me, and the fruits of his criticism remain today. The late Ryōtai Kaneko of the Tōyō Bunko in Tokyo opened the doors of his private office to me long after those of the general reading room were slammed, and is warmly remembered not only for his help but also for his firm and selfless friendship. Lucien Bianco and Jonathan Unger also contributed valuable constructive criticism of the completed dissertation, which helped launch it onto the road to publication. Finally, I owe a debt of appreciation to Mr. Leslie Lyall and the staff of the China Inland Mission in London for readily opening their offices and files to me in the winter of 1970. Sincere thanks are also due to Charles Curwen, David Goodman, John Hall, Winston Hsieh, John Lust, Peter Nolan, Nozawa Yutaka, Ogata Yoichi, Shimada Kenji, Tim Spengler, Ronald Suleski, Shu T. Tanaka, Anthony Whitehorn, and Eugene Wu, all of whom helped, perhaps more than they realize, at various stages of the work.

After a hiatus of more than four years I began revising the dissertation for publication in 1979. As the text grew in length and complexity a number of people were once again kind enough to read it for me. Ralph Thaxton and Elizabeth Perry, who undertook to read the first draft, gave me important advice on reorganizing what was threatening to grow into

Preface

Unscrupulous, defiant, stern as the fates, but true in covenant and brave in conflict, these men and women are not of the smiling, temperate, human sort; they are terrible: beings of the cave and the mountain den. Their implacable demand . . . for a justice which the law is too feeble and too corrupt to give underlines the cruelties and oppressions of an age when right is defenseless and authority takes the side of the wrong-doer.

— G.T. Candlin, Chinese Fiction *(Chicago, 1898),*
quoted in Ruhlmann 1960: 169.

"BANDITS": few people could claim to be totally unmoved by at least one of the variety of images the word evokes. Whether a symbol of romantic protest or the object of self-righteous anger, bandits and their basic stance of living off the proceeds of others have produced strong preconceived notions. Indeed, systematic analysis of banditry and the conditions that produced and nourished it was almost non-existent until recently.

In 1969 the English social historian Eric Hobsbawm published a seminal work entitled *Bandits*, an extended treatment of the subject of one chapter of his earlier *Primitive Rebels* (1959). Despite its modest length, the second book was the cue for a spate of scholarly research on the topic of banditry. The pioneering nature of Hobsbawm's work not only gave it a kind of mythical quality but also ensured that it would become the target of scrutiny and elaboration from various quarters. During the years since its appearance, scholars have examined the phenomenon of banditry in every continent of the globe.[1]

Despite the title of his 1969 book, Hobsbawm made it clear on the first page that he would be dealing with only one variety of bandits, namely, "those who are *not* regarded as simple criminals by public opinion . . . [but] 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." [2] This "social banditry," as Hobsbawm called it, could be found "wherever societies are based on agriculture (including pastoral economies) and consist largely of peasants and landless labourers ruled, oppressed and exploited by someone else—lords, towns, governments, lawyers, or even banks." [3]

The defining characteristic of "social banditry," as spelled out by Hobsbawm, was its strong connections to the peasantry. Operating within the peasant community that had given them birth, social bandits in their words and actions reflected the morality of that community; and as long as they did so (such as by choosing victims from among those defined by the community as its enemies) support was usually forthcoming. The relationship was a mutual one: the social bandit remained in the local community because its support—a conspiracy of silence concerning the gang's whereabouts, a network of informers supplying knowledge of the enemy—would be lacking elsewhere; the community in turn maintained its support because the bandit offered at least limited protection, and symbolized its unspoken resentment toward the officially sanctioned order.

The fact that the deeds leading the social bandit into outlawry did not contravene local values is significant, implying an ideological conflict between the local community and the wider community—the state. The social bandit was the armed representative of the former against the efforts of the latter to impose its own values by the use of military force. The social bandit's choice of victims from among the enemies of the poor—the rich and privileged—rather than from the oppressed community itself was an active expression of that conflict of values.

On the other hand, as Hobsbawm unequivocally stressed, social banditry contained certain built-in limitations that made it less than revolutionary: "As individuals, they are not so much political or social rebels, let alone revolutionaries, as peasants who refuse to submit.... *En masse*, they are little more than symptoms of crisis and tension in their society.... Banditry itself is therefore not a programme for peasant society but a form of self-help to escape it in particular circumstances." [4]

Bandits, that is, were primarily interested in their own survival, and this fact provided the point of departure for Anton Blok's fundamental critique of Hobsbawm's views. By paying too much attention to the peasants and to the bandits themselves, asserted Blok, Hobsbawm had failed to take into account the relationship of the peasant community to higher levels of society around it, "which included the landed gentry and the formal authorities." [5] Bandits, as one aspect of the community, were as constrained by that relationship as anyone: "Given the specific conditions of outlawry, bandits have to rely very strongly on other people.... Of all categories, the peasants are weakest.... It may hence be

argued that unless bandits find political protection, their reign will be short." [6]

The revolutionary limitations of the social bandit were attributed by Blok not to modest ambition or a lack of appropriate organization and propaganda, but to the fact that "their first loyalty is *not* to the peasants." [7] Bandits with political ties tended to "prevent and suppress" autonomous peasant activity, either by putting down that activity through terror, or by "carving out avenues of upward mobility" and thereby lessening class tensions. [8] By suggesting an alternative route to wealth, power, and happiness, banditry ultimately impedes revolutionary potential. [9] In short, according to Blok, banditry is "essentially conservative," expressing no more than "man's pursuit of honour and power." [10]

Blok illustrated his argument with examples drawn from his research on the Sicilian Mafia, primarily Salvatore Giuliano, "who shot down peaceful Communist demonstrators upon orders of high-ranking politicians," and Liggio, whose activities were "primarily aimed at the demobilization of the peasants who had just begun to organize themselves in order to attain agrarian reform." [11] Other bandits who had come to terms with their overlords were given special charge of public security, an avenue to "respectability" that was institutionalized in the Mafia.

Despite the apparent disparity between Blok's and Hobsbawm's positions, detailed case studies such as those of Singelmann and Lewin on northeastern Brazil have generally shown both their arguments to be true. Bandits, that is, were "social" in the sense that anyone with ties to other people is social, yet, their social ties extended not only to the powerless peasants but also to the powerful overlords. For bandits who proclaimed themselves champions of the poor knew only too well that long-term survival meant forging some relationship with the elite. The book that follows is an attempt, focusing on the Chinese case, to understand better the nature of that paradoxical situation.

Twentieth-century Chinese banditry, by the sheer number of its practitioners, made itself impossible to ignore. By placing not only banditry itself but also the individuals who filled its ranks in the context of a system of unequally distributed power and privilege, the present study uses a perspective that is rarely taken into adequate account in studies of China's rural unrest. Instead of approaching the "bandit problem" in relation to other issues such as peasant mobilization, warlord control, or the organization of mercenary armies, this book focuses upon the bandits themselves, emphasizing the close relationship between sociopolitical environment and consciousness. Usually portrayed as the desperate, frenzied reaction of men with a paranoid grudge against

society, banditry was on the contrary often a rational course of action taken in response to particular natural or social conditions and as a means of satisfying certain deeply felt needs. In the process of the discussion some bandits will appear in a darker light than others; but this does not deny them the right to serious consideration by historians, and the significance of their behavior will be closely examined. Among other things, this will involve jettisoning the standard manipulationist vocabulary that saw bandits as living in "lairs," referred to areas with strong bandit traditions as "brigand-infested," and envisaged bandits as "skulking" rather than walking, "scuttling" rather than marching.

Bandits, in the end, were people caught up in a grim situation and reacting to it as appropriately as they could. The massive increase in banditry in the years following the 1911 Revolution underlined as well as anything else could the harshness of peasants' lives during those years. Amid a general atmosphere of violence and insecurity encompassing all China and every level of society, bandits looked out for themselves just as anyone else did. The literature on China, however, has treated them only from the perspective of those whose bitter enemies they were. Terms such as "outrages," "looting," "atrocities," and so on expressed the values of the propertied classes and totally masked the bandits' own perceptions of what they were doing. Consequently, though innumerable observers tossed the time-worn bandit clichés around, and some even experienced bandits at first hand by becoming their ransom "tickets," few considered them worthy of study in their own right. As one eminent authority has already pointed out, bandits have usually meant more to the security policeman than to the social historian.[12]

Evidence for the present study has been drawn from all over China, but principally from the northern half of the country, with the main focus on the peripheral areas of south and west Henan, Anhui, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Shaanxi. Despite regional variations, the common properties uniting bandit attitudes and activities everywhere is remarkable. It is the author's hope, therefore, that this book will provide a basis for generalizations about Chinese bandits as a whole.

Chapter 1 begins by outlining the nature of banditry and its twentieth-century manifestations. The word "bandits" became a key motif of early twentieth-century China, but the difficulties of gaining a clear view of what was meant by the term are enormous. The authorities manipulated the word to discredit their political enemies, and there was a widespread tendency to confuse banditry with other forms of association such as secret societies. Just how wide a range of activities the word "bandit" could encompass is indicated by the careers of the three major chiefs introduced to round off the chapter: Bai Lang, who led a powerful

army of peasant rebels; Lao Yangren, who masterminded the "soldier-bandit" strategy and led tens of thousands of his followers on rampages across north China; and Fan Zhongxiu, the "bandit-militarist" who spent twenty years alternating between outlawry, the army, and the revolution.

Chapter 2 looks at the physical conditions conducive to banditry: political and geographical remoteness from provincial or county core areas; the frequency of natural disasters such as floods or drought; and inhospitable terrain such as mountains and forests, where banditry often seemed a more profitable occupation than farming. Areas with these conditions often saw the creation of actual "bandit villages"; but even where banditry was not chronic, certain times of year, when the resources to sustain life became scarce, saw outbreaks of it. The common denominator in all this was poverty; the insecurity it created provided the backdrop to banditry throughout the ages and all across China. The advent of "warlordism" and the incessant fighting between rival local militarists debased the conditions of life in the countryside still further, with the result that bandits became more numerous than ever. A province-by-province review reveals starkly the close relationship between banditry and warlordism.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed case study of Henan province, defining and explaining both the physical and the social characteristics of those counties traditionally known as "bandit regions," and drawing out the connection between poverty and banditry by employing the distinction between developed and degenerating areas. It then traces the evolution of twentieth-century banditry from the rebellion of Bai Lang in 1912–14 through the rise of the "soldier-bandits" of the 1920's to the all-out "banditization" of the province in the 1930's. By the latter period, joining a bandit gang had come to be regarded as almost the only available form of "life insurance."

The motives that drove men and women into bandit gangs were many and complex, and Chapter 4 seeks to account for them. For most people, banditry was a last resort, and their decision to take the final plunge was based on primal considerations—imminent death from starvation or the inability for various reasons to show their faces in the village. For the majority of bandits it was a temporary activity, resorted to when conditions demanded it and abandoned when farming became viable once more. For the rest it became a permanent way of life that not only satisfied the whims of self-indulgence or sadism but also offered a solution to more profound issues resulting from a particular individual's personality or life-situation.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine bandit gangs from the inside. The ways they came together, the kinds of leadership structure they evolved, the

delegation of power and responsibility within them, and the enforcement of discipline all reflected not only the insecurity of being fugitives from the law but also their complex relationship with the "straight" world and the pervasive influence of the traditional Chinese family. The relationship between leaders and led was no feudal relic but a relative balance of power that made the bandit gang not only a reasonably effective fighting machine but also a body much more responsive to its members' needs and demands than many regular military units. The disciplinary rules major gangs evolved were designed not only to aid the gang in its permanent confrontation with the authorities but also to provide members with a distinct sense of identity.

For most of its participants, banditry meant a life spent on the run, and the emotional state of most rank-and-file bandits reflected the harshness of their lives. At the same time, Chapter 6 shows that banditry offered young men a chance to satisfy some of the basic needs permanently frustrated by the humdrum life in a poor village: the impulse to appear brave and self-confident in the eyes of others, and the need to vent aggressive energy. Although a clear distinction can be made between chiefs and followers, most bandits' behavior suggests that they were seeking the recognition denied them in straight society. Bandit lives were short, however, and the resentment they felt at being forced into such a precarious life, coupled with anxiety about the future, resulted in a powerful current of violence, particularly toward women. To blur the reality of their grim lives as well as to confirm their distinctness from the outside world, bandit communities evolved complex alternative vocabularies and often a repertoire of signs and gestures, which they combined with a comprehensive pattern of speech and behavior taboos.

Chapter 7 takes up bandits' role in the local power structure. The local elite—magistrates, military commanders, and gentry figures—had a vested interest in reaching some sort of modus vivendi with the bandits of their vicinity that would eliminate the need for expensive and dangerous suppression campaigns. For the bandits, too, the realities of power meant that the safest road to realizing their dreams was to come to terms with some political patron. By manipulating their elite connections, bandits were sometimes able to wield considerable local influence. Yet they could not ignore the local peasants completely. Their relationship to them was based on a combination of love and fear, so they cannot be thought of romantically as "liberators"; at the same time, there was a paramount need not to alienate the local community because of the protection it could offer. The result was a special relationship based on common local affiliations without which no bandit gang could survive.

After the inauguration of the Chinese Republic in 1912, banditry underwent a major transformation, as described and analyzed in Chapter

8. The militarization of Chinese society made bandits a potent force and opened up new avenues of advancement for ambitious chiefs. The wholesale absorption of gangs into the regular military, the degeneration of former military units into mammoth, undisciplined bandit gangs, and the manipulation of the new gangs created by the unsettled conditions to destabilize rivals all became fundamental motifs of twentieth-century Chinese politics. So numerous did bandits become that all political operators—including foreign aggressors such as the Japanese—were obliged to seek to win them over to their own side. Far from being no more than pawns in other people's chess games, bandits were in fact a vital factor in the warlord-period political equation, having reached the point where they could not be ignored.

Chapter 9 traces the involvement of bandits in the revolutionary movements from 1911 to 1949 (with a brief glance at events thereafter), showing how revolutionaries by and large inherited the manipulative attitudes of their predecessors, since they were unable to ignore bandits yet unwilling to regard them as anything more than expendable auxiliaries. Bandits in turn reacted to them as they had reacted to earlier patrons. Behind this uneasy relationship was the fact that bandits and revolutionaries were created by and obeyed the dictates of totally different worlds. The mutual distrust was partially eliminated by the patient and thoroughgoing approach of the Communist movement, but in the end the only approach most bandits appreciated was the big stick. Only by managing to establish both political and military dominance did the Communists effectively solve their bandit problem. Even then, in areas like Henan that had a tradition of predatory self-help, banditry continued to be the automatic response to insecurity long after 1949.

Chapter 10 tries to draw some conclusions from the preceding data. It stresses the need for social historians to examine the workings of banditry through the bandits' own eyes, and suggests a connection between banditry and popular attitudes in the peripheral areas where it was most commonly found: a different approach to "law and order" on the part of both the local elite and the peasants; and a different perception of what was or was not "rational" behavior. Given the nature of banditry itself as defined in the preceding pages, I suggest the virtual impossibility of pure "social banditry" and stress instead the situation of bandits themselves within a local structure of power and influence whereby they were obliged to create a viable working relationship with all concerned. Finally, I suggest that the disturbed conditions of the warlord period, creating increased poverty and insecurity throughout China instead of merely in selected areas, broke down the traditional distinction between "center" and "periphery," so that in a sense the whole country beyond the walls of the cities became the "periphery." The bandits created by

this development reacted accordingly: where they had once sought al-
liances with local elite figures to ensure survival, they now did the same
on a national level, creating connections with warlords and other po-
litical figures, and, ultimately, with the Communists and the Japanese.
With this development it could indeed be said, in the words of the de-
spairing cliché so commonly heard after 1911, that China had at last
become a "bandit world."

Contents

Introduction

Whenever there is political decay, history teaches us, there will be bandit outbreaks taking advantage of it. —Nan Yan 1924: 4

Since the Republic was inaugurated, there has been no bandit-free district, nor a year without brigands. —Dai Xuanzhi 1973: 61

Bandits are a disease of China's vitals, and that disease has now begun to affect the critical region around the heart. —Osame 1923: 1

BETWEEN THE TWO Chinese revolutions of 1911 and 1949, newspapers and magazines were filled with lurid reports of bandit-provoked chaos and mayhem in the rural interior. Despite the repeated passage of "anti-bandit" legislation, bandit numbers increased rather than decreased, underlining Lao Zi's famous dictum that "the more laws and ordinances there are, the more thieves and robbers there will be."[1] By 1930 the country's total bandit population was being conservatively estimated at some twenty million,[2] and local gazetteers echoed a popular refrain when they complained that "the nation has all but ceased to be a nation, and is becoming instead a bandits' world!"[3] Chaff to the mill of the domestic law and order brigade among the expatriate community, too, the "bandit problem" became a frequent theme. The accepted treaty-port view of bandits, or "*tufei*," saw only "orgies of murder, robbery, violation of women, and indulgence in opium dreams."[4] Few foreigners saw in banditry the birth pangs of profound social change. At the same time, "bandit outrages" confirmed the racist and imperialist convictions already held by contemporary advocates of the "white man's burden" and provided the pretext for constant threats of foreign intervention. Japanese and American "China watchers" concluded almost simultaneously that China itself was no more than one huge bandit gang ("400,000,000 outlaws"), so that a study of banditry might reveal nothing less than the hidden workings of the Chinese national character

itself.⁵ "China," as one typical treaty-port joke put it, "can't put ban in banditry until she has put the try."⁶

Banditry, unsung and practically unstudied, was one of the commonest peasant reactions to oppression and hardship. In China its origins went back at least to the beginnings of private property and the state, and celebrated bandits of antiquity included the semilegendary Dao Zhi ("Robber Zhi") and Zhuang Jiao ("Robber Zhuang"), both of whom flourished as more or less "noble robbers" during the Warring States period (481–221 B.C.). The former evidently became a sort of bandit "patron saint," with ornate temples dedicated to his memory in at least one of the traditional bandit regions. Even Daoist visions of Utopia evidently assumed the presence of outlaws.⁷

Behind the seemingly repetitive cycle of dynastic decline and renewal spanning some two thousand years of Chinese history lay an equally predictable pattern of popular upheaval characterized by Mao Zedong as "without parallel in world history."⁸ The motive force for these regular upheavals was provided by peasants pushed beyond the point of no return by desperation and encouraged by the promises of salvation held out by millenarian societies like the White Lotus Sect (*Bailian jiao*). Among the first to respond were bandit gangs, and indeed many of the rebel chiefs who challenged the imperial order with varying degrees of success over the years had originally been bandit chiefs.

The rebellion of Li Zicheng at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was a classic case and has been widely drawn upon for comparative data in the present study. Li was a former groom in the government postal service in Shaanxi. After losing his job in 1629, he first became a Ming soldier, then mutinied a year later to join one of the many bandit gangs flourishing in northwest China because of a long famine. In a short time he emerged as a leader and set about bringing the numerous bandits and ex-soldiers like himself into a unified paramilitary federation. By 1641 he was strong enough to establish a provincial base in Henan; in 1644 he proclaimed himself emperor of a new dynasty based in Shaanxi, and within three months his troops were in control of Beijing. Li's triumph was short-lived, however, for his men paid little heed to discipline and soon alienated the city's population, with the result that when the Manchus invaded from the north shortly afterward they faced little resistance. Li fled south with the remnants of his army but was quickly defeated and killed.

Just over two hundred years after Li Zicheng, North China was shaken once again by the Nian Rebellion. Like all other peasant rebellions, it came about as a result of imperial decay and grew in pace with a series of natural disasters whose effects the authorities did little to alleviate. After years of scattered local activity by bandits and secret societies, during