

# **Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung**

Band 25  
2001



# The Myth of the “Turning-Point” – Towards a New Understanding of the Long March<sup>1</sup>

Frederick S. Litten

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Lü shi chunqiu, ch. 22, Chazhuan 察傳

The Long March of the Chinese Communists in 1934/35 has for a long time captured the imagination of many people, turning it into one of the icons of the 20th century. There are probably two main reasons for this: It is a tale of adventure and heroic endurance, which even seems to end well; and it is seen as the background to and reason for the rise of Mao Zedong. In the simplified and teleological schemes often to be found in Communist history, the Long March thus becomes the major “turning-point”, when Mao snatched the CCP and Red Army from the jaws of defeat and led them inexorably on towards victory over the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

Within the Long March, the Zunyi Conference of mid-January 1935 has for a long time been made out to be *the* “turning-point”, with CCP history often being divided into a pre-Zunyi period led by “Leftist” incompetents, and a post-Zunyi period led by Mao or a collective leadership centered on Mao and following “correct” line.

This interpretation can be traced back quite far; in fact, important elements already appear in the so-called “Zunyi Resolution”.<sup>2</sup> It was then developed in various works by Mao in the second half of the 1930s, and was eventually adopted in the CCP’s 1945 “Resolution on Certain Historical Questions” (translated, for example, in Saich 1996:1164-1179; also see Saich 1995), thus considerably constraining all future research on this topic.

Nowadays, with conferences and meetings in the months before and after Zunyi becoming better known, the role of the Zunyi Conference is often seen as less elevated; but the concept of the Long March being a “turning-point” in CCP history is still going strong, not just in China (e.g., Tong 1995; Wang 1995; Wei Zhonghai 1997; Epstein 1998:203; Uhalley 1988:49-50; Kagan 1992; Kim 1992; Teiwes 1994:3-4; Dreyer 1995:194; Hunt 1996:126).

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Averill, Timothy Cheek, Peter Kuhfus, Hans van de Ven, Andreas Wendtberger and the editors of the BJOAF for their valuable comments on various drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A translation can be found in Jerome Ch’en (1969). “Zunyi Resolution” seems to be a misnomer, as it was in fact passed about three weeks after the Zunyi Conference, most likely on 8 February 1935, although it is commonly held to reflect the results of the Zunyi Conference. See Kampen 2000:71; Chen Guoquan 1999:68, 74.

Intimately connected with, and nearly as old as the concept of a “turning-point” is the concept of the “struggle between two lines”: “Leftists” and “Maoists”. Since two “lines” are said to have been competing, everyone is put in one of the two camps (defined by Chen Shaoyu, a.k.a. Wang Ming, and Mao), though conversions, such as in the case of Zhang Wentian, a.k.a. Luo Fu, were possible (e.g., Zhang Shude 1999). From that point of view a more complex positioning of people is not acceptable. But is it actually unreasonable to imagine, for example, that one person was following different “lines” on different topics, such as land reform and military matters, or that personal relationships had an impact on the course of events? The “Maoist” black-and-white model, at least, does not allow for what one would expect to observe: a broad spectrum of opinions on different matters, which in some cases, particularly in times of confrontation, narrowed into a number of “lines” based on commonly shared interests and ideological beliefs.

Yet the “Maoist” model pervades most memoirs and studies of the Long March. Even the editions of primary sources dealing with this period are not free of this bias, though they have certainly broadened our knowledge of the events under consideration, especially in the 1980s. Most likely, documents were selected for publication according to the above-mentioned model and to other interests not necessarily serving the cause of “objective” history.

To make things even worse, the only high-level “non-Maoist” source for the Long March, the memoirs of the then military advisor Otto Braun (Braun 1973), is unreliable as well. When he wrote his book in the late 60s and early 70s, Braun was pursuing an “anti-Maoist” agenda. Furthermore, although he was allowed to check his report of 1939 to the Comintern, he also used additional unknown sources the reliability of which cannot be assessed.<sup>3</sup>

These difficulties are compounded by the near lack of contemporary sources illuminating what went on behind the scenes. Party documents of the time rarely allude to internal differences and are not automatically credible, no matter when they were finally published.

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With regard to the primary sources, the situation is therefore quite dispiriting. In my opinion, the same applies to academic work on the Long March. It is not possible here to detail the vast amount of Chinese literature relating to the Long March – although I have seen a larger share of it than indicated in the references, I

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<sup>3</sup> The only other “non-Maoist” eye-witness account for the Long March would be Warren Kuo (1970). However, I do not regard him as a “high-level” source; in addition, he, too, writes decades after the events, after having changed sides, and with recourse to other people’s remembrances and documents. Also cf. note 44.

could not truthfully claim familiarity with it as a whole – but my impression is that even the more recent publications rarely venture outside the “Maoist” model.<sup>4</sup>

Western studies on the Long March and topics closely related to it have, somewhat surprisingly, not been numerous since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The best-known is certainly Harrison Salisbury’s 1985 journalistic account of the Long March, which both reflected and, in turn, influenced the “mainstream” Chinese interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Yang’s *From Revolution to Politics* (1990) seems, at first glance, more scholarly and contains useful information. Yet, in essence, it presents just the old “Leftist” vs. “Maoist” dichotomy in a new dress. Thomas Kampen has recently published a brief study on *Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Leadership*, mainly concentrating on the years 1931 to 1935 (Kampen 2000).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There are, however, attempts to do so, such as Fang Qingqiu (1983) on the Fujian Rebellion, Zeng Jingzhong (1986) on the preparations for the Long March, or recently Chen Guoquan (1999) on Zhou Enlai as “center” of the “collective leadership” during much of 1935. In his overview of 50 years of CCP history, Yang Kuisong (1999) gives several examples, especially from the 1980s, of Chinese authors challenging “truths”, but neither the Long March nor the late Jiangxi Soviet make an appearance here.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, every book on CCP history before 1949, or on Mao, touches on the Long March. Among the more recent ones, Gregor Benton’s study of those left behind (Benton 1992), Tony Saich’s document edition (Saich 1996), the introductions to *Mao’s Road to Power*, vols. IV and V (Averill 1997; Schram 1999), and Philip Short’s biography of Mao (Short 1999) may be mentioned here. There still seems to be no more recent equivalent to James P. Harrison’s history of the CCP (Harrison 1973).

<sup>6</sup> In some ways it can therefore be compared to Edgar Snow’s famous original account, *Red Star over China* (Snow 1978).

<sup>7</sup> In this study, which is a slightly altered translation of Kampen (1998), he claims to have laid to rest the myth of the “28 Bolsheviks”, also called the “returned students” (cf. Levine 1992c). Kampen shows that there was no such group as the “28 Bolsheviks”, because they came from different backgrounds, went to and returned from the Soviet Union at different times, did not enter the CCP leadership as massively as had hitherto been assumed (but cf. Saich 1995:332 note 4), and, when they finally came into the Central Soviet, were not much in confrontation with Mao, mainly because the latter had already considerably lost power to Zhou Enlai, Xiang Ying and Ren Bishi. Yet, Kampen seems to persist in seeing them as a group held together by some common approach. In his conclusion, for example, we find: “most of the ‘28 Bolsheviks’ just concentrated on ideology and propaganda, and failed.” (Kampen 2000:121). The problem is that he never analyzes the ideology or beliefs of these so-called “28 Bolsheviks”, nor their actual activities. Kim (1973:9) already concluded by reading their then available texts that the “returned students” were not a monolithic grouping. Kampen, instead of updating Kim’s study, simply charts their positions in the formal hierarchy and makes statements about the power distribution. His study clearly points out that quite a lot of people often ignored, not the least Zhou Enlai, have to be considered important, even beyond 1935; but his superficial treatment of too many issues, such as the confrontation with Zhang Guotao (Kampen 2000:75-76), and his confusion of simply making statements with “proving” anything are disappointing. He also faults Western CCP historians for their “biased and misleading accounts” (Kampen 2000:126), but fails to mention that he himself provided such “biased and misleading accounts” in his articles in the 1980s (e.g., Kampen 1989a:134, 1989b:706) when he also took the Chinese accounts for granted.

Besides these books, several articles and papers by Benjamin Yang (1986), Kampen (1986, 1987, 1989a, 1989b) and myself (1988a, 1997) touch on topics and people closely related to the Long March. In this context, Anthony Garavente's review essay on the Long March is noteworthy, being one of the few examples of an author trying to name and pierce the pervasive myth(s) (Garavente 1995).

Of the Western literature published before the 1980s, Frank Tarsitano's dissertation on the Fifth Encirclement Campaign should be mentioned here (Tarsitano 1979). He tries to analyze the Fifth Encirclement Campaign and the Communist response nearly exclusively relying on documents of the time and, in doing so, questions Mao's later claims about what actually happened. Unfortunately, this intriguing study has been virtually ignored so far.

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In the first part of this article, I will attempt to explain the events in the military-political sphere between the end of 1930 (the beginning of the encirclement campaigns) and about mid-1935 (the meeting between the First and Fourth Front Army) by considering the situation and the CCP's decisions at certain points in time. Indeed, the following explanation can be called a "counter-myth" and is not original in all its details. Yet it seems to provide a more plausible explanation of the Long March and its origins than previous studies. While the present analysis is obviously far from being a complete and definitive narrative and/or analysis, it is hoped that it will at least offer a fresh look at the topic and encourage further research.

Instead of assigning specific decisions and policies to individual people or groups, including the Comintern and its representatives,<sup>8</sup> the term "leadership" (defined neither in terms of the number of people involved nor in terms of the composition of the group of leaders active in the period covered here) will be used in the first part. Thus "leadership" is meant to include all those who made and influenced decisions at the time. It may be noted, however, that this somewhat simplistic notion of "leadership" must be considered merely an analytical tool providing for nothing but preliminary results.

An analysis of the internal dynamics within the CCP "leadership" during the early Long March in the second part of this article will illustrate, on the other hand, that the available information does not yet allow for a more sophisticated view.

In the third section I will return to the issue of the "turning-point" and conclude with a number of observations and thoughts on CCP history in the 1930s in general and on the Long March in particular.

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<sup>8</sup> The roles of the Communist International's political advisor to the CCP, Arthur Ewert, and of the military chief advisor to the CCP, Manfred Stern, remain practically unknown. Both are not even mentioned, for example, by Benjamin Yang (1990) or Kampen (2000). I also wonder whether Chinese party historians only learned of them in Braun's memoirs. On Stern and Ewert cf. Litten 1997:55-57; on the Comintern's *apparat* in Shanghai in the early 1930s cf. Litten 1994.

## Part I

After having defeated his rival Feng Yuxiang in late 1930 in one of the larger battles of the Chinese civil war, Chiang Kai-shek turned his attention to the Communists. At that time their major base, the “Central Soviet”, was located in Jiangxi province.<sup>9</sup>

In the First and Second Encirclement Campaigns (December 1930 to January 1931 and during May 1931), mostly provincial troops were used against the Communists, with less than impressive results (Benjamin Yang 1990:41-46). These often badly trained and equipped troops were no real danger for the Communist Red Army, in particular because they were none too keen to fight, and their leaders wished to spare them for “more important” battles against rival warlords and Chiang Kai-shek (for a contemporary view see Fleming 1983:204-205). On the other hand, although the Communist troops seem to have been well-organized and competently led, they were only able to attack and defeat the inferior enemy units (Averill 1997:xxxix), and the strategy/tactics of “luring the enemy deep” and the accompanying cycle of losing and regaining territory prevented any significant expansion of the Central Soviet.

The Third Encirclement Campaign, which began under the personal supervision of Chiang Kai-shek in July 1931, was to be different. This time, a more serious effort was made to wipe out the Communists. During the next months, Nationalist troops struck deep into the territory of the Central Soviet without the Red Army being able to counter them effectively. Though the Nationalist lines became dangerously stretched, without external “help” the Central Soviet would likely have degraded to the lower status of a guerilla base area. This help was provided – coincidentally? – by the Japanese who started their occupation of Manchuria on 18 September 1931, forcing Chiang to put his best troops to more pressing use. Moreover, the so-called Guangdong Incident and the general hostility of southern warlords towards Chiang Kai-shek also alleviated the pressure on the Communists (Averill 1997:xliii). Even by the standards of the earlier campaigns – keeping the noose from tightening – the Communists’ “success” this time seems to have been a qualified one (cf. Huang 1989a; Shang 1990): Massive extraneous incidents were necessary to stop Chiang Kai-shek; large areas had to be reconquered, casting a shadow over the “luring the enemy deep” strategy; and the losses, according to numbers favorable to the Communists, had been twice as high as on the Nationalist side, if put in relation to the overall strength of the army (Huang 1989a:40).

At that stage two factors seem to have coincided: the need for a new military strategy, and changes in the political situation. Strategy had to be changed because,

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<sup>9</sup> Though he has to concentrate on Mao and probably trusts his sources a bit too much, Averill (1997) does seem to provide the best compact overview of the CCP in the early 1930s yet. In the following I mostly disregard other Communist bases in China, such as Zhang Guotao’s. Benjamin Yang (1990) has included information on them, but more studies are still necessary.

not only had the Nationalists become aware of some of the stratagems of the Red Army (Tarsitano 1979:30), but to continue with the defensive strategy of “luring the enemy deep” would have resulted in major problems with the local population which certainly did not appreciate being forced off the land repeatedly by the retreating Red Army or enduring the rampages of both Communist and Nationalist troops. Moreover, with land reform one of the few and probably the most important of the communist battle-cries to stimulate the local peasants, a more permanent control of territory was paramount to the political ambitions of the CCP. In addition, such a fundamentally defensive mindset left the military initiative almost completely to the enemy.

The changes in the political situation were manifold. The Jiangxi Soviet had, more or less, stood the test of various attacks, so that in November 1931 the Chinese Soviet Republic was proclaimed there. Assuming many of the trappings of an independent state, this was seen as a major milestone in the development of communism in China. By the same token, it shackled the government of the Chinese Soviet Republic, with Mao Zedong at the helm and the CCP as ruling party, because it now had to ensure the safety of its populace and the territorial integrity of the Soviet.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, more and more members of the national CCP leadership (for example, Zhou Enlai) began to arrive in the Central Soviet, which now looked like the most secure and promising place for communists in China. The Japanese invasion was perceived as a major and lasting diversion of Chiang Kai-shek, leaving the Communists free to expand in Jiangxi against mostly weak provincial troops better prepared to fight among themselves. Finally, the economic crisis in the “capitalist” world provided a positive international environment, further weakening the Nationalists’ domination of China.

All of this seems to have uplifted the morale of the CCP cadres enormously, initially even leading again to exuberant predictions of victory in one or more provinces.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, by early 1932,<sup>12</sup> a new strategic line was developed: changing from the defensive one of “luring the enemy deep” to an offensive and “positive” one of

<sup>10</sup> Whereas Benjamin Yang (1990:23) considers the “soviet” mostly in administrative terms, territorial control is the basis for administration and therefore a necessity for practical purposes. In my opinion, however, the concept of the “Central Soviet Republic” as a “state” also contained a more abstract obligation to ensure territorial integrity. Accordingly, progressing from “guerilla base area” to “soviet” to “soviet republic” would have entailed ever less freedom to give up territory, even temporarily.

<sup>11</sup> This mood is evident in various documents published in WJXJ 8. Also cf. Saich 1996:558-566.

<sup>12</sup> According to Benjamin Yang (1990:45), a proposal for a more active defense was made already in June 1931 by Mao, possibly providing the reason for the decision to take a stand at Gaoxingxu in September 1931, and leading to an important defeat of the Communist First Front Army (Whitson 1973:274). In April 1932, too, Mao is said to have pursued a more active defense (Gong 1992:37). Mao is usually associated with the “luring the enemy deep” strategy/tactics.

mobilizing the masses, fighting at the borders of the Central Soviet and beyond, concentrating troops to defeat the enemy, and generally regaining the initiative (e.g., WJXJ 8:266-283). Military structures were reorganized, regularized and modernized. "Guerillaism" – defined as a distaste for regular military structures, as insubordination, and as "pure defense" – became increasingly subject to criticism. Conversely, attempts were made to switch to conventional warfare combined with extended guerilla activity behind the enemy lines (e.g., WJXJ 7:486; cf. Averill 1997:1-liv; but see van de Ven 2000:385-390).

This new, offensive line showed some promising effects in the Central Soviet during 1932. The Red Army succeeded against the Nationalists' Fourth Encirclement Campaign (December 1932 to March 1933) at the border of the Central Soviet by attacking the enemy while he was still preparing, defeating two Nationalist divisions and losing practically no territory (Tarsitano 1979:40-42; Benjamin Yang 1990:63-67). But these victories do not tell the full story. While the Central Soviet had survived, the other two most important ones, the E-Yu-Wan (Hubei-Henan-Anhui) and the Xiang-Exi (Hunan-Western Hubei) Soviets, had been destroyed by Chiang Kai-shek's troops during the summer of 1932. Their Red Armies were being forced on „Long Marches" of their own (Benjamin Yang 1990:51-63). Furthermore, the Japanese again "assisted" the Communists in their efforts, this time by invading North China (Chahar and Jehol provinces) early in 1933, thus forcing Chiang to redeploy his troops and to break off his campaign against the Communists.

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After the Fourth Encirclement Campaign, both sides evaluated the situation and prepared for the next round. Chiang Kai-shek had become aware that it would not only take more of an effort, but a different one to defeat the Communists decisively. Numerous changes were therefore introduced on the Nationalist side, especially in three areas: army organization; strategy and tactics; and "political warfare" (Tarsitano 1979:ch. 2). In the first area, this meant regularization and strengthening of command, down-sizing divisions, establishing a training center at Lushan, better intelligence, and so on.

In the second area, both strategy and tactics were completely changed. Now a combination of offensive strategy and defensive tactics was to be employed over an extended period of time. Cornerstones of both strategy and tactics were the "pill-boxes" or "blockhouses" built in prodigious numbers. Strategically, they enabled the Nationalists to advance carefully and to slowly strangle the Central Soviet, while ensuring safe logistical routes and avoiding overstretching. Tactically, they provided shelter for the Nationalist troops and a kind of psychological restraint to prevent smaller units from becoming overoptimistic, dashing about, and



falling victim to the Red Army's tactical feints. Slow but continuous and secure advance was to be attained on both levels.<sup>13</sup>

The third area, "political warfare", was a real innovation in this context. Chiang Kai-shek now tried to come up with new political ideas (the "New Life Movement"; cf. Yip 1992), and to actively better the lot of the people in the "freed areas", for example by improving the infrastructure – which was beneficial to military logistics, too.

For the Communists in the Central Soviet surveying the situation in the middle of 1933 the outlook was a mixed one. On the one hand, the Red Army had proved capable of defeating the odd "central" division among Chiang's troops, and was at the time actually doing quite well in Fujian (Averill 1997:lxxvi). But could it hold out against a concerted onslaught without external intervention? Chiang had concluded the Tangu Agreement with Japan in May 1933, so he had his back free this time. The new, more aggressive strategy had been quite successful, though circumstances had been favorable. To adopt an effective offensive strategy, on the other hand, would have been too dangerous. The troops of the Red Army in Jiangxi, numbering 100,000 at best, were surrounded by an increasing number of some 500,000 Nationalist soldiers.

The economic blockade of the Central Soviet by Nationalist and provincial troops continued and slowly began to bite, leading inter alia to problems in recruiting and morale. On the positive side, during 1933 rumours intensified that the southern warlords might go to war against Chiang (Litten 1988a:23). The international situation, however, as seen from Moscow and thus at least in part by the CCP, worsened with the rise of Hitler in Germany and the easing of the world economic crisis.

Various alternatives were open to the Communists at this point. They could keep on trying to defend the Central Soviet Republic, their "beacon" to revolution in China. Or they could give up the idea of a "soviet republic" and try to "transfer" most of the Central Soviet to another, less endangered region, hoping to win time but losing prestige and power. Or they could just revert to pure guerilla warfare, try to save the Red Army's "living forces", abandon for the time being the idea of establishing any soviet, shelter in the mountains or rove around pin-pricking the Nationalist armies and hoping for miracles.

Given these choices, the CCP leadership's decision to stay and to try to defend the Central Soviet Republic seems understandable and defensible.<sup>14</sup> While the

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<sup>13</sup> This approach even continued for some time after the main forces of the Red Army had left the Central Soviet (Benton 1992:20).

<sup>14</sup> There is no definite contemporary evidence of such a discussion. Of the top CCP leaders only Zhang Guotao, who had lost "his" E-Yu-Wan Soviet, is reported to have held the view of preserving the Red Army first, the soviet later, if at all (*Chuan-Shan geming genjudi lishi changbian* 1982:338). Also cf. Benjamin Yang 1990:131-132.

Communists had sobered up (see, for example, WJXJ 9:536-537), they were still entitled to guarded optimism about attaining that goal; only with hindsight is the hopelessness of their situation obvious.

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As mentioned earlier, rumours of internal strife in Chiang Kai-shek's camp had been ripe in 1933. Chiang needed troops from warlords such as Chen Jitang in Guangdong or He Jian in Hunan, but they were as weary of Chiang as of the Communists. The weakest point in Chiang's encirclement strategy, however, was the 19th Route Army in Fujian, formerly famous for their defense of Shanghai against the Japanese in early 1932, under the command of Chen Mingshu and Cai Tingkai. Their discontent with Chiang was an open secret, and they were decidedly unwilling to fight against the Red Army, as the latter's operations in Fujian in the summer of 1933 had shown (Litten 1988a:19-20).

On 26 October 1933, shortly after the start of the Fifth Encirclement Campaign, the 19th Route Army and the Communists signed a truce and discussed a common front against Chiang Kai-shek. To the Communists this was a welcome break of the encirclement, enabling them to get provisions through the Nationalist blockade. At the same time, the CCP seems to have been suspicious and reticent, too, and for good reason – the 19th Route Army was desperate. Chiang Kai-shek had, of course, known about their discontent all along and had cut off the money transfers from Nanking. This forced the leadership of the 19th Route Army either to surrender to Chiang and lose face, or to revolt. They decided to do the latter and were now looking for allies among the many factions and groups unfriendly to Chiang. But Chiang had the situation under control, owing to his military might and to "General Dollar", and by sowing rumours that the 19th Route Army was already hand in glove with the Communists – a thought that did not improve relations with other potential allies (Litten 1996).

In fact, the Fujian Rebellion, starting on 20 November 1933, was mostly make-believe.<sup>15</sup> With the possible exception of the so-called "Third Party", which had some influence in the beginning, nobody really wanted to fight – the main aim was to save face by pretending to fight. The Communists seem to have tried to help the Fujian "government" militarily for about a month (besides pursuing their own aims); it is difficult to decide whether thereafter Chiang's troops or the collapse of the Fujian "government" progressed faster. At the end of January 1934, the rebellion by one of China's most famous armies had been crushed. There remained the task for the Communists to profit as much as possible from the temporary disarray in Fujian, and for Chiang Kai-shek to close the encirclement anew.

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<sup>15</sup> The most complete study of the Fujian Rebellion remains Eastman 1974:ch. 3, though with regard to the CCP it is now out of date. Cf. Litten 1988a:ch. 2, or Litten 1988b.

In other words, the Fujian Rebellion was a sham, and by no means the “big chance” that had been lost by the incompetence or doctrinaire stance of the then Communist leadership, as later writers, beginning with the so-called “Zunyi Resolution”, would claim. With the temporary respite and the chance to convene the Second National Congress of the Chinese Soviet Republic in January 1934, the Communists had probably got the most out of it,<sup>16</sup> but Chiang’s position and especially his prestige had also been strengthened. Having bought off the Japanese for some time and crushed resistance to his rule in such a way, there was scant chance of any further interruption of this encirclement campaign.

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At the end of January 1934, the Fifth Encirclement Campaign began anew. The intermezzo of the Fujian Rebellion had not changed the Communists’ strategic options, limited as they were both by circumstances and by the political decision to defend the Chinese Soviet Republic. A strategic offensive was inadvisable if one took into account the numerical and technical superiority of the National and provincial troops (nearly one million men by now) who, though they might not all actively fight the Communists, were certainly protecting their turfs. The old “luring the enemy deep” strategy could not be used for two reasons: Firstly, Chiang Kai-shek had chosen his strategy and tactics to prevent being “lured deep”. Secondly, the principle of territorial integrity, or at least the uphold of Communist administration and land reform, prevented the use of this strategy. Other forms of strategic retreat or guerilla warfare were incompatible with the overriding political decision to defend the Central Soviet. Therefore there remained only one strategy: stubborn defense, in theory on the whole frontline, in fact mostly in the north-eastern sector, where the Red Army was confronted by Chiang Kai-shek’s best and most active troops. Given Chiang’s strategy and tactics, it was obvious that this stubborn defense could also lead to positional warfare. However, it is important to note again that the possible necessity for this kind of warfare arose from the political decision to defend the Central Soviet and from the military situation, not from any of the leaders’ putative personal predilections or incompetence, as is often alleged (e.g., Benjamin Yang 1990:121; but see Jerome Ch’en 1986:206-208).

In November 1933, the Red Army, it seems, had attempted the aggressive variant of this strategy, perhaps in connection with the events in Fujian – but it failed (Tarsitano 1979:117-119). Afterwards, possibly influenced by a wait-and-see attitude during the later part of the Fujian Rebellion, the defense strategy became more passive and many “Red” blockhouses were built.

<sup>16</sup> This does not preclude that certain tactical measures taken by the CCP and Red Army leadership were not optimal, or even wrong. Qin Bangxian, a.k.a. Bo Gu, then at least nominally the top CCP leader, wrote in August 1934 – before the “great chance” myth had arisen – that the Red Army had not sucked up enough of the “Fujian rebel” troops left scattered by Chiang’s attacks (Bo 1934:17).

Tactics was, of course, also constrained by the strategic choice and by the actual circumstances. An article by Xiang Ying and Wang Jiexiang, written in November 1933, presents quite a passive form of tactical defense – for all practical purposes this was a call for positional warfare – centered on the “Red” blockhouses (Litten 1988a:50). At the end of the first phase of the Fifth Encirclement Campaign (i.e., up to the battle of Guangchang in April 1934), a more mobile tactical variant was introduced under the name of *duancu tuji* (“short, swift strikes”). This tactic put less stress on “Red” blockhouses, using them mainly as a launch pad for attacks on Nationalist units that ventured out of their blockhouses.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these tactical concepts for “regular warfare”, which was meant to bear the brunt of the fighting, the guerilla units were allotted quite an important role, too. They were meant to operate in the enemy’s hinterland and between his blockhouse-lines, to disrupt his logistics, and to force him to divert troops from the front.

However, theory and practice seem to have gone their own ways as time progressed. The guerilla troops did not follow orders, and the regular units seem to have become quite wedded to the more passive forms of defense. Of course, the *duancu tuji* were rather demanding in coordination and swiftness, and not all Communist commanders and troops were up to it. But there was also a noticeable decline in the general quality of troops, since human supplies were running out, forced recruitment was increasing, morale sinking (Tarsitano 1979:111-138; Benton 1992:11). In fact, morale was battered from all sides: the economic situation grew worse all the time; Chiang Kai-shek’s troops seemed to advance relentlessly; CCP-internal struggles, such as the fight against the “Luo Ming Line” (Averill 1997:lxix-lxiii; van de Ven 2000:373-385), were less than opportune; and Chiang’s “political warfare”, and the Communists’ track record, threatened to rob the CCP of its main *raison d’être* in the eyes of much of the Soviet’s population: the promise of reform and a better life.

General considerations were thus probably more important than purely military ones in the Communist leadership’s decision to take a firm stand against the Nationalist troops in Guangchang, considered the “gateway” to the Central Soviet, in April 1934. It is still obscure what exactly happened in the battle of Guangchang on the Communist side, but it was a big defeat with about 4000 Communists killed or wounded, compared to about 2500 Nationalist troops (Litten 1988a:52-55).<sup>18</sup> A

<sup>17</sup> The *duancu tuji* are commonly attributed to Otto Braun, the German military advisor to the CCP. That they were also propagated, in slightly different forms, by Lin Biao (see Saich 1996:627-635) – who even claimed to have invented the term (Snow 1957:30) –, Peng Dehuai and others is usually dismissed as a sign of Braun’s power of “persuasion”. The Moscow Archives might give a clue to the role of Manfred Stern in the development and propagation of this tactic. On tactics and their execution during that time see Tarsitano 1979:ch. 5; Litten 1988a:ch. 3.

<sup>18</sup> For Benjamin Yang (1990:81-82) there are no difficulties in covering the Guangchang battle. In his opinion the defeat is fully Braun’s fault, since Peng Dehuai says so. Braun’s story is seen as an excuse

renewed discussion of the various political-strategic options now became unavoidable.

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The negative course that the fight against the Fifth Encirclement Campaign had taken punctured the Communist leadership's confidence in being able to defend the Central Soviet. It is impossible to be certain when and by whom the possibility for a strategic transfer of the Central Soviet was first mentioned seriously, but there seems to have been a period of uncertainty (May to about July 1934) about whether and, if so, how to effect it, although this did not result in paralysis. In the wake of Guangchang, strategy was changed somewhat to ensure higher mobility of troops even if it might cost territory.<sup>19</sup> Besides calls for more mobilization drives and intensified guerilla war, defensive action by regular troops and the building of blockhouses were now to be concentrated at fewer and more important places. To relieve pressure on the Soviet, in early July 1934 the Seventh Army Corps, called "Anti-Japanese Vanguard" for propaganda reasons, was sent to the border of Fujian, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi to make trouble there for Chiang Kai-shek – and perhaps provoke a Japanese reaction.

Whereas the acceptance of territorial loss and the sending of the Seventh Army Corps are not necessarily proof of a firm decision for the transfer – there also seems to have been a discussion in July whether the "strategic transfer" should be a temporary measure with the ultimate aim of returning to Jiangxi, or whether the main forces should abandon the Central Soviet for good (Zeng 1986:189; Braun 1973:107) –, the plans for the relocation of the Sixth Army Corps as given in a directive of 23 July 1934 show that by then the "strategic transfer" had been decided for all practical purposes (WJXJ 10:355-360). The Sixth Army Corps under Xiao Ke was ordered to leave the Xiang-Gan Soviet (adjacent to the Central Soviet), which was said to have become untenable and was to be "demoted" to an active guerilla area, and, after causing confusion in central Hunan, to go to West Hunan (the region of Xintian, Qiyang and Lingling, east of the Xiang River) to establish a soviet there. This soviet was then to be enlarged in a northern direction towards Xinhua and Xubu counties and finally even further north towards the Second Army Corps, which, under the command of He Long, was operating in the border area of Guizhou, Hunan and Sichuan. The leadership of the Central Soviet

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because he was, after all, responsible for the disaster. However, Yang sees neither the contradictions in Peng's story and in other recountings, nor does he assume that Peng, commander of the Third Army Corps which was heavily involved in the battle, might possibly bear some responsibility, too.

<sup>19</sup> This was really the time of the *duancu tuji* as propagated by Braun. Furthermore, this seems to have been part of the first "quarterly plan" (May to July), quite likely written by Braun (Braun 1973:101; Zeng 1986:188).

reasoned that the area where the Second Army Corps was operating was the weak link between Jiangxi and Sichuan, and thus had to be strengthened.

The plan for the Sixth Army Corps, whose details read like the rehearsal for the evacuation of the Central Soviet, only makes sense in the context of a "strategic transfer" of the Central Soviet Red Army (First Front Army); otherwise it would have meant weakening the defense of the Central Soviet without any possible re-compensation as in the case of the Seventh Army Corps. (The Hunanese warlord He Jian was less troublesome to the Communists than Chiang Kai-shek.) The Sixth Army Corps was to reconnoiter and prepare the way for the First Front Army (see also Jin 1994:281, citing Zhou Enlai).

Since about the middle of July 1934,<sup>20</sup> therefore, the "strategic transfer" must have been planned and organized – even if the final decision was taken later, likely in September. For this operation a "troika" was constituted, made up by the CCP's leader Qin Bangxian, Zhou Enlai, and Braun (Litten 1997:43; Benton 1992:18-20). The secrecy surrounding most of it, as well as later political distortions, make it extremely difficult to find out more about the preparations and, for example, the contents of the second "quarterly plan" (August to October), prepared again in all likelihood by Braun (Zeng 1986:190ff.). One can assume, though, that all other military operations of the Red Army now served mostly to win time and to deceive Chiang Kai-shek (and most Communists, too).

In September, secrecy was relaxed a bit, and Zhu De and Zhou Enlai launched negotiations with the Guangdong warlord Chen Jitang in order to prepare for the breakout of the Communists (Zhu 1983; Litten 1988a:58). Chen Jitang could have had no interest in the Communists being destroyed – after all, they kept Chiang Kai-shek from turning on him (see SHAT: 7 N 3295, 1 February 1935). On the other hand, it was obvious that the Central Soviet was doomed, so it was the best solution for him to let the Communists out and hope that Chiang's troops would follow them and stay away from Guangdong.

At the end of September, an article by Zhang Wentian, a.k.a. Luo Fu, in "Red China" for the first time mentioned publicly that the Central Soviet was to be abandoned (Benjamin Yang 1990:96); in mid-October more than 85,000 men (and some women), burdened with everything from provisions to printing-presses, began the "strategic transfer"; about 15,000 troops and about 30,000 wounded stayed

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<sup>20</sup> According to Braun (1973:106-108), the date would be about a month later, with the final decision only in September; but I wonder whether this description is based on memory (either at the time of his report to the Comintern in 1939/40 or at the time of writing his memoirs), or on other sources used but not named in his memoirs. Li Ping (1996:18) argues, without any sources given, that the decision was already taken in May 1934, and that the Comintern's placet arrived in late June (cf. Benton 1992:13), but that Braun was trying to delay leaving the Central Soviet. Li also cites Zhou Enlai at an unspecified Central Committee meeting saying that there had been no actual preparation for the March before September.

behind in what was now to become several “guerilla areas” (Benton 1992 tells their story).

The breakout occurred in the southwestern part of the Central Soviet, at the border between Guangdong and Hunan, with initially good progress. Yet there had been big difficulties with the Sixth Army Corps. That corps had not been able to stay east of the Xiang River and build a “soviet”, but had been pushed over the Xiang further west towards Liping. There the leadership of the Sixth Army Corps decided to change course, head north and unite with the Second Army Corps (up to then called the “Third Army”). In late October, the two army corps met in north-eastern Guizhou, later to become the Second Front Army (Benjamin Yang 1990: 90-93).

About a month later, at the end of November 1934, the Red Army from the Central Soviet had broken through the first three Nationalist blockade lines and arrived at the fourth and final one – at the Xiang River.

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According to the studies of most scholars, both in China and in the West, the Xiang River crossing was a huge disaster. Usually it is claimed that afterwards the First Front Army had shrunk by at least half its original strength of about 80,000 men at the outset in mid-October. This is taken as proof for the utter failure of the leadership at the time (mainly Qin Bangxian and Otto Braun) and for the necessity of the changes to be implemented shortly thereafter at Liping and Zunyi.

Such an interpretation, however, is an absolutely essential part of the Long March myths, and thus deserves some closer inspection. The first question to ask is: Was there a battle at the Xiang at all? This may sound absurd in light of Salisbury’s description of this battle (Salisbury 1985:96-104), to give just one example. However, there is an article by Chen Yun, a Long Marcher and politburo member already then, originally published in France in 1936, in which he claims more or less plain sailing through all four blockade lines (Chen Yun 1985a:8). Furthermore, neither the so-called “Zunyi Resolution” nor Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China* (Snow 1978) specifically mention a battle at the Xiang. Karen Gernant also cites a certain Meng Qiu (presumably Xu Mengqiu) writing in 1938 that the crossing went on “peacefully and without incident” (Gernant 1980:92). Xue Yue, commanding general of the pursuing Nationalist troops, does not mention any large battle at the Xiang (Xue 1978); the official Nationalist history of the “bandit extermination campaign” notes a battle after the crossing of the Xiang with about 3000 dead and wounded on the Communist side (*Jiaofei zhanshi* 1967:861). It seems that an enormous battle at the Xiang entered the record only later, and only on the Communist side.

On the other hand, there are indications that some kind of battle or battles actually happened at or near the Xiang crossing. For example, an American military intelligence report dated 20 December 1934 (USMIR X:125) claims that one col-

umn of the "Reds" entered Guangxi province, where it met with resistance by the Guangxi troops (also cf. Garavente 1995:65). Nowadays, Chinese sources claim that (latecoming) parts of the First Front Army got stuck on the east bank of the Xiang where they were attacked (e.g., *Mao Zedong nianpu* 1993:438).

The following may have happened: There may have been a tacit agreement between the Communists and the Guangxi warlords, similar to the one with the Guangdong warlord Chen Jitang, to effect "free passage" at the Xiang (cf. Salisbury 1985:93-94). As the Communists kept Chiang Kai-shek and other warlords occupied, even without such an agreement the Guangxi warlords still had good reasons not to impede their march, as long as it did not threaten their own territory. Mostly this worked for the Communists, but the crossing took too long: more than a week. Nationalist troops were approaching, and the Guangxi warlords may have felt the need to prove their anti-Communist stance and their "support" of Chiang Kai-shek on that matter. In addition, parts of the Red Army seem to have strayed too far onto Guangxi territory for comfort, and the Sixth Army Corps was not in place.

Whether what happened there can be seen as a series of battles or as one battle cannot be decided here. But was it a huge disaster for the Communists? The question of the casualties of the battle or battles at the Xiang is inextricably linked with the question of the losses of the First Front Army during the first seven to eight weeks of the march. Since Chinese sources seem to be quite coy about providing numbers of losses at the Xiang alone,<sup>21</sup> I will concentrate on Western studies. Harrison Salisbury (1985:103) gives the lowest estimate: battle casualties at the Xiang would have been most of at least 15,000; Philipp Short (1999:3) speaks of 15,000 to 20,000 combat troops lost, and up to 40,000 bearers and reserves deserted. Benjamin Yang (1990:286 n.17) assumes losses of about 20,000 at the "Xiang River Battle"; Karen Gernant (1980:95) postulates losses of between 25,000 and 30,000. Jonathan Spence (1999:83) casually mentions that the Red Army lost about half its numbers (i.e., about 40,000) in casualties. I am not certain whether losses are always understood as casualties (meaning killed or wounded), or simply as a reduction in numbers. In fact, this is a crucial point also concerning the losses of the First Front Army as a whole between mid-October and either early December 1934 or mid-January 1935 (the date of the Zunyi Conference). Today, most authors seem to agree that the First Front Army started with about 85,000 men.<sup>22</sup> Chinese sources nowadays usually state that after the Xiang crossing 30,000 plus men remained (e.g., *Mao Zedong nianpu* 1993: 438). Chinese estimates of losses during the first ten weeks of the March amount to 40,000 to 50,000 men on average, ac-

<sup>21</sup> Jing (1999:238), though, writes of more than 30,000 corpses being left behind by the Red Army.

<sup>22</sup> In an unpublished appendix to his review essay on the Long March, Garavente (1995:appendix 6) provides a discussion of this question.



ording to Salisbury (1985:103); Benjamin Yang (1990:105) argues for losses (it seems, in the sense of casualties) of about 40,000; Jerome Ch'en (1986:209) states that the Red Army had lost nearly two-thirds of 100,000 men after crossing the Xiang.

But there are other numbers as well. Edgar Snow (1978:216, 220) states that the Red Army lost about one-third of its forces – i.e., 30,000 men – until it arrived in Guizhou after the Xiang crossing.<sup>23</sup> In his memoirs, in this case based on his report in 1939 to the Comintern, Otto Braun (1973:114, 127) mentions 75,000 to 81,000 men at the outset, and at least 45,000 after the Xiang crossing, on the authority of Zhou Enlai.<sup>24</sup> William Whitson (1973:282-283) argues that the Red Army started with 100,000 men, lost 25,000 before the Xiang Crossing, and arrived at Zunyi with about 30,000 men. Contemporary American military intelligence reports estimated the number at the outset at 30,000 men, in Guizhou after the Xiang crossing at 23,000 rifles(!) (USMIR 23 November 1934 X:108, 20 December 1934 X:125). Moreover, on 3 January 1935, “a reasonable estimate of red losses due to battle casualties, straggling, desertion and capture would be about 10,000 men” (USMIR X:135).

I cannot explain these divergent numbers. But there are a number of points to be made: Losses were not only due to casualties, but also to desertions, to troops being deliberately left behind to delay the pursuing enemy, to wounded soldiers being left in the care of locals, to porters and other support personnel becoming superfluous, etc. In fact, I would venture that actual battle casualties, even at the Xiang crossing, did not constitute the majority of losses. As Joseph Stillwell commented in 1936: “In general, the defense offered by provincial troops was disgraceful and the pursuing Central Government troops simply followed in the wake of the Reds, always arriving just too late to prevent an attack but just in time to loot completely what the Reds had left” (USMIR XII:244).<sup>25</sup> All in all, desertions and unnecessary personnel being left back probably accounted for most of the losses (cf. Whitson 1973:61). There were also recruitments during the March which are difficult to estimate. The American military intelligence report of 3 January 1935 estimates about 5000 men recruited during the first about 10 weeks (USMIR X:135). Furthermore, the numbers cited do not give the number of actual combat-

<sup>23</sup> Snow (1978:234, 492-493) provides further interesting information: Citing Zhou Enlai he puts the First Front Army's strength in early May 1935 at 45,000 men, at the beginning of August 1935 at 30,000 men, and at the end of the March, in October 1935 at 7000 men.

<sup>24</sup> In Braun's earlier, serialized memoirs, the numbers were 60,000 at the start, 35,000 to 40,000 after the Xiang crossing (Braun 1969).

<sup>25</sup> I assume that Zhou Enlai's comment that the Red Army's losses “due to actual fighting with the Guomindang forces were less than those from fatigue, sickness, starvation and attacks from tribesmen” refers to its later travails through Guizhou, Sichuan and Xikang, where, according to him, the “greater part of the Red Army losses” took place (Snow 1957:100).

ants or support staff directly necessary for combat. According to Braun, combatants numbered 57,000 to 61,000 (out of 75,000 to 81,000) with 41,000 to 42,000 rifles (Braun 1973:114; cf. the data given in the entries in HJFZS).

Yet the question remains: Was the Xiang crossing a huge disaster? Braun (1973: 125-127) argues that the First Front Army had preserved its battle-trying and important forces – mainly the First, Third and Fifth Army Corps –, had shed weight, and was therefore a more mobile and more effective fighting force. I think he is correct here; and though the Xiang crossing had not gone as planned and had led to losses (not necessarily casualties!) for the First Front Army, it was not a huge disaster.

Did it show the failure of the then (military) leadership? Again, there is no easy answer. Braun hints at what he would call a "tactical" error: After the crossing, the Red Army kept well away from Guangxi territory (Braun 1973:126). The main problem, however, had quite certainly been that the First Front Army was overburdened with non-combatants and equipment. Thus, as a direct outcome of the decision to "transfer" the Soviet, it became too slow; the term "moving house" seems to describe this quite well, in fact. However, this had not been a strategic, but a political decision that afterwards was recognized as wrong (or at least overambitious, see below), similar perhaps to the earlier decision to defend the Central Soviet.

On the other hand, the First Front Army had broken through four lines of blockade, even without the planned assistance by the Sixth Army Corps at the Xiang, had marched hundreds of kilometers, and had still kept its "living forces". Zhou Enlai told Edgar Snow that during the Fifth Encirclement Campaign the Red Army alone had suffered 60,000 casualties (Snow 1978:216). Now, the First Front Army had succeeded in breaking through what seemed to be quite insuperable barriers with significantly less casualties. This would seem to be a success, unless a "negotiated exodus" (SHAT: 7 N 3295, 1 February 1935) without any problems had been a realistic expectation.

The assessment of the Xiang crossing, or more generally of the first roughly two months of the Long March, partly determines the answer to the next question: How can one explain the change of strategy made at Liping? First, though, let us turn to the circumstances.

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The first leadership meeting in Guizhou was held not in Liping, but in Tongdao on 11 or 12 December 1934. It is badly documented, but seems to have been a hasty affair without any fundamental decisions being made (Zeng 1996).<sup>26</sup> A few days later, the First Front Army entered Liping, the leadership held a meeting, and probably the most important resolution of the Long March was taken. The gist of the Liping Resolution, dated 18 December 1934, was: The original plan of estab-

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<sup>26</sup> Considering that Philip Short has virtually next to nothing to say about what happened in Tongdao, his claim that Tongdao marked the start of Mao's rise to power seems a bit surprising (Short 1999:1).

lishing a new Soviet in West Hunan was neither possible nor appropriate any longer; to coordinate better with the Fourth Front Army (in Sichuan under the command of Xu Xiangqian, Chen Changhao and Zhang Guotao) and the Second and Sixth Army Corps (now under the joint command of He Long and Xiao Ke in northwestern Hunan) and in order to obtain good political and economic conditions to “shatter” the Fifth Encirclement Campaign, it was decided to create a new base area – not, apparently, a “soviet base area” – at Zunyi or, should this fail, northwest of Zunyi; moreover, battles should be avoided as well as any drift towards West or Southwest Guizhou or even Yunnan (WJXJ 10:441-442).

To understand the importance of this resolution it is necessary to go back several months and to try to establish the “original plan”. As noted in the Liping Resolution, the Red Army was to shift from Jiangxi to West Hunan. This fits in well with Braun’s reminiscences (Braun 1973:108) and the orders given to the Sixth Army Corps which could thus function as a reconnaissance force, a shield against enemy troops, and as a bridgehead over the Xiang to the north and towards the Second Army Corps. But was West Hunan to be the final destination or just a way station (and a propaganda trick)? According to the plan presented to the Comintern in Moscow in September 1934 by Manfred Stern, the former Comintern chief military advisor to the CCP, the only place for the Communists to get their act together again was northern Sichuan, where help from the Soviet Union could also be provided either via Xinjiang or Mongolia (Yang Kuisong 1995:258).<sup>27</sup> Since the orders to the Sixth Army Corps in July 1934 had mentioned a “strong” Soviet in Sichuan, and Hunan as a weak link between Jiangxi (which, though not explicitly stated, was to be given up for all practical purposes) and Sichuan, it is tempting to assume that the real destination had been northern Sichuan. Even the risk of taking along so much non-military material and personnel over such a distance might have looked manageable with the Sixth and Second Army Corps in place.<sup>28</sup>

At Liping, this plan was dropped. But why? As already mentioned, part of the answer lies in the events at the Xiang and generally since the start of the Long March. I do not intend to claim that these events provided absolutely no reason for a strategic change. At the same time, I do not think that they made changes absolutely necessary. Up to then, battle casualties had been comparatively low, and

<sup>27</sup> Stillwell, noting the misgovernment and poverty in Sichuan, was of the same opinion (USMIR XII: 245). Also cf. Garavente 1995:58-61.

<sup>28</sup> There is a slight possibility that the West Hunan plan was just a decoy, and that Zunyi had been the final destination from the beginning, though it would be difficult to explain why Zunyi, or the border region of Guizhou and Sichuan in general, would have been chosen in the first place, and why not even an attempt of getting to the other army corps or the Fourth Front Army would have been made. I do not think it can be argued that Zunyi might have been planned only as an intermediate stop from the beginning – the route to the other Communist troops would then have been so long and arduous as to make carrying all that equipment criminally insane. It is a bit more likely that Zunyi had been an alternative from early on in case something went wrong, as it did with the Sixth Army Corps.

there does not seem to have been any real battle with the pursuing Nationalist troops. Only the Guangxi troops had inflicted wounds on the Red Army, but as long as the Communists kept away from their territory, which was easy now, they did not enter the stage anymore. It seems quite likely that the losses had shaken the leadership's nerves somewhat, but they did not diminish the important parts of the First Front Army. If the events up to Liping provided a concrete input to the deliberations, it seems to have been nervousness and exhaustion, more than any iron-clad argument.

Another reason for the change at Liping may have been that Hunan and Nationalist troops were blocking the way to the Second and Sixth Army Corps operating roughly north of Liping; yet the terrain and a well-chosen route at the borders of He Jian's territory might still have allowed the Red Army to get through, now that it was more mobile and compact.<sup>29</sup>

Garavente argues that the Second Front Army unsuccessfully tried to turn south to link up with the First Front Army, compounding the latter's "disappointment at the outcome of that crossing" of the Xiang (Garavente 1995:65).

It seems, however, that a majority in the leadership now wished to avoid any battles. Perhaps they really were in a state of shock at the time – and perhaps in retrospect one may underestimate the impact of any losses at the Xiang. Anyway, though it may not be sufficient, a detailed study of the Xiang crossing and of casualties and losses during that phase would be crucial to any definitive statement regarding the reason(s) for the change at Liping.

As to the "new plan", there are grave difficulties for the historian. As stated in the Liping Resolution, the new base area was to be centered on Zunyi or to be located northwest of Zunyi. With the Second Front Army roughly northeast of Zunyi, any thought of meeting them was probably off the agenda. The Fourth Front Army was still far north of Zunyi; to go straight north from there was, however, impossible, with Chongqing "blocking" the way. But was the attempt to unite with the Fourth Front Army still on the agenda? Or was Zunyi meant to be more than just a resting place? Or was there no "new plan" at all, and after the initial shock or nervousness had worn off, the First Front Army could only follow what it perceived as the line of least resistance or, at best, improvise because going back was impossible.

The latter interpretation looks especially tempting in view of what happened next. At the Houchang meeting (the resolution is dated 1 January 1935), the "plan" was to establish a soviet area in North Guizhou with Zunyi as center, later to expand into Sichuan – and to attack Xue Yue's troops! Interestingly, the resolution claimed that the First Front Army was in contact with the Fourth and Second Front

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<sup>29</sup> In his historical novel *Xiangjiang zhi zhan* [The Xiang River Battle] Li Ruqing seems to think along similar lines. I have not read the novel, but translations of two highly critical Chinese reviews of Li's book can be found in *CCP Research Newsletter*, no. 6&7, 1990, pp. 48-51.

Armies, and that coordination between them was required, but no mention is made of an attempt to unite with them. On the contrary, the creation of a Sichuan-Guizhou soviet is seen as necessary to sabotage Chiang Kai-shek's "new encirclement plans" against the Second and Fourth Front Armies (WJXJ 10:445-447).

To stay at Zunyi, or in that region, also seems to have been the intention when the Red Army arrived there. In a directive dated 14 January 1935, the General Political Department considered the defeat of enemy troops and the building of a new soviet in the Guizhou-Sichuan border region as the main task. Significantly, new directives for the treatment of the local population (merchants, rich peasants, etc.) were given (WJXJ 10:448-451). But not even a week later, on 20 January, after the Zunyi Conference (15 to 17 January 1935), the "plan" had changed again. Now the First Front Army was meant to cross the Chishui River and shift to South Sichuan, from where it was to head to Northwest Sichuan to meet/support the Fourth Front Army; meanwhile, the Second Front Army was to tie down enemy forces in the border region of Sichuan, Guizhou, Hunan and Hubei (WJXJ 10:476-480; QGWJ 90-91).

This plan soon proved untenable, too. In a series of leadership meetings in early February<sup>30</sup> it was decided to establish a soviet in the border region of Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan (JSDB 114-115; WJXJ 10:490-492). Afterwards, the Chishui was crossed a second time, Zunyi was occupied and left for a second time, and the Chishui was crossed twice more; some battles were fought, others avoided (cf. Yuan 1990). There was no longer any "plan", the First Front Army was tossed about like a pea on a drum.<sup>31</sup>

There are probably two explanations for the chaos that engulfed the First Front Army after Liping, and even more after Zunyi. The Communists had now lost the last shred of military initiative and could only react to the real and/or imagined movements and blockades of the enemy troops; and leadership struggles and changes within the CCP and the Red Army may have led to erratic command (but cf. the next section). This was one of the most disastrous periods in the Red Army's history – it lost lots of its men without getting anywhere.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> These meetings were collectively called "Zhaxi Conferences" or "Weixin Conferences" (Zhaxi is located in Weixin county in Yunnan). See Zhang Jiade 1992; Yu 1997.

<sup>31</sup> Xiong Xiaoyan (1998) argues that the "forced", "hasty" and "badly prepared" retreat from the Central Soviet should be called just "great transfer" (*da zhuan yi*), while only with the changes at Liping the "great transfer", having none of the above characteristics anymore, had earned the epithet "strategic" (*zhan lue*). Uhalley (1992:250), too, argues that a "debacle" was turned into an "orderly campaign", after Mao took charge at Zunyi.

<sup>32</sup> I will not go here again into details concerning the numbers of losses. It should be mentioned, however, that not one of the top leaders, not even Wang Jiaxiang, who had suffered bad health since being wounded in 1933, perished on the March. To them, the Long March was kinder than the Nationalists would have been.

Only at the beginning of May 1935 had the First Front Army shifted so far west and out of the way of most provincial or national interests that it finally managed to break out of the "cage", cross the Jinsha River, and enter West Sichuan. Subsequently, it went north – which was about the only possibility – and, in mid June, finally met the Fourth Front Army at the Jiajin Mountains.

The meeting with the much stronger Fourth Front Army presented the "Central Soviet" leadership with new military options, but also with grave political and strategic difficulties caused by the presence of Zhang Guotao, one of the top CCP leaders. A lack of research of my own on this question precludes any analysis here (cf. Benjamin Yang 1990:ch. 6; Apter & Saich 1994:39-49; Schram 1999), as well as the continuation of the story of the Long March to its end in northern Shaanxi in autumn 1935 for the First Front Army (the Second and Fourth Front Armies would still take some time to end their respective marches).

## Part II

Above I portrayed the "leadership" as if it were more or less monolithic. Yet, this notion is presumably misleading. To discover what went on within the "leadership", however, and how it might have influenced decisions is extremely difficult. I will present here a different approach from that usually taken by other scholars, Chinese or Western, by at first finding out what we know about the inner structure and dynamics of the "leadership" in 1934/35 – or actually do not know, contrary to many claims. I will then sketch several possible "scenarios" of what happened during the early months of the Long March, pointing out some of their weak and strong points respectively.

To find out what we really "know" about the "leadership", it is necessary to look at the sources to be used. In this section I take an extreme stance: I do not accept anything written by participants or scholars after the Long March. The reason is simple: For this purpose they are too unreliable.<sup>33</sup> There are numerous instances of memoirs, for example, telling us things that can either be shown to be wrong, or to contradict other memoirs of the same level. One test which can be used here is the treatment of Otto Braun's tactic of "short, swift strikes" (*duancu tuji*). We do have Braun's articles, written in 1934 in the journal *Geming yu zhanzheng* [Revolution and War], which clearly show the concept of the "short, swift strikes" to have been a variation upon the theme of mobile warfare on a tactical scale (e.g., Braun 1934; all of them have been republished in Shi & Zhou 1987:93-145; also cf. Tarsitano 1979:ch. 5; Litten 1988a:47-50). One might argue that Braun's articles tell us

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<sup>33</sup> Since my 1988 study, I have become less confident about the sources and more pessimistic about our ability to look behind the scenes. But if the "evidence" and the "interpretation" seem questionable, is it not time to start asking questions? Without first knowing about and admitting our ignorance we have practically no chance of getting closer to what really happened, and how and why it happened.

nothing about what he actually said to, taught or ordered the Red Army's military men; this is, however, quite unlikely because the articles were meant to educate the audience he would also be talking to.<sup>34</sup> The practice may have looked different, but anyone claiming that Braun favored "passive defense" and "positional warfare" – and that seems to be about everyone with the exception of Braun himself – has failed the test. Of course, on other matters Braun's memoirs are as unreliable as the rest (e.g., in connection with the Fujian Rebellion; cf. Litten 1988b:67-68), therefore they will be excluded, too.

In fact, it is obvious that in the highly politicized atmosphere already to be found during the Long March, looking back was even less than usual an "objective" act. While we may be able to get around this in the case of events documented by a wider range of sources, as I tried to show in the preceding part, it becomes nearly impossible when we are concerned with internal debates that may have been distorted practically from the beginning. What we need are contemporary protocols of the meetings, notes of private talks, and so on, not only for the information they provide themselves, but also to act as "touchstones" for the evaluation of other sources and studies. Moreover, we need all materials available, we have to be sure that they were not selected or edited to conform to certain preconceptions, and even then we have to be very careful in using them, and try not to force them into prefabricated models.<sup>35</sup>

Concerning the Long March, I am aware of only one document which might come near to giving us a glimpse of the debates within the "leadership": Chen Yun's "Outline for Communicating the Zunyi Enlarged Politburo Meeting", prepared in February or March 1935 (e.g., Saich 1996:643-648). Here we find Zhang Wentian, Mao and Wang Jiaxiang – and it is not only my impression, that Zhang Wentian should be listed first (Litten 1988a:78; Zhang Peisen 1987:38)<sup>36</sup> – challenging Qin Bangxian and Braun. Yet there are problems with this source, too. Not surprisingly, it presents a view quite similar to the so-called "Zunyi Resolution" which I hold to be a totally unreliable propaganda piece. The "Zunyi Resolution" has been recognized several times in the West as containing a number of baseless,

<sup>34</sup> This is in contrast to, for example, Zhou Enlai's article exhorting people to "defend every inch" of the Soviet (Zhou Enlai 1934), which I regard as propaganda. Cf. Litten 1988a:50-51.

<sup>35</sup> See note 49 for an example. Teiwes (1988:3-5) raises these problems but argues that the new sources available make an analysis possible. Yet he fully subscribes to the "two-lines" model of Mao vs. the "Returned Students", without first questioning its appropriateness. Then, of course, much of the information provided by Chinese sources (written or oral) will fit in and the analysis will look "feasible".

<sup>36</sup> However, if Edgar Snow (1978:553) is correct, Zhang was recruited to the CCP by Chen Yun, which might explain the preference. The "renaissance" of Zhang Wentian in China after 1979 has scarcely been noticed in the West (Levine 1992a; cf. Xiong Zijian 1993), and the only Western article on him concentrates on his importance for Goethe studies in China (Gálik 1999). There is no comparable interest in Qin Bangxian, neither in China (Chen Xi 1997) nor in the West (Levine 1992b).

even nonsensical accusations; among other things, it completely fails the “Braun test” (Tarsitano 1979:208-209; Litten 1988a: 59-62; Benjamin Yang 1990:123). Its two-fold purpose seems to be quite clear: to serve as a morale booster for party and army; and to absolve most of the “leadership” from any responsibility. The situation in Zunyi was quite desperate: The Red Army had shrunk, the pursuers were still on its heels, there was confusion as to what to do. In such a situation, to stand back, analyze what had happened, and stress the “objective” factors – i.e., the numerical and technical superiority of Chiang Kai-shek’s troops – would have amounted to a call for suicide. Much better then to claim past errors for the defeat – if they could be pinned on an “outsider”. Here, Braun came in handy: a foreigner with only a loose connection to the Comintern (he had, after all, been sent to China by Soviet Military Intelligence and had become Comintern military advisor more or less by chance; cf. Litten 1997), but seen to be involved deeply enough in military affairs to make accusing him not look too ridiculous, especially when Qin Bangxian, whose protégé he is said to have been, was criticized, too. Braun was the ideal scapegoat because he did not really matter to the CCP; on the other hand, the accusations would only hurt his pride, they would not have any (immediate) consequences for him. The CCP and the Red Army leadership had always been “correct” (and judging by the criticisms in 1934, several army leaders were in dire need of such absolution; cf. Tarsitano 1979:157-165), so everything would be fine from now on.

If my view of the “Zunyi Resolution” is correct, then what does it say about the reliability of Chen Yun’s “Outline”? If he does not tell us the truth about the reasons for the defeat, might he not also be unreliable as far as the internal debate(s) are concerned?

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I will now try to list what I consider “facts” about several of the key leaders in relation to the preparation and early phase of the Long March: Qin Bangxian was “person with overall responsibility” of the CCP;<sup>37</sup> other top party members were Zhang Wentian, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yun (and, of course, Chen Shaoyu in Moscow and Zhang Guotao in Sichuan), as seen from the prominence of their speeches and articles in the contemporary Communist press (e.g., Hsiao Tso-liang 1961, 1967:chs.22-24). Mao held one of the two leading positions in the Central Soviet Government, as did, since January 1934, Zhang Wentian. Zhou Enlai was Politkommissar of the Red Army in the Jiangxi Soviet, as well as vice-chairman of the Central Revolutionary Military Commission. Zhu De was Politburo member, Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army and chairman of the Central Revolutionary Military Commission. We do know that as a result of the Zunyi Conference Qin

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<sup>37</sup> This would be the equivalent of “general secretary”. I put these titles in quotation marks because there is doubt about their de jure correctness. See Chen Yun 1985b.



Bangxian was criticized for “serious partial political mistakes” and Braun for military mistakes, as such criticism is contained, for example, in the “Outline Resolution of the [Zunyi] Enlarged Politburo Meeting ...” (e.g., Saich 1996:640-643). In early March 1935, a “front command” was established with Zhu De as commander and Mao as Politkommissar.

To these “facts”, we can probably safely add Mao’s election to the Politburo at the Fifth Plenum in January 1934 (*Mao Zedong nianpu* 1993:420)<sup>38</sup> and Zhang Wentian’s replacing Qin Bangxian as “person with overall responsibility” in early February 1935.<sup>39</sup> Somewhat more circumspect is the information concerning the decisions taken by the Zunyi Conference, provided by Chen Yun in his “Outline”: Following the Zunyi Conference in January 1935, the “troika” consisting of Qin Bangxian, Zhou Enlai and Braun was dissolved.<sup>40</sup> As a consequence, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De became the top military leaders, the party entrusting Zhou Enlai with having the last word in military matters. At Zunyi Mao became a member of the “standing committee” of the Politburo, and an “assistant” to Zhou Enlai on military matters.

Chen Yun should probably be classed as an “unreliable” source, as indicated above. There seems to be no contemporary documentation enabling us to confirm or negate his statements. It is, moreover, problematical that he lists the members of the “standing committee” – itself a somewhat dubious structure, especially on the Long March – as himself, Mao and Zhang Wentian. Benjamin Yang (1986:271 note 9) contends that Chen Yun is mistaken here: He should have included Zhou Enlai and Qin Bangxian – leaving Zhu De the only Politburo member on the March outside this committee. But even if Chen Yun only made an “honest” mistake, can we rely on him elsewhere?

<sup>38</sup> Kampen (2000:61) argues that Mao already became a Politburo member in early 1933 when the Shanghai leadership newly arrived in the Central Soviet merged with the “Central Bureau” there. Short (1999:312), who emphasizes the “provisional” nature of much of the CCP’s leadership structure after the arrest and execution of the former “general secretary” Xiang Zhongfa in summer 1931, seems to be, at least “formally”, more correct here.

<sup>39</sup> This would have normally been included under “facts” if it were not for the strange statement by Edgar Snow (1957:82), based on his interviews in 1936, that Zhǎng had been “secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee” already in Jiangxi, presumably since the Fifth Plenum. This is not repeated in Snow (1978) and may be explained by Zhang’s wish to “legitimize” his position by tracing it back to a plenum instead of the meetings of dubious legality during the Long March. On the other hand, Braun (1973:144) mentions that, although Zhang became “general secretary” soon after Zunyi, Qin remained “secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP”, implying two different positions. Even more confusingly, Zhou Enlai is claimed to have become “secretary of the secretariat” (*shujichu (de) shuji*) at the Fifth Plenum (*Zhou Enlai jian* 1993:627; Jin 1994:273), the “secretariat”, according to Kampen (2000:64), being the “standing committee”. Still, I am quite convinced that Zhang Wentian replaced Qin Bangxian as “general secretary”, as afterwards Zhang was the one to present the political reports at party meetings. Cf. Saich 1996: Commentary E.

<sup>40</sup> This seems to be the only contemporary mention of the “troika” (*sanrentuan*).

To list what we do not “know” would take more space, therefore I will highlight only a few points. We know nothing definitive about the relations between all of the people mentioned. For example, the relationship between Qin Bangxian and Zhang Wentian is obscure. Both had studied in the Soviet Union and had worked closely together in Shanghai, but were they therefore a kind of friends, as Kampen (2000:75) seems to aver; or adversaries, as Chen Yun’s “Outline” would imply? How did Zhou Enlai react to the nominally higher-ranking Qin Bangxian’s arrival in the Jiangxi Soviet early in 1933? What did Mao think of Zhou Enlai, who had replaced him as Politkommissar at the Ningdu Conference in October 1932 (WJXJ 8:530, 542-544; Huang 1989b)?

What about decision-making? Was “person with overall responsibility” or “general secretary” a powerful office independent of the holder? The “troika” dissolved at Zunyi seems to have sprung into existence after the Guangchang Battle, to prepare the “strategic transfer”. How were the tasks and the power distributed within the “troika”? Chinese scholars steadfastly claim that Zhou Enlai only did a kind of clerical and organizational work, without being able to influence decisions (e.g., Hu Xiongjie 1984:40, 43; Jin 1994:281; Liu & Kong 1996:23); Braun’s memoirs give a different picture (e.g., Braun 1973:107). Why was Zhu De not a member of the “troika”?<sup>41</sup> Can we trust the statement that the “troika” was instituted by the “secretariat” and tasked with planning the “transfer” (Liu 1998:22, citing *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1990:262)? How did the Central Revolutionary Military Commission, nominally a government body, relate to the “troika”? Had the decision to “transfer” the soviet – to “move house”, in other words – been taken by the “troika”, by the “standing committee”, by the Politburo, by the Central Committee or by the Central Revolutionary Military Commission? Unanimously or with significant dissent? If the latter, who had dissented?<sup>42</sup>

Who said what at the meetings and conferences on the Long March? There is no contemporary information whatsoever on the debate, if there was one, at Liping; nothing can be substantiated, we only have the result. What is more, we cannot

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin Yang (1990:81) contends that Zhu De was “as ever a figurehead”, echoing, probably unconsciously, Lin Biao’s criticism of Zhu De in 1959 (Teiwes & Sun 1996:185-186). Yang’s view of several important personages in the CCP runs as follows: “Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Zhang Wentian and others all showed their weaknesses when faced with [Zhang Guotao]: Zhou’s tenderness, Zhu’s ignorance, [Zhang Wentian’s] incompetence. Zhou was a flexible diplomat, Zhu a staunch soldier, and Zhang an eloquent scholar – Mao was a complete politician.” (Benjamin Yang 1990:164) According to Teiwes (1988:30-31), Zhang Wentian and Zhou Enlai simply lacked any leadership ambitions. On Zhu De’s “independent” activities during the Fourth Encirclement Campaign cf. Hu Song 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Jing (1999:ch.12) gives a rather detailed description of the preparations for the Long March, centered on Braun’s role. For example, he cites a Comintern telegram – without giving the source – and various contemporary newspaper articles, yet he also “cites” discussions verbatim, such as a dispute between Qin Bangxian and Zhang Wentian after the Guangchang battle. Do notes of these discussions then actually exist, or has Jing taken poetic license? The “faction” or “historical novel” category in Chinese historical studies (also cf. Li Ruqing’s *Xiang River Battle*) presents the historian with enormous problems.

even reasonably extrapolate from positions held, for example, by Mao before Liping, because we do not know them either.<sup>43</sup> Yet even if we did know the military “lines” of everyone involved at Liping or any other of the conferences, would they be rigidly adhered to, or might they be influenced by events? And what about the influence of political considerations, such as coalition building, or ideological beliefs?

If Chen Yun’s “Outline” is reliable in this respect, Zhang Wentian, Mao and Wang Jiaxiang argued at Zunyi against Qin Bangxian’s report.<sup>44</sup> Qin seems to have been somewhat unrepentant; He Kequan, a.k.a. Kai Feng, seems to have supported Qin, Braun to have been totally unrepentant. Were they taking the accusations serious, or were they objecting to this particular way of rewriting history? But, again: Is Chen Yun reliable? And what was his own position?<sup>45</sup>

The “front command” of Zhu De and Mao in early March 1935 is a fact because we have the order establishing it on 4 March 1935 (signed by Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and Wang Jiaxiang) and two orders issued by it on 5 March 1935.<sup>46</sup> But that is all we have. Similar military orders up to June 1935 have been published, but they are either signed by Zhu De alone, or by the Central Revolutionary Military Commission, presumably still headed by Zhou Enlai (JSDB 134-147). There is talk of the creation of a new “troika” consisting of Zhou Enlai, Mao and Wang Jiaxiang, later in March 1935 (e.g., Zeng 1989; Kampen 2000:76). Did this “troika” supplant the “front command”? If so, why? What were the relationships and the distribution of

<sup>43</sup> We do not seem to have any statements by Mao on military matters in 1934 or early 1935. According to *Mao Zedong nianpu* (1993:435), in October 1934 the Central Military Revolutionary Commission issued a booklet on guerrilla warfare, written by Mao. Although the authors of the *Nianpu* are able to give some details, such as number of characters, chapter headings, etc., I am not aware that this publication is available. We also get no information about how the topics mentioned were treated in this book.

<sup>44</sup> The details of the Zunyi Conference would merit a chapter in themselves. Memories differ widely: Braun (1973:136), for example, “remembers” Mao replying at length to the reports by Qin Bangxian and Zhou Enlai, while in China it is now argued that Zhang Wentian was the first to reply (cf. Litten 1988a: 78-80, 88-89). The latter now begins to be accepted in the West, too (Schram 1999:xxxix; Kampen 2000: 74), though neither universally (Short 1999:11-13), nor based on anything other than the fact that it is now being said by Chinese authors. The quite different description of the proceedings and of its outcome given by Warren Kuo (1970:16-27) is nowadays totally ignored (also by Litten 1988a), yet not even Benjamin Yang (1986:243-247) tells us in his discussion why this should be so. Personally, I doubt that Kuo has always got his facts right (for example, that Mao replaced Zhou Enlai as head of the CCP’s Military Council, which was different from the Central Revolutionary Military Commission), although his interpretations often strike me at least as interesting (e.g., on Mao’s military abilities; Kuo 1970:27). Also cf. note 47.

<sup>45</sup> Bachman (1985:7-11) argues that Chen Yun’s work in 1933/34 had been concerned with topics (labour, party work in “White”, i.e. non-Communist, areas) that kept him out of the contentious fields. But cf. Gai 1995.

<sup>46</sup> These orders can be found in JSDB 130-133. Interspersed is an order of 5 March, signed only by Zhu De. Translations of the two orders by the “front command” can be found in Schram 1999:9-11.

power and responsibility between this "troika" and/or the "front command", military commanders, and their Politkommissars? Was the proposal at Zunyi to go to Northwest Sichuan, allegedly made by Nie Rongzhen and Liu Bocheng (Zeng 1988:54-55), the only instance that "military" leaders influenced the discussions? And did it make any sense, as it may have in the Jiangxi Soviet, to establish a "front command" at all?

At the Huili Meeting in May 1935, Mao is said to have been heavily criticized by Lin Biao, but possibly by Peng Dehuai, Zhang Wentian and others, too (Benjamin Yang 1990:127; Cheng 1993:47-49; Teiwes & Sun 1996:183). Did this really happen; was Mao the only one to be criticized; had it really to do with the "front command", as alleged, or with the "troika"?

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Quite a lot of other questions could be asked. To show how the few "facts" we have could be connected, I will now propose several scenarios regarding what might have happened within the "leadership" of the CCP on the Long March. None of them can be considered proved or disproved, though they might be ranked according to "plausibility". Yet "plausibility" would partially depend on assumptions that might again rest on less than solid ground. To keep it within manageable proportions, I use quite simplified versions, concentrating on a few "key" players. Also, the comments should not be seen as exhaustive.

A) Mao, supported by Zhang Wentian and Wang Jiaxiang, challenges Qin Bangxian. This is the standard scenario: Mao, by dint of his having the "correct" line and using his persuasive powers – "political savvy", according to Benjamin Yang (1990:257) –, convinced first Wang, then Zhang, finally Zhou Enlai and others to change strategy at Liping and to challenge Qin for the leadership at Zunyi. This accords more or less with Chen Yun's "Outline" and practically all later memoirs, including Braun's, who would only object to Mao following the "correct" line. There are, however, problems with this view. As mentioned, Chen Yun seems to emphasize the role of Zhang Wentian. Also, Zhang seems to have led the attack against Qin at the Zunyi Conference, he seems to have prepared the "Zunyi Resolution", and to have become "general secretary" (see Zhang Shude 1999:ch. 7). So he would seem to have profited more than Mao.

Furthermore, one could ask why Zhang Wentian would have supported the lower-ranking Mao in his quest for power.<sup>47</sup> Because of the "correct" line,

<sup>47</sup> Warren Kuo (1970:16-27) argues that Zhang Wentian was not really supporting Mao's challenge which was built on the "pent-up rage" and dissatisfaction of several other members of the leadership, such as Peng Dehuai and Liu Shaoqi. However, Zhang's conciliatory arguments led to a "successful" conclusion of the debate. Mao had won a battle, but did not press on immediately because he still lacked enough support and was mindful of the Comintern. Acceptance of this variant hinges in part on acceptance of Kuo's description of the proceedings and the outcome of the Zunyi Conference (cf. note

whatever it is meant to have been?<sup>48</sup> Or because of Mao's charm?<sup>49</sup> Would it not be more plausible that Mao supported Zhang?

- B) Zhang Wentian, supported by Mao and Wang Jiaxiang, challenges Qin Bangxian.<sup>50</sup> However, problems remain. For example, why was Qin Bangxian challenged? Were Zhang, Mao, etc. really concerned about a mistaken strategy and held Qin responsible for it, or was the challenge directed mainly against Braun, with Qin "collateral damage"? But then Braun could surely have been dealt with in a less grandiose manner.<sup>51</sup> How should we rate re-

44); but would Kuo, who was not a participant of the Zunyi Conference, really be a reliable witness? If Mao's role were diminished, Kuo's version might qualify as a variant of scenario F).

<sup>48</sup> One might argue that the "correct" military "line" was in evidence at Liping: Not to try to combine with the Second Front Army, but to go to Guizhou. But in what way would that have been "correct"? Looking back, we can say that the First Front Army survived that way – but we cannot say that it would not have survived the other way, because we cannot know. What I would regard as the main mistake – taking along all that equipment from the Central Soviet – had anyway by then mostly been corrected, albeit involuntarily. (This also lead automatically to the possibility of more mobile warfare.)

<sup>49</sup> Recently, Michael Sheng (1997:20-21) and Stuart Schram (1999:xxxix) have put forward a further reason why Zhang Wentian and others might have supported Mao: a letter from the CCP's delegation to the Comintern in Moscow (i.e., from Chen Shaoyu) to the CCP party leadership stating that the Comintern considered Mao an experienced leader. This should have convinced Zhang to throw in his lot with Mao. If we go back to their source, however, this looks much less convincing. Yang Kuisong (1987:136) refers to an "extract from a letter of the CCP's delegation to the Comintern" dated 14 November 1934, but does not give its whereabouts. From this extract Yang presents only one piece of information: The Comintern considered Mao as having "rich experience" (*fengfu jingyan*, those four characters being the only direct quote). It seems likely that the letter contained a bit more information which might even put the quotation in a different light; but we do not know it. Furthermore, the letter, according to Yang, was sent from Moscow in November 1934, so the date given is presumably the one on the original letter. (But was the letter already sent on that day?) Both according to Sheng (1997:21-23) and to Schram (1999:lxiii), radio communications between Moscow and the First Front Army were down at the time, therefore the letter must have found its way physically by courier to the Communists; and it must have arrived there within about four weeks to have worked its "magic" before the Tongdao Conference on 11 or 12 December 1934. Kampen (2000:82-83) gives some examples of couriers from Moscow to the Communists on the Long March in 1935: The fastest took three months and could not bring any documents with him for security reasons. At the end of 1934 the Red Army had been even farther away and less accessible from Moscow.

<sup>50</sup> Even the Chinese "champions" of Zhang Wentian would not go that far; they still cling to the topos that Zhang Wentian "supported" Mao (e.g., Zhang Shouchun 1997). The case of Wang Jiaxiang, who ranked higher in the military sphere than Mao, is similar. In 1934/35 Wang was the second vice-chairman of the Central Revolutionary Military Commission besides Zhou Enlai. According to Kampen (1989a: 125, 1989b:711) and Zhang Xixian (1993:40), Wang became a full Politburo member at Zunyi. This is not mentioned in Kampen (2000).

<sup>51</sup> The more I have been pondering Braun's role in China, the less I am convinced that it was such an exalted one (cf. Litten 1997:31-32). He would appear to have been quite important in 1934, but this may have been due to his being the "front man" for his superior Manfred Stern in Shanghai. (Braun's interpreter Wu Xiuquan presented to the world biographical data of Braun which, in fact, may have been Stern's; cf. Litten 1997:50; Litten 1988a:93-94.) After Stern had left Shanghai, probably in summer 1934,

ports that Zhang Wentian, Mao and Wang Jiaxiang had already collaborated since 1933 (Kim 1973:139; Braun 1973:101; Cheng 1990:176)? Was this an old-fashioned power-struggle, with the military matters a smoke screen, a side-show, or even a different show altogether? And what about Zhou Enlai?

- C) Zhang Wentian and/or Mao challenge Qin Bangxian, but only as a first step in challenging Zhou Enlai. Assumption: Zhou Enlai was the most important CCP leader during the preparation and early phases of the Long March; he was one of the highest-ranking party members; he held the most important positions linking party and army, including his role in the "troika"; and military matters were predominant at the time. Hungry for power and/or because they held him responsible, Zhang, Mao and others set out to challenge him, but had at first to take out Qin Bangxian. But why? Was Qin an ally of Zhou's, so they could hurt Zhou this way? Or did they simply need Qin's elevated (?) position in the party to train their guns on Zhou? Because, if we accept Chen Yun's statements and the establishment of a new "troika", should these not be seen as attempts to reign in Zhou Enlai who, after Zunyi, had final decision on all military matters, i.e., on practically everything? And did Zhou Enlai know or guess what was afoot? Maybe the challenge was directed against Zhou from the start, but he was able to deflect it, at first, towards Qin.
- D) Zhou Enlai uses Zhang Wentian and/or Mao to challenge Qin Bangxian and to dissolve the "troika". This would assume that Zhou Enlai was, or felt, hemmed in by the "troika". To get rid of it, he either instigated Zhang and/or Mao to challenge Qin, or used their at first independent discontent to that effect. This would best explain why Zhou seems to come out of Zunyi in an even better position than before. But was Zhou challenged afterwards by his erstwhile accomplices? And was Zhou then not held responsible for the defeats in the Fifth Encirclement Campaign and the events of the early Long March? Was Qin Bangxian held responsible, or was nobody held responsible because the key players thought that there had been no real alternative?
- E) There were no "challenges" at all; all talk about it is just a smoke screen to hide Zhou Enlai's manipulations. Assumption: Zhou was the mastermind in

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Braun presumably was just what he later claimed to have been: military advisor without decision-making powers. He was asked for advice, and his advice may have been accepted, but he could not decide the important military-political and strategic points. In fact, his specialty had always been tactics. Braun's role would then have been more or less constant from about the second half of 1934 to at least early 1936, when he last participated in higher-level military meetings. According to this reading, as far as Braun is concerned, the dissolution of the "troika" would have been just an acknowledgment of his real status, not a sign of his loss of power as I argued earlier (Litten 1988a:89-90). Reliable information is, as usual, lacking, but might be lurking in the Moscow archives.

control (similar to some images of Mao; cf. Teiwes 1988:26). He needed scapegoats, or was just no longer content with his puppets, therefore he replaced Qin Bangxian with Zhang Wentian, and Braun with Mao. Also, the "front command" and the "troika" are just a charade, having been either impotent or instruments to disturb any potential coalitions against Zhou.

- F) There was a "collective leadership", either with a changing "center", or with no "center" at all.<sup>52</sup> In that case, no matter whether Mao, Zhou Enlai, or even Zhang Wentian was at the "center", the disputes and challenges were not a matter of life and death, nor part of any struggles between two "lines". Especially if there was no clearly defined "center", one might argue that the few data we get on such things as personal criticisms or elevations and demotions are mostly attempts to give the outside world some temporary grip on the amorphous and shifting internal reality.

Fancyful? Maybe. But the main conclusion about the CCP's internal debates must be: We do not know! Without further information or a new, well-founded approach (which is not in evidence in any of the studies on the Long March and its origins), everything remains pure speculation. We cannot even be certain that what happened at Liping, to give the most important example, fell within the framework of the above-sketched scenarios. All of them, F) being only a partial exception, attempt to find one single thread to a story we may not really know, as in the case of the Xiang crossing. Chance must have played some role, and the reality was presumably more complex than the simple scenarios presented above.

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It may have been noticed that nothing has been said about ideology and possible ideological disputes. This is a defect because the "leadership" quite certainly was not ideologically homogenous. However, I am not aware of any reasonably substantial study on any member of the "leadership" which does not a priori accept the "Maoist" model for the first half of the 1930s, also in the West, where such studies are scarce anyway (e.g. Kampen 1989b; Teiwes 1994:40-52). Moreover, even at a simplified level, one would assume interactions between ideology, political considerations and events in the actions and reactions of single members as well as the "leadership" as a whole; yet I can find scarcely an attempt to do this in the litera-

<sup>52</sup> In recent years, Chinese historians seem to have written more often about a "collective leadership" with Mao at the "center", beginning at the turn of 1934/35 and ending in 1976 with his death (e.g., Cheng 1997). Kampen (2000:119-121) also now holds to some concept of "collective leadership", but he extends it back to 1931, sees Zhou Enlai at the "center", and ends it in 1943. Chen Guoquan (1999) proposes the above stated Chinese view of "collective leadership" with a twist: During a "transitional period" of about eight months, from the Liping Conference to the Maoergai Conference, Zhou Enlai was at the "center". When he fell ill, due to overwork and amoebic dysentery, he was replaced by Mao as the one mainly responsible for military questions in the CCP.

ture on the Long March or the late Jiangxi Soviet. At this stage, introducing “ideology” or “political paradigms” (Womack 1982) would either mean confusing the picture even further – or introducing a wholly false sense of security.

### Part III

The Long March – a “turning-point” in CCP history and in Mao’s career? As a corollary: the end of the “soviet movement” (e.g. Saich 1996:524), or the coming of age of the CCP by breaking with the Comintern (e.g. Yao 1998:33)? One thing, at least, is certain: Such an interpretation of the Long March belongs to the central tenets of CCP history.

But was it a “turning-point”? In military matters not much of a change is evident.<sup>53</sup> The Long March did not lead to an improvement of the Red Army’s precarious military position (cf. Esherick 1995:53). The next encirclement campaign by the Nationalists was already in preparation. The stressing of mobile warfare, of the use of guerilla units and co-ordination with regular units in the Wayaobao Resolution (23 December 1935, WJXJ 10:591-594) can also be found in Braun’s articles in 1934; the rejection of a fixed front probably resulted more from the fact that there was not yet much territory to defend, than from any fundamental change in strategic thinking.<sup>54</sup> If there had been in fact a “struggle between two lines” in the military sphere, it must have been quite different from the one usually given in the literature.

Neither are political changes in evidence. No break with the Comintern occurred on the Long March, neither politically nor with the accusations against Braun which do not seem to have mattered to the Comintern. The “soviet movement” was still on the cards after early 1935, as the Lianghekou and Shawo Resolutions (28 June, 5 August 1935) clearly show (WJXJ 10:528). Indeed, stripped of geographic names, these resolutions with their calls for establishing new soviets to triumph first in a larger region and then in China as a whole could easily have been written in earlier years. Even the Central Soviet Republic still existed, if only in name, with “Chairman Mao” at the top. And it has already been recognized by Selden (1971:106-108) that changes at the top level of both government and party after the Long March were not really visible.

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<sup>53</sup> Liping’s impact on the course of the Long March was enormous, but it did not change strategical thinking (at least, not for long). One could make an alternative-history case that it changed the strategical situation by preventing an earlier and potentially more powerful combination of the First, Second and Fourth Front Army, but, as I will argue below, the “fundamentals” would still have been against the CCP.

<sup>54</sup> The Wayaobao Conference also called for an enormous enlargement of the Red Army. It is typical not only of Benjamin Yang (1990:185) to see this as an expression of some subtle “plan” by Mao, whereas the assessment of the recruitment drives during the pre-Zunyi era is much more negative (Benjamin Yang 1990:73). Zhang Zhaoxian (1996) stresses Zhang Wentian’s role at the Wayaobao Conference.



Most importantly, the Central Soviet era leadership seems to have been less incompetent than the “Maoist” version of history would like us to believe (also cf. Kim 1973:201). The defeat in the Fifth Encirclement Campaign was due mostly to “objective” factors, e.g. Chiang Kai-shek’s superiority, outside the control of the CCP. Yet an important factor influencing the decisions of the CCP has in my opinion been underestimated, if not ignored (but cf. Womack 1982:144) – the existence of the Central Soviet Republic. This was the first Communist “state” in China, the CCP had made a considerable “investment” in it, and it provided an “anchor” to the Communists to prevent them from degenerating into roving bands of political misfits. The genesis of the Long March – the “delay” in leaving the Central Soviet and the decision to “move house”, not just to abandon it – cannot, in my opinion, be understood and judged without reference to this factor. (Moreover, it seems likely to me that other decisions and debates were affected by it, too.) If we accept these factors as given, room for manoeuvre was seriously limited – and the CCP leadership does seem to have made quite a good attempt to use it. The “strategic transfer” was anything but a “panicky flight”; it had been planned and prepared for months in advance and does not seem to have been too unreasonable, though over-optimistic, in its goal of preserving not only the “living forces” but also the substance of the Central Soviet Republic. If we posit, for the sake of the argument, that after the Long March the “leadership” was mostly “competent”, where was the difference, then? Yet without such a difference, the “turning-point” vanishes and the case for a political “struggle between two lines” or a “paradigm clash” becomes much weaker.

As for Mao’s rise during the Long March, formally the only changes were his becoming a member of the “standing committee” of the Politburo and regaining the post of Politkommissar of the Red Army’s “front command”. Yet the “standing committee” looks just like the association of Politburo members present at the Long March of the First Front Army – minus Zhu De –, so it may not be very significant. Regarding the post of Politkommissar, I already mentioned that the “front command’s” permanence is open to question; at the meeting with the Fourth Front Army, it would have been dissolved just like the putative new “troika” (Benjamin Yang 1990:149). If we look at what is commonly held as the “nadir” of Mao’s career, summer 1934, and compare it with his position in summer 1935, there seems to be not much of a difference.

But it is not sufficient to look at formal positions only; one has to capture the “spirit” as well (e.g., Short 1999:14). Yet spirits are hard to capture and pin down. We do not know about Mao’s de facto influence during 1934, both in political and in military matters. Relying on Chen Yun and others, we may assume that his influence in military matters rose during the Long March. But was it still heightened in summer 1935, after the allegedly blistering criticism at the Huili Meeting?

Turning to his political influence, it seems far from evident to me that, before the Long March, Mao was excluded from decisions to the degree usually claimed.

After all, he became a Politburo member in 1934 – this being the highest position in the “national” CCP he had held since about a decade earlier –, and he was still “Chairman” of the Central Soviet Republic and kept a high profile there (Kim 1973:72-74). There has been no study based on the newly available documents investigating the relations between CCP and Central Soviet Republic government and their relative weights. So one could equally well argue that the Long March just served to stabilize Mao’s standing among the top leaders.

Considering the second half of 1935, I get the impression that Mao was able to further consolidate his position in connection with the dispute with Zhang Guotao, on which he delivered a report mentioned in the resolution of the Ejie Conference (Saich 1996:685), and possibly by a weakening of Zhou Enlai’s grip on military matters, one of the reasons for which might have been the break-up of a putative “Zhou Enlai-Zhu De team”. But I would still hesitate to call this a “significant change” for Mao.

It may be argued that, though Mao had not become stronger by himself, others had become weaker because they were held responsible for the debacles of the Fifth Encirclement Campaign and the early Long March (e.g., Kampen 2000:76-77). This argument raises further questions, however, which are usually ignored. For example, if, say, Bo Gu was blamed for the defeat in the Fifth Encirclement Campaign, was this done because he “really” was responsible, because he was perceived “in good faith” to have been responsible, or because a pretext was needed to either attack him or explain to those outside the “leadership” his loss of power, which was in fact due to other factors. Even if one of the first two explanations would hold true, why was the matter of responsibility for this part of CCP history brought up at all? By comparison, nobody within the CCP seems to have been blamed for the roughly equal losses on the second leg of the Long March after Zunyi. Taking the “Zunyi Resolution” as a guide, assignments of blame were only loosely, if at all, connected to “reality”. The fact that someone was held responsible for some event then becomes part of the question why he lost power and influence – not the answer to it.

So, the jury is still out – and will be until there are many more studies on the events and people of the first half of the 1930s (e.g., Averill 1995) which are not a priori beholden to that one-dimensional, simplistic and very likely wrong “Maoist” model. My preliminary assessment, however, would not assign the “real” Long March any significant role – not even as background – in Mao’s undeniable, though neither inexorable nor straightforward rise in the 1930s and 1940s. How much the “myth” influenced Mao’s career, and the development of the CCP, must be left open here.

Changes – the extent of which will have to be redefined in further studies since many of them were “steps” rather than “turning points” – within the CCP and concerning Mao’s role since the first-time establishment of a Communist governmental structure in China at the beginning of the 1930s have to be dated to the years

after the Long March, in part starting with the split with Zhang Guotao, which technically began before the Long March had ended. Chen Shaoyu's and the Comintern's role, the United Front with the Kuomintang, Mao's rewriting of history, and, above all in my opinion, the Anti-Japanese War have then to be considered as major factors. The Long March, in contrast, was an unusually long and unexpectedly complicated military operation, for the most part only a prolongation of the Central Soviet period.

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However, another perspective must also be employed. Seen from the outside, competent CCP leadership was necessary for the well-being of the Communist movement in China, but it was not sufficient. The CCP's and the Red Army's fate was to a large degree in other hands. At first, the CCP was ignored by the real powers in China, then it was underestimated; it could survive and expand, but on borrowed time. When Chiang Kai-shek finally turned his full attention to them, the Communists were saved from destruction only by the warlords' distrust among themselves and towards Chiang, and by repeated Japanese interventions in China (also see William Wei 1992:122-123). Looking at the Long March from this perspective, it becomes just the most glaring example of the CCP's continuing lack of power to gain the initiative. This would be true even more if contemporary suspicions would prove correct that Chiang Kai-shek "simply herded the bandits through Hunan, Guizhou and Sichuan as an excuse to follow with his own troops and thus establish himself in areas which previously were only nominally under Nanking control" (Joseph Stillwell, 29 January 1936, USMIR XII:245). This dismal situation only changed when another external event saved the Communists: the Xi'an Incident in December 1936, which was, of course, a by-product of the looming Japanese threat.

Since the last major change in the Chinese internal situation in 1927, the "fundamentals" had been against the Communists. In many ways, the development of soviets in the late 1920s represented an advance for the CCP, yet it could not alter the balance of power in China significantly. An undoubted feat of endurance and, in retrospective, a godsend as propaganda, the Long March changed neither the CCP nor the situation in China in any fundamental way. The Japanese presence in northeast China in combination with the perceived threat to the Soviet Union, and the full-scale invasion of China beginning in July 1937, on the other hand, shuffled the cards anew and changed the rules. Although far from automatically leading to more "degrees of freedom" in the Chinese political system, or even a Communist victory, the Japanese threat has, in my opinion (see also, for example, Bianco 2001), to be considered the major factor of change in the history of China and, paradoxically, as the "big chance" in the history of the CCP in the 1930s.

## List of Abbreviations

- DSYJ *Dangshi yanjiu* [Party history studies].
- FYBKZL *Fuyin baokan ziliao – Zhongguo xiandai shi (K4)* [Reprints of articles and materials – Contemporary Chinese History].
- HJFZS *Zhongguo gongnong Hongjun fazhanshi jianbian (1927-1937)* [Concise history of the development of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army (1927-1937)]. Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1986.
- JDSYJ *Jindaishi yanjiu* [Modern history studies].
- JSDB “Zunyi huiyi qianhou de sishiyifen junshi dianbao” [Fourty-one military telegrams from the period around the Zunyi Conference]. *Wenxian he yanjiu* [Documents and research], 1985:101-149.
- QGWJ “Zunyi huiyi qianhou Zhonggong zhongyang youguan zhanlue fangzhen de qige wenjian” [Seven documents of the CCP Center concerning the strategic policy from the period around the Zunyi Conference]. *Wenxian he yanjiu* [Documents and research], 1985:86-100.
- SHAT *Service historique de l’armée de terre* (French Army Archives), Vincennes/France: 7 N 3295/EMA,2 Chine.
- USMIR *U. S. Military Intelligence Reports: China, 1911-1941*. Microfilm Edition. Reels X, XII. Frederick, Maryland: UPA, 1983.
- WJXJ *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji* [Selected documents of the CCP Center]. Comp. Zhongyang dang’anguan [Central Party Archives]. Vol. 7 (1931), 8 (1932), 9 (1933), 10 (1934-1935). Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangjiao chubanshe, 1991.
- ZGDSYJ *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* (CCP history studies).

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