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Cover photograph Portrait of Hedda Morrison by Adolph Lazi, Stuttgart, 1931–32
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MAOGATE AT MAOLIN? POINTING FINGERS IN THE WAKE OF A DISASTER, SOUTH ANHUI, JANUARY 1941

史 Gregor Benton

On December 9, 1940, in response to friction between Communists and Nationalists in central China, Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 ordered the Communists' New Fourth Army (N4A) units in Jiangnan 江南,¹ including the N4A headquarters in Wannan 皖南, to go north of the Yangtse 长江 before the end of the year. The Communists in Yan'an 延安 agreed in principle. On January 4, 1941, the Wannan N4A left its base around Yunling 云岭, avowedly in line with this instruction, and was surrounded and wiped out by Guomindang 国民党 forces.

This event, known as the Wannan (South Anhui) Incident, is usually seen as a moral victory for the Chinese Communist Party and a decisive moment in its patriotic legitimization. Yet it was also a crushing defeat in which several thousand Communists were lost: among the prisoners and casualties were some of the Party's most experienced leaders, including the N4A's Commander (Ye Ting 叶挺) and Deputy Commander (Xiang Ying 项英).

The incident marked the culmination of tensions that had grown up as a result of unauthorized Communist expansion in Jiangbei 江北² in the early years of the war against Japan. It led to a severe crisis, though not yet to a final break, in the second united front between the Communists and the Guomindang. At the same time, it confirmed Mao as supreme Communist leader by destroying the Party's last 'independent kingdom', that of Xiang Ying.

The incident has come under intense scrutiny in China. Since 1979, four documentary collections, seventy-odd memoirs, some ninety articles, and a conference attended by more than three hundred people have been devoted to it.³ This is not only because of its signal importance in modern Chinese history but because it dramatically illustrates several of the Party's favourite themes: the two-line struggle, the united front, Communist patriotism, and Nationalist perfidy.

My thanks to W. J. F. Jenner, who raised some useful questions about this paper and helped me clarify its argument; and to Feng Chongyi and Song Yingxian, who helped me with some references. Needless to say, the argument itself, and any mistakes that may be found in it, are mine alone. Thanks also to Lois Wright, who made the maps; and to the publications office of the University of Leeds, which paid for them.

¹ Jiangnan is the name of the region (encompassing parts of Anhui, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang) south of the lower reaches of the Yangtse river (or Changjiang). See Map 1.

² Jiangbei is the name of the region (encompassing parts of Anhui and Jiangsu) north of the lower reaches of the Yangtse. See Map 1.

³ He Li and Zhang Xingxing, "Tan Wannan shibian yanjiu he Wannanshibianxiaoshuo" [Research on the Wannan Incident and the novel *Wannan Incident*], in *Wannan shibian yanjiu yu zhengming* [The Wannan Incident: Research and contention], ed. Tong Zhiqiang (Anhui: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 1990), pp. 382–91, at 385; Ren Guixiang, "Dui xiaoshuo *Wannan shibian* de zhenglun" [On the controversy surrounding the novel *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp. 405–13, at 411; Wei Pu and Chen Guangxiang, eds, *Xinsijun yanjiu suo yin* [An index to N4A research materials] (Suzhou: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 1990).

Map 1

Area of early New Fourth Army activity



⁴ Gregor Benton, "The South Anhui Incident," *Journal of Asian Studies* 45.4 (1986): 681-720, at 710.

Ever since the incident, most Communist politicians and historians have blamed the defeat on Xiang Ying (though not at first publicly, since the levers of power in the N4A belonged ostensibly to Ye Ting, appointed commander by Chiang Kai-shek).⁴ Xiang, they say, should have left his base at Yunling earlier and by a different route. (For the possible routes, see Map 2.) Instead, he hung on until surrounded and then walked into a trap; his blunder was no accident, but a symptom of his general right-opportunism.

In August 1984, at the First International Symposium on Chinese Communist Bases in World War Two, I read a paper asking whether Xiang

really was to blame for dallying or, when he did leave, for going the wrong way.⁵ I argued that both Xiang's route and timing accorded with directives from Yan'an: one sent on November 21, 1940, telling the N4A leaders that they could delay departing for one to two months (in fact they left on January 4, 1941), and another on December 23, 1940, telling them to march north through Maolin 茂林, "the trap [say Xiang's later critics] into which Xiang walked."⁶

The Debate in China

In December 1984, a semi-scholarly account of the Wannan Incident admitted the existence of a supposed instruction dated December 23, 1940, but challenged its authenticity.⁷ Since then, other Chinese historians have cast similar doubt on it. The question was highlighted in 1987 by Li Ruqing 黎汝清, whose controversial bestseller about the Wannan Incident, *Wannan shibian* (The Wannan Incident), triggered fresh scrutiny of Xiang's role.

There are two views of Li's book. One is that it is "a seminal and multifunctional masterpiece in novel form but rooted in real historical events of which it is an actual record; a milestone after many years of historical literary creation; a victory for dialectical materialism and realism." Another is that it is "a novel that describes the decision by the N4A's forces in Wannan in January 1941 to obey the order to go north and to leave via Maolin ... as a case of killing two birds with one stone, by taking the opportunity to execute a [secret] plan to strike south; it wantonly belittles and defames Ye Ting and Xiang Ying, two important leaders of the N4A, and glorifies Chiang Kai-shek and Gu Zhutong 顾祝同, the butchers of the Wannan Incident; it distorts history, takes enemies for friends and friends for enemies, and is a thoroughly bad book."⁸

Li's admirers welcome his new focus on psychological motivation as opposed to "external," political issues. His detractors criticize him on political grounds, in particular for explaining the suppression of the N4A as retaliation for a Communist attack on Nationalist forces north of the Yangtse;⁹ and for suggesting that in deciding to leave via Maolin, Xiang was not only acting on his own account (a view with which many historians agree) but was hoping to slice off toward the south, rather than go north as the Nationalists—echoed by the leaders in Yan'an—had instructed him to do. This last accusation accords with the Nationalist view of the incident, as a necessary measure to stop Xiang marching south to attack Nationalist forces, and seemingly justifies the destruction of the N4A headquarters.¹⁰ Though *The Wannan Incident* is a novel, its author knows the archives and insists that his version of events reflects the documentary record.

Today there are three main schools of thought concerning Xiang's destination:

⁵ Gregor Benton, "Lun Wannan shibian" [On the Wannan Incident], in *Zhongguo kang Ri genjudi shi guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji* [Papers of the International Symposium on Chinese Bases in the War against Japan], ed. Nankai daxue lishi (Beijing: Dang'an Chubanshe), 1985, pp. 291–304.

⁶ See Benton, "South Anhui Incident," p. 695.

⁷ Chen Feng, *Wannan shibian benmo* [The Wannan Incident from start to finish] (Hefei: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 1984), p. 93.

⁸ Chen Niandi, "Shi zunzhong lishi, haishi waiqu lishi" [To respect history, or to distort history], in *Jinian "Wannan shibian" 50 zhounian zhuanji* [Special compilation to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Wannan Incident], ed. Ruan Shijiong and Yang Liping (Shanghai: Tongji Daxue Chubanshe, 1990), pp. 294–300, at 294.

⁹ Ren Guixiang, "On the controversy," p. 410.

¹⁰ Yu Shen, "Xiang Ying weishenmonanzou Maolin" [Why Xiang Ying went south through Maolin], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp. 321–8, at 321.

Figure 1

Ye Ting, Commander of the N4A



Figure 2

Xiang Ying, Deputy Commander of the N4A



¹¹ He Li and Zhang Xingxing, "Research on the Wannan Incident," p.383.

¹² Chen Liao, "Wannan shibian lishi he Wannan shibian xiaoshuo" [The history of the Wannan Incident and the novel *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.291–9, at 292.

¹³ Li Ruqing, "Wo yao shuode hua" [What I want to say], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.369–71.

¹⁴ Gregor Benton, *Mountain fires: the Red Army's three-year war in South China, 1934–1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁵ See Cai Changyan, "Lunshu Zhonggong zhongyang dui Wannan xinsijun beiyi luxiande juece bianhua" [On changes in the policy of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the route north of the Wannan N4A], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.59–63, at 60.

¹⁶ Benton, "South Anhui Incident," pp.688–9.

¹⁷ Here and elsewhere in this article, when I speak of Mao, I also mean the group of leaders in Yan'an under Mao's paramountcy.

¹⁸ Li Ruqing, "Wannan shibian lishi yanjiu cunzai yanzhong biduan" [Serious malprac-

1. Some writers believe (with Li Ruqing) that Xiang had scant intention of going north and wanted to wage war independently from old Communist bases in the south, his real destination. This theory in some respects supports Chiang Kai-shek's charge that Xiang was engaged in a rebellion.¹¹

2. Others—a majority—believe that though Xiang's passage through Maolin was unauthorized by Yan'an, nonetheless it was the first stop on a journey that by a devious route would have ended across the Yangtse, in line with Chiang's (and Mao's) directive. According to one variant, the Guomindang had previously agreed to the route Xiang took; according to another, Xiang chose it by himself.

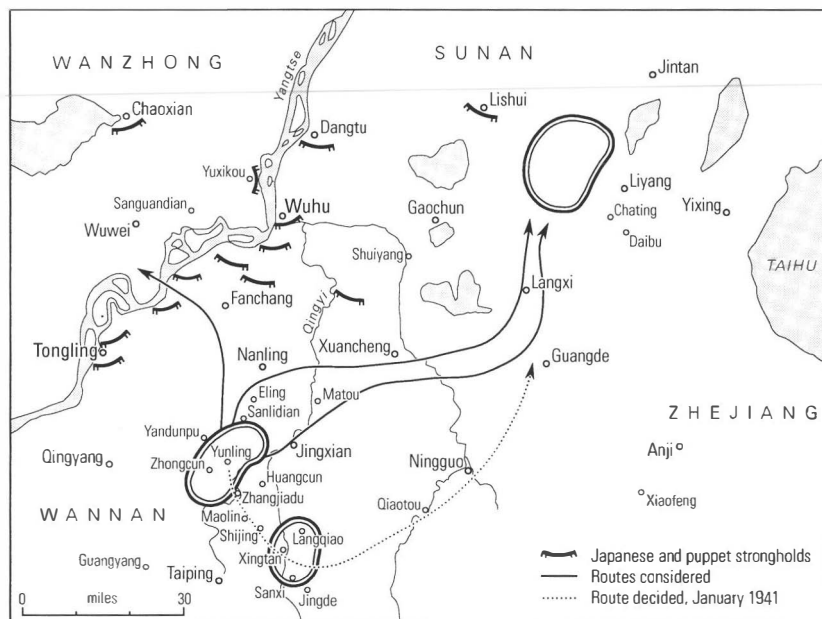
3. Still others, a minority, believe that, in heading for Maolin, Xiang was acting on a directive from Yan'an, the one dated December 23, 1940. Some say that the Guomindang had agreed on the Maolin route with Ye Ting, and the Party centre then adopted it; others, that the decision to go via Maolin originated in Yan'an.¹² The implication of this minority thesis is that Mao and his fellow leaders were responsible for one of the Party's worst military defeats, and conspired to cover up their culpability.

Blaming Xiang Ying

The 'southern strike' theory, like the 'unauthorized detour' theory, blames Xiang for being in Maolin, but has the merit of proposing a plausible explanation for his presence there: Maolin was the first stop on a march even further south that would happen if Nationalists attacked the marchers. The 'unauthorized route' theory, by now standard among Communist historians, also blames Xiang, but sees him as a bungler, not as a schismatic or traitor.

In defence of his 'southern strike' theory, Li Ruqing cites ten sources attesting to Xiang's southern strategy, to rebut critics who describe this strategy as a figment of Li's imagination.¹³ Li's references are convincing. Xiang clearly hankered after old haunts of the three-year guerrilla war in the south, waged by Red Army units left behind when the main forces left in 1934 for what later was called the Long March.¹⁴ Although other leaders in Yan'an and Jiangbei (where by 1940 most of the N4A was ensconced) at various times (including as late as November 1, 1940)¹⁵ supported the idea of a retreat south by Xiang in the event of serious friction around Yunling, on the whole they opposed his southern strategy,¹⁶ especially after November 1940.

In another article, Li argues that Xiang, believing that Mao¹⁷ would oppose a route through Maolin were he to hear of it, hid it from him. Though the Maolin decision was taken at a meeting on December 28, 1940, says Li, Xiang waited until January 1, 1941 before reporting on the meeting to Yan'an, and even then kept quiet about Maolin and spoke only of "moving into Sunan 苏南 (south Jiangsu)," by a route not specified; as a result, Mao assumed (we are not told why) that Xiang was planning to march due east into Sunan; on January 3 he praised Xiang's decision as "wholly correct."¹⁸ But that Xiang

**Map 2**

New Fourth Army routes north from Wannan

hankered in general after the south need not mean that by going to Maolin he was on his way south; and failing to mention Maolin is not the same as keeping quiet about it, as I shall show presently.

The 'unauthorized detour' theory similarly assumes that Mao was ignorant of Xiang's planned route and that Xiang kept him in the dark about it. But unlike the 'southern strike' theory, it is short on motive. Why should Xiang hide a route that he thought to be right? It is especially hard to see what Xiang had to hide given that on December 26, 1940, the Party centre told him "to find a way himself of ... moving north."¹⁹

Was the Maolin Route Especially Dangerous?

The main reason why a route through Maolin need not be equated with a southern strike or explained as Xiang's blunder is that it was a plausible way, under the circumstances, into Sunan, whence the Yangtse could be crossed northward. Some of Xiang's critics, keen to prove that the route was so dangerous that Mao could never have approved it, claim that the decision of December 28 came out of the blue and the route was unresearched and unprepared;²⁰ Li Zhigao 李志高 said after the Incident that he had criticized it on precisely those grounds at the meeting on December 28.²¹ But Li himself had reconnoitred the south-easterly route through Sanxi 三溪 and Jingde 旌德 in June 1940 and declared it safe.²² Since Li's mission was carried out on orders of the Party centre,²³ his report was almost certainly transmitted to Yan'an. This report may explain why, on November 1, 1940, the Party

[vice in historical research on the Wannan Incident], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.281–90, at 286; Takeuchi Minoru, *Mao Zedong jibujuan* [Supplementary volumes to Mao Zedong's collected works] (Tokyo: Hokubosha, 1984), vol.6, pp.243–5; Cai Changyan, "Policy changes," p.62; Tong Zhiqiang, "Wannan shibianzhong xinsijun junshi xingdong jiantao: jianlun Xiang Ying zai Wannan shibianzhongde cuowu" [An examination of the military operations of the N4A in the Wannan Incident, and a discussion of Xiang Ying's mistakes in the Wannan Incident], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.102–11, at 107; Huang Kaiyuan, "Jiujing shi shei jiaohunle yitan qingshui" [Exactly who muddied the clear waters?], in Ruan Shijiong and Yang Liping, eds., *Special compilation*, pp.274–9, at 279.

¹⁹ "Wannanshibian" Bianzuan Weiyuanhui, eds., *Wannan shibian* [The Wannan Incident] (hereafter WNSB) (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi Chubanshe, 1990), p.78.

²⁰ E.g. Duan Yusheng et al., *Ye Ting jiangjun zhuàn* [A biography of General Ye Ting] (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1989), p.380.

²¹ Yu Shen, "Why Xiang Ying went south," p.321.

²² Huang Kaiyuan and Zhou Zuxi, "Lishi wenxuede jiben qingjie buying xugou: dui *Wannan shibian* xiudingban jiyude xiwang" [The basic plot of historical literature should not be fabricated: hopes for the revised edition of *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.358–68, at 366; Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Li Yimang tan Wannan shibian yu Xiang Ying" [Li Yimang on the Wannan Incident and Xiang Ying], *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* 1 (1992): 4–8, at 5.

²³ Huang Kaiyuan and Zhou Zuxi, "Basic plot," p.363.

²⁴ Cai Changyan, "Policy changes," p.60.

²⁵ Li was perhaps right to worry. In November 1941, after escaping north across the Yangtse in April, he was arrested by N4A security people on suspicion of treason, and interrogated about "important questions in the Wannan Incident." In January 1942 he is said to have killed himself. "Li's suicide was a sign that he was unable to withstand tests," commented a comrade. See Yang Gang, "*Wannan shibian de lishi zhenshixing he zai*" [Where is the truthfulness of *The Wannan Incident*?], in Ruan Shijiong and Yang Liping, eds., *Special compilation*, pp.287–93, at 289.

²⁶ Chen Liao, "History," p.291.

²⁷ Tong Zhiqiang, "Xiaoshuo *Wannan shibian* shiwu tan" [On the errors in the novel *The Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.261–70, at 266; Yu Shen, "Why Xiang Ying went south," p.323; Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Wannan shibian zongheng tan" [A conversation about the Wannan Incident], in Ruan Shijiong and Yang Liping, eds., *Special compilation*, pp.206–52, at 224 and 234.

²⁸ Gu Weibin and Xu Baoqi, "Guanyu xinsijun Wannan budui nanjin Maolin diqu de wenti" [On the question of the march south into the Maolin area by the N4A's Wannan forces], in Ruan Shijiong and Yang Liping, eds., *Special compilation*, pp.329–34, at 332–3.

²⁹ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.226.

³⁰ Takeuchi Minoru, *Supplementary volumes*, vol.6, p.247.

³¹ Nan Bei, "Guanyu Wannan shibiande xinsijun beiyi luxiande xuanze" [On the N4A's choice of route north in the Wannan Incident], in *Zhonggong dangshi wenzhai niankan (1987 nian)* [Abstract of articles on the history of the Chinese Communist Party (1987)], ed. Liao Gailong (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1990), pp.349–51, at 351.

³² Zhou Zuxi, "Xiaoshuo *Wannan shibian* yu shishide churu" [Some discrepancies between the novel *Wannan Incident* and the historical facts], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.340–5, at 344.

³³ See Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.226.

centre proposed three possible routes north, including "bursting through the encirclement to the south."²⁴

What was true in June was not necessarily true in December. After the disaster, survivors of the Wannan N4A were keen to distance themselves from the decision to adopt the Sanxi-Jingde route, and Li Zhigao had more reason than most to want to do so. This might explain his claim to have questioned the decision on December 28.²⁵ Today, however, many Chinese historians agree that an incident was inevitable whichever route the N4A took, and that its losses would scarcely have been smaller (and may even have been greater) had it marched north or due east instead of first "inclining to the south."²⁶

To the east were the plains and the Guomindang's 52nd Division, which Xiang "feared and hated," plus heavy Japanese concentrations.²⁷ To the south were mountains that the marchers could use as cover, and the 40th Division, which according to Li Yimang 李一氓 (a survivor of the incident, and head of the Secretariat of the Party's South-Eastern Bureau) they had "more than enough forces to deal with."²⁸ (See Map 3.) At the time of the final decision to leave via Maolin, this route, far from being a blind alley, was the "only gap [left] for proceeding east into Sunan."²⁹ The choice was between marching east along the string of the bow or south-east along its arch, through Maolin. Either way, the destination was the same.

In 1941, and among historians today, the most cogent criticism concerned not the route but the timing of the evacuation. On January 7, by which time it was too late, Mao warned Xiang not to tarry at Maolin;³⁰ Li Yimang thought that "had we left three days sooner, we might have got through."³¹

Xiang Ying's Report to Yan'an

Did Xiang deliberately keep quiet about Maolin in his report to Yan'an? The 'southern strategy' theory explicitly accuses Xiang of acting in bad faith. The 'unauthorized detour' theory naturally assumes that he kept his plans to himself, for otherwise Mao would be implicated in the blunder; but it offers no convincing explanation for his silence. Both charges presuppose that he did not mention Maolin in some other report on or around December 28, and that his failure to mention it on January 1 admits no explanation other than deceit.

The first presupposition is open to doubt. Without access to the whole record we cannot know what other correspondence Xiang transmitted. The published documentation is incomplete and the archive not yet fully open;³² nor are the archive's restricted sections necessarily in good array. Xiang sent at least one radio message, on December 31, to N4A leaders north of the Yangtse before radioing Yan'an. (It is mentioned in the diary of Lai Chuanzhu 赖传珠, N4A Chief of Staff, but Lai's account of it is "extremely summary.")³³ And Chen Yi 陈毅, also north of the Yangtse (where he was implementing

Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi's 刘少奇 policy, of which Xiang Ying disapproved), knew by December 25 that Xiang "was going north within the next few days."³⁴ Did Xiang mention or hint in this correspondence that he was heading for Maolin? We cannot say.

If Xiang did wait four days before reporting on the meeting of December 28, Mao would surely have reproached him. It seems more likely that there was radio communication, but we have no way of knowing what it said.

Xiang may have waited for news of the outcome of negotiations in Chongqing 重庆 with Chiang Kai-shek before reporting on the meeting. On December 30, Mao told him the result of the negotiations and advised him to go "in groups via Sunan." On December 31, Xiang told the command north of the Yangtse that he would go north via Sunan; on January 1, he informed Mao that he was about to move into Sunan. Some say that the decision of December 28 to enter Sunan via Maolin was broadly compatible with Mao's radio message of December 30, and that the coincidence was a case of "agreement without prior consultation."³⁵ But it can also be argued, as I shall show, that the coincidence of views between Xiang and Mao was not broad but close, and that the agreement was reached by prior consultation. The second presupposition—that Xiang's failure to mention Maolin on January 1 was an act of deliberate deception—is also questionable. Even if we leave aside until later the disputed instruction of December 23, which specifies the route upon which Xiang embarked, there are other plausible explanations why Xiang may have preferred not to mention Maolin.

The name Maolin was not unknown in Yan'an; it had been a destination of the Fang Zhimin 方志民 expedition from the Central Soviet Republic in 1934 and the site of Fang's defeat in early 1935. According to Xiang's critics, Mao first heard that Xiang's route was through Maolin on January 5, when Ye Ting and Xiang reported that they had "arrived [at a point] between Taiping 太平 and Jingxian 泾县."³⁶ There is no evidence that Mao was startled by this report from the fateful town, and reason to think that he was not. If Maolin had been such a bad idea, and news to Mao, one might expect evidence of surprise, anger, worry, or dissent in his reply to Xiang's message from Maolin. However, the radio message of January 7 does not criticize Xiang for being in Maolin but simply warns him not to stay too long there: to go east immediately and burst the circle

³⁴ Zhou Zuxi, "Some discrepancies," p.344.

³⁵ Cai Changyan, "Policy changes," p.62.

³⁶ Takeuchi Minoru, *Supplementary volumes*, vol.6, p.249.

Figure 3

The town of Maolin, in Anhui province



³⁷ Ibid., p.247.

³⁸ Chen Liao, "History," p.292.

³⁹ Tang Xiqiang, "Wannan shibian dashiji" [Chronicle of events in the Wannan Incident], *Anhui shida xuebao* 3 (1981): 31–43, at 33–4.

⁴⁰ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.226; Yue Xingming, "Gu Zhutongde fangong junshi yinmou" [Gu Zhutong's anti-Communist conspiracy], in WNSB, pp.444–9.

⁴¹ Cf. Chen Liao, "History," pp.291–3.

⁴² Ibid., p.292.

⁴³ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.226.

⁴⁴ WNSB, pp.65–6.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.155–6, 183, 285–6, 363.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.113.

before it is too late. It also mentions Xuancheng 宣城 and Ningguo 宁国 as further points on Xiang's route.³⁷ This mention suggests that Mao knew in detail the route that Xiang was following.

How (short of authenticating the instruction of December 23) can we explain Mao's apparent equanimity? Several sources suggest that a southerly route into Sunan (via Jingde and Ningguo) figured early in discussions between the N4A and Gu Zhutong, Nationalist Commander of the Third War Zone of which Wannan was part. Mao knew that these discussions were taking place. The negotiations in November happened on the Party centre's instructions, conveyed in a directive: "If you cross into Sunan, you must get Gu Zhutong's permission."³⁸ According to Tang Xiqiang 唐锡强,³⁹ the Nationalists proposed as early as October 1940 that the marchers leave Wannan on an arch-like trajectory that would go first to Jingde (via Maolin) and then curve up toward Guangde 广德. Yue Xingming 岳星明, Gu's chief staff officer, wrote in 1962 that he had drafted such a route (probably in late October) and confirmed it in mid-December 1940.⁴⁰ If that was so, Mao must have known of these plans.⁴¹ Mao's knowledge would explain why, after December 28, Xiang felt no need to specify his route in his report to Yan'an, and why Mao took the news from Maolin in his stride. Xiang may even have wanted for security reasons to keep the route secret until the last minute, for though Gu is said to have approved it, by late December he had withdrawn it.

Had Gu formally agreed such a route? The evidence is contradictory. According to Yue Xingming, he agreed it "in general outline,"⁴² but there is nothing in the published record to support Yue's recollection.⁴³ Xiang's November 18 report to Mao on the outcome of the negotiations with Gu about withdrawing from Wannan may have specified the route set for the evacuation, but if so, the published text omits the section describing it,⁴⁴ as do all the statements (insofar as I could consult them) issued at the time of the negotiations.

If Gu instructed Ye to leave by a south-easterly route, Mao would have heard of it and voiced an opinion on it; and he may even have approved it, a possibility explored later in this paper. (That he opposed it is unlikely, for then Xiang would hardly have dared propose it, let alone have succeeded in pushing it through on December 28.) However, there is no discussion of the Maolin option in any of the published texts from late 1940 (save for the 'instruction' of December 23), though there may be in documents not so far made available.

Sources dating from shortly after the incident and memoirs insist that the route through Maolin was fixed by Gu in November 1940.⁴⁵ As early as January 13, 1941, Zhu De 朱德 and others said: "The forces under [Ye] Ting and the other leaders were obeying the order to go north and were following the route set by Commander Gu Zhutong into Sunan."⁴⁶ Unless these charges were invented in order to blame the bloodshed on Chiang Kai-shek, they cast doubt on the claim that Mao was unaware of Xiang's planned route.

Whatever Gu might earlier have agreed, directly or through Yue Xingming, by late December he was no longer prepared to let the N4A leave Wannan by any way other than directly north. When Xiang eventually headed south toward Maolin, the most he could claim was that he was following a route at one time set by Gu, but later rescinded.

Different routes were set (either unilaterally, by the Nationalists, or after joint consultation by Nationalists and Communists) at different times for different groups of N4A troops; it is not always clear which routes applied to which groups. In mid-November 1940 a route was set for combatants that first went north, then curved east, and finally crossed the Yangtse at Zhenjiang 镇江; a second route was fixed for non-combatants that led east via Jingxian. Again in mid-November, Yuan Guoping 袁国平 reportedly negotiated a route with Gu Zhutong that passed through Jingde (beyond Maolin), went south of Ningguo, crossed between Guangde and Langxi 郎溪, and ended up east of Zhenjiang (the route upon which Xiang apparently embarked). On November 29, Gu told the Wannan administration that he had set two routes eastward into Sunan, one through Jingxian and the other through Nanling 南陵, north of Jingxian.⁴⁷ (See Map 2.)

Is it Plausible that Xiang Ying Deceived Mao?

One of the biggest holes in the thesis that Xiang tried to deceive Yan'an is its implication that Mao (not to mention Liu Shaoqi and Chen Yi, north of the Yangtse) would have been taken in by Xiang. It is hard to believe that Mao was prepared to swap ideas with Xiang about the evacuation route that were no more specific than that it would "first lead into Sunan." Any military command—and Xiang had two to deal with, in Yan'an and in Subei 苏北—would have demanded further information about such a major deployment. It is hard to escape the conclusion that both Mao and Xiang knew exactly what the other meant in their communications between December 30 and January 3, and had no need to spell it out. And what of Xiang's comrades in Yunling? Xiang could hardly hide his agenda from the people who would have to implement it. Both Ye Chao 叶超, the N4A's operational staff officer, and Li Zhigao, head of its operational section, learned on the evening of December 28 that the initial line of march was to the south-east, after which it would curve north toward the Yangtse. On the eve of the evacuation, N4A leaders in Yunling said in their valedictory propaganda that their destination was Jiangbei.⁴⁸ Must we assume that Xiang was deceiving not only the distant Mao but also his own troops and fellow leaders by pretending that he intended to go north when actually he intended to go south? In the weeks before the evacuation, the Party centre in Yan'an had already requested that Ye Ting leave in advance of the main evacuation. Had Xiang really intended to strike south, would he not have jumped at this chance of shedding his main rival before carrying out his secret plan?⁴⁹ Instead, he kept Ye Ting with him.

⁴⁷ 'Wannan Shibian Ziliao Xuan' Bianxuanzu, eds, *Wannan shibian ziliao xuan* [A selection of materials on the Wannan Incident] (Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), p.494; Tang Xiqiang, "Chronicle of events," p.34; WNSB, pp.84, 452.

⁴⁸ Tong Zhiqiang, "On the errors," pp.265–6; Yu Shen, "Why Xiang Ying went south," p.321.

⁴⁹ Gan Fajun, "Ping changpian lishi xiaoshuo *Wannan shibian*" [An evaluation of the long historical novel *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.304–13, at 306.

⁵⁰ See Benton, "South Anhui Incident."

⁵¹ Li Ruqing, "Benlai shi yitan qingshui, weishenmo bei jiaohunle? Guanyu *Wannan shibian* chuanguo jingguoda bianzhe wen" [Why muddy pure waters? Answers to questions by the editor about the process of creation of *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.211–35, at 215.

By this time, Xiang's authority had been severely weakened, first by Mao's highly personal criticism of him in his directive of May 4, 1940, ordering Xiang to reach out into the enemy rear and adopt a more vigorous position, independent of the Guomindang; and then by the December 26 directive.⁵⁰ These were sticks with which Xiang's enemies in Yunling could beat him if he stepped too obviously out of line. Would he have risked the beating? One theory is that Xiang fooled his Yunling comrades by pretending that Mao's general comment that it was "wholly correct" to enter Sunan referred specifically to Xiang's plan to go to Maolin.⁵¹ But this theory is based on surmise.

The Question of the Route in Light of the Incident

⁵² Gan Fajun, "Evaluation," p.306.

⁵³ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.232.

⁵⁴ Benton, "South Anhui Incident," p.705; Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.232.

⁵⁵ Yu Shen, "Why Xiang Ying went south," p.325.

⁵⁶ WNSB, pp.98–9.

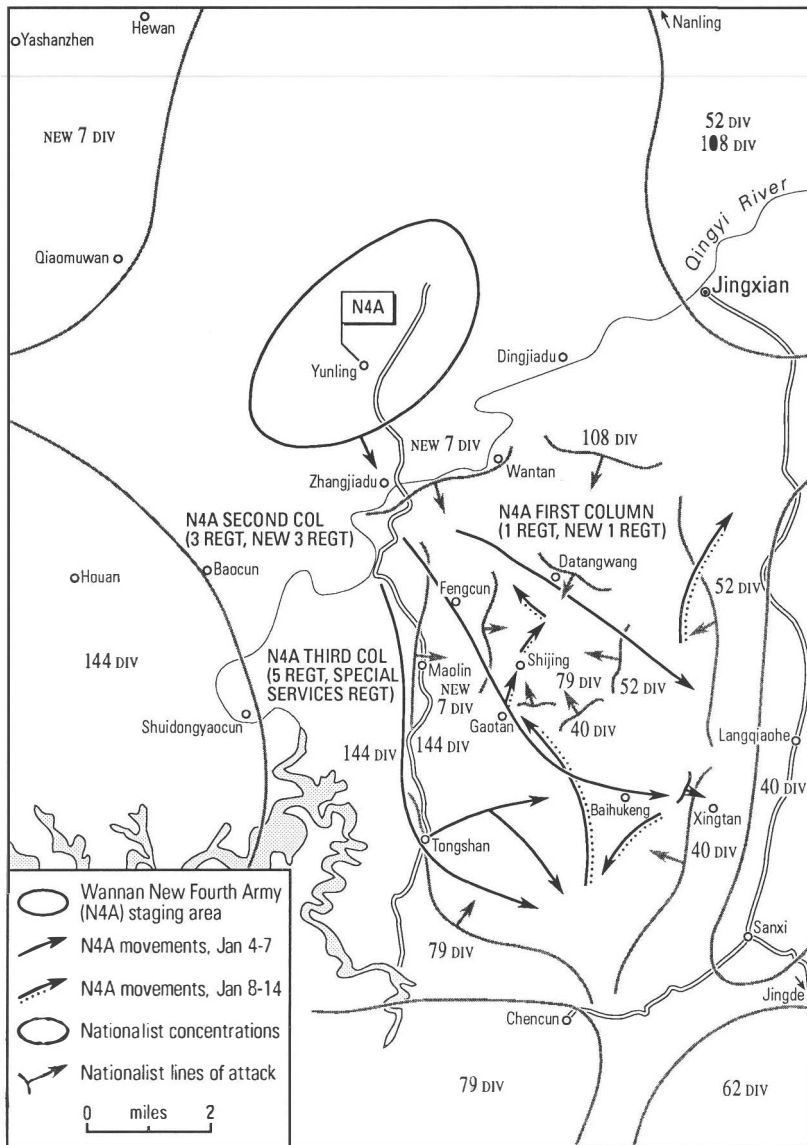
⁵⁷ Benton, "South Anhui Incident," p.696.

If Xiang intended to strike south, why did he allow the division of the marchers into three columns that left Maolin by separate routes, putting two thirds of them beyond his control at the moment when he might have been expected to carry out his plan?⁵² (See Map 3.) One of the earliest Nationalist 'proofs' of N4A 'insubordination' in January 1941 was its sortie toward Taiping, in the south-west, at the start of the incident. True, if Xiang's goal had been Jiangxi 江西 (or Huangshan 黄山), it would have been logical for him to head for Taiping, which linked Maolin by a lightly garrisoned road to the Nationalist rear. But the marchers sent only a special task regiment toward Taiping that turned back east halfway.⁵³ What's more, on January 7 it was Ye Ting who proposed heading for Taiping, while Xiang insisted on continuing in a south-easterly direction, on the grounds that going to Taiping "could not be justified politically."⁵⁴

We could be more sure about the planned route of the march after Maolin if the maps prepared in Yunling were available for consultation. N4A sources claim that a map showing that the N4A was headed east, not south, was captured in the incident. Nationalist officers confirm that a map was captured but insist that it showed the N4A "slipping south to launch a surprise attack on the Nationalist army." The map has not to my knowledge been made public.⁵⁵

Had the Nationalists been caught unawares by Xiang's passage through Maolin, one might conclude that the route was thought up at the last moment, in a desperate attempt to outwit Gu; or that it was a plan that Xiang developed secretly. But on December 29 large Nationalist forces occupied a line just south of Maolin.⁵⁶ If Gu knew Xiang's intentions, are we to believe that Mao did not?

There is evidence that on January 2 Ye Ting told the Nationalists in Sanxi, some sixty miles south-east of Maolin, that he would leave "by the agreed route."⁵⁷ Would Ye have told them but not the Party centre in Yan'an? If Ye did tell Yan'an, Mao's instruction of January 3 to "move at once into Sunan" would look like an endorsement of the Maolin route. Ye's mention of an



“agreed route” through Sanxi corroborates Yue Xingming’s recollection that the south-easterly route had been agreed between Yue and N4A leaders.⁵⁸ So there is no positive proof or even strong presumptive evidence of a planned ‘southern strike’ or ‘unauthorized detour.’ Moreover, it is likely that the route through Maolin had figured in communications between Yunling and Yan’an, and that no one in Yan’an had questioned it.

⁵⁸ Yue Xingming, “Gu Zhutong,” pp.444-6.

⁵⁹ Benton, "South Anhui Incident," p.696, fn.

⁶⁰ Wang Zhenhe, "Guanyu Wannan xinsijun beiyide xingjun luxian wenti" [On the question of the route of the Wannan N4A's march north], *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao* 19 (1980).

⁶¹ Chen Feng, "Wannan Incident," pp.93–7.

⁶² Chen Shouli, "Xiaoshuo *Wannan shibian* yu jiben lishi shishi bing wu churu: yu Zhou Zuxi tongzhi shangque" [There are no discrepancies between the novel *Wannan Incident* and the basic historical facts: a discussion with Comrade Zhou Zuxi], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.346–57, at 347; Tong Zhiqiang, "An examination," p.106.

⁶³ Shao Yingzi, "Ping *Wannan shibian* dai houji" [An evaluation of the essay in place of postscript to *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.276–80, at 278.

⁶⁴ Tong Zhiqiang, "Wannan shibian yanjiu shinian (dai xu)" [Ten years of research into the Wannan Incident (in place of a preface)], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.1–17, at 9.

⁶⁵ Chen Shouli, "No discrepancies," p.347.

⁶⁶ Li Luo, "Dui zhenming jiashide yi: ji Shanghai shi xinsijun yanjiuhui *Wannan shibian* xiaoshuo yantaohui" [Objections to attaching real names to false things: recalling the symposium organized by the Shanghai N4A Research Association on the novel *Wannan Incident*], in Tong Zhiqiang, ed., *Wannan Incident*, pp.397–413, at 403.

⁶⁷ Chen Shouli, "No discrepancies," p.347.

Maolin, Maogate?

The most breathtaking theory about the Maolin route is that Yan'an authored it. The evidence for this theory is a document found in the Beijing Party archives originally taken to be the text of a radio message dated December 23, 1940. It reads: "All the Wannan forces should proceed in combat readiness by a roundabout route via Maolin, Sanxi, Jingde, Ningguo, and Langxi to Liyang 溧阳, and there await the chance to go north." This wording is almost identical with that of the decision taken by Xiang and others on December 28.⁵⁹ If authenticated, this evidence would show that when the Wannan Communists marched to Maolin, they were acting on orders from leaders in Yan'an, who must therefore take responsibility for a disaster that they blamed on Xiang Ying.

The first mention of the December 23 instruction I know of was by Wang Zhenhe 王振合, who admitted its existence in 1980 and explained it as a concession to Xiang Ying by the Party centre, which "had no alternative" but to accept Xiang's proposal;⁶⁰ as far as I know, the first attempt to invalidate it as only a copy (*chaojian* 抄件) and not an original (*yuanwen* 原文) was made by Chen Feng 陈枫, four years later.⁶¹ Others claim to have combed the archives unavailingly—some "over a period of several years"—for the "original" message.⁶² Received opinion in China today is that the instruction exists merely as a copy; the "overwhelming majority" of scholars denies its authenticity,⁶³ and "a basic consensus has been achieved refuting the very damaging copy of the instruction . . . deposited in the Museum of the Chinese Revolution."⁶⁴ Even so, "a considerable number of comrades" still believe that Xiang was obeying orders when he marched south.⁶⁵ These dissenters seem to be relatively numerous (for obvious reasons in a society where political stigmas can be acquired by association) among N4A veterans.⁶⁶

What can we conclude from the existence of this copy and the unavailability of an original? And, given that copies are by definition transcripts of something, of what is it a transcript? If the document dated December 23 had been an original radio message, presumably it would be encoded and carry the name of its transmitter and the time of transmission; or, if we are looking for the original written order by a top commander or staff officer, it would presumably carry an authenticating signature or chop. I assume that it has been identified as a copy because it does not meet any such criteria. However, it reads like a Yan'an radio message, and was presumably filed with other leadership directives: why else would its finder take it for the text of a radio message? We do not know whether the copy's published text is integral, or whether the copy contains other clues about its status. Even so, there is no obvious reason (other than the absence of an original) to deny that it is the copy of a radio message.

Unless, of course, it is a copy of something else, or no copy at all, but a mistake or forgery. The document "registers no source,"⁶⁷ but that has not

stopped people finding one for it. According to its keeper in the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, "it was transcribed from some newspaper . . . I'm not sure which; to this day I've been unable to track it down."⁶⁸ But it is unlikely that a Party newspaper of the period, even an internal one, would publish such an instruction. And if it did, are we to assume that the newspaper misreported the instruction, or forged it?⁶⁹

Li Ruqing argues that the copy is a transcript of the decision of December 28, with the '8' wrongly given as a '3'.⁷⁰ One author who says that it was transcribed from a report by a survivor of the incident speculates that it was copied, "inadvertently" or "deliberately," by friends of Xiang intent on reversing the verdict and switching the blame onto the Party centre.⁷¹

The forgery theory can be neither ruled out nor proved. Under other circumstances, the wrong date theory might make sense, for many wartime directives are wrongly dated.⁷² But it fails to explain why the author of the instruction is given—apparently as part of the very text of the instruction—as the Military Commission in Yan'an. Though the integral text of the instruction has not been published, we would surely have been told by now if it had been attributed to any source other than the Yan'an commission; and we would have known even sooner if it were attributable to Xiang's branch of the commission, in Yunling.

Into the Archive

Most historians base their doubts about the December 23 instruction on the absence of an original. "In those days all directives and reports were by radio," says Li Ruqing;⁷³ "there can be no question of the absence of material evidence." (He forgets that his task is how to explain away "material evidence," in the shape of the copy.) It would be useful to know if an original is essential for validating other radio messages.

How complete are the various archives containing material relevant to the N4A's Wannan period? Probably not very. On December 26 Mao ordered Xiang to destroy all secret documents,⁷⁴ so even the marchers who escaped took none with them. There can therefore be little or no possibility of a record of the receipt of the message surviving. And to what extent have the relevant archives been reduced to order? Not much, to judge by reports. Some archivists have apparently spent years hunting in the Museum of the Chinese Revolution for the original of the December 23 instruction.⁷⁵

These questions about the text of the instruction, the criteria for validating copies, and the state of the archive bear heavily on the status of the copy of December 23, but they have not (as far as I know) been addressed.

Among the many attempts to discredit the copy, that least easily refuted is the claim that it is a forgery. But though some commentators are prepared to argue that a forgery was insinuated into the archive, no one seems to have

⁶⁸ Li Ruqing, "Why muddy pure waters?", p.230.

⁶⁹ See Chen Liao, "History," p.294.

⁷⁰ Li Ruqing, "Serious malpractice," p.282.

⁷¹ Chen Shouli, "No discrepancies," p.347; Anhui Sheng Dang'anguan, Anhui Sheng Bowuguan, Xinsijun Junbu Jiuzhi Jinianguan, eds, *Xinsijun zai Wannan (1938-1941)* [The N4A in Wannan (1938-1941)] (Henan: n.p., 1985), p.343.

⁷² Li Ruqing, "Why muddy pure waters?", pp.213-14.

⁷³ Ibid., p.230.

⁷⁴ Takeuchi Minoru, *Supplementary volumes*, vol.6, p.235.

⁷⁵ Chen Shouli, "No discrepancies," p.347.

⁷⁶ Li Ruqing, "Why muddy pure waters?", p.230.

asked the much more obvious question: was the original of this "highly damaging" document spirited from the archive by Mao loyalists? After all, either side could have had a motive for putting a false document into the record or removing a genuine one. It would certainly have been easier for Mao loyalists to remove an original than for cronies of the dead, discredited Xiang Ying to plant a forgery. There is no evidence of Maoist interference, but there are rumours of it. According to one rumour, during the Cultural Revolution a historian came across the original in the archive but was afraid to publicize his discovery. After the fall of the 'Gang of Four', he returned to find that it had vanished.

Others have argued in private that the Party centre agreed to the plan to go south via Maolin, but the death of Xiang and Yuan Guoping removed two main witnesses to its complicity and yielded the necessary scapegoats. Li Ruqing⁷⁶ calls this argument illogical, for Xiang did not die until March. But the Party centre did not know that Xiang had survived the incident; and whether or not physically dead, Xiang was certainly politically dead after the Resolution of January 15, 1941 (discussed below).

So the absence of the text as transmitted does not prove that the copy is irrelevant or forged; it may simply mean that the original has been lost, overlooked, hidden, or destroyed. Until the provenance of the copy (or the fate of the original) is determined, we must examine events, decisions, and documents contemporary to the instruction to see if they give credence to the existence of such a directive from Yan'an.

The Context of the December 23 Instruction

⁷⁷ Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich, editors' introduction, "A guide to material on the Chinese Communist movement: Zhang Zhuhong's *Historiography of China's Modern Revolutionary History*, pt. III," *Chinese Studies in History: A Journal of Translations* 24.3 (Spring 1991): 3–14, at 10.

⁷⁸ WNSB, pp.74–7.

Some of the communications between Yan'an and Yunling are yet to be made public, so any analysis of the context of the Maolin decision must be provisional. Access to Party archives is normally restricted to cadres of the "old generation of revolutionaries"⁷⁷ themselves part of the political process and well placed to suppress damaging information. Gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the published record reduce scholarship here to the first steps in incremental exploration. But that does not mean that we must confine ourselves to asking questions. We can also venture judgments, and hope that they will provoke the release of new evidence by those with access to it.

Did any message that might have elicited an instruction like that in the copy reach Yan'an from Yunling? On December 21, 22, and 23, leaders in Yunling informed Yan'an that Gu Zhutong had ordered them to go north into Wanzhong 皖中 (central Anhui) instead of east into Sunan. The Wanzhong route, being heavily patrolled by Japanese troops and, further to the north, by anti-Communist Nationalist forces, was a death-trap;⁷⁸ the route east into Sunan was also blocked. The published version of Xiang's report to Yan'an

of December 23 is—perhaps significantly—truncated. Could the omitted sections contain information that might help prove the copy true or false? Perhaps so, for reports from Yunling from this period commonly end with a description of the N4A's planned action and a request for directives on it. A December 23 instruction would fit logically into such a context, as a resolution of the dilemma reported from Yunling. Are the routes north and east blocked? Then first march south and later swing back north toward the Yangtse.

If authentic, the December 23 instruction throws light on another message from Mao, dated December 24, telling the N4A to “start moving immediately, in groups.” Li Ruqing says that this message was actually sent on November 24. In his opinion, this correction resolves some contradictions in the record.⁷⁹ But if we accept the instruction of December 23 as authentic, then that of December 24, far from contradicting other messages, is at least in some ways consonant with it.

Against this must be set the testimony of Li Yimang, who administered radio messages and documents and was a non-voting member of the branch Military Commission in Yunling. “The Party centre took no decisions from afar about the route by which the N4A would cross north,” said Li in 1984. “To say that the Party centre set the route ... is conjecture.”⁸⁰ However, Chen Pixian 陈丕显, in an article published in 1986, seemed to belie Li's claim. “According to what Comrade Li Yimang, the former head of the Secretariat of the Headquarters of the New Fourth Army, told me,” said Chen Pixian, “on the eve of the Wannan Incident every [decision] regarding the time at which and the route by which the headquarters should leave was approved by the Central Committee (CC) of the Chinese Communist Party. At the time, Comrade Yimang was in charge of radio communications.”⁸¹ These two statements flatly contradict one another. Which should we believe?

Ten Truths to Catch a Lie?

In an exchange with Zhang Zhouming 张周明, a Party historian, Li Ruqing lists some circumstantial reasons why the December 23 instruction must be false.⁸² He promises Zhang to name ten truths that would fall were it to be authenticated.

First, he argues that such an instruction is incompatible with Ye Ting's visit to Shangrao 上饶 in November 1940 on orders of the Party centre to negotiate a route with the Nationalists.⁸³ But he forgets that in mid-December the Nationalists cancelled their previous agreement on the route: the instruction of December 23 would make sense as a secret countermanning of the Nationalist decision.

Second, he cites the CC Resolution on Xiang and Yuan's Mistakes (January 15, 1941) and the Summary Issued by the Staff Officers' Department

⁷⁹ Li Ruqing, “Why muddy pure waters?”, p.213.

⁸⁰ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, “Conversation,” pp.222, 227; Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, “Li Yimang,” p.5.

⁸¹ Chen Pixian, “Guanyu bianxie Suzhong qu kangzhan shide jige wenti” [On some issues in editing and compiling the history of the War of Resistance in Suzhong], *Dajiangnanbei* 3 (1986): 1–8, at 2.

⁸² Li Ruqing, “Why muddy pure waters?”, pp.228–9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.215, 229.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.229.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Takeuchi Minoru, *Supplementary volumes*, vol.6, p.233.

⁸⁷ WNSB, pp.155–6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp.78–9; cf. Chen Feng, “Wannan Incident,” p.93.

of the Military Commission of the CC on the Military Lessons of the Wannan Incident (January 20), which according to him conclude that “Maolin was a blind alley, that Xiang brought ruin upon himself (*zixun jue lu* 自寻绝路).” “What,” he asks, “would be the Military Commission’s motive for suddenly ordering troops down a blind alley?”⁸⁴ Later I shall reveal some flaws in Li’s interpretation of these documents. But even if they conformed entirely to Li’s view, they would be no use to him, for they view the incident through hindsight.

Third, he quotes the CC Military Commission’s criticisms of Xiang: “When Xiang was obstructed at Piling 丕陵, he reported to the Party centre that his real intention in advancing south was to make a feint against the diehard army. The Military Commission of the CC did not agree with Xiang Ying’s attempt at self-exculpation, and refuted it by saying: First, Maolin is a dead-end, and moreover close to [Xiang’s] army headquarters, so he should have known [that it is a dead-end]; second, if the sole aim was to distract the enemy, he would need only to use a small part of the troops’ overall strength rather than go to Maolin with all the troops.”⁸⁵ Li’s point is that if the commission was so critical of Xiang’s presence in Maolin, it would not have sent him there. But he forgets that Xiang was blocked on January 7, whereas the commission made these criticisms a fortnight later. Zhang Zhouting, Li’s interlocutor, missed this fault and threw in the towel, sparing Li the need to spell out his other seven truths.

Mao continued to issue instructions about the evacuation even after December 23; some take this fact as evidence against an instruction issued on December 23. For example, on December 25, Mao told Zhou Enlai 周恩来 and Ye Jianying 叶剑英 in Chongqing to negotiate a two-pronged evacuation east and north of Yunling; and to press for two months in which to complete it.⁸⁶ But such moves do not rule out an earlier directive. Perhaps Mao was trying to raise a smoke-screen behind which Xiang could slip away. Perhaps he equated the route through Sunan with the one through Maolin. (In the wake of the disaster, Party spokespersons automatically identified the route through Maolin with the route into Sunan fixed by the Nationalists.)⁸⁷

Historians also point out that on December 26 Mao told Xiang that “on the question of how to transfer north, how to overcome the difficulties of such an operation, it is up to you yourselves to think of a method, and to have the determination.”⁸⁸ Would the Party centre have issued such an order, they ask, if it had set a route on December 23? But the December 26 directive was chiefly designed to criticize Xiang’s irresolution and his repeated failure to obey the centre by supporting a policy of resolute advance into Guomindang-occupied and other areas behind Japanese lines. It is no more incompatible with the instruction of December 23 than the other conflicting orders that Mao rained down on Yunling in late 1940, either in exasperation at Xiang’s immovability or in a desperate search for an exit from the deepening crisis.

The Conference of December 28

The final decision to go via Maolin was taken at a conference in Yunling on December 28, 1940. It is not known how this meeting was called, what issues it addressed, and precisely who attended it.⁸⁹ Xiang's critics assert that the meeting was divided on whether to head south, through Maolin, as Xiang wanted, or east, as Ye Ting wanted.⁹⁰ Others say that the Maolin decision was collective, and moreover logical, given the blockades to the north and east.⁹¹ The evacuation started on January 4, 1941. Beyond Maolin, at Piling, on January 7, the marchers were attacked and later destroyed.

Autopsies

In the weeks and months after the incident, there were numerous inquests into it; each produced a report. Public reports were designed to present the marchers as victims of an unwarranted attack rather than to explain the causes of the incident. Even some 'internal' reports were less than frank, in line with a decision on January 15 to hide the criticism of Xiang and Yuan Guoping from all but senior cadres.⁹² Reports written for the general public need not concern us. The five texts that I shall consider are the "Resolution on the Mistakes of Xiang and Yuan" (January 15, 1941);⁹³ the "Summary Issued by the Military Commission" (January 20, 1941);⁹⁴ Liu Shaoqi's "Report to a Plenary Conference of Cadres" (January 1941);⁹⁵ the "Summary Report on the Wannan Incident" (probably written in 1941);⁹⁶ and the transcript of a discussion in May 1941 by senior cadres of the Party's Central China Bureau on the lessons of the incident and Xiang's mistakes.⁹⁷ What light do these documents throw on the Maolin route?

The earliest of the five documents, the Resolution of January 15, criticizes Xiang (and Yuan Guoping, whose name is absent from later indictments) less forcefully than the Summary of January 20. It says nothing about the merits of a route due east into Sunan. Its main criticism is that the marchers paused at Maolin, letting the Nationalists tighten their encirclement. It describes the losses in the incident as avoidable, and due to Xiang and Yuan's "shameful vacillation": "First they vacillated, then they brought ruin upon themselves (*zixun juehu*) by throwing themselves into the net cast around them by Chiang Kai-shek's anti-Communist armies. Just a short while after starting out, ten miles along the road, at Maolin, ... they stopped and hesitated, so the anti-Communist army was gradually able to encircle them.... This defeat resulted from Xiang and Yuan's consistently opportunist leadership; it was not a normal, accidental defeat in battle."⁹⁸

This criticism is directed not at the route itself but at the marchers' failure to leave Maolin quickly enough to beat the blockade. This distinction is

⁸⁹ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," pp.223–4.

⁹⁰ Li Ruqing, "Serious malpractice," pp.284–5.

⁹¹ Shao Yingzi, "Evaluation," p.279.

⁹² Anhui Sheng Wenwuju Xinsijun Wenshi Zhengjizu, eds, *Wannan shibian ziliao xuan* [Materials on the Wannan Incident] (Hefei: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 1981), p.267.

⁹³ Anhui Sheng Wenwuju, *Materials*, pp. 264–7.

⁹⁴ Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, eds, *Wannan shibian (ziliao xuanji)* [The Wannan Incident (a selection of materials)] (Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1982), pp.269–71.

⁹⁵ Liu Shaoqi, "Guanyu xinsijun wenti zai quanti ganbu huiyishang de baogao" [Report to a plenary conference of cadres on the N4A question], in Ruan Shijiong and Yang Liping, eds, *Special compilation*, pp.22–7.

⁹⁶ Anhui Sheng Dang'anguan, *The N4A*, pp.340 ff.

⁹⁷ He Li and Zhang Xingxing, "Research," p.384.

⁹⁸ Anhui Sheng Wenwuju, *Materials*, p.265.

⁹⁹ Li Ruqing, "Why muddy pure waters?", p.230.

¹⁰⁰ Li Ruqing, "Serious malpractice," p.282; Gu Weibin and Xu Baoqi, "The march south," p.330.

¹⁰¹ He Li and Zhang Xingxing, "Research," p.383; Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.206.

¹⁰² Anhui Sheng Wenwuju, *Materials*, pp.265-6.

¹⁰³ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.206, and "Li Yimang," p.8.

¹⁰⁴ Shum Kui-kwong, *The Chinese Communists' road to power: the anti-Japanese National United Front, 1935-1945* (Hongkong: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.217.

important, but some writers try to skate over it. For example, according to Li Ruqing,⁹⁹ "even if we concede (a big concession) that [the central leaders] are trying to evade responsibility [for the route], they would hardly be so stupid as to box their own ears by both directing [Xiang] to go through Maolin and denouncing him for doing so. They could have chosen another method, e.g. [saying] that the mistake was not in going via Maolin but in getting held up there." Li fails to notice that this tactic is not so very different from the one adopted by the Party centre on January 15.

The phrase *zixun juehu* needs analyzing. Its standard translation is "to court destruction" or "bring ruin upon oneself"; literally it means "to seek out for oneself a dead-end." In the Resolution of January 15 it apparently means that Xiang and Yuan had brought their troubles on themselves, referring to the marchers' general plight and to the net cast round them. In later statements, the term dead-end refers specifically to Maolin: the reason the defeat had happened was because Xiang had taken the wrong route. Some commentators, including Chen Yi in 1941 and Li Ruqing today, imply (unconvincingly) that the phrase *zixun juehu* was used in its literal meaning in the Resolution of January 15,¹⁰⁰ i.e. that the resolution specifically condemned the Maolin route.

The Resolution, dated January 15, the day after the end of the fighting, was almost certainly drafted while the incident was proceeding.¹⁰¹ Why the haste? Why did Yan'an not wait for more information before condemning Xiang and Yuan? After all, the incident had only just happened several hundred miles away, and its survivors were still trying to fight their way to safety. The resolution even speculates on sabotage by "hidden traitors," and while not "at present" putting Xiang on a par with the "renegade Zhang Guotao 张国焘," it notes "many suspicious circumstances."¹⁰² In treating Xiang and Yuan not only as scapegoats but as possible traitors, the Resolution seems to be defending the other leaders' claim to infallibility, while intimidating potential dissenting witnesses into silence. The Resolution of January 15 ends by saying that Xiang and Yuan's mistakes would be dealt with at the Party's Seventh Congress, but they were dealt with neither at this (in 1945) nor at any subsequent congress.¹⁰³ Perhaps Mao changed his mind, or perhaps he lacked sufficient backing for his plan to blame Xiang.

Whether or not the attack on Xiang was fair, it is extraordinary that a highly placed leader should be so harshly attacked within days of his defeat by the Guomindang. Just three weeks earlier, Mao had criticized the policies of "all alliance and no struggle" and "all struggle and no alliance" associated with Wang Ming's 王明 "left" and "right" opportunism. This criticism, prompted by Liu Shaoqi, heralded a new stage in Mao's ideological struggle against Wang.¹⁰⁴ It may be that Mao had enough evidence to convince the Politburo of Xiang's culpability, but this paper suggests otherwise. More likely, the destruction of the Wannan N4A removed yet another obstacle from Mao's way to a confrontation with his principal rivals, for not only was Xiang



Figure 4

"Resist the enemy!"—a badge of the New Fourth Army during its Wannan period (1938–40)

Wang's political associate but his Wannan army was an embodiment more of Wang's than of Mao's united front.¹⁰⁵

Not until January 20, 1941, when the Military Commission issued its statement on the incident,¹⁰⁶ was a more detailed criticism of Xiang put together. After denouncing his history of opportunism, the Summary, citing Liu Shaoqi, condemns the line of march through Maolin and admonishes Xiang for not going due east. Maolin, it concluded, was a dead-end enclosed by water, mountains, and "diehard" divisions, which Xiang should have known, as it was close to his headquarters. The Summary, like the Resolution, asks whether "hidden traitors" might not have had a hand in the incident.

Blaming Xiang for choosing a wrong route rather than simply for tarrying at Maolin was launched by Liu Shaoqi and then adopted in Yan'an. Was Liu more forthright because he, unlike some other comrades in Yan'an, did not know the route's true origin? Liu, as a prominent Party leader in central China and the N4A, was a perfect witness for Xiang's prosecution, and falsehood spoken in the belief that it is true is often more convincing than when spoken knowingly. Liu may also have had a political motive for blaming Xiang whether or not Liu knew of Mao's part in the fateful decision, for Liu was often to the fore in this period in the campaign against Wang Ming.

Addressing another audience in January 1941, Liu said that the route through Maolin was militarily and politically justifiable. He pointed out that the way north was blocked and that it would have been impossible to take a column of ten thousand people due east into Japanese-occupied territory. He added that the Nationalists had instructed the Wannan N4A to march to

¹⁰⁵ Benton, "South Anhui Incident."

¹⁰⁶ Zhonggong Zhongyang, "Wannan Incident," pp.269–71.

¹⁰⁷ Liu Shaoqi, "Report," p.25.

¹⁰⁸ Takeuchi Minoru, *Supplementary volumes*, vol.6, p.247.

¹⁰⁹ Nan Bei and Dong Zhixi, "Conversation," p.223; Anhui Sheng Dang'anguan, *The N4A*, pp.340–52.

the north and to the east, into Sunan, "in both cases without restriction," implying that Maolin was a permissible stop on a route into Sunan. "We are a national army," said Liu. "When acting in accordance with orders, we should have the right to march along any road that is Chinese." He also noted that the marchers had been directed (by the Nationalists) to collect ammunition and expenses in the Ningguo area.¹⁰⁷ Mao too had mentioned Ningguo in his radio message to Xiang of January 7.¹⁰⁸ This mention of Ningguo is hard to explain unless both Liu and Mao knew which route the Wannan N4A was following and that it had been set by the Nationalists. How to account for the discrepancy between this report and Liu's comments as noted by the Military Commission on January 20? By the audience he was addressing, for though "internal" it was plenary, and the Resolution of January 15 had stipulated that Xiang and Yuan should be criticized only before senior cadres.

Our fourth document, probably written in 1941, is the Summary Report discovered at some point in N4A headquarters by Party workers. This document, drafted by a staff officer who survived the incident as a record of his experience, was revised by Ye Chao; it lacks formal status, was not checked against documents, and contains inaccuracies, but it is frequently quoted in accounts of the incident.¹⁰⁹ First, it describes the route set by Gu Zhutong as due east into Sunan, and notes that Gu's approval was one of the easterly route's chief advantages. Does this contradict Yue Xingming, who says that the official route passed through Jingde, in a south-easterly direction? Not necessarily, for different routes were set at different times in late 1940. Second, it describes rather precisely the route adopted at the meeting held in Yunling on December 28, 1940, which matches almost word for word the route in the disputed instruction of December 23. If the Summary Report really was written without reference to documents, this coincidence means one of two things: the N4A's decision of December 28 followed the instruction of December 23; or the supposed Yan'an order was copied from the decision of December 28 and wrongly dated, by mistake or by design. The law of parsimony would find for the first explanation, barring additional evidence. And even if such evidence could be cited, anyone arguing for the second would need to show that the Summary Report had been unearthed from the archive before the finding of the 'forged' instruction of December 23. Third, it tries to justify the route through Maolin. Here it resembles the Resolution of January 15 rather than the Summary of January 20, which criticizes the route. Also like the Resolution, it focuses on political errors and various tactical and operational errors committed during the evacuation, in particular a lack of speed and resolution.

The fifth text is the transcript of a conference of senior cadres called by the Central China Bureau in May 1941 to discuss the incident and Xiang's errors. I have not seen this document, but it seems from reports to be relevant to this article. Speakers attacked Xiang far more vehemently than the Resolution of January 15, as a "double-dealer," a "hypocrite," and someone

“extremely imbued with the consciousness of the exploiting classes” who “calculated everything from the point of view of his own interests.”¹¹⁰ But this invective was not apparently based on specific knowledge of the course and causes of the incident: in some ways it was probably a substitute for such knowledge. At the conference was Rao Shushi 饶漱石, who had been promoted shortly before the incident to deputy secretary and propaganda chief of the Party’s Southeastern Bureau, which controlled the N4A. As a main actor in the incident, Rao was better placed than the Yan’an leaders to know what had happened at Yunling and Maolin. He was also one of Xiang’s critics in the N4A. And yet he felt it necessary to ask why the marchers had headed south in the direction of Maolin. Rao was a senior figure in the Wannan N4A: his question was probably less than naive. No one could answer him, so he proposed maintaining an attitude of caution and deferring any conclusion until after an investigation.¹¹¹ Rao’s forbearance contrasts strikingly with the attitude of Mao and others, who rushed to exploit the question of the route in their campaign against Xiang. Despite his fall from grace in the 1950s, Rao was never associated with Xiang’s “mistake.” After all, having been instrumental in purging Xiang, he could hardly be branded as a party to Xiang’s bungle or conspiracy. But his call for an inquiry into why the march went to Maolin was to my knowledge never met.

¹¹⁰ He Li and Zhang Xingxing, “Research,” p.384.

¹¹¹ Gu Weibin and Xu Baoqi, “The march south,” p.330.

Party History in Light of the Maolin Debate

The discussion in China on the incident confirms that Party history-writing is now freer than at any time since its infancy in the 1920s. But freer does not mean disinterested. Access to Party archives is still normally restricted to senior historians. The documents they publish are often unexplainedly truncated and released in dribs and drabs. That the archives still hold unpublished documents essential to elucidating the incident is evident from the publications that selectively quote from them.

Documents are of best use if published unabridged, with a full account of their circumstances, standing, and attributes. What is important for judging and situating one text may not be for another. On what grounds is the instruction of December 23 classified as a copy? How does it compare with other copies? Is it signed? Is it encoded? Does it indicate a time and place of origin? What is its shape, size, and writing material? Is it written on the type of paper and in a form normally used for drafting radio messages? Does it contain other clues—marginal comments, subscriptions, and the like—that might shed light on its meaning? Who found it? Where exactly was it found? When was it found? What is its present home? And so on. Without such information, no one can pronounce authoritatively on the significance of an instruction signally relevant to the reputations of Mao, Xiang, and other principal figures in China’s modern history, as well as to explaining a major

¹¹² Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Party history or history of the Chinese Revolution? On the political training of university students in the PRC" (Paper delivered at the conference "New perspectives on the Chinese Communist Revolution," Holland, Jan. 1990).

incident in that history. A first step toward solving the enigma would be to throw open the archives, as the Nationalists on Taiwan have done, to more than the select few.

Another weakness of Party history-writing today is that its pluriformity often turns out on closer inspection to be simply a more liberal variant of old-style factionalism, where schools contend on grounds not of truth but of political interest. This is inevitable in an academy where the flow of evidence is politically controlled. Party history schools are, of course, especially vulnerable to faction-forming.

In the debate about the Wannan Incident, the factional glue is politics rather than ideology. Thus N4A veterans resented Li Ruqing's attempt to portray Xiang Ying as little short of a traitor, and mobilized against it. After 1966, Xiang and his associates were vilified as scoundrels. Xiang's rehabilitation in the 1980s righted a political wrong, and removed from some of these veterans the mark of infamy that for years had denied them the privileges and comforts associated with old comrade status. These veterans control or have privileged access to certain journals, research associations, and publishing houses; senior veterans have secretaries to record the past as they see it. This is one of the material bases upon which factions form among Chinese historians, who become the clients of such patrons.

In an academic community where access to the archives is politically governed, certain texts, released perhaps to a factional end, become icons, and the debate about their evidential merits degenerates into sterile point-scoring, as scruple succumbs to interest.

The debate after 1989 about the Wannan Incident shows that the CC's History Bureau no longer has a firm grip on history writing, particularly in the regions. On August 4, 1989, senior Party historiographers called for a struggle against bourgeois liberalism and negative attitudes toward Party history, which they believe should echo political decisions. But they face resistance from several quarters, including younger historians of the "third rank" who would like history to limit the power and influence of the centre;¹¹² and from some older cadres, whose interests coincide partly with those of the young modernizers.

Since Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 return to power, it is no longer always clear to which Party leaders historians should defer. Under Deng, much power has been decentralized to the regions. This change has inevitably affected Party historiography. Elderly cadres, among them N4A veterans, thrust back into power in the provinces after 1978 began to look to their place in history and to speak to posterity through memoirs and commissioned studies. Earlier, materials on the revolution were usually published centrally; unorthodox recollections were suppressed or brought into conformity with the prescribed view. In the 1980s, as provincial and local presses became more active, history, which had once served only the centre, began to serve smaller, regional groupings too. Party leaders in the provinces and the

counties encouraged their history committees to publish articles, documents, chronologies, and memoirs. In the past, such publishing, even where it happened, rarely reached foreign scholars, but in the new, more casual climate of the 1980s it often did, through formal and informal channels. Local historians became avid accomplices in the campaign to promote the local contribution to the revolution, not just to “seek truth from the facts” but to please their patrons, gratify local pride, and raise their own profile in Party history circles by discovering a regional tradition. The new particularistic history valued special circumstance and originality; it started a competition to be best, and different. It interested the younger ‘third-rank’ historians who want to promote pluralism, to tell the truth, and to legitimize reform.

Even a maverick like Li Ruqing, whose version of the Wannan Incident dishonours the Party by echoing Chiang Kai-shek’s case against the Communists in 1941, has not been silenced by the demand for an end to historiographical “smears” and “distortions.” Li has made enemies throughout the power elite, but many young Chinese see in his eclectic and iconoclastic writing a remedy for the main symptom of the “crisis of Party historiography,” the lack of a specifically historical method and content. Li’s political message, which plays down class struggle, helps account for his popularity with a public alienated by “leftism.”

Maolin and the Mao Myth

The issue in the debate about the Wannan Incident could hardly be clearer. A minority of historians is prepared to give serious consideration to the theory that on December 23, 1940, the Yan’an leaders secretly ordered

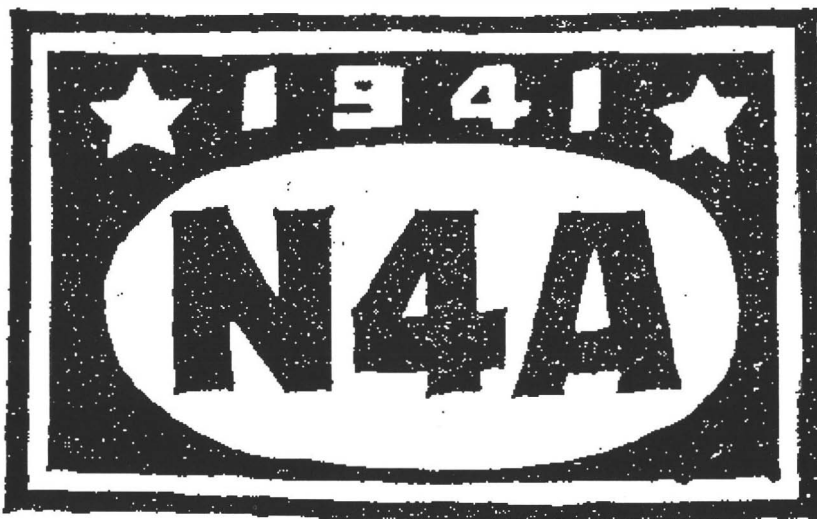


Figure 5

A badge of the New Fourth Army after its reorganization in the wake of the Wannan Incident

the N4A to evacuate Yunling via Maolin, that on December 28 Xiang Ying agreed to do so, and that in early January his forces were destroyed near Maolin. The majority, on the other hand, denies that any such instruction was sent, dismisses the existing text as a copy (forged or otherwise), and blames Xiang for going to Maolin and disaster. Which opinion does the evidence bear out?

We shall only finally know the significance of the December 23 copy if its original is identified (assuming it has not been destroyed). In the meantime, it is hard to see why it should not be taken at face value, as the transcript of an instruction from Yan'an. The only other suggestions, made by those out to prove the copy false, are that it was wrongly transcribed from the directive of December 28 or that it is a forgery, slipped into the archive to shift the blame onto the leaders in Yan'an. But it is more reasonable to assume that the archive has been pruned and culled to support the official view than that the copy got there by mistake or mischief.

Do related facts make it more or less likely that the supposed copy is a reliable transcription of a genuine order from Yan'an? The issues here include the following. Did Gu Zhutong agree to a route through Maolin? Would Mao have been aware of any such agreement? Might Mao have given serious thought to the Maolin option? Is an instruction like that in the copy compatible with other documents from around December 23? Would a route through Maolin have made sense in late December? Did the Yan'an leaders know in advance that the evacuation was scheduled to pass through Maolin and Ningguo? Did they only criticize the route through Maolin after the intervention by Liu Shaoqi?

Since the answer to these questions is probably yes, most impartial observers will have more than a sneaking suspicion that Yan'an's Military Commission did send Xiang to Maolin. Why then have all but a few historians ignored or tried to cover up this fact? Mostly to avoid trouble, real or imagined; but in the case of a handful of loyalists, because such an order would both kill the myth of Mao's unfailing genius in the resistance years and expose him as a cheat who knowingly maligned his subordinates. One can see the loyalists' point.

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