

Patrilineal Social Organization and rural society on the Pearl River
Delta during the 1920s: The case of the Guangzhou Nationalist
Government's people's militia policy

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The present article considers the unique character of rural society in modern Guangdong Province's Pearl River Delta region through an analysis of the people's militia policy implemented by the Guangzhou Nationalist Government and the actual conditions of the militias that were organized on the ground. The policy, which was first implemented in 1923, was a pre-Northern Expedition attempt to maintain law and order in a post-Xinhai Revolution rural society wracked with civil unrest, by organizing armed militias to defend each administrative district. The policy's basic legislation, called Regulations Concerning People's Militias in the Provinces (Quansheng Mintuan Tiaoli 全省民團條例), established a framework for subordinating the militia's under the government, but also guaranteed their autonomy vis-a-vis the rural communities they were defending. In the background to this recognition of autonomy lay the pre-policy custom of the formation of self-defense forces centered upon local elites; therefore, the Government attempted to further its integrated governance of the provinces by institutionalizing this custom under the state.

Nevertheless, in reality, the actual formation of the militias on the ground was based on traditional Chinese patrilineal kinship groups (*zongzu* 宗族), meaning that instead of providing self-defense for rural communities as a whole, the militias functioned more to preserve *zongzu* organization and even expand its influence. Consequently, a clash of interests emerged between the Guangzhou Government attempting to exercise its control over the militias and the *zongzu* resisting such control; and it was this discrepancy between policy principles and reality that made it impossible for the Government to establish real political control over rural society. Therefore, the maintenance of law and

order in rural society was made possible by militias organized according to the bonds of patrilineal kinship, not government policy.

Moreover, the strength of such kinship bonds also exceeded that of the Chinese Communist Party-sponsored peasant struggle (Nongmin Yundong 農民運動) against the feudal ruling class, which was being conducted at the same time as the people's militia policy. Although there were many cases of peasant associations organized within *zongzu*-led locales, most had very little influence on rural society, in general, and patrilineal kinship bonds in particular. Within the civil unrest which followed the Xinhai Revolution, the defense of life and property in the face of a breakdown of law and order in rural society would have been impossible without traditional experience and forms of organization, as well as the *zongzu* themselves, which financed the self-defence efforts. This is why the traditional *zongzu* bonds of kinship were indispensable to peace and security in Pearl River Delta society during the 1920s.