

## Research Note

### Did Chiang Kai-shek trigger the Fujian Rebellion? A look at some Western archival documents

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In his study of the Fujian Rebellion, Lloyd E. Eastman asserts that Chen Ming-shu, a former Cantonese general and provincial chairman of Guangdong, began to organise a rebellion against Chiang Kai-shek and the Nanking government in October 1933, because he saw a good chance that the warlords of Guangdong and Guangxi would now co-operate with him. Chiang knew of these moves and tried to steer clear of any conflict, in a final effort by appealing to Cai Tingkai, the commander of the 19th Route Army now stationed in Fujian without success. The rebellion by the former "heroes of Shanghai" broke out "officially" on 20 November 1933, but was quickly subdued by Chiang's troops and bribes in January 1934.<sup>1</sup>

In an earlier publication I already raised the possibility based on a book by Gerald Yorke, who had been in China as a journalist at that time that Chiang actually forced the outbreak of the rebellion by stopping Nanking's vital payments to the 19th Route Army.<sup>2</sup>

To find out more about this I looked up hitherto unused documents in the archives of the German and French Foreign Ministries and in the French Army Archive.<sup>3</sup> Besides various reports by diplomatic personnel and the Deuxième Bureau, the French army's intelligence service, on the course of the rebellion, I also happened upon an analysis by the Service de Attaché, Militaire of the French legation in China, concerned with the events in China between October 1933 and April 1934.<sup>4</sup>

Here it is stated that Chiang Kai-shek, far from trying to avoid the rebellion, was in fact setting the scene for it. According to this analysis, Hu Hanmin had been trying to build up a grand coalition against Chiang in 1933. Therefore Chiang judged it necessary to take the offensive. Other documents show the political situation at that time: Chen Jitang, the warlord of Guangdong, had just weathered a revolt of his own troops, thanks to Chiang and his money.<sup>5</sup> The leaders of the Guangxi Clique, Li Zongren and Bai Zhongxi, although former allies of Fujian rebel Li Jishen,<sup>6</sup> seem to have become indifferent or even hostile to him.<sup>7</sup> In North China, Yan Xishan had no money for large-scale military ventures, and Feng Yuxiang was, at least temporarily, not important; the only problem there would have been the return of Zhang Xueliang.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the time for Chiang to act against the popularity of Hu Hanmin was propitious, and the means was the neutralisation of the 19th Route Army, which, according to the French analysis was created by Hu Hanmin. The pretence for stopping Nanking's payments in June 1933 was the lack of co-operation by Cai Tingkai in the fight against the Communists.<sup>9</sup> With Chen Jitang having been

bought for the time being by Chiang, Cai's most important potential ally was not available. Severely underfunded, Cai was forced to follow the example of numerous other malcontents to rebel against Nanking. But being quite isolated and with Chiang not only being well prepared but also having "General Dollar" at his side,<sup>10</sup> he had no chance.

This contemporary analysis differs in two important points from Eastman's study. Not only is the role of Chiang Kai-shek and Nanking's monetary contributions seen differently, the whole affair is depicted as part of the struggle between Chiang and Hu Hanmin (who, though asked, did not after all participate in the rebellion), whereas in Eastman's account, Chen Mingshu is Chiang's main adversary in this case.

There are further documents which tend to confirm the first aspect of the French analysis. Both an undated German confidential report and a U.S. Military Intelligence report state that Cai used the termination of contributions from Nanking to justify the take-over of the province's banks and thus the unofficial outbreak of the rebellion.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the situation seems to have been considered by western observers as quite dangerous and inopportune for Chiang up to the beginning of his offensive in January 1934; there is no indication that they noticed any special preparedness by the Guomindang against internal conflict in November or December 1933.

However, I would venture that the possibility of Chiang having intentionally triggered the rebellion is quite high. It is a very astute move, right out of *Sunzi Bingfa*, to set the time and circumstances of an anyway pending conflict according to one's own convenience. By ending payments, Chiang compelled the leadership of the 19th Route Army either to revolt or to give in and lose face. It is somewhat unlikely that he took this step without considering the consequences.

Regarding Hu Hanmin, he is mentioned in the U.S. Military Intelligence Reports in the context of the rebellion, but as a player on the periphery;<sup>12</sup> other documents ignore him. Chen Mingshu and/or Cai Tingkai are always named as main perpetrators, with their personal and political enmity towards Chiang given as reason for the rebellion. Though Hu certainly played a role in Chiang's calculations, the main target was the 19th Route Army.

This opinion is based not only on the documentary evidence but also takes into account that the Fifth Encirclement Campaign against the CCP was meant to begin at that time. The truce agreement of 26 October 1933 between the Communists and the 19th Route Army had finally and openly put the latter out of the fighting. The discontentment with Chiang among its leaders was well-known; so it would have been a logical step for Chiang first to put his forces in order before taking on the Communists in earnest.

Anyway, after the rebellion had been crushed by the troops conveniently at hand for the Fifth Encirclement Campaign, his position was strengthened. It seems that the Fujian Rebellion was one of the cases where Chiang was proactive rather than re-active.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

- 1) Lloyd E. Eastman, **The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule 1927-1937**, Cambridge 1974, chapter three, especially pp.103-105.
- 2) Frederick S. Litten, "The CCP and the Fujian Rebellion", **Republican China**, 14 (November 1988) 1, pp.57-74, here p.70, note 10.
- 3) The relevant files in the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (AAPA), Bonn, are: R 85626 (internal politics in China, 13 March 1933 to 31 October 1933) and R 85627 (dito, 1 November 1933 to 4 May 1934). Weekly reports on the situation in China during that period can be found in the archive of the Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris: Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Chine, nr. 595. The pertinent documents of the Service Historique des Armée de Terre (SHAT), Vincennes near Paris, have the call numbers: 7 N 3286 AM 1934, 7 N 3297 AM 1933 and 7 N 3297 AM 1934.
- 4) SHAT: 7 N 3286 AM 1934 (10 April 1934).
- 5) Cf. U.S. Military Intelligence Reports (USMIR): China, 1911-1941; Report No. 8689, October 25 - November 9, 1933; Reel I, fr. 878, of the UPA microfilm edition.
- 6) Cf. Diana Lary, **The Kwangsi Clique in Chinese Politics 1925-1937**, Cambridge 1974.
- 7) AAPA: R 85627 (22 November 1933, 9 December 1933).
- 8) AAPA: R 85627 (1 December 1933). Cf. Eastman, pp.112ff.
- 9) The money from Guangdong continued to flow, probably because of a perceived risk of the 19th Route Army entering Guangdong.
- 10) SHAT: 7 N 3297 AM 1934 (12 April 1934).
- 11) AAPA: R 85627. USMIR: Report No. 8698, November 9 - November 23, 1933; Reel I, frame 881.
- 12) E.g., USMIR: Report No. 8728, December 21, 1933 - January 4, 1934; Reel I, frame 905.
- 13) Cf. Lloyd E. Eastman, "Nationalist China during the Nanking decade, 1927-1937", in: **The Nationalist Era in China 1927-1949**, ed. by Lloyd E. Eastman et al., Cambridge 1991, pp.1-52, especially pp.11-12.