

# Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: A Few Words on the Sources

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**Abstract:** While all historical sources must be used with care, the archival documents found in *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution in New China* demanded extra attention. These archival sources—four criminal casefiles from a rural Public Security Bureau in Poyang County, Jiangxi Province—are packed with detail. But they were also composed by outsiders who were unfamiliar with local conditions even as they held preconceived notions about village life. This essay discusses some of the most challenging aspects of working with such documents, including issues of authorship, outsider bias, and the many silences in the historical record.

**Keywords:** Archives, Grassroots History, Rural China, Local Administration.

***Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution from New China* by Brian DeMare (Stanford University Press, 2022).**

In my latest book, *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution from New China* (Stanford University Press, 2022), I introduce readers to the arrival of Communist power in Poyang, an overwhelmingly rural county in northern Jiangxi Province. Through four narratives, each detailing an instance of what the Communists called ‘counterrevolution’, the book brings a grassroots perspective to regime change and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

I consider this book to be something of a love letter to archival sources, particularly the many files I found while living and working in the PRC. This love, however, was never reciprocal. The four casefiles that made a book about the arrival of ‘New China’ in rural Poyang possible are both spectacularly rich and deeply complicated. I found the archival files full of real-life characters but bringing their voices and their experiences to the page was a long and difficult process. What follows is a brief overview of a few of the most vexing archival issues I encountered while working on the project.

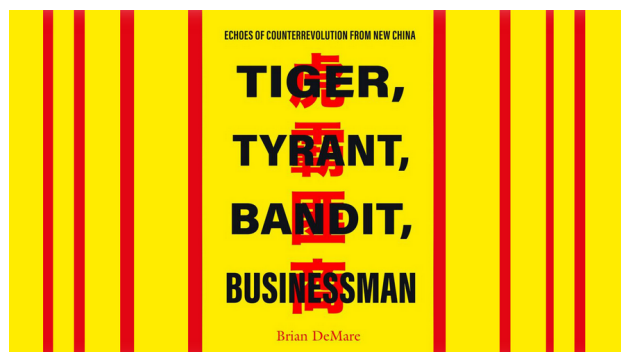


Figure 1: Cover of *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit,*

**Unreliable Narrators and the Problem of**

## Authorship

To start, the documents suffered from severe material limitations. Some texts were torn and incomplete. Handwritten by cadres and rural folk of varying degrees of literacy, many words were beyond recognition or written incorrectly. The documents, moreover, were filled with inconsistencies and contradictions. Given that these documents were generated during legal proceedings, this was not surprising. The accused, after all, had every incentive to proclaim their innocence when charged with counterrevolution. The real villain was always someone else. And accounts could evolve slowly or change quickly if the accused accepted guilt for lesser crimes in the hope of avoiding execution. Some accusers, meanwhile, had personal reasons to slander their neighbours. Big Tiger, a local hooligan at the centre of the book's second casefile, had a long-running affair with another man's wife. When Big Tiger was arrested for murdering a cadre, his lover's husband secured revenge through the legal system. Might he have strayed from the truth when he gave his passionate testimony to ensure that Big Tiger—a man he surely hated to the core—never returned home?

The documents become even further complicated once readers stop to consider the issue of authorship. As most of these texts were written by unknown local cadres, it is difficult to say much about the authors, but all evidence suggests they were produced by the newly arrived army of cadres who had just taken over the county government. The county, of course, is a bedrock of Chinese administration dating back to the imperial era. Back then, the *yamen* offices at the county seat represented the furthest reach of imperial power. By design, the magistrates who served in Poyang Town's *yamen* were all outsiders.<sup>1</sup> This is just one of the many links between previous regimes and the county's new People's Government: like the magistrates of old, the cadres who wrote these documents were outsiders, with significant

cultural and linguistic differences that distinguished them from Poyang locals.

And, as seen in the way these cadres referred to Poyang communities in their documents, they were also unfamiliar with the local terrain. In the casefile excerpted below, 'The Case of the Bodhisattva Society', a landlord from the Fifth District went on the run during land reform. This was quite common, and the documents are littered with the names of powerful men who got out before the Communists came calling. This Fifth District landlord most likely hoped to get to Hong Kong, but he failed to escape Poyang. Exhausting all his options, the Fifth District landlord turned himself in to the county's Public Security Bureau. There he offered up a tantalising confession, revealing a possible hiding place for a pair of Fourth District landlords who were still on the run. There are, to be sure, many placenames in the casefiles, but the cadres who compiled these documents frequently, and at times exclusively, referred to places through a numerical administrative system.

## Administrative Continuity and Rupture

Working with the documents over the years, I came to realise that the numerical administrative system had real implications for how I read these texts. Locals of course preferred placenames to numerical divisions, and they barely understood some administrative divisions. The landlord who turned himself in would never have thought of himself as coming from the Fifth District; for most locals, a 'district' (区) was a meaningless bureaucratic term. The prevalence of numerical administrative divisions in the four casefiles, especially at the district level, underlines the problematic relationship between the creators of these documents and the citizens who interacted with the new People's Government. Most of the documents in question were

created by non-locals—specifically, newly arrived cadres from the northern provinces of Hebei, Shandong, and Henan.<sup>2</sup> Their reliance on a numerical administrative system underlines their outsider status.

But not all administrative divisions are created equal. The cadres running the new People's Government inherited and expanded the administrative systems from previous regimes. The district-level government was relatively new, but at the subdistrict levels, there was much continuity with Nationalist (1911–49) and even imperial administration. The most important administrative system below the county, the *baojia* (保甲), dated back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). This system attempted to increase state control over local society by grouping 10 households into a *jia* unit under a *jia* chief, with 10 *jia* units forming a *bao* unit under a *bao* chief. County governments relied on unpaid *jia* and *bao* chiefs to help collect taxes, organise corvée labour, and help mediate disputes. Compared with the district, these *baojia* units seem to have been generally understood by local citizens. Even here, however, the numerical nature of the system reminds us that this was a top-down administrative network, with varying degrees of overlap with natural communities.

The district, in contrast, was a much more recent innovation. The Nationalists were the first to divide the county into districts, which was part of their attempt to tighten state control over the countryside in the early 1930s. But the Nationalists' districts were never stable and ultimately only temporary. Later administrative developments suggest these districts were always too large to effectively control the countryside, and they only grew progressively larger over the years. The Nationalist administration eventually abolished their district units, which would not appear again until the early PRC when northern cadres again divided the county into districts. Over the next few years, the administrative system of the

People's Government expanded rapidly and, in 1955, the numerical system for naming districts was finally dropped in favour of local placenames.<sup>3</sup>

I initially saw these numerical administrative systems as clear evidence that this was an outsider's imposition; I suspected that outsider officials did not know the names of these communities, while locals would entirely eschew an 'outsider' numerical system. But I later reconsidered my assumptions regarding the *baojia* system. As a historian, I have tended to dismiss the *baojia* system for its many defects and all the things it was not, but the system did exist, and the casefiles really brought home just how meaningful *bao* and *jia* units were to locals, precisely because they were burdens imposed by the state. The *baojia* administrative system, while imposed by the county government, had deep roots in the countryside by the time the Communists showed up. Reading the casefiles, I find multiple references to the leaders at the *bao* and *jia* levels who played an important role during these years of regime change. There are, furthermore, signs that the artificial *baojia* system had significant overlap with natural communities. The confessions penned by Scholarly Wu, one of the critical figures in the book's first casefile, demonstrate his ability to expertly use knowledge of the numerical *baojia* system to describe local society.

The numerical district system found in the casefiles, however, strikes me as very different from the *baojia* system. The district administration had some precedent in the previous Nationalist regime, but that earlier system had been continually reshuffled and eventually abolished. I see little evidence that locals embraced the district unit. While reading the documents, I kept in mind that administrative schemes, even when they made sense to locals, were imposed by the various regimes that ruled over the Poyang countryside. They are tangible evidence that

the authors of the texts were outsiders attempting to impose control over villagers, who in turn were long accustomed to having state power mediated through local elites, not professional bureaucrats.

## What's Left Unsaid

The fact that the documents were created by bureaucrats and security officers—outsiders attempting to establish a new regime—had a profound impact on *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman*. So much is left unsaid—and, again, this reflects the security officers who created the files used to write the book. Take, for example, the total lack of female voices in the casefiles. Quite to my frustration, only one woman is mentioned by name: Miss Zhao, who had a long-running affair with Big Tiger from the book's second casefile. The fate of Miss Zhao has puzzled and fascinated my students for the past couple of years. But if security officers ever interviewed her, they never filed her statement in the casefile in question. Her voice has been lost to history.

At least Miss Zhao got her name into the record, allowing me to bring this one small detail into my account of the affair. I found multiple references to other women in the casefiles, but these mothers, wives, and sisters remain nameless. What did the arrival of New China mean for the women whose sons, husbands, and brothers found themselves tangled up in the Communists' legal system? Common sense tells us that women played a crucial role in the events profiled in the book's four casefiles. Security officers, in a reflection of both the crimes in question and the pervasive patriarchy of the time, were only concerned with men, and unfortunately their records reflect their societal views. Here, I will note that I did consider taking some artistic licence to 'improve' the book. By using the experiences of other rural divorces, I could have imagined how things looked from the

perspective of Miss Zhao. In the end, I stayed true to what I could find from the casefiles.

As I note in the book, the bureaucrats and security officers who produced the documents were just as important as the victims, witnesses, and accused. The documents say precious little about their creators aside from their job titles, so they, too, remain largely hidden in the book. This is a shame, as I believe knowing more about these cadres would considerably enhance our understanding of the casefiles. Consider this recent discovery: a few months ago, a colleague alerted me to a brief article about Jiang Beiran, the county chief who oversaw the legal system during these trials.<sup>4</sup> The article was essentially a puff piece about the county chief's extreme honesty: determined to host a bare-bones wedding ceremony while keeping the event festive, he decided to split the bill with another couple looking to tie the knot. After their simple meal of four dishes and one soup, county chief Jiang angrily refused an offer of an evening tea party, sending back gifts of cigarettes, candy, and sunflower seeds. But his desire to please his new bride, Yu Cuirong, or as he called her 'Little Yu', hints at the fact that the security officers and bureaucrats who produced these documents had their own lives, which naturally included families and romantic relationships. And so it was that in the spring of 1950, around the time he established the Poyang County People's Tribunal to bring order to the countryside, county chief Jiang became romantically involved with one of the secretaries working for the county government. The documents used to create this book, while seemingly filled with endless detail, cannot even begin to capture the complexity of the arrival of New China in rural Poyang.

## BOOK EXCERPT: The Case of the Bodhisattva Society

*This is an excerpt from the third casefile*

*featured in Brian DeMare's Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution in New China (Stanford University Press, 2022). The style has been left unchanged but the references to archival sources have been removed.*

He reached the end of his rope in the summer of 1951, over two years after the Communists officially liberated Poyang. Originally from the mountainous north, not far from where Golden Cao and his bandit gang once roamed, Runaway Xu had no place else to run. He had fled from *land reform*, the campaign that brought the revolution down to each and every village governed by the People's Republic. Land reform included the distribution of class labels, a process that divided peasants, the friends of the revolution, from landlords, who were assumed to long for the return of the Nationalists. Like many Poyang men given the dreaded landlord class label, Runaway Xu chose to flee from home rather than face the ritualized humiliation and violence that accompanied land reform. In Jiangxi work team cadres initially wavered between conducting "peaceful" land reform, free of violence, and letting poor villagers beat and terrorize landlords. Some cadres, not knowing how much wealth landlords might have stashed away, used torture to get everything they could from their victims. With the party increasingly stressing the pitfalls of peaceful land reform, violence became widespread. Wealthy farmers started to panic. Many landlords decided that staying put and waiting for rural revolution was a death wish. In one county more than 3,000 landlords fled.

Runaway Xu was far from alone in making the decision to escape his village before land reform brought New China to his doorstep. He may have hoped to make his way south to Hong Kong, but he couldn't even get out of Poyang. And now he was alone, with nowhere else to

go. Defeated, he turned himself in to the new order. That meant questioning from officers in the Political Defense Section. The Section was new, formed by the county Public Security Bureau in that same year of 1951, just a few months after widespread paranoia over the threat of counterrevolution had launched a nationwide campaign to root out dissent. These officers, in charge of investigating crimes, interrogating suspects, and uncovering counterrevolution, were about to have the case of their young careers.

Meeting with security officers in the Political Defense Section, the fugitive landlord found redemption. Runaway Xu offered up what the officers would later call a "thread": a lead on two notorious criminals, both landlords from the Old County Crossing area. Security officers knew that corner of the countryside much better as the People's Government's newly created Fourth District. These two landlords, arrested by their district government during land reform, had conducted a brazen jailbreak and disappeared into the countryside. Their daring act had created a ripple effect in surrounding villages. News of their escape fueled rumors linking their movements to the return of the old Nationalist regime. One wild rumor even claimed that a third landlord, killed during the jailbreak, had returned from the dead to terrorize the Communists.

The officers taking Runaway Xu's statement must have been familiar with the case of the escaped criminal landlords. There was, after all, an ongoing investigation into the duo's whereabouts. They had been underground for over four months by the time Runaway Xu showed up. Were they still even in Poyang? A troubling case made even more disturbing by the wild rumors of an undead landlord roaming the mountains. But this case must have been particularly special for the men of the county Public Security Bureau. One of these two criminal landlords, a man they had been trying in vain to track down, was the father of one of



their agency colleagues.

## An Old Revolutionary Gets Martyred

Runaway Xu gave the Political Defense officers a thread that would link the two escapees to a murder long past. And not just any murder, but the 1930 execution of Comrade Cheng Yangshan. Even in these first days of the People's Republic, Comrade Cheng was already considered an "old revolutionary." Exactly what happened to the old revolutionary is unclear. The casefile in question contains almost nothing on Comrade Cheng, except a stray note that his hometown was now part of the newly created First District. Luckily, Poyang historians have lavished much attention on martyrs such as Comrade Cheng. Born in 1896, he had a short but eventful career as a Communist organizer. He joined the party in the spring of 1930 during a hightide of rural activism. Local Communists, under orders to jumpstart the revolution in the countryside, went all out to organize poor villagers. The party's county branch promoted peasant uprisings in support of newly formed governments at the district and township levels. The Red Tenth Army even seized Poyang Town. In retaliation the Nationalists mobilized a massive force, backed by gunboats sailing on Lake Poyang. Chiang Kai-shek failed to annihilate the Communists once and for all, but forces led by local Nationalists hunted down rural revolutionaries, creating no shortage of martyrs. One of them was Comrade Cheng.

The documents in the casefile are unconcerned with the circumstances of Comrade Cheng's martyrdom. But according to Poyang's official history, Comrade Cheng had been an able organizer, mobilizing farmers in dozens of villages to support the Communists and punish hated rural bosses. After the Red Tenth Army was pushed out of Poyang, Comrade Cheng stayed behind to keep the revolution alive. Then, on the afternoon of December 13, he was

betrayed by a man named Kuang Rong'en. Comrade Cheng was captured alive at Taiyangbu, just down river from Likuang Village, where Kuang was a leading citizen, and dragged down to Poyang Town. The Nationalists executed Comrade Cheng the very next day.

Not long after the Communists liberated Poyang, the dead man's brother journeyed to Likuang Village. 6 With the new regime coalescing, he must have known that the time had come to seek justice. Kuang Rong'en, the man who betrayed his brother, was long gone. But the man's family was still in Likuang Village, and he could hold them accountable for getting his brother martyred. Demanding a payoff in return for a life lost almost two decades earlier, this outsider held the fate of the Kuang family in his hands. As he made clear, if his demands were not met, he would turn to the People's Government for justice.

## Two Kuangs Form the Bodhisattva Society

The martyr's brother arrived in Likuang Village at a time of transition. Tellingly, the village took half of its name from its most powerful lineage: the Kuangs. The Likuang Village order was led by Hua and Mai, two Kuang men in different economic situations. According to the Communists, Hua was a landlord, while Mai was a middle peasant. This would make the first a class enemy, the second a potential ally. But both men were members of the Nationalist Party and graduates of Poyang Academy, the closest thing to a modern school in Poyang. Hua had graduated from a teaching college before serving in multiple positions for the old regime at the township and county levels. Mai was a farmer with a surprising military background. According to a later report, after graduating from Poyang Academy he had gone on to study at Whampoa Military Academy, the famous training center established by the Nationalists during their initial alliance with

the Communists. In the rhetoric of New China this made him a *fake* military officer.

One a landlord and the other a farmer, Hua and Mai were united in their control over their village even as they occupied different roles in the rural economy. But times were changing. Faced with this demand for a payoff to compensate the Cheng family for the life of their martyred relative, the two men quickly moved to keep their secrets safe from outsiders. Villagers in Poyang often came together to settle disputes and deal with outside threats. Some formed village compacts, especially smaller communities with powerful clans. Typically included alongside genealogical records, these compacts regulated local society, detailing ideal behavior for villagers. Compacts also included instructions for protecting local forests, safeguarding crops from theft, and fighting bandits. What happened in Likuang Village, however, was much more than a reading of the village compact. Calling a meeting at Middle Peasant Mai's house, the Kuang clan gathered dozens of village "bosses" together to discuss how they could compensate the outsider and keep their secrets hidden away from the Communists. That very night they swore a sacred oath of loyalty to each other. Sworn oaths among men, modeled after the fabled "Peach Tree Oath" taken by the heroes of the epic novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, were not to be taken lightly.

The men of the village took their oaths in front of a small statue, the centerpiece for local religious practice. Out of concern for its safety, it had just recently been moved from its original public location into Middle Peasant Mai's house. This statue would play an outsized role in the drama to come. The officers investigating the case, dismissive of religion as mere superstition, paid little attention to the statue. But this object of worship held great power, venerated by villagers when they prayed for fortune and good health. All that we

really know about the diminutive statue is that Likuang villagers called it a *bodhisattva*. In Buddhism bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who dedicate themselves to helping others. Locally in Poyang, "bodhisattva" was used as a catch-all term for the gods that villagers turned to in times of need. Security officers, however, made sure to call it a *fake* bodhisattva.

In front of their bodhisattva, the villagers drank rooster blood mixed with wine. They vowed to protect their homes, cultivate their hearts, accumulate merit, and do good deeds to ensure their next lives. These tales of ritualistically drinking rooster blood, found in the documents created by security officers investigating this case, tied the villagers to some of the most important traditions of secret societies. Many secret society rituals culminated in the drinking of wine mixed with rooster blood. During initiation rituals for new members of the Gowned Brothers, an underground organization on the Chengdu plain, society elders mixed blood from a freshly killed rooster with wine. New members drank the blood wine as part of their oath-taking ceremony. The sacrifice of a rooster had long been a potent symbol used in Daoist and later Buddhist rituals, and was eventually adopted by secret societies.

The use of Buddhist rituals by secret societies, as well as the deep reverence for the bodhisattva statue, should be expected. Buddhist beliefs and practices permeated the Poyang countryside. Local Buddhist practice was primarily lay in nature: in 1949 the county only had forty or so nuns and monks. But every village had believers, who congregated at the hundreds of temples scattered throughout the countryside. Most of these religious sites featured a statue or image of a Buddhist figure, such as Guanyin or an Arhat. Many were destroyed during Japanese invasion. But Likuang, like nearly all Poyang villages, still had its bodhisattva.

Deeply religious villagers believed the

bodhisattva statue to possess great power. There was a long history of religious practices built around Buddhist beliefs in Poyang, many of which are decidedly fantastical. Hong Mai, perhaps Poyang's most famous scholar, included some local tales of the supernatural in his classic *Record of Hearsay*. Buddhist mediums were said to recite spells that allowed them to enter boiling water and fire. These mediums gave Hong's own brother instructions to cure diseases through Buddhist incantations, invoking the name of Nagarjuna, an ancient Buddhist philosopher, to cure blisters. Such fantastic tales aside, Poyang families turned to Buddhism largely due to their faith in bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who promised to rescue the faithful in their times of need, including moments of great peril. In a world with almost no healthcare and high child mortality rates, this promise of hope gave these diminutive Buddhist statues considerable power in Poyang villages.

As the holder of the bodhisattva, Middle Peasant Mai took the lead in cementing village

unity to protect the secrets of the Kuang clan, telling his rooster blood brothers to spread the word that everyone should go all out to protect them, lest they suffer a calamity themselves. If they had any questions they could come ask the bodhisattva, conveniently located in his house, for answers. This gave him and Landlord Hua considerable sway over their highly religious neighbors. The men, forming what security officers later called the "Bodhisattva Society," seemed to have figured out a way to buy the silence of Comrade Cheng's family: the dead man's brother was among those at the secretive meeting. Unfortunately, that did nothing to solve their much larger problem. They could buy off a family, but not the People's Republic.

**Read more in *Tiger, Tyrant, Bandit, Businessman: Echoes of Counterrevolution in New China*, published by Stanford University Press in 2022. Readers can get 20 per cent off the book by using the code TIGER20 at [this link](#).**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Learning that officials posted to their native places were most likely to enrich their relatives, deviate from their imperial instructions, or perhaps even rise in rebellion, imperial states used the 'law of avoidance': magistrates had to be outsiders. This helped magistrates and other bureaucrats avoid entanglements as they implemented the will of the imperial state in Poyang County. Their jobs were not easy. As the representative of imperial power in the countryside, the magistrates oversaw everything from bandit suppression to tax collection. For a list of Poyang magistrates, see 鄱阳县志 [*Poyang County Gazette*], Beijing: Fangzhi Chubanshe, 2010, 421–24.

<sup>2</sup> The Fifth Corps of the Second Field Army liberated Poyang County. The cadres who



accompanied them were a fraction of a much larger force organised for the takeover of Nationalist-held regions. As discussed by James Gao, in 1948, the party had called for the training of some 53,000 cadres for this task nationwide, estimating that a county such as Poyang would need 75 cadres. Recruiting northern cadres to travel south was hampered by the localism of rural cadres, who preferred to return to farming once the Civil War ended. Southbound cadres were also forbidden from marriage for two years, lest they lose focus on the task at hand, although as seen at the end of this essay, some northern cadres quickly tied the knot. To balance these factors, the party emphasised the honour of serving the revolution and gave southbound cadres a promotion. Not all these cadres were farmers. Other southbound cadres included intellectuals, student activists, and former government employees. See James Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou: The Transformation of City and Cadre, 1949–1954*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004, 19–52.

<sup>3</sup> A key moment was in late 1951 when Poyang was divided into 17 districts and 274 townships. For everything on Poyang County administration, see the *Poyang County Gazette*, 52–55.

<sup>4</sup> 上饶红色故事汇（69）四菜一汤办婚礼 [Collection of Red Stories from Shangrao (69): A Wedding with Four Dishes and One Soup]. 上饶日报 [Shangrao Daily], 20 July 2021.