

**Private Guns, National Politics:  
Regulating Gun Ownership in Wartime China (1937-1945)**

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In early 1940, the female communist cadre Wei Gongzhi wrote to the Henan Provincial Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). After three-month long social survey in Henan province, she observed that “weapons can be brought anywhere by ordinary civilians in Henan, and so foreign and indigenous guns are available in every village.”<sup>1</sup> Evidence from several sources confirms that almost each county in west and south Henan province had more than 10,000 guns in the hands of civilians. The Henan Provincial Committee of the CCP was pleased to see the general prevalence of private guns in local society of Henan. These communist cadres were aware of the importance of mobilizing the armed civilians to develop the CCP’s power in Henan province. The CCP quickly endeavored to organize these armed people and make use of their potential military power. It was proved that the CCP’s policies towards armed civilians played an important part in enhancing its power in North China.

Wei was not alone in this observation. Newspapers during the Republican period were filled with criminal cases of shootings and firearm smuggling in which the firearms figured prominently. These accounts together suggest new aspects of Chinese society in the first half of the 20th century when many civilians became owners of private guns. Not only in Henan, many sources in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century prove that personal weapon ownership was surprisingly common in Wartime China (1937-1945), when many civilians became owners of guns for self-defense. Because gun ownership was such an sensitive and dangerous part of social life, both the

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<sup>1</sup> Wei Gongzhi, *Guanyu Yunan Wuzhuang Gongzuo Buchong Baogao* 關於豫南武裝工作補充報告, in *Kangzhan Shiqi de Henan Shengwei* 抗戰時期的河南省委, 80.

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Nationalist government and the Chinese Communist Party made efforts to measure, and in some cases regulate, private gun ownership in wartime China. This project examines the gun, as the weapon of the individual, seeking to understand its social and political implications. Specifically, I seek to find answers to these questions: How did ordinary people come to own guns, either foreign made guns or indigenous guns? How did the state respond to private gun ownership? What was the relationship between private gun ownership and national politics?

Existing analyses of the guns in China, although often informative, are generally limited to China's military modernization. Historians have highlighted Qing and Republican officials' efforts to modernize the armed forces by introducing Western weapons, military technology, and training methods.<sup>2</sup> However, they have failed to understand that foreign weapons also came into China through private channels including smuggling, allowing large numbers of Chinese civilians to collect and own foreign weapons.<sup>3</sup> And also they have not understood that the general prevalence of guns in private hands led to dramatic social and cultural changes. In particular, civilian possession of powerful guns challenged central and local governments' authorities over local areas, affecting the power relationship between the state and commoners. Moreover, different political regimes always generated various approaches to deal with the

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<sup>2</sup> China historians have explored several issues on China's military transformation, ranging from the reception of foreign technology, changes in the organization of the Chinese military, and the ideas of Chinese military officials. Some important works include: John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, vols. 10 and 11* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978-1980); Mary Clabaugh Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T'ung-Chih Restoration, 1862-1874* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957); Wang Ermin, *Qingshi junshi shi lunjin 清世軍事史論集 (Essays on military affairs in the Late Qing)* (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> This project mainly focus on the foreign-made guns, instead of Chinese traditional guns. Starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, foreign guns entered China in large numbers and substituted Chinese traditional guns as the major weapons of ordinary civilians. The foreign guns also referred to the foreign weapons that were counterfeited in by Chinese.

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private gun ownership, which are overlooked by scholars. These mechanisms had different political outcomes. This research will fill this gap and explore how the private gun ownership changed Chinese society and national politics in wartime China.

### *Arming the Chinese: the Social Life of Gun in Modern China*

In 1931, German missionary F. Strauss embarked on a journey to China, where he would spend the next twenty years of his career. Travelling across the mountains and plains of northern China, he was amazed to find that many urban and rural dwellers owned guns. In his observation report of 1937, Strauss noted that foreign guns, made by the likes of Browning, Mauser, Colt, and Remington outnumbered Chinese-made weapons, constituting the bulk of small arms in Chinese society. Observing the variety of guns in private hands led him to declare that China was a “splendid gun museum.”<sup>4</sup> Personal weapon ownership was surprisingly common in Republican China. Foreign guns, or *yangqiang*, which were vastly superior to the traditional Chinese bird gun (*niaoqiang*), constituted one of the greatest threats to public safety during these periods. In the meantime, Chinese bird gun did not step down from the stage of history. People living in rural areas still used traditional gun as their personal weapon. Ownership of these guns had a profound and heretofore unnoticed impact on Chinese society and politics.

A full understanding of the dynamic between private gun ownership with the state politics is not possible without explaining who carried guns and why. This project sets the private gun in its social and cultural context, seeking to find the answers to these questions: how did foreign guns sweep into China and become so popular among Chinese civilians? What were the social and cultural consequences of private gun use? This study draws inspiration from

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<sup>4</sup> F. Strauss, “In Perils of Robbers,” in *We Are Escaped*, et al. F. Strauss (London: China Inland Mission, 1931), 30.

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anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's assertion that "commodities, like persons, have social lives," and "their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories." It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the social significance of private guns varies in both actual times and social spaces, as Chinese people of different classes, and genders, assign private guns different symbolic values, For some, they were an implement to stamp out evil, to others, they were an icon of social status.

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing through the first half of the 20th century, China was inexorably drawn into a whirlwind of global economic, technological, and political changes, accelerating the diffusion of personal weapons nationwide. Faced with slumping domestic markets for military arms, many Western arms producers turned to China, with its vast population and mounting civil insecurity as a potential new market. Sales representatives from Remington, Colt, Winchester, Krupp, and Vickers came to China in large numbers to dispose of their surplus arms. Many periodical articles and advertisements of the time show that Chinese civilians came to prefer foreign guns for their greater accuracy, penetration, and operability. At the same time, the inclination towards foreign guns was inextricably intertwined with trends in consumption.

During Republican period, as historians Sherman Cochran and Frank Dikötter suggest, in China from the middle of the 19th century to 1949, "foreign" denoted "modern" and "superior"

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<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed, Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3.

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and always signaled elevated social status.<sup>6</sup> China's huge domestic market and its escalating firearm demand spurred the emergence of gun merchants, who served as intermediaries between arms manufacturers and Chinese customers. In this period of persistent military conflicts, many foreign trading companies in the treaty ports, including Carlowitz & Co. of Germany, Mitsui & Co. of Japan, and many others, not only functioned as importers by providing Chinese officials the weapons they needed to fight rebels or defend themselves, but also played pivotal roles in circulating foreign guns among civilians. As bicultural intermediaries, these comprador-merchants, who were familiar with China's market, came into being to handle the actual gun transactions. Fully utilizing their expertise in foreign firearms and adept at marketing through modern advertising in newspapers and periodicals, these middlemen became sole licensed agents for urban dwellers to obtain this fashionable new products.

While legal trading companies offered civilians the latest guns at exorbitant prices, a huge number of surplus or outmoded weapons from arms-producing states or armed conflict-prone regions flowed into China through illicit arms trafficking. Once these foreign guns arrived in China, ordinary people learned to pirate their advanced design, and manufactured innumerable poor copies. For example, Nanyang, a city of southwestern Henan Province had hundreds of small workshops operated by local gentry that manufactured guns of foreign design and sold them to local people.<sup>7</sup> Firearm suppliers, foreign gun smugglers, Chinese criminal organizations, and corrupt officials saw the profitability of gun sales. A vast gun smuggling and distribution

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<sup>6</sup> See Sherman Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Li Yu, *Li Yu Huiyi Lu*, 120.

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network formed gradually, resulting in the prevalence of foreign guns not only in China's coastal areas but also in the interior.

Chinese acquired foreign guns for a variety of nonmilitary reasons, including self-protection against armed bandits, elevating social status, and seizing local power. The relative popularity of foreign guns in Chinese society provoked cultural responses. The image of foreign guns in the twentieth century appeared in many different sites: literary works, tabloid newspapers, and filmic representations, which treated gun ownership as a symbol of masculine power and status. Even in many martial arts books, the images of traditional *gongfu* exponents were displaced by those of new heroes with foreign guns in their hands. Given its exotic nature, owning guns of foreign design was always seen as one way to elevate people's social status. Civilian demand for foreign guns was thus fueled by its powerful symbolism in popular culture, which reinforced its symbol of manliness, implying that having guns was key to becoming strong and aggressive, a crucial part of male nature and social status.

### ***Gun Ownership and Power Structure in Local Society***

Private gun ownership in the Republican periods indicated a significant degree of power devolution. Civilian possession of private guns helped subvert central and local government authority over local areas, affecting the power relationship between the state and commoners. Thus, the social phenomenon of private gun ownership challenged the state authority over local arena, which will allow me to re-evaluate the dynamic interactions between the state and society.

China historians have generally relied on three approaches to understand the dynamic interaction of the two. The first approach adopted by the first generation of China scholars was to study the gentry's role as intermediaries between the government and common people. Influenced by Max Weber, Fei Hsiao-t'ung, Chang Chung-li, and Ch'u T'ung-tsu reinforced the

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functions of elite in local society. Local elites, who were perceived as equivalent to the gentry, played important roles in public works, education, and tax collection in local society, where government had limited access to penetrate.<sup>8</sup> The second approach was to explore the elite activism in social mobilization. Through empirical research of a couple of commercialized cities, Keith Schoppa, Mary Rankin, William Rowe, and David Strand have found these elites' roles in extrabureaucratic activities.<sup>9</sup> In part, their works were inspired by Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated into English in 1989, which led China historians to debate the nature of "public" in modern China.

However, the above two approaches have over emphasized on the role of elites, and have also conveyed the impression that the elites only performed their activism in commercialized urban areas. These approaches also neglect the efforts of the state to exercise its power in the local arena. A recent approach has been to study the process of state making, which analyzed the failure of the Nationalist government's attempt to centralize the state power. As Philip Kuhn, Prasenjit Duara, Julia Strauss, Xiaoqun Xu describe, in the shadow of "state involution," the state's efforts were jeopardized by local powers.<sup>16</sup> In his research on judicial reform in early twentieth-century China, Xu pointed out the complexity of implementing government policies.

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<sup>8</sup> See Hsiao-t'ung Fei, *China's Gentry: Essays in Rural-Urban Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); T'ung-tsu Ch'u, *Local Government in China under the Ch'ing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955); Kung-chan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> See Keith Schoppa, *Chinese Elites and Political Change: Zhejiang Province in the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Mary Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1965-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); William Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); and David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

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For example, governments' judicial reform was largely impeded by provincial authorities and local powers. Rather than discretely exploring elite activism and the state's endeavors, my study will take these elements in a historical synthesis to probe how private gun ownership complicated local society, impeding the practice of state power. Specifically, Julia Stauss's idea that China as "strong institutions in weak polities" and Prasenjit Duara's "state involution," help me explain the failure of the bureaucratic penetration in local society, especially when the state issued strict gun regulations.<sup>10</sup>

The successive chaotic periods of modern Chinese history witnessed an astoundingly high level of private gun ownership, which brought about tremendous social consequences. Private gun ownership contributed to persistent social unrest, which was manifested in violent confrontations and internal conflict. Numerous police files show that the ready availability of private guns enhanced the incidence of aggravated assault and homicide. Offenders with lethal intentions often resorted to private guns when committing violent crimes. The social insecurity that resulted from frequent gun violence led to an arms race of sorts, incentivizing other Chinese to purchase ever more powerful guns, or replace their Chinese-made weapons with foreign-made ones during the wartime. In rural areas, the process of what China historian Prasenjit Duara calls "state involution" throughout the Republican era gave rise to regional predatory powers, which were freed from central constraints and controls. Over the course of political fragmentation and in response to the increasingly widespread armed banditry, this period witnessed pervasive local militarization as a form of collective self-defense. Militarized mobilization in rural society

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<sup>10</sup> See Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*; Xiaoqun Xu, *Trial of Modernity: Judicial Reform in Early Twentieth-Century China, 1901-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Julia Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Polities: State Building in Republican China, 1927-1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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generated new forms of social power and domination, in which the use of private guns played an increasingly decisive role in local control. Consequently, local elites in many regions, who had managed local affairs in the Qing dynasty, either obtained foreign guns to retain their dominance, or gave way to the newly emerging martial elite in the Republican period. One example was the ambitious activities of Bie Tingfang, a local “bully” from South Henan. Starting from mid-1930s, Bie controlled several local governments in South Henan and was in charge of self-defence forces in thirteen counties. Bie’s local dominance had been enhanced when he operated many gun factories in local society and distributed these powerful weapons to local civilians for self-protection against any outside enemies. These martial elite challenged the central authority and prevented the government enforcing its gun policies in local society.

### ***Regulating Gun Ownership in Wartime China***

Widespread and largely unregulated private gun ownership exerted appreciable effects in the national political arena. Civilian possession of private guns not only endangered public security, but also helped subvert central and local government authority over local areas, affecting the power relationship between the state and commoners. Various mechanisms had been enacted or proposed by governments to regulate the foreign gun’s circulation. The Qing Code and many criminal cases of the late Qing confirm that carrying of firearms by civilians was prohibited and that the penalty for violation was severe. Despite the strict laws, the number of guns in private hands increased rather than decreased. Rich in detail, these cases demonstrate that the Qing prohibition was ultimately ineffectual. In the Republican period, persistent social unrest led the Nationalist government to allow those people it defined as “good civilians,” or *liangmin* to own guns to guarantee their rights of self-defense. The government also made efforts to reduce firearm smuggling and illicit weapon transactions, implementing a national policy of gun

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licensing to ensure the compliance of gun owners. The Republican government merged control of gun ownership with the *baojia* system, an administrative mechanism for local control and surveillance. However, this gun registration system failed when the central power was undercut by regional power blocs. In wartime, the Nationalist government even ceased scrutinizing unregistered gun ownership for fear that restrictive control might provoke illegal gun owners to insurrection.

While the Nationalist government failed to implement a mechanism to regulate private gun ownership and uses, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) quickly realized armed civilians' potential power in the base areas. The CCP's organizational achievement in rural China has been understood by historians either as a hegemonizing process or as popular participation based on democratic principle.<sup>11</sup> Maurice Meisner and Mark Selden might be the first to investigate the populist dimensions of the Communist movement. Writing on the Communist movement in northern Shanxi, Selden develops his concept of the "Yenan Way," to explain why the CCP gained support from the peasants. He argues that the success of the CCP benefited from its mass line policies, which affirmed the Party's commitment to peasants and old elite's interests. Recently, scholars like Chen Yung-fa and Tetsuya Kataoka reject Selden's position by highlighting the totalitarian ambitions of the CCP in uniting the peasants. However, these scholarly works present little attention to the actual process of popular mobilization under the CCP's organization initiatives. This research departs from the above two approaches that

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<sup>11</sup> The classic work highlighting the people's voluntary participation is Mark Selden's *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). Tetsuya Kataoka and Chen Yung-fa reject this view by arguing that the CCP had totalitarian ambitions to mobilize the peasants. See Chen Yung-fa, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937-1945*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Tetsuya Kataoka, *Resistance and Revolution: The Communists and the Second United Front* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

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polarize statism and populism. Instead, through probing the CCP's policy towards armed civilians in base areas, I hope to show that the two paradigms were not mutually exclusive. The findings of this project thus will make a crucial contribution to the ongoing debate about how the CCP built its grassroots organization, leading to its victory in 1949.

Unlike the KMT, the Communist Party (CCP) took the opposite position and linked private gun ownership with their ongoing revolutionary campaign. It quickly understood and exploited the potential military power of civilian gun holders. In some regions, the number of peasants owning foreign guns even determined the location of their revolutionary bases. My preliminary investigation of Henan, Shanxi, and Shandong suggests that the CCP's gun ownership policy fit into its general ideology of mass line policies. In Henan and Shandong, for example, in seeking to mobilize these armed civilians, the CCP prevented them from registering their guns with the Nationalist government. Local Communist cadres like Wei Gongzhi either organized the armed civilians into guerrilla units or confiscated private guns for military use. The mobilization of armed civilians in local society thus played an important role in strengthening its military power and defeating the Nationalist army.

In sum, this research suggests that private gun ownership both contributed to persistent social unrest, but also changed Chinese politics. Especially, the decisions that each political entity made about how to deal with armed civilians had profound effects on the national political arena from 1937 to 1945.

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