

COMMEMORATING THE NANCHANG UPRISING:
HOW THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY LEGITIMIZED ITS USE OF FORCE,
1933-1953

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ABSTRACT

SARA BUSH: Commemorating the Nanchang Uprising: How the Chinese Communist Party Legitimized Its Use of Force, 1933-1953
(Under the direction of Michael Tsin)

Drawing upon theoretical concepts from the field of memory studies, this thesis argues that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders emphasized doctrinal priorities, mobilized troops, and legitimized their use of military force in part through annual commemoration of the August 1, 1927 Nanchang uprising, which they declared to be the founding event for the armies that became the PRC's armed forces. Tracing the evolution of the Nanchang uprising narrative between 1933, when CCP leaders first officially commemorated the event, and 1953, when Chinese involvement in the Korean War concluded, reveals new insight about how the Communist leaders used collective memory to recruit support for its continued use of military force, even as strategic priorities evolved. Official party documents and party-authored editorial articles directed at the public from 1933 to 1953 suggest that party members constructed a commemorative narrative about the 1927 uprising that they saw as legitimizing the party's military actions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, historians and political scientists have been addressing one of the most persistent questions about twentieth-century China: how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was able to come to power and consolidate political authority over the Chinese state. The earliest studies by Western scholars to explore this issue, produced in the shadow of the Cold War and constrained by a lack of access to historical sources, were often narrowly focused on either the political struggles of Chinese Communist leaders or on specific policies for social mobilization that Communist leaders enacted.¹ Despite their limited scope, these studies raised several valid explanations for the CCP's ability to attract support that have had lasting influence on subsequent scholarship. For example, Benjamin Schwartz and Stuart Schram argued that the CCP's success was a result of the charismatic leadership of Mao Zedong; Chalmers Johnson emphasized the CCP's ability to rally people on the basis of a shared interest in Chinese

1. The anti-communist intellectual atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s was in many cases discouraging to scholars attempting to pursue studies that could be perceived to portray Chinese Communism in a positive or complimentary manner, which complicated initial efforts at objective study of CCP ideology, goals, and intentions. On the other hand, the foreign policy interests and anti-communist agenda of the United States government and, to some extent, Western European leaders in this period probably encouraged the study of contemporary Chinese politics as a means of contextualizing and advancing anti-communist foreign policy goals. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnamese Communist revolution and American experience fighting in Vietnam urged scholars such as Chalmers Johnson and Mark Selden to question the role of the Chinese population in the Communist revolution, but their studies still exhibit a "top-down" approach characteristic of Cold War-era studies. For further on the sources and effects of politicization on Cold War-era studies of the early PRC as well as the changes in the past two decades that have increased scholarly interest in early PRC history, see Julia Strauss, "Introduction: In Search of PRC History," *The China Quarterly* 188 (December 2006), 856-7.

nationalism; and Mark Selden concluded that the CCP relied on popular policies, especially land reform and redistribution, to win over the loyalty of the Chinese population.² The broadest conclusions of these scholars have gained wide acceptance, but from today's perspective these classic studies are ultimately unsatisfying. They appear both outdated and parochial in their strict political focus. Simply identifying key characteristics in CCP elite politics and influential Communist policies is not enough to adequately account for the evolutionary process by which the CCP transformed from a small, unarmed group of Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s to the leaders of a professionalized military revolution by the 1940s that established them as China's top political authority by the 1950s.³

Recognizing a need to expand and update the original studies of the Chinese Communist revolution, scholars in the post Cold War period have taken a greater interest in studying the political activity and opinions of Chinese people who were not part of the CCP elite—in other words, those who were the subjects of CCP political initiatives. Historians and political scientists since the 1990s have begun to take advantage of gradually increasing access to sources in China to produce studies that are more detailed, multidimensional, and complex than the classic scholarship of the Cold War era. For example, relying on access to a variety of regional and municipal CCP archives, Odoric Wou argued that understanding China's Communist revolution requires not only consideration of elite politics, but also the careful analysis of the effects of CCP mobilization policies on the Chinese people, which

2. Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951); Stuart R Schram, *Mao Tse-tung*, [Reprinted with revisions]. (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1967); Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); Mark Selden, *The Yanan Way in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

3 For purposes of this study, in the context of CCP history, the term *elite* refers collectively to the party's founders, leaders, and those members serving in influential positions within the party's central decisionmaking bodies such as the CCP Central Committee.

eventually brought about a social revolution.⁴ Similarly, Elizabeth Perry analyzed the collective political action of Chinese workers and militia members in Shanghai, using access to party archives in Shanghai to demonstrate that average Chinese workers had a much greater role as agents of revolution than Cold War-era studies had indicated, whether or not they were responding to the CCP's organizational and mobilization efforts.⁵ Ralph Thaxton drew similar conclusions about the political agency of Chinese individuals in rural areas suggesting that the Communist agenda appealed to rural people because they perceived the CCP as an ally in their long-standing grievances with China's central government over commercial regulation and taxes.⁶ These and other recent studies have effectively established that the rise of the CCP required the recruitment and participation of average individuals. By attempting to interpret the popular reception of the CCP's mobilization efforts, recent studies have significantly expanded the scope of scholarship beyond the narrow political focus of the Cold War era.

However, even with greater exploration of relevant social factors influencing the CCP's status, recent scholarship continues to focus too narrowly on the most traditional indicators of political power and state-society relationships, such as policy implementation and the control of administrative institutions, which alone cannot explain how the CCP legitimized its claim on political authority.⁷ The Chinese Communists had to define for

4. Odoric Y. K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses : Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press,, 1994), 1-19.

5. Elizabeth J Perry, *Shanghai on Strike : the Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993); Elizabeth J Perry, *Patrolling the Revolution : Worker Militias, Citizenship, and the Modern Chinese State* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

6. Ralph Thaxton, *Salt of the Earth : The Political Origins of Peasant Protest and Communist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press,, 1997).

7. Scholars typically look for indicators of the state-society relationship or political efficacy of actors like the CCP in documents that reveal policy implementation and administrative changes such as police, court, and

themselves and for their constituents a basis for their legitimate right to political authority, drawing a crucial link between the ideological goals of the party elites and their real interactions with the Chinese people they were attempting to mobilize. Establishing political legitimacy was a dynamic process for the CCP that evolved over a period of decades and was intertwined with strategic behavior and the use of military force. The next step toward a deeper understanding of how the CCP acquired the political legitimacy necessary to lead its revolution can benefit from methodological insights that have emerged from the work of cultural historians, and especially those who have studied collective memory.⁸ The interdisciplinary methods for research in the humanities employed by many cultural historians to analyze narrative and rhetoric can help reveal the processes by which the CCP justified its political authority.

Party-sanctioned narratives of turning points in party history play a particularly important role in galvanizing party ideology and mobilizing the public because they establish collective memories of shared experiences that legitimize the party. Moreover, narratives embedded within official proclamations of the party record the evolutionary process by which Communist leaders attempted to appeal to the public. The historical evidence for this claim can be found woven throughout the party's official documentary record, but this essay

militia records, documentation of land redistribution, and records of disbursement of social welfare benefits as well as preserved correspondence between individuals and government officials about these issues.

8. In referring to methodological insights that have emerged from the work of cultural historians, I am invoking those interdisciplinary methods for historical scholarship that have become broadly associated with responses to the so-called "Cultural Turn." The theoretical approach of this essay bears significant influence of the following sources, among others: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Calder, Angus, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991); Frederick Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995); Rubie Watson, ed., *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1994).

will focus on one of the most important examples: the evolution of the CCP's narrative to commemorate the Nanchang uprising.

The Nanchang uprising occurred August 1, 1927, and it has been celebrated since at least 1933 as the founding event of the party's armed forces.⁹ At the most basic level, commemoration of the uprising has served to venerate the actions of CCP members who turned against the army of the Nationalists in which they had been serving and led several regiments of troops to occupy the city of Nanchang in China's eastern province of Jiangxi, hoping to trigger a broader backlash. The revolt failed to meet its intended tactical purposes, but the CCP has nonetheless continued to showcase narratives of the event in its official party and military history up to the present, using it as a means to build leadership cohesion, party-army cooperation, and public support for the military.

As the evolution of the Nanchang uprising narrative demonstrates, in terms of the party's ability to mobilize support, one of the most critical characteristics of the CCP before and after 1949 is its attitude toward the use of force. As a non-state actor for its first several decades, the CCP faced a formidable task of justifying its right to wield military force. Deeply influenced by the core principles of Marxist-Leninism, the CCP defined its role as the leaders of a people's revolution that integrated political ideology, military action, and empowering Chinese people to oppose all forms of oppression and imperialism.¹⁰ This

9. For full Chinese text of documents announcing the commemoration of Army Day in 1933, see 南昌起 念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], (Chinese Communist Party History Press, 1987), 169-70. These documents will be analyzed in greater detail later in this article.

10. It bears recognition here that the principles of Marxist-Leninism also deeply influenced the ideological development of the CCP's primary opponents: the Nationalist Party. Both parties emerged from a new Chinese political tradition that claimed Sun Yatsen as a founder and absorbed organizational and ideological advice and training from the Communist International (Comintern) and Soviet government. Though this paper will focus on the ways that the CCP deliberately distinguished itself from the Nationalists, it does not intend to de-emphasize the numerous similarities the parties exhibited throughout the early twentieth century.

attitude has had profound implications for the evolution of the CCP's strategic culture and relationship with its supporters. Starting in the late 1920s CCP leaders legitimized their use of force and distinguished themselves from their primary opponents by blurring the boundaries between party, military, and people in both their ideology and rhetoric—themes which appear prominently when the CCP invokes the collective memory of the Nanchang uprising that it has fostered.

Examples of the CCP's references to the Nanchang uprising in official declarations and statements document the Party's attempts to conceptualize its use of force through a series of changing narratives, and how that process of narrativization itself in turn served a legitimizing function in party ideology and rhetoric. In other words, party declarations about the Nanchang uprising were not simply propaganda or artifacts external to the political process; in fact, drafting and reproducing the documents was an essential step in the political process itself, solidifying party values among leaders and constituents alike. Despite their failure to meet their military objectives in the Nanchang uprising, CCP leaders gleaned important lessons from the experience about the necessity of appealing to ordinary Chinese people for support of and participation in their military activities. Thus in narratives commemorating the Nanchang uprising, CCP leaders specified a closely integrated relationship between party, military, and people that justified their party's use of military force.

By the time the PRC was established in 1949, the close relationship of the CCP and its military—in which each military officer was shadowed by a party counterpart and most military officers simultaneously held high party ranks—had become a defining characteristic

of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and PRC strategic culture.¹¹ In short, in the process of memorializing the Nanchang uprising story in official declarations, the CCP leadership began not only to communicate their justification for the use of force but also to internalize the relationships that the commemorative narrative symbolized as a cause of their revolutionary success.

11. People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the term used by the CCP to refer to its armed forces since 1949. Between 1927 and 1949, and to a certain extent, between 1950 and 1953, CCP military forces went by a variety of different names. Today's CCP traces the origin of the army it calls PLA to the 1927 Nanchang Uprising, but this path of origin is not as linear as CCP ideological history makes it appear. This essay will attempt to use historically specific army names when possible or will refer to the armies in general as "the CCP's military forces."

CHAPTER 2

SUMMONING COLLECTIVE MEMORY TO ESTABLISH POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

In order to understand how early CCP leaders met their natural obligation to justify their use of military force to themselves and their constituents, this study bases its approach on the premise that Communist party leaders often use historical narratives to legitimize their ideologies, policies, and plans. The behavior is not specific to the Chinese Communists, who modeled their ideology and rhetoric on the Bolsheviks and that party's principles of democratic centralism. Communist party historical narratives represent negotiated versions of significant past events that party elites have accepted as aligned with their desired political image and supportive of their planned future for their party. Historians such as Frederick Corney, Susan Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, and Felix Wemheuer have each applied theoretical principles from landmark research in the field of memory studies in order to better explain what official Communist historiography can and cannot reveal about the intentions of past Communist leaders in Russia and China. The work of these scholars argues for the reexamination of official CCP documents and long published writings by early CCP leaders. In light of their theses about the role of historical narrative in validating the political goals of Communist parties, the Nanchang uprising emerges as an example of how CCP leaders negotiated, projected, and internalized their strategic priorities leading up to and immediately after the founding of the PRC.

In his book, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Frederick Corney uses principles drawn from studies of collective memory to demonstrate

that the Bolshevik founding narrative was not a simple description of events that happened, which could have been interpreted in a variety of ways, but rather an argument for a single interpretation of events that served a political purpose.¹² Influenced by concepts from memory studies, Corney demonstrates that understanding the process by which Bolshevik leaders in Russia developed their version of the October Revolution story can reveal important new insight about their values, priorities, and fears. Using examples from 1917 through the early 1920s, Corney shows how the process of developing the October revolution narrative involved a competition of opposing political values. However, once consensus was reached, the outcome produced a story of the party's foundation that ultimately legitimized its leadership authority. Corney also emphasizes that although the process of narrative development was a conscious effort, the result was successful only to the degree to which individuals involved in the process of telling it, both within the party elite and general public, could locate themselves in it or, in other words, see it as their own story. According to Corney, "Foundation myths derive their most enduring power from the processes of their telling."¹³ Corney's findings suggest that the process of constructing and repeating the October Revolution narrative played a key role in distilling and articulating the party's core values for both its public audience and the party leaders themselves.

Important differences distinguish the CCP's commemoration of the Nanchang uprising from the Bolsheviks' narrative of the October Revolution. First, the CCP did not develop the Nanchang uprising narrative to consolidate their political power and set the tone for authority to lead the state, as Corney argues the Bolsheviks did. For the first two decades that the CCP developed and reproduced the Nanchang uprising narrative, the party did not

12. Frederick C Corney, *Telling October : Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 8.

13. *Ibid.*, 4.

command a state. Instead, the narrative was initially used for motivating and mobilizing forces and for establishing the ideological bona fides of maintaining a militarized political movement under a Communist banner. It was only in the late 1940s and early 1950s, after the Nanchang story had helped establish an ideological foundation for the CCP's legitimate use of force within the party itself that the leadership began to call upon the narrative to support its new role as leaders of the PRC. Second, Corney depicts contestation over the collective memory of the October Revolution that simply does not exist in the Nanchang uprising example. Several competing political parties were involved in the October Revolution, and Corney shows how, in some ways, each of the parties had a claim on political legitimacy which the Bolsheviks were challenging. The Nanchang uprising, on the other hand, did not hold the nearly same significance for the Nationalists—the CCP's opponents in the event—as it did for the Communist leadership. Because the Nanchang uprising involved relatively few individuals and presented relatively little tactical threat to the Nationalists in 1927, Nationalist leaders easily dismissed it.¹⁴ Moreover, because the uprising assumed much greater significance for the Communists in retrospect than it had at the time, the CCP's narrative of it proved to be slightly more malleable than Bolshevik versions of the October Revolution story.

Though these differences exist between the Bolshevik and CCP narratives, the variation should not overshadow the relevance of Corney's thesis and conclusions to the study of the CCP's development of a Nanchang uprising narrative that legitimized its unique integrated approach to its military. The CCP leaders operated on many of the same ideological principles as the Bolsheviks and were influenced by the guidance of Bolshevik

14. For a thorough explanation of Nationalist attitudes toward Communist insurgency in 1927, see "The Communists Turn to Rebellion (Chapter 6) of C. Martin Wilbur, *The Nationalist Revolution in China, 1923-1928* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

advisors throughout the period discussed in this essay. CCP leaders' commitment to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and democratic centralism modeled by the Bolsheviks led them to pursue many of the same uses for historical narratives as their Soviet counterparts when developing their rhetoric. In a process very similar to the one Corney describes, the narrative that the CCP leaders produced evolved into a core part of the Communist army's collective memory and strategic identity that persists to this day.

Corney's argument for the relevance of memory studies to understanding the historical role of political rhetoric in Communist systems parallels the key conclusions of two historians who focus on twentieth-century Chinese history, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Felix Wemheuer. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Wemheuer separately argue for a correlation between the CCP's historical narratives and the party's efforts to establish and maintain political legitimacy. According to Wemheuer, party history in Communist China "is treated as the shared knowledge of the elite and plays an important role at all levels of the examination system as well as for entry into the CCP."¹⁵ The work of both of these scholars suggests that a re-examination of early CCP historical narratives such as that of the Nanchang uprising can illuminate how the CCP deployed historical narratives to mobilize support and consolidate its political power.

Underscoring the potential significance of the results of the CCP's efforts to control collective memory, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Wemheuer each analyze some of the CCP narratives that continue to create the most contestation in state-society relationships—the Cultural Revolution and the mass starvation caused by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, respectively. In a recent article, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik argues that one result of traumatic

15. Felix Wemheuer, "Regime Changes of Memory: Creating the Official History of the Ukrainian and Chinese Famines under State Socialism and after the Cold War," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 1 (Winter): 34-5.

events such as the Cultural Revolution has been an erosion of the CCP's political legitimacy because the personal experiences of people involved presented such a challenging contrast to the party's master narrative. 16 She contends that the party has long used self-manufactured narratives of historical events that do not rely strictly on factual accuracy in order to shape collective memory in support of its ideological agenda. When the party's master narrative is effective, it boosts the CCP's authority and legitimacy. This approach to narrative can backfire, however, in cases such as the Cultural Revolution where the personal memories of individuals sharply contradict the party's master narrative. Drawing a firm distinction between the party's master narrative and the lived personal memories of Chinese individuals based on research from the field of memory studies helps Weigelin-Schwiedrzik deconstruct some of the discursive tension surrounding particularly traumatic mass social events. Although the story of the origins of the CCP's armed forces incited far less contestation than the traumatic periods in PRC history that Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Wemheuer study, the way that those scholars have conceptualized the political function of collective memory in Communist China is useful for historicizing the development of the CCP's justification for the use of force through the production and repetition of the Nanchang uprising story.

The conclusions of Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Wemheuer make plausible the claim of this essay that, similar to the case of the Bolsheviks and the October Revolution as Corney describes them, the CCP relied on its version of the Nanchang uprising story to justify its use of military force, and, in the process, reinforced the emphasis the story placed on integrated, cooperative party-army relations as a crucial characteristic of the CCP's distinctive political identity. In order to interpret the events of the uprising in a way that highlighted the meaning

16. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History," *The China Quarterly* 188 (December 2006): 1072.

they sought to transmit, CCP leaders have selectively omitted facts, including some that CCP members themselves initially reported and documented. The CCP encouraged a collective memory of the Nanchang uprising intended to draw attention to the party's priorities and to support the party's political legitimacy. However, unlike events such as the Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward, the Nanchang uprising was not a traumatic historical experience for most of the Chinese population. In fact, a very small number of people were involved, which has meant personal memories presented little challenge to the CCP version. Moreover, since the Nationalists viewed the Nanchang uprising as a relatively unimportant and unsuccessful event, they did not produce a powerful counternarrative. Having described how and why the CCP relies on historical narratives to legitimize itself, the remainder of this paper will trace the evolution of the Nanchang uprising narrative by first providing historical context on the uprising itself and then by analyzing representative examples to demonstrate the role of this specific narrative in shaping the CCP's deeply-rooted strategic identity.

A Few Words About Sources

Because this essay tracks the way the CCP has characterized its relationship with its military forces in its narrative of a particular historical event over a period of two decades, the most useful sources are documents produced by party leaders, including those intended for intraparty communication and those meant to represent the voice of the party to the public. Three categories of relevant published documents are widely available: official resolutions of the party leadership, articles meant to inform party members or the Chinese public about party ideology that were published in CCP-controlled periodicals, and essays or memoirs of senior CCP leaders (both essays contemporaneous to events and retrospective memoirs are

available in several cases). Modeled on the Leninist style, the Chinese Communist Party has relied throughout its history on a consensus-based approach to leadership among its highest echelon of political and military leaders. The top level of leaders participate in meetings, both regularized and informal, but rarely public. Any debates that occur among these leaders tend to take place behind closed doors, and when a consensus is reached, the party typically documents the results in the form of official resolutions and directives. Many such documents are made public at the time of their release and others gradually become available for historians years or decades after their initial distribution. Anthologies of published official party documents have lined the shelves of academic libraries for years, including some in English translation.¹⁷ Though some scholars have previously discounted these sources as party propaganda, the documents are extremely useful for tracking the evolution of CCP historical narratives and for understanding the role of this unique form of political rhetoric in the institutional history of the PRC. It is worth mentioning, however, that the documents do not explicitly indicate how the CCP's decisions were received by the public. This essay is focused on how the CCP used its interpretation of historical events in the development of its strategic culture; the effectiveness of these messages on the broader Chinese public is an interesting question that would require extensive research beyond the scope of this project.

17. For a good example of a recent comprehensive anthology of translated and annotated CCP documents see Tony Saich, ed. *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party: Documents and Analysis*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

CHAPTER 3

LESSONS LEARNED:

BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN POLITICAL AND MILITARY

The Nanchang uprising was the first in a series of small confrontations between the CCP and the Nationalists in the late 1920s, which though largely unsuccessful, were instrumental in shaping the CCP leaders' perception that the party needed to unify its military and political goals. The Nanchang revolt is significant as the party's first coordinated independent military act. A close reading of the earliest CCP documents about the uprising reveals the immediate recognition of CCP participants that the event was not just a military failure, but also a political one, and most importantly, that these two aspects were linked and would be equally crucial to the party's future. In their earliest assessments of the Nanchang uprising, CCP leaders recognized the event's outcome as a tangible sign of the importance of linking their ideological priorities with military objectives.

The Communist uprising at Nanchang occurred at a time when the Chinese Nationalist Party, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, was attempting to consolidate its political power throughout China by defeating regional warlords who technically controlled portions of the country. In 1923, just two years after the foundation of the CCP, the Soviet-led Comintern brokered an agreement between the Chinese Communists and the Nationalists to cooperate against the warlords. Though the Soviets sought to eventually assist China in transitioning to a socialist regime, preferably under the leadership of the CCP, they supported Nationalist efforts to unify China under one political administration, determining it to be a

key step toward establishing a socialist regime.¹⁸ The CCP did not have its own military forces prior to events at Nanchang, but some CCP members were in the military and served under the Nationalists when they embarked upon the Northern Expedition unification campaign in 1926.¹⁹ In the meantime, the CCP followed a policy of seizing serendipitous opportunities that arose to advance socialist goals by providing aid and political education to the Chinese population.²⁰ Prior to 1927, the CCP had not planned to organize a professional independent military force, preferring instead to leverage their cooperation in the Northern Expedition to increase their exposure to the public and their political power.²¹

By spring 1927, successes in the Northern Expedition campaign began to make the alliance with the CCP less desirable to some Nationalist leaders, who were growing irritated with the CCP's "opportunist" activities educating people about socialism, cooperating with urban trade unions to foment labor protests, and stirring up rural interest in Communist land reform policies. In April 1927, debate over the alliance culminated in the Nationalist party's division into two factions. The faction led by Chiang Kai-shek not only sought to end cooperation with the CCP, but also attempted to eliminate the CCP entirely through a violent

18. For a definitive work on the Leninist model of revolution and its application in China that has stood the test of time, see Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography 1888-1938* (New York: Knopf, 1973), especially 258-261. Bruce Elleman has also recently re-examined the role of the Soviet Comintern in 1920s China in *Moscow and the Emergence of Communist Power in China, 1925-30: The Nanchang Uprising and the Birth of the Red Army* (London: Routledge, 2009), making use of Russian sources, but not Chinese sources.

19. It bears recognition that individuals' self-identification with political parties in China at this time was somewhat murky, possibly due in equal parts to the parties' joint influence of the mandate of Sun Yatsen's revolution, the newness of the Chinese republic, and the chaos of the warlord period. Several of the CCP's most famous early military leaders had been active Guomindang members before committing to the CCP cause or in some cases prior to the founding of the CCP in 1921. These individuals often had access to training at the Whampoa Military Academy before the Northern Expedition. For further information on the background of early CCP military leaders, see William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927-71* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

20. Jacques Guillermaz, *A History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-1949*. (New York: Random House, 1972), 72.

21. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command*, 26.

attack on Communists in Shanghai. Chiang's campaign killed about 300 Communists, according to CCP records, and left 5,000 more wounded, missing, or forced into hiding in Shanghai and elsewhere in eastern China.²² Following this purge, Chiang set up a headquarters for his faction in Nanjing. The other faction initially preserved its alliance with the CCP for several months, but by late July 1927, trust between the two parties had eroded and the arrangement was falling apart.²³

Chiang Kai-shek's antagonism of the CCP in April 1927 shocked the Communists not only as a threat to CCP survival but also as a betrayal of the spirit of China's 1911 national revolution, which had ended the Qing Dynasty and heralded China's efforts to establish itself as a modern nation-state. Disappointment in their former allies was instrumental in shifting the attitudes of CCP leaders about the use of force.²⁴ Because they assessed Chiang Kai-shek to be aligning himself too closely to the wealthy and corrupt figures in Chinese society, the CCP leaders came to believe they were justified in beginning to build a party army and mobilizing the Chinese masses to rise up against the Nationalists under CCP guidance. In the late spring of 1927, they decided to seek opportunities to plan and execute armed uprisings.²⁵

Their first opportunity came in late July 1927, when the military situation around Nanchang presented a unique opportunity for the Communists. Several regiments of the

22. Guillermaz, *History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-1949*, 124-5.

23. Jacques Guillermaz, "The Nanchang Uprising," *The China Quarterly* 11, no. Jul (1962): 160-168.

24. Evidence of the attitudes and intentions of CCP leaders in the late 1920s can be found in reports from the 中央通信 [Zhongyang Tongxin/Central Newsletter], an internal CCP newsletter published in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Reports in this publication were written by party members and tended to be eyewitness accounts of events or ideological essays. Some documents from this publication have been compiled and published in Chinese in 南昌起 念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], Part 1 (1-181).

25. Guillermaz, "The Nanchang Uprising," 162.

Nationalists' Second Front Army forces that were under the leadership of CCP members or sympathizers as part of the alliance were coincidentally posted in the Nanchang vicinity at the same time, facilitating their cooperation in a revolt. The site itself was also tempting because large amounts of arms and ammunition were stored there. Furthermore, Nanchang was strategically located on the way to the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, where the CCP initially intended to gather to wait for additional Soviet support if they were successful in triggering a broad socialist revolution. The planned objectives of the Nanchang uprising included creating a Communist-led revolutionary committee to serve as a new military and political authority, positioning the CCP as a replacement for what the CCP assessed to be a counterrevolutionary Nationalist Party, and implementing serious land reform in the Nanchang area, which would involve confiscating the land held by the most powerful landlords and redistributing it to poor sharecroppers, according to a report from one uprising participant.²⁶ CCP leaders involved in the plans also hoped that it would have the effect of joining various Communist-led Nationalist army regiments into one force separate from the Nationalist Party leadership that would then inspire the residents of Nanchang to resist the Nationalists and transfer their allegiance to a Communist administration.

Based on these ambitious objectives, several CCP members who were serving as division leaders in the Nationalist Army on August 1 commanded their regiments to seize Nanchang. At least five divisions of soldiers entered the city, probably around 20,000 to

26. 李立三 告：八一革命之 与教 [Li Lisan baogao: bayi geming zhi jingguo yu jiaoxun/Li Lisan's report: Lessons and Process of the 8-1 Revolt], 南昌起 念 : 南昌八一起 念 [Nanchang qi yi: Nanchang bayi qi yi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], 82.

30,000 total troops.²⁷ In the initial confusion of the surprise attack, the soldiers subdued the limited resistance they met from the Nationalist troops who had been stationed to guard the city. They quickly established a headquarters and a revolutionary committee in the city. However, the attack remained a surprise for only a very brief time.²⁸ Nationalist military leaders immediately ordered troops still under their control (the majority of them) to reclaim the city. The CCP members had expected to be able to defend their hold on the city with the help of Nanchang residents who they believed would rally behind them. Instead, the Communists received little help from local residents.²⁹ By August 3, the Nationalist troops had forced the Communists to retreat from Nanchang. Outnumbered and outmaneuvered, the Communists fled Nanchang into the surrounding countryside, leading a retreat of all the troops they could prevent from deserting and carrying all the Nationalist ammunition they could acquire.

Though they were counting on the aid of the Nanchang-area residents, the CCP leaders had not allocated the time or resources to adequately engage in any large-scale political program in Nanchang. The Nationalists, in contrast, had spread negative propaganda about the Communists throughout the countryside, convincing local people that the CCP members were “a Northern Army putting into effect communal wives and

27. According to Guillermaz, a “Chinese regiment (tuan) consists generally of three battalions (ying), each battalion consisting of three or four companies (lian). Battalion strength stands probably between 500 and 700 troops.” Guillermaz, “The Nanchang Uprising,” p. 163, ref6.

28. In fact, some sources suggest that the leadership of the Second Front Army received advance news of the impending revolt at Nanchang on July 31 before it happened. Li Lisan claimed a battalion commander of the 20th Army, perhaps He Long, leaked details of the CCP plans to Guomindang officers. For further, see Marcia R Ristaino, *China’s Art of Revolution: The Mobilization of Discontent, 1927 and 1928* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1987), 26.

29. 周逸群 告：于南昌起 [Zhou Yiqun baogao: Guanyu Nanchang qiyi wenti/Report from Zhou Yiqun: Regarding the Problem of the Nanchang Uprising, October 30, 1927], 南昌起：南昌八一起念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang “8-1” Uprising], 120-121.

communal property.”³⁰ Therefore, rural residents viewed the CCP troops with considerable suspicion and antagonism, probably perceiving them as they would any other dangerous and threatening warlord army or violent gang common in this period in China’s history. Though the CCP Revolutionary Committee intended to rely on local support to provide food, water, and shelter, as well as assistance in carrying the force’s various heavy munitions, instead they encountered resistance and animosity from residents.

At the same time, poor conditions on the road south led to the attrition of the troops rallied under the Communist banner. Many simply deserted. Others perished from exhaustion from carrying heavy ordnance or from the poor conditions and lack of provisions on the road. CCP member Li Lisan reported that the weather was extremely hot during the march and the CCP troops marched 60 to 100 *li* (20-30 miles) each day, with each carrying 250-300 rounds of ammunition.³¹ Soldiers also had to carry heavy artillery on their backs and shoulders without help from porters since local peasants refused to assist them. Food and water were not available for troops, so many became ill from consuming contaminated supplies. Once sick, soldiers in the fledgling army seldom received care due to the CCP’s lack of medical capabilities or supplies. Li Lisan reported that “men were constantly dropping dead on the road.”³²

Morale among the CCP troops plummeted and many more deserted. As the situation deteriorated, it became more violent in some places, with reports of soldiers shooting civilians, which could not have improved the CCP’s image in those areas.³³ The combined

30. Li Lisan’s report.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Zhou Yiqun’s report.

effects of these conditions had a dramatic impact on the CCP forces. From an initial count of as many as 30,000 troops, the CCP forces decreased to about 5,000 troops by the end of the Nanchang episode and as few as 1,000 by the time they reached their southern rally point later in 1927.³⁴ The attrition caused CCP member Zhou Yiqun to remark in his report that “it was stunning to see such huge losses without a battle even having been fought.”³⁵ Beyond personnel losses, the fact that so much of the ammunition and artillery was abandoned put the CCP forces in a weaker position for future engagements.

The main successful aspect of the operation was that the event was technically the first example of a Communist-led military insurgency in China. The CCP force that fought in it therefore represented an embryonic example of what would become the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, precursor to the Chinese Communist forces that eventually became known as People’s Liberation Army in 1949. Aside from this important achievement, the Nanchang military engagement itself was a failure in almost every way and those present described it as such in their reports.

The earliest accounts from CCP members who participated in the Nanchang revolt, circulated internally within the party, reflect their desire to provide detailed analysis of how the party’s execution of the revolt failed in order to prevent repeating mistakes. Participants documented their assessments in reports that circulated in the late 1920s among early CCP leaders. The reports concluded that developing military forces under exclusively Communist leadership was important, but it was equally important to encourage mass support for the party throughout the countryside. To guarantee support from the broad population, the CCP

34. Zhu De, “Zhu De’s Reminiscences of Nanchang Uprising” *Xinhua News Agency*, July 31, 1982 (excerpted and reprinted from Zhu De, “From the Nanchang Uprising to Going Up the Jinggang Mountain,” June 1962. Translated and digitally archived by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS).

35. Zhou Yiqun’s report.

leaders determined that the party must synchronize military and political plans, ensuring that military actions bolstered rather than undermined the party's image with workers and peasants. In retrospect, it is clear that participants in the uprising reached conclusions that were critical to how CCP leaders later conceptualized the integrated relationship between party, army, and people.

Though the Soviet model of revolution had already advocated this close interaction between the Communist Party, the people, and armed forces, the Nanchang uprising was the first of several similar experiences in the late 1920s that encouraged CCP leaders to develop a party-army relationship that they deemed specifically appropriate for the Chinese context in its emphasis on protecting and serving the Chinese population. Implicit within this understanding was recognition by those who had fought at Nanchang that the CCP must develop strategies to overcome their lack of resources in comparison to their opponents and that the CCP could not expect to dominate the Nationalists in a head-on battle. This realization increased the appeal of guerilla tactics and non-traditional approaches to warfare for the Communist leaders. In sum, those involved in the Nanchang uprising whose accounts have been preserved reported that succeeding in military conflicts against the Nationalists would require a close integration between political ideology, mobilization efforts, and military strategy, all best achieved under the close scrutiny of the political leadership of the party itself.

Reports on the results of the Nanchang incident and subsequent retreat went into considerable detail describing political shortcomings and speculating about the kinds of political work that would have been effective. Party leaders drew two important overarching conclusions. First, the CCP had entered a new phase of its history that would require it to

develop independent military strength. Second, to achieve any lasting support and success from the public, the CCP's independent use of military force must be fully integrated with its political goals. The reports of CCP leaders who participated in events at Nanchang appear to have had a direct influence on Central Committee Document Number 13, the party's official assessment of CCP action at Nanchang, released on October 12, 1927.³⁶

Document Number 13 is notable as a turning point in the narrativization of the Nanchang uprising because it marks the first example of the party's use of the Nanchang uprising events as part of its developing rhetoric to legitimize the CCP's use of military force. The document declared the revolt at Nanchang to have been a defeat of the CCP, but it also announced the beginning of a new phase of "revolutionary armed struggle" that would involve workers and peasants. In the document, the party's Central Committee also acknowledged that the party would need to develop its military, but could not hope to win direct engagements with Nationalist opponents. Rather, it recommended that the military work with workers and peasants to continue stirring up revolt that would disrupt Nationalist control. The document highlights lessons learned at Nanchang and affirms the party's official commitment to pursuing a new kind of people's war, characterized by a close relationship between the CCP and its armed forces; neither could achieve their goals on behalf of the Chinese people without the other or without the full assistance and support of the people themselves.

36. This document is widely available in collections of early CCP documents. For the Chinese version, see 中共中央通告第十三：叶失事件[Zhanggong zhongyang tonggao dishisan: wei ye he shibai shijian/Central Committee Public Notice No. 13: On the Incident of the Defeat of Ye and He] 南昌起：南昌八一起念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], 53-64. For English translation see C. Martin Wilbur, "Ashes of Defeat," 38-44.

CHAPTER 4

JUSTIFYING DOCTRINE THROUGH COMMEMORATION IN 1933

As the party's official consensus on the important ideological and strategic lessons learned from the Nanchang uprising, the publication of Central Document 13 marked the beginning of a period of transformation for the Communists' strategic behavior, moving toward greater integration of political and military goals. Moreover, CCP leaders in the early 1930s interpreted changes in their attitude toward the use of force as one key reason their party was able to survive repeated Nationalist attacks between 1927 and 1933.³⁷ Thus the party's declaration in 1933 of an official anniversary holiday commemorating the Nanchang uprising that became known as Army Day (建军节, *jianjunjie*) presents an image of a Communist Party that looks back with pride on its success in repelling a series of brutal Nationalist attacks on the Communist base in Jiangxi province that they had worked hard to establish. The CCP's prideful commemoration of the Nanchang uprising in 1933 now appears somewhat ironic in light of the brutal Nationalist crackdown on the CCP bases that would soon collapse them and drive the Communist leaders on the notorious Long March (1934-1935). However, the official resolutions that record the party's assessment of the Nanchang uprising prior to the Long March are useful because they document a key turning

37. Many scholars today would argue that if these strategic changes had any effect on CCP success in the early 1930s, it was probably fairly minor. In fact, some have suggested that the Communist survival was due in part to Japan's invasion of China, which prevented Chiang Kai-shek from applying his full military force to destroying the Communist Party between 1927 and 1933. For a concise analysis of the Japanese arrival in China and the Nationalist response, see Edward L Dreyer, *China at War, 1901-1949* (London ;New York: Longman, 1995), Ch. 5.

point in the party's use of the memory of shared military experiences to shore up support for political and military policy.

It is striking that these first examples of the party's commemorative narrative about the Nanchang uprising omit references to tactical failures, even though several of the original published accounts of the event describe the event as a defeat. Because the Nanchang revolt marked the start of a trend toward what the party in 1933 interpreted to be its military success, its failure to meet its specific objectives in 1927 was made irrelevant in the collective memory of the CCP elite. Moreover, the party's ability to achieve its political goals using the strategic trends put in motion by the Nanchang revolt validated the party's intention to continue honing its use of force in the same way. The two main documents the party produced to declare the official commemorative holiday—one from the military and the other from the party's broader central committee—reflect this process of self-validation.

The first commemorative declaration came from the CCP's Central Revolutionary Military Committee (CRMC), a body of military officers responsible for the primary decisionmaking on military affairs that included some members who had participated in the Nanchang incident. After the Communists repelled the fourth attack by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist troops, the CRMC formally recommended to the party's top leaders that August 1 be made an official party holiday.³⁸ The document implies that such a holiday would be observed within areas under CCP rule, which at this time would have been rural enclaves the party called soviets. The CRMC's recommendation came during a brief period of peace and

38. “中央革命 事委 会命： 于决定八一 中国工 成立 念日 [Zhongyang Geming Junshi Weiyuanhui ming: Guanyu jue ding Ba-Yi wei Zhongguo Gongnong Hongjun Chengli Jinianni/Central Revolutionary Military Committee Order Regarding the Decision to Make “8-1” the Anniversary of the Establishment of the Peasants and Workers Red Army,” June 30, 1933, 南昌起 ；南昌八一起 念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang “8-1” Uprising], 169.

optimism that the CCP experienced in the summer of 1933, before the Nationalists launched their successful fifth offensive later in the year.³⁹ The party's celebration of a Nanchang uprising anniversary suggests that in June and July, before the fifth offensive, the Communists were celebrating their belief that they had earned the right to govern in their small area, and perhaps even to expand their rule.

The CRMC's recommendation echoes the emphasis of 1927's Document 13 on the necessity of involving workers and peasants in military struggle to seize political power. Specifically, the CRMC directive urges the commemoration of the founding of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army each on August 1 because on that day, the army began "fundamentally shaking the imperialist Guomindang hold on power, became a kind of turning point for the revolution, became organizers of the revolutionary war of the proletariat, and thoroughly advanced the main force of the people's revolution."⁴⁰ No mention is made of the details of the Nanchang attack, including the specific outcomes of the confrontation or the admission of failure by those involved.

Similarly, the Central Committee's response to the CRMC proposal, formally establishing the 8-1 holiday, makes only brief and politically-charged references to the specific events at Nanchang.⁴¹ This document was released by the party's Central Committee, whose members collectively exerted the highest level of political power and

39. For comprehensive descriptions of the third and fourth Nationalist encirclement campaigns, see William Whitson, *The Chinese High Command*, 272-278.

40. "Central Revolutionary Military Committee Order."

41. "中央政府 于八一 念运 的决 [Zhongyang Zhengfu Guanyu Ba-Yi Jinian Yundong de Jueyi/Central Government Resolution Concerning 8-1 Anniversary Campaign," July 1, 1933, 南昌起 : 南昌八一起 念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], 170. This document was originally published in the CCP's *Red China* newspaper, which had a print run of about 40,000 copies, according to Guillerma, *A History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-1949*, 215.

oversaw the CRMC. The Central Committee references the Nanchang revolt itself only as the instance when the party joined with the workers and peasants to fight back against the imperialist threat that the Nationalist Party had started to present. According to the document, it is this spirit of cooperation between party, workers and peasants in offensive military acts that gives rise to the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. The remainder of the document approves the establishment of Army Day on August 1, as well as creating formal institutional structures to provide for the dependents of soldiers. It is unlikely that these soldiers or their dependents were able to enjoy tangible benefits from this provision for very long, however, because the fifth Nationalist attack launched in November 1933 destroyed the Jiangxi Soviet in early 1934, causing the surviving CCP members to flee to the southwest on the Long March.

Given the cult of personality that later arose around Mao Zedong and credit he received for military theories he wrote about later in the 1930s, it is striking that none of the party documents referenced so far in this paper about the origins of the CCP military forces and the earliest need for integrated party-army leadership refer specifically to Mao.⁴² He was not present at the Nanchang uprising itself, though he was involved in later uprisings that occurred in fall 1927. The omission of references to Mao and other leaders in the early Nanchang revolt commemoration reflects the degree to which events at Nanchang, and the lessons the party subsequently drew from those events in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were a result of collective decisionmaking, following the basic principles of democratic centralism from the Marxist-Leninist model. The collective nature of the party's earliest published official records on the significance of the Nanchang uprising also underscores that

42. Mao's strategic writings are widely available in Chinese or in English translation. For example, see *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung*, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1963).

by 1933, the CCP leadership had reached consensus on the party's legitimate need to use military force alongside and as an extension of political goals. Though Mao would later elaborate on this theme in his famous military writings, he is not responsible for the original idea.

The CCP's published documentary records include few narratives of early party military history, including that of the Nanchang narrative, between 1934 and 1944. Because the Army Day holiday is still an important state ritual in the PRC, CCP historians over the years have compiled comprehensive anthologies of party documents and memoir excerpts relevant to the Nanchang uprising; the dates of included materials jump without explanation from the 1933 documents declaring the Army Day commemorative holiday to documents from 1944 that will be analyzed below. While the absence of evidence cannot be invoked to denote a historical trend with any real confidence, this lacuna in party documents glorifying the establishment of the CCP army could indicate that the release of many of Mao's most important writings on strategy eclipsed party interest in the Nanchang uprising. The CCP may also have felt less pressure to emphasize its legitimate right to use force in the immediate aftermath of the Long March and during China's war with Japan, when it maintained a nominal alliance with the Nationalists. An equally plausible and not mutually exclusive explanation is that during this decade of great hardship and warfare, the CCP was simply not producing the same volume of documents or that the documents were not as effectively preserved. The status of Army Day activities in the 1934-1944 period is a subject that deserves further research in unpublished party documents.

Despite the gaps noted above, the party records that have been preserved demonstrate that the CCP's experiences in the period between 1933 and 1944 reinforced

lessons CCP leaders had drawn from their earliest assessments of the Nanchang uprising. In particular, the party continued to stress the seamless integration of political and military goals with the priorities of the Chinese people, and they identified this relationship as their primary justification for action. When they were successful, and even when success was defined simply as survival, triumph was credited to the kind of cooperation between political and military elements to liberate the people emphasized in the party's version of the Nanchang uprising story. When they were less successful, on the other hand, the themes ensconced in the commemorative narrative legitimized their continued fight. With these values embedded in the Army Day narratives and reinforced through repetition and commemoration, party leaders internalized them as core values that enabled them to survive hard times. By the time competition with the Nationalists intensified in the mid-1940s, requiring the CCP to mobilize public support on a mass scale, the Communist leaders relied on the Nanchang uprising story to invoke a collective memory of a past event that they believed validated their claim to represent the Chinese people by fighting with them and for them.

CHAPTER 5

ESTABLISHING “8-1” AS A SYMBOL OF PARTY-ARMY RELATIONS

In the history of the party's reliance on the Nanchang uprising to symbolize party-army relations, the first noteworthy development was the official declaration in 1933 of the Army Day holiday to commemorate the importance of the uprising; the next significant turning point came in the mid-1940s as the Communists sought to recruit support and absorb new members. At this point, CCP leaders began to slightly de-emphasize the association of the Nanchang revolt with the beginning of the “anti-imperialist revolution” and the development of the Chinese Workers' and Peasant's Red Army, the dominant themes of the narratives about Nanchang events in circulation until the 1940s. Instead, they became interested in fostering within the broadest portion of the population an image of the CCP's army as a professional military force capable of defending both the CCP ideals and the Chinese nation-state; references to the Nanchang uprising shifted accordingly.

As civil war in China began to seem more likely, CCP leaders based at Yan'an focused intently on transforming their ideological goals into administrative practices, building an increasingly professionalized modern military, and on mobilizing broad public support. As the party absorbed a dramatic increase in new members, narratives of its foundation and early history assumed a new role for legitimizing the party's political identity and its claim on political authority in China. In conjunction with party rectification efforts that took place in the 1940s, CCP leaders devoted considerable attention at this time to producing and reproducing narratives of the party's early history and shared experiences

from the previous two decades, including the Nanchang uprising. CCP leaders turned with renewed interest to the task of writing the party's official history.

It is at this time that the details of the Nanchang revolt itself become much less essential to the CCP's narrative than in the earliest versions. For party leaders who had been commemorating the Nanchang uprising for about a decade based on the 1933 narrative, references to the Nanchang uprising had become synonymous with the themes of party-army cooperation and the CCP's military culture, which they had internalized as a key characteristic of the CCP's identity. In other words, as a result of the party's retelling of the Nanchang uprising events and its process of commemoration between 1927 and 1944, even brief references to the uprising had assumed the ability to convey layers of meaning about party-army relations and the CCP's responsibilities to the Chinese people. Thus, while formalizing the first versions of the party's official history at their base in Yan'an, the CCP leaders subtly converted the collective memory of the Nanchang uprising into a shorthand cultural reference to the origin and justification of the Communist armed forces.

This process is recognizable in the party's documentary record. In 1944, party leaders held a symposium where they determined how the official history of their army would be written, according to the memoirs of Zhu De, a famous Chinese military leader who was present at the symposium.⁴³ As Zhu recalls party political and military leaders present at the symposium recounted the details of the Nanchang uprising as they had been preserved in Document 13 in 1927 and in the 1933 commemoration announcements as well as how they were preserved in the personal memories of those cadre who had participated in the revolt.

43. 朱德: 在写第一史座谈会上的化() [Zhu De: Zai bianxie hongjun yijuntuan shi zuotanhui shang de jinhua (jielu)/The Evolution of the first symposium on writing Red Army history (excerpt), 1944] in 南昌起 : 南昌八一起念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian /Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], 176-179.

They recorded the Nanchang uprising as the first example of the CCP's momentous decision to use military force to achieve its objective, which was to defeat the Nationalists and the imperialist forces it represented.

As party members gathered in meetings for the Seventh CCP Party Congress, the consensus on the Red Army's history that Zhu De and other leaders had reached in 1944 also made its way in a distilled form into the party's famous "Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on Certain Historical Questions" (April 20, 1945), which was a crucial document produced at the Seventh Party Congress, setting out the CCP's main party line on its history, from which it derived its political and military legitimacy, as argued by Weigelin-Schwiedrzik and Wemheuer and referenced earlier in this essay.⁴⁴ The focus of this document is political ideology, so specific references to events, even those as important as the Nanchang uprising, is rare. Nonetheless, references to the same ideological characteristics found in the party's Nanchang uprising narrative since its first use are evident, even when associated with and attributed to Mao Zedong. For example, the following quote:

Comrade Mao Zedong's military line proceeds from two fundamental points. First our army is and can be an army of only one kind; it must be an instrument subordinate to the ideological leadership of the proletariat and serving the struggle of the people and the building of revolutionary base areas. Second, our war is and can be a war of only one kind; it must be a war in which we recognize that the enemy is strong and we are weak, that the enemy is big and we are small, and in which therefore we fully utilize the enemy's weaknesses and our strong points and fully rely on the strength of the masses for survival, victory, and expansion.⁴⁵

Within this prose lies a core idea party leaders had internalized since the original Nanchang uprising narrative was drafted: the CCP's army was a cooperative political and military effort and such an approach would enable it to defeat stronger opponents.

44. The complete text of this document is available in Chinese on the CCP's official website. See “ 于建国以来党的若干 史 的决 [Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti.de jueyi] (via cpc.people.com.cn),” *cpc.people.com.cn*, accessed November 30, 2010, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64563/65374/4526455.html>. For a complete English translation, see Tony Saich, ed. *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party*, 1164-1179.

45. Saich, ed. *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party*, 1173-1174.

By the time the People's Republic was founded in 1949, the official CCP narrative about the Nanchang uprising and the origin of the CCP army took on a form only slightly different from the version that exists on the website of China's state-run news service today. Mirroring the 1933 documents, the narrative matched the triumphant and patriotic tone of the annual Army Day celebration. It minimized or omitted references to negative outcomes of the uprising, even if factual, that could cast a shadow over the image of the founding of the party's army, with which the party's leaders supposedly cooperated so closely. When the PLA was formally established in early 1949 before the founding of the PRC itself, the party designed its logo and flag to include the Chinese characters 八一 ("8-1," designating August 1) in reference to its origin at the 1927 Nanchang revolt.

The shift in the late 1940s in which the party's collective memory of the Nanchang uprising was transformed into a meaning-laden metonym for the historic origins of the party's armed forces can be seen in two further examples. First, a rhetorical shift occurred. The term used to describe the CCP's actions at Nanchang has changed over time, reflecting the evolution of the memory of the event within party historiography. By 1949, the CCP began referring officially to the events at Nanchang using the term "uprising" (*qiyi* 起), which in Chinese usually has connotations of a heroic and just collective action taken in self defense. Historian Martin C. Wilbur first noticed in the 1960s that this term was not regularly applied in party documents prior to 1949.⁴⁶ Publication since then of many additional accounts of the August 1 incident in the original Chinese bears out Wilbur's findings.

46. Wilbur, "Ashes of Defeat," 6. For an example of current CCP history of the Nanchang uprising, see article in the CCP history section of the web portal of China's state-run news service, *Xinhua*: "八一南昌起 之八一建 [Ba yi nanchang qiyi zhi "ba yi" Jian Jun Jie]"/"The 8-1 Nanchang Uprising and the 8-1 Army Day holiday", *Xinhua News Service*, www.xinhuanet.com, accessed on October 15, 2010.

Most descriptions of events at Nanchang up until the establishment of the People's Republic refer to the situation as a "revolt" or "insurrection" (*baodong* 暴), which simply implies a minority group taking violent action against an authority. Some authors, such as CCP members Li Lisan and Zhou Yiqun, who wrote after-action reports about the Nanchang uprising referenced earlier in this essay, often refer to the situation simply as an "incident" (*shijian* 事件) or even as a defeat (*shibai* 失). At other times they and others use the term "revolution" (*geming* 革命), which emphasizes both the fact that the incident was a revolt, but also that it set in motion a period of armed Communist revolution. In these cases, they generally do not refer to a "Nanchang Revolution," but rather a "Workers and Peasants Revolution." Central Document Number 13, representing the consensus of the party on Nanchang events at the time, uses the term "revolt" (*baodong* 暴) as does the official declaration of the Army Day holiday in 1933. Not until the 1950s, after the Communists have taken power in China, does the party regularly use the term uprising.⁴⁷

Standardizing the use of the term "uprising" after the 1950s probably reflects the interest of CCP leaders to use the memory of the party's experience at Nanchang as a tangible reminder of its success at achieving a symbiosis between political and military goals. Capitalizing on this shared history in a symbolic way would have been particularly important in the first years of the People's Republic, as China recovered from a prolonged period of war and the party's leaders struggled to unify the country under one civilian Communist regime. Encouraging the preservation and commemoration of the special relationship

47. For example, see "附:周恩来等 等参 的<<八一起 >> 明稿 1957 [Zhou Enlai deng qin deng qinbi canguande "bayi qiyi" shuominggao" / "Zhou Enlai on an Autograph Tour for the "Nanchang Uprising" exhibit"] article, 1957 (month and day unclear), in in 南昌起 : 南昌八一起 念 [Nanchang qiyi: Nanchang bayi qiyi jinianguan bian / Nanchang Uprising: Collected Memorials of the Nanchang "8-1" Uprising], 181.

between party and military would have helped justify the continued need for a party army, instead of an army directly controlled by a non-partisan state apparatus as exists in many countries. It also would have served to help integrate large numbers of demobilized soldiers into a civilian society.

A second example of the party's use of condensed and symbolic references to the Nanchang uprising narrative in the late 1940s is the main article commemorating the "8-1" Army Day that ran in the party's top newspaper on August 1, 1949. The article contains about 1,200 words, but only two sentences focus specifically on the Nanchang uprising event itself; they emphasize the important role of the Nanchang uprising as the civil war's first stage and the founding event of the army.⁴⁸ Rather than recalling the details of the uprising being commemorated, the rest of the document recounts the valor of the PLA throughout the two civil wars (1927-1937 and 1945-1949) and the war against Japan.

This example is important not just for documenting the transition the party had made in the content of the narrative about the Nanchang uprising it was disseminating, but also for the audience at which it was directing this message. By 1949, the Army Day commemoration was not an activity primarily designed to encourage esprit d'corps or to clarify the party's ideological basis for the use of force for other party members. Instead, this commemorative narrative was aimed at the broadest possible audience and designed to justify the party's use of force to the Chinese public, the new citizens of the PRC. This is the purpose that the Nanchang uprising narrative has largely served for the party since 1949. In particular, the collective memory party leaders invoked with references to the Nanchang

48. Ma Xulun, "念 大 8-1 建 [Jinian weida "8-1" jianjunjie /Commemorating the Great "August 1st Army Day]," *The People's Daily*, August 1, 1949.

uprising, or simply “8-1,” became an important tool for legitimizing civil-military relations in the early PRC.

Between 1950 and 1953, when the PLA was assisting North Korean troops in repelling the invasion of American and South Korean forces, the CCP’s activities commemorating Army Day reflect the extent to which party leaders had internalized the concepts their narratives highlighted. The PLA’s intervention in Korea was a demonstration on a massive scale of what party leaders thought they could accomplish through close ideological management of their army and its demonstrated ability to defeat strong opponents through superior tactics. In 1950, less than a year after the establishment of the PRC, references to “8-1 Army Day” helped the leaders mobilize their army and homefront to their next great anti-imperialist war.

Articles written in honor of Army Day during the Korean War period (1950-1953) also document the developing cult of personality around Mao Zedong’s leadership. A commemorative article published in the party’s main newspaper August 2, 1952 shows the degree to which Mao had become associated with the ideological legitimacy of strategic decisionmaking. The article, written by He Long, a CCP leader who had participated in the Nanchang uprising, briefly references the Nanchang events as “the birth of the Chinese People’s Army” and “the first time the Chinese people, under the leadership of the CCP, independently took up arms and organized the people’s armed forces.”⁴⁹ The remaining five paragraphs of text serve to credit Mao for establishing the strategic guidance that enabled the PLA to achieve victory in all of its conflicts.

49. He Long, “念 大 8-1 南昌起 建 [Jinian “8-1” Nanchang Qiyi Jianjunjie /Commemorating the “8-1” Nanchang Uprising Army Day],” *People’s Daily*, August 2, 1952.

He Long's article is helpful as an example of how the CCP has used the Nanchang uprising narrative since the establishment of the PRC as a complex rhetorical device, metonymically conveying a version of collective memory about the party's military history that the CCP negotiated over time. Very few Army Day narratives go into detail about the Nanchang uprising itself, but references to the story symbolize the party's willingness to take up arms against forces CCP leaders identified as harmful to Chinese people. In this narrative, under the party's close supervision, the PLA can accomplish amazing military feats because it is fighting on behalf of the Chinese people. Beyond these basic symbolic messages, the story is flexible. New aspects of the CCP's military history can be added to it as the party reaches consensus upon them. In the Nanchang uprising narrative, the CCP leaders found a malleable story valuable for verifying their party's right to bear arms, for their civilian constituents as much as in their own minds.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the CCP's Nanchang uprising narrative had a profound effect on how CCP leaders conceived their own right to bear arms and how they communicated these ideas to the Chinese public before and after the establishment of the PRC. As party leaders developed their strategic ideology in the 1930s, the process itself of refining and reproducing the Nanchang uprising narrative encouraged CCP leaders to stress a collaborative and integrated relationship between CCP political leaders, the military, and the Chinese people as a pillar of their party's strength and a persistent source of political legitimacy. When the CCP succeeded in surviving the first few years of Nationalist attacks, the leaders chose to interpret their success as validation of their strategy, further legitimizing the themes of their Nanchang uprising narrative. Later, when the CCP in the late 1940s began to broadcast its ideology to the widest possible part of the Chinese population, the collective memory of the Nanchang revolt that Communist leaders had established in their early narratives, and its incumbent layers of meaning, became metonymic for the themes of party-army cooperation imbedded within those narratives. In other words, a simple reference to the date "8-1" simultaneously carried with it symbolic reference to the founding event of the PLA and the party's integrated relationship between itself, its military, and the people, which was crucial to the party's ultimate success in leading revolution.

The process of commemorating the Nanchang uprising both influenced and was influenced by how CCP leaders defined their relationship to the use of military force, setting

the tone for militarized political rhetoric that came to characterize the state-society relationship in the PRC. Commemoration of the Nanchang uprising has been one of the most visible ways that the CCP leadership invokes shared experiences of revolutionary warfare in order to define the role of the military in the PRC. Thus, understanding the process by which the Nanchang uprising became a symbol of the CCP's emphasis on integrating political and military ideology illuminates how and why the party's political legitimacy became so closely linked to its military practices and strategic ideologies in the early PRC—valuable context for explaining the militarized tone of the party's leadership of the PRC in the Mao era and beyond.

Because narrativization of the Nanchang uprising was an integral part of the political process by which the CCP developed its militarized institutional culture, this study suggests that not only was the emphasis on integration of party, army and society deeply rooted in the CCP's ideological rhetoric by 1949, but the CCP leaders had internalized their own rhetoric as an explanation for their party's survival and success, a factor that distinguished them from other political actors, and a reason for their acquisition of support from the Chinese people. Therefore, transforming or eliminating the rhetoric derived from the Nanchang uprising narrative or moving to a system with more clearly defined political, military, and social realms was equated with a critical risk to the party's legitimate authority and right to govern. This conclusion raises new questions that deserve future research about the implications of the party's early military experiences on its state-building efforts when it inherited the apparatus of state power in China in 1949.

Furthermore, this study suggests that, in general, the CCP's use of narrative as an integral part of its political process has been undervalued by recent scholarship. The

introduction of new methodologies and theoretical orientations influenced by cultural studies into historical scholarship has made it possible for scholars to read new insights from the CCP's most public declarations regarding the development of the party's own ideology and institutional culture as well as the dynamic process by which China's Communist leaders established their legitimacy in the twentieth century. Rather than dismissing such party documents as mere propaganda, scholars may find that further analysis of CCP narratives can provide a meaningful contribution to the ongoing debate over the CCP's rise to power.

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