

# 1927

*As the Chinese Communist Party suffered a major defeat at the hands of Chiang Kai-shek in the wake of the massacre and purge of leftists in April 1927, Party leaders once again found themselves questioning the feasibility of a strategy that relied on raising the political consciousness of and organising the urban proletariat. Instead, their attention shifted to the countryside as a site of potential revolutionary change. This essay centres on the formation of the Hailufeng Soviet in 1927 and the emergence of the peasantry as a political category. The particular socioeconomic context of the early twentieth century created a situation in which Communist activists like Peng Pai could see peasant activism and unrest as forming a historically significant 'peasant movement'. For Peng, peasants were becoming landless in Haifeng because of the depredations of global capitalism, and thus were becoming proletarians. The movement to create peasant unions in Haifeng reached its peak in 1927 with the formation of the soviet. The Nationalists repressed the radical government in 1928, and Peng was killed a year later.*

# Organising Rural Society: Disintegrating Rural Governance, Peasant Associations, and the Hailufeng Soviet

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It is not easy to date the beginning of the Hailufeng Soviet (海陆丰苏维埃). Localised uprisings, the formation of peasant associations, landlord killings, and shifting territorial control were ongoing in the years leading up to 1927. Although Communist control over rural areas was far from complete, it was increasingly hard for anti-Communist forces to enter areas of the countryside in the two counties of Haifeng and Lufeng in Guangdong Province.<sup>1</sup> On 1 May 1927, Communist-led peasant forces briefly took over the Haifeng County seat, only to lose it and return to the countryside nine days later. That autumn, Communist and peasant activists pushed for rent resistance under the slogan ‘Land to the Tillers’ (耕者有其田). In September, in a town in the northern part of the county, a small mutiny resulted in a Communist takeover, which the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) designated as a ‘soviet’ (苏维埃). Despite soon losing control of the town, they successfully formed soviets in the countryside in fourteen districts across the two counties. Peasant militias and local Communists entered Haifeng again, forming the Provisional Revolutionary Government, on 1 November—a date often associated with the founding of the Hailufeng Soviet, although the formal name came a few weeks later.<sup>2</sup>

This chaotic period in the spring of 1927 began when the Nationalists split from and suppressed the CCP (see S.A. Smith’s 1927 essay in the present volume). Following the advice of the Communist International (Comintern), the Communists shifted to an insurrectionary strategy. The ‘Nanchang Uprising’ in August and the ‘Autumn Harvest Uprising’ in September were rapidly crushed by ascendant Nationalists, scattering CCP forces in different directions. Mao Zedong famously established a base in the Jinggang Mountains on the border of Jiangxi and Hunan provinces, while other Communist forces from the Nanchang Uprising ended up briefly in eastern Guangdong before dispersing under attack by a much larger Nationalist army. Among the Communist forces was Peng Pai, a

local activist and the son of a landlord from Haifeng. Peng fled to Hong Kong, returning to the newly formed soviet in Haifeng in the middle of November. If the CCP was to survive under these changing political and military conditions, a new social form of political organisation and of relating to the local population was clearly necessary. As a consequence, as it was pushed out of the cities, the Party refocused on the peasants. The Hailufeng Soviet was the first soviet formed in the Chinese Revolution, providing a model for the spread of insurrectionary action and for the transformation of peasant activism into revolutionary power. Soon led by Peng Pai, the soviet would become 'the most radical attack on the rural order until that time'.<sup>3</sup>

### The 'Peasant' as a Political Category

The formation of the Hailufeng Soviet was not the beginning of the peasant movement nor even of militant action in the area, as the zone was already considered a model for rural revolution before the soviet was established. The soviet was, in fact, the result of a long series of events and shifting conditions in which Communist politics and forces joined together with peasant activism, with the 'peasant' (农民) becoming a political category in the process. This political category emerged in the context of China's entry into global capitalism, rapid agrarian change, and sharpening political tensions, at a time when rural networks of labour disintegrated or were restructured. The particular socioeconomic conditions of the late-Qing and early Republican periods created a situation in which people like Peng Pai, who had been actively organising peasants in the area since the early 1920s, could see and frame the activity of peasants as a historically significant 'peasant movement' (农民运动). At the same time, peasants in Haifeng came to view the new peasant political organisation as a powerful intervention in the degraded rural power structure that had emerged since the late Qing.

According to historian Robert Marks, peasants were particularly receptive to Peng's radical talk about injustice and oppression because of recent dislocations triggered by China's incorporation into global capitalism and the tensions this caused among the peasantry. 'It took Peng Pai,' Marks states, 'to articulate issues in such a way as to create a new type of social organisation among peasants, clearing the way for collective action along class lines.'<sup>4</sup> Yet Marks argues that we should not use the term 'peasant movement' to describe this struggle even though Peng used the term

himself. In Marks's view, peasants had been shaping Haifeng's rural society since the late Ming, and this history is erased by seeing Peng as the creator of a recent 'peasant movement'. In his words: 'Peasants had their own history, forms of organization, goals, and experiences in collective action long before what has been called the "peasant movement" began.'<sup>5</sup>

My purpose in this essay is different. That Peng could see the activity of peasants as a 'peasant movement' was a significant moment in the Chinese historical-political imagination of the peasantry and for the development of the revolution<sup>6</sup>—one shaped both by the political and economic contexts of the time and by the transnational circulation of radical ideas of historical and social change. None of this, of course, should be taken to mean that Peng simply created the peasant actions by naming them a 'movement' or that peasants were not active agents in historical transformation. Rather, this essay stresses that the revolutionary event of the Hailufeng Soviet was the result of the interaction of radical practices both local and external to the Haifeng area, which took place in the economic context produced by China's colonial encounter with capitalism as well as the disintegration of rural governance from the late Qing.

#### Global Capitalism, Control over the Labour Process, and the Transformation of Rural Governance

The complexity of the economic effects resulting from the incorporation of Chinese peasant labour within global capitalist markets in the late-Qing and early Republican periods is well described by Marks, who argues that, in the late nineteenth century, there was a period of benefit for the peasants of Haifeng County, as they accessed wider markets for their goods.<sup>7</sup> Rural handicraft industries in the area—specifically, sugar refining and cotton spinning and weaving—initially expanded with growing markets. Yet, as the market grew, foreign and domestic merchants increasingly took control over the labour process, bringing about the industrialisation of handicrafts and the emergence of putting-out systems and wage labour. In other words, rural households were losing control of their own labour and becoming more dependent on global capitalist markets. Those markets were transformed over time to the detriment of the Chinese peasantry in the area. In particular, late-Qing peasants who were engaged in raw sugar production for foreign-owned processing factories were especially damaged when, in 1907, the sugar market collapsed because of financial dealings in New York as well as new competition from the Japanese in

Taiwan, the Dutch in Java, and the United States in Cuba and the Philippines. The fact that much of this sugar production was enabled by loans to poor peasants magnified the effects of the market crash, bringing about a concentration of land in the hands of landlords—as noted by Peng—and the predominance of less secure forms of tenancy.<sup>8</sup> In addition, women's sideline work in spinning and weaving was also impaired by the introduction of machine-made yarns at the end of the nineteenth century, dividing labour processes originally integrated within the household, and increasing the dependency of households on expanding markets. By the end of World War I, weaving, too, was concentrated among and done by wage labour. Thus, the restructuring and industrialisation of spinning and weaving resulted in the end of this important handicraft industry among the peasantry of Haifeng.<sup>9</sup> Add to these changes the high inflation of the cost of daily necessities, and increasing rural tensions come into greater focus as rural social relationships and the economy were permanently altered. As Marks concludes: 'Imperialism created the conditions under which collective action along the vertical lines of lineage and Flag would be replaced by collective action along the horizontal lines of social class.'<sup>10</sup>

Other scholars detail a similar trajectory in different regions of China. Kathy Walker describes the transformation of the spinning and weaving industry in the northern Yangzi Delta as a 'semicolonial process' that benefited urban capital at the expense of most peasants.<sup>11</sup> Kamal Sheel argues that the incorporation of rural Jiangxi into global capitalism brought about an increasing vulnerability of the peasantry to 'obscure market forces', an 'agrarian crisis', and the collapse of the moral economy of the peasantry, leading to rural revolution.<sup>12</sup> Like Walker, Sheel views this colonial process as leading to the loss of security in landholding and other rights that peasants had gained from the late Ming on. Sheel finds a trajectory for the spinning and weaving industries in the Xinjiang region of Jiangxi similar to that which Marks finds in Haifeng: local weavers first shifted to machine-made yarn, but then were put out of business by cheaper cloth from the textile industry, bringing about the 'total collapse' of home weaving and 'a massive loss of jobs in rural households'.<sup>13</sup>

Less clearly delineated in the abovementioned texts was the concomitant degradation of rural governance. While late-Qing attempts at modernising rural governance as part of the post-Boxer New Policies had varied effects, in many areas, they led to a breakdown of traditional rural governance as the state put more pressure on peasants to fund modernising projects.<sup>14</sup> This often led to the emergence of 'predatory state brokers', who used their

official or semi-official positions to exploit rural residents for personal gain.<sup>15</sup> As Roxann Prazniak argues, the New Policy reforms ended up augmenting the power of the rural elite, compounding the already tense situation in the countryside, and helping to lead to a series of peasant revolts in the last few years of the Qing.<sup>16</sup> Looking at Haifeng, Yuan Gao sees a similar process, arguing that the ‘semiformal governance’ that grew in rural China from the late Qing and extracted greater resources from the rural population brought about escalating local violence and the rise of revolutionary politics.<sup>17</sup>

### Bringing Revolutionary Practices to the Countryside

In the last decade of the Qing, philologist and revolutionary activist Liu Shipai interpreted these local revolts against rural modernisation and China’s colonial incorporation into global capitalism as the emergence of a revolutionary peasantry capable of transforming China.<sup>18</sup> During a period of study in Japan from 1917 to 1921, Peng Pai joined a populist socialist group, the Builders’ League, and took these insights further as he involved himself in the Japanese peasant movement.<sup>19</sup> The Builders believed the peasantry were the bearers of a natural human cooperative spirit that needed to be mobilised against an invasive capitalist and competitive culture—a position similar to Liu Shipai’s radical agrarian humanism.

Carrying the political practices and ideas of the Japanese peasant movement back to Haifeng in 1921, Peng soon threw himself into local politics and education reform.<sup>20</sup> Increasingly believing in the revolutionary overthrow of private property, Peng argued that peasants in Haifeng were getting poorer as land was being concentrated in the hands of landlords.<sup>21</sup> The force of this revolution would be the proletariat—a group that, for Peng, included anyone who did not own property, including most peasants who were not landlords. But that force for revolution—the people—had to be ‘awakened’ by radical intellectuals.<sup>22</sup> In 1922, a year after his return from Japan and increasing proximity to Marxism, Peng began organising peasant associations to push for rent reduction in Chishan township, Haifeng.

Though Peng was consciously attempting to organise a ‘real movement’ (实际运动), the idea for a peasant organisation came from peasants themselves.<sup>23</sup> Though initially very small, the peasant association was able to block a local elite from intervening in a minor dispute over the death

of a child bride and settle it themselves, thus marginalising the authority of the predatory semiformal power structure. This newly emerging dispute-mediation mechanism, as Gao Yuan argues,

embodied both the continuity of the Chinese tradition of rural mediation that sought to settle disputes within the community rather than to resort to county courts, as well as modern notions and innovations introduced through revolutionary rural politics, namely that peasant organizations and a class standpoint were to play a pivotal role in rural life.<sup>24</sup>

These early successes in a practical struggle, together with rising local tensions, facilitated the expansion of the peasant association, and, by the end of 1922, Peng estimated that 20,000 households in the county had joined, forming the Haifeng General Peasant Association (海丰县总农民协会) on New Year's Day, 1923. This successful organising effort led Peng to believe he had divided 'the county into two classes: the peasant and the landlord'.<sup>25</sup>

This initial organising effort ended in repression, but Peng returned to this work again in 1924, when the Nationalist-CCP alliance and the focus on the Northern Expedition helped create a climate more open to such work. Peng, who was now a CCP member, joined the Nationalists and began to work as secretary of the peasant department and principal of the Peasant Movement Training Institute (later taken over by Mao), graduating hundreds of peasant organisers. As the Nationalists moved towards expanding their control in southern and eastern China from 1925, Peng led peasant resistance in Haifeng and reorganised peasant associations there, gaining nearly 200,000 members by 1926.<sup>26</sup> With conflicts between peasant associations and the local elite growing in number and intensity, the associations formed 'peasant self-defence corps' (农民自卫军) and carried out rent-reduction campaigns.<sup>27</sup> As elites fled, landownership by landlords decreased dramatically. The peasant associations had effectively taken over rural governance, sidelining the local predatory brokers and elite power structure that had sedimented since the late Qing.

As peasant demands radicalised, they outpaced the tamer proposals of the CCP.<sup>28</sup> As the Nationalists moved further to the right, more clearly condemning class struggle, the CCP vacillated over whether it should represent peasant interests and take a more formal leadership role in peasant organisations. With the Nationalists controlling Guangdong in

1926, the peasant movement there came under increased repression and was no longer seen as necessary to the national revolution. As a result of its increasing marginalisation, Peng lost his argument within the CCP for a heightened role for the Party in peasant work in Guangdong; conversely, the peasant movement in Hunan received support as it was on the Northern Expedition's planned route, and Mao was made the head of the Central Committee's new peasant department, penning his famous 1927 report on the peasant movement in Hunan soon after. Peng would publicly refute the CCP, coming to the conclusion, as Marks argues, 'that the large cities had become centres of reaction, while the countryside was the only place keeping the revolution alive'.<sup>29</sup> In effect, Peng's connections with an organised peasant force collided with the Party's historical teleology, which suggested that the national and anti-feudal revolution was the current political task and that the land revolution should be put off to the future.<sup>30</sup>

#### The Soviet and Its Defeat

While the Nationalists had made instrumental use of mass organisations, especially the peasant movement, during its Northern Expedition, once in Shanghai in April 1927, Chiang Kai-shek turned on the mass movements and, from then, relied primarily on military means for reunifying China. Out of the chaos into which CCP strategy was thrown, the peasant movement and the attempt to transform rural social relations reemerged. With peasant and Communist control of Haifeng from 1 November 1927, the newly formed Haifeng Provisional Revolutionary Government went about transforming the county by wiping out landlord power. Many landlords fled; others were caught and executed. Rents and debts were quickly abolished, elections were held for an assembly, and the Hailufeng Soviet was officially proclaimed at a massive meeting led by Peng Pai. At the time, the Party saw the soviet as a transitional political form through which the democratic revolution could be turned into a socialist one.<sup>31</sup>

Once formed, the revolutionary government, unofficially led by Peng, shifted to carrying out a land revolution—a task far more difficult than Party leaders initially assumed. Deciding how to define landlords, how to establish who should get land, and how to reallocate land was not easy, and, in the end, the county leadership only promulgated general guidelines, leaving most details up to individual village peasant associations. By the end of January 1928, the process was considered complete,

if uneven.<sup>32</sup> This unevenness was a symptom of how pivotal village power structures were to the land revolution, as peasant activists attempted to transform the local balance of class forces, leading to different outcomes in different areas. Nonetheless, Hailufeng provided the Party with a model for intervening in the degraded structure of rural governance and the weakening economic environment—a model that grew out of particular local circumstances, though the forces impinging on the area were global. Top-down approaches to understanding this revolution fail to account for the power of local peasant activists, yet, in the end, this power could only be sustained as long as the military power of the Nationalists was focused elsewhere, as it largely had been until early 1928.

This revolutionary process was dramatically cut short. After the Communists attempted to spread soviet control to neighbouring counties, and with Peng outside Haifeng, the Nationalists invaded at the end of February. As conscription efforts failed and the county town was initially abandoned, the Communists attempted to maintain control in the villages. But this time, they failed in the countryside as well, and the Nationalists and their local supporters regained control. New land deeds were written for returning landlords, and the soviet and peasant associations were defeated. After fighting in the area for a few months, Peng was moved to work underground as a Communist organiser in Shanghai, but he was betrayed and killed at the end of August 1929.<sup>33</sup>