

## Frontier Youth

1894–1914

Wei Baqun's birthplace, Donglan County of Guangxi Province, was a frontier region in more than one sense. It was not far from China's southern border with Vietnam. In Wei Baqun's time, travelers from Donglan would often choose to pass through Vietnam in order to reach Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Wei Baqun himself took that route at least twice. The border between Guangxi and Vietnam could be easily crossed partly because neither the French colonial government in Vietnam nor the local Guangxi militarists took the area seriously. The French concentrated their attention on Yunnan rather than Guangxi, whereas the leaders of Guangxi thought that the regions to the east and north were much more important than the southern borders.<sup>1</sup> Donglan was also very close to the border dividing Guangxi from three other Chinese provinces: Yunnan, Guizhou, and Hunan, making it a frontier county of a frontier province (Map 1.1).

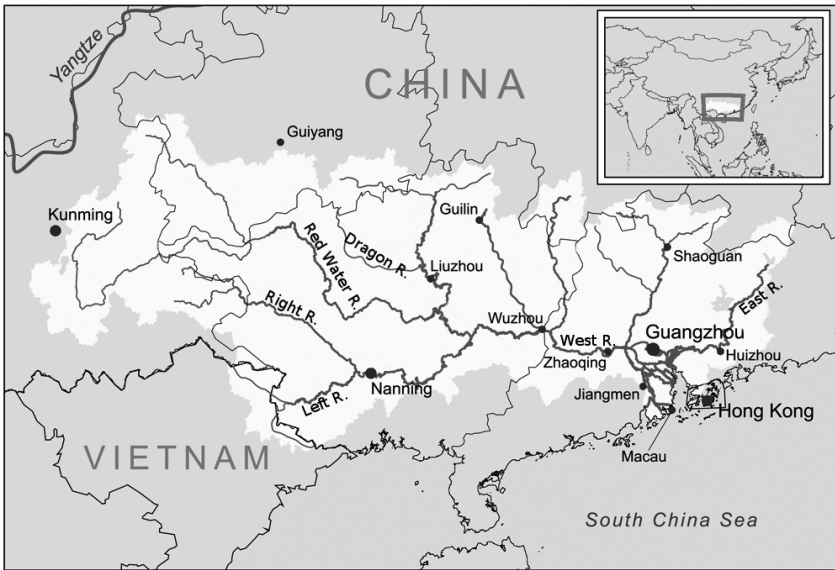
In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Donglan fit well the stereotypes of a typical frontier region in China. First of all, it was a multiethnic area. The dominant ethnic group, of which Wei Baqun was a member, was the Turen (which means natives) or Zhuang, whose ancestors, known as Yue, Baiyue, Luoyue, Xi'ou, Wuhu, Liliao, and Lang in different periods and different places, used to occupy a large part of southern China. By the early twentieth century, however, the Zhuang heartland had shrunk so much that it covered only western Guangxi and a small part of Yunnan. The Zhuang area in western Guangxi can be divided into four major regions shaped by and identified with four major rivers, respectively. From the north to the south the four rivers are the Dragon River (Longjiang), the Red Water River (Hongshuihe), the Right River (Youjiang), and the Left River (Zuojiang). All four rivers merge into the



MAP 1.1 Location of Donglan in Contemporary China.

West River, which is a major branch of the Pearl River. Donglan is situated in the Red Water River valley, which often is considered part of the greater Right River region (Map 1.2)

The Zhuang people have their own spoken language, but used Chinese characters for writing. Traditionally, they followed many practices that appeared to be exotic or bizarre to the Han. Zhuang women did not bind their feet, and Zhuang men and women were extremely fond of singing and dancing, talents that were very much looked down on by the Han populace in general and the Confucian literati in particular. The Zhuang singing contest could last for days and nights and they would sing about many different themes, ranging from love, family, legendary and historical heroes, rituals, to farming, traveling, fishing, hunting, herding, and construction of houses. It is no wonder that one of the most prominent figures in the folklore of southern China is a Zhuang singer named Third Sister Liu (Liu Sanjie).<sup>2</sup> Han observers also had trouble understanding why in some regions Zhuang women would stay with their parents after getting married and would not live with the husband's family until after giving birth to the first child. Some Han authors believed that Zhuang men were vengeful and violent, and were idlers who made their women do the hard work for them.<sup>3</sup> Although the portrayal of the lazy Zhuang men shows



MAP 1.2 The Four Rivers in Northwestern Guangxi.

obvious bias, Zhuang women were indeed very hard working. In Donglan, even before moving into the husband's house, a married woman was supposed to show her skills at farming by planting cotton on the hills near her husband's home in the spring.<sup>4</sup> Extremely unacceptable to some Han commentators was the custom that, after childbirth the husband would stay home with the baby, pretending that he was the one who had given birth to the child, whereas the weakened wife had to go out to take care of the paddy fields.<sup>5</sup>

There are other major and minor differences between the Han and the Zhuang. The Han built their houses on the ground, but the traditional Zhuang houses were built on stilts, with animals staying at the lower level and humans occupying the upper part. Whereas both the Han and the Zhuang worshipped dragons, the Zhuang also worshipped snakes and frogs. The Han followed Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism as the three traditional doctrines, whereas the Zhuang embraced Confucianism and Daoism but showed little interest in Buddhism. The Zhuang liked to chew betel nuts and followed some unique burial custom.<sup>6</sup> For ceremonies, the Han used wooden drums, but the Zhuang preferred bronze drums, and Donglan was known as the land of bronze drums. Even today, every village has its own collection of bronze drums, and the villagers living along the Red Water River are particularly fond of them. Often,

neighboring villages would hold drum-beating contests on mountaintops that could last for days.<sup>7</sup>

In Donglan, the Sinicized Zhuang elite controlled political and economic power, and the Zhuang commoners were farmers occupying the valleys and basins. Most local officials were Zhuang. Yao and Han were the two minority groups in the county. The Yao in Donglan were divided into two groups. The Tu (indigenous) Yao moved to the county during the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, whereas the Fan (“barbaric”) Yao did not arrive until the Qing Dynasty.<sup>8</sup> Although most ethnologists believe that the Zhuang arrived in Donglan much earlier than the Yao, some local people hold that the Yao were the true indigenous people and that they had been driven into the mountains by officers and soldiers from northern China who settled in Donglan and became the ancestors of the Zhuang. There are many folk stories about how the Yao lost the plains to the Zhuang. One popular Yao legend holds that when the Zhuang first came to grab the plain from the Yao, the two groups agreed to ask the plain and let it decide who its owners were. A Yao asked the plain first, but got no answer. A Zhuang then took his turn and received a positive answer from the plain. As a result, the Yao lost the plain. It only became clear later that the Zhuang had cheated by hiding someone near the plain to provide an answer on its behalf.<sup>9</sup>

The Tu Yao lived close to the Zhuang communities and some even lived among the Zhuang. Therefore, they were more assimilated by the Zhuang, and were better off than the Fan Yao. Some Tu Yao were even wealthy enough to qualify as landlords and rented land to the poor Zhuang and Han. The Fan Yao, who scattered on the mountain slopes cultivating dry land crops such as maize, sweet potatoes, and pumpkins using the slash and burn techniques and supplementing agriculture with hunting and gathering, were at the bottom of the local society. They had to provide free labor for the local power holders, and were not allowed to wear white clothes, shoes, hats or other head covers; to use umbrellas; to ride horses; to attend school; to take the civil service examinations; or to live in the plains. Unable to buy enough clothes, in winter the Fan Yao had to sleep by fires to keep warm. Long-time exposure to fire would turn their feet red, giving rise to the derogatory label “Red Feet Yao.” They relied on rain for drinking water and during a drought, they traveled long distances to fetch water.<sup>10</sup>

The migration of northerners from China’s Central Plains to Guangxi began at the latest during the Qin Dynasty, but the early settlers were small in number and it took only a few generations for them to be assimilated by the ancestors of the Zhuang. The Han people who lived in Donglan in the early twentieth century were recent immigrants or their descendants. They came from Hunan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Guangdong, Jiangxi, and other provinces and spoke various dialects, including Hakka, Cantonese, and various variants

of Mandarin. They were traders, officials, and peasants. The Han traders and officials lived in the towns, whereas the peasants lived in the mountains.<sup>11</sup> The saying that “the Zhuang live on riverbanks, the Han live on the streets, and the Yao live on mountains,”<sup>12</sup> which was used to describe the ethnic distribution of a region in the neighboring Yunnan Province, was very much applicable to Donglan, although in Donglan there were Han peasants living in small basins in the mountains. Despite the fact that the Han already made up the majority of the population in Guangxi and controlled both the provincial and central governments, the Han minority in Donglan was not the most powerful local group in the early twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> In fact, because most of the Han settlers who moved into Donglan during the Qing Dynasty were believed to be former anti-Manchu rebels led by Li Dingguo, they were perceived to be renegades and discriminated against by the Zhuang.<sup>14</sup> During the Qing Dynasty, the descendants of these Han rebels in Donglan were not allowed to sit for the civil service examinations, and some of them had to disguise themselves as Zhuang in order to take the exams. It is interesting to note that although many Zhuang identified with the Han of a past era or a faraway place, they were not fond of the real Han around them.

The founding of the Republic of China brought some favorable changes to the Han. Some Han moved from the mountains to the plains, and some even became low-ranking government officials. Overall, the Han occupied a higher position on the local social ladder than the Yao. There was more intermarriage between the Zhuang and the Han than between the Zhuang and the Yao. Economically, most Han were better off than the Yao, but were poorer than the Zhuang. A Zhuang from a village near Wuzhuan commented in 1951 that in his area the Zhuang would eat rice for half the year and corn for the other half, the Han had rice for four months and corn for eight, whereas the Yao had to consume corn, pumpkins, and millet throughout the year. It was estimated in the early 1950s that before the Communist takeover, the Zhuang on average could afford salt for six to ten months every year, whereas the Han could have it for three to four months each year, and the Yao could only have salt for three days every month.<sup>15</sup> Whereas most Han in Donglan were powerless commoners, a few families of Han officials or merchants that moved to Donglan in the late Qing were able to join the local ruling class.

There was some animosity between the three groups. The Zhuang liked to refer to the Han as “Bugun” (base aliens) and the Yao as “Buyou” (monkeys from the mountains); the Han would call the Zhuang “Nitou” (people made of urine soaked earth); and some Yao would call the Zhuang barbarians.<sup>16</sup>

Like some other frontier regions of China, Donglan was sparsely populated in the past, but went through rapid population growth during the Ming and particularly the Qing dynasties. It is estimated that at the beginning of the Ming, there were only about 25,000 people living in the county. The number

increased to 72,000 in late Ming and early Qing and 167,000 in late Qing.<sup>17</sup> In the early years of the Republican era, Donglan was about 110 kilometers in both length and width and its land area made up 0.94% of the total land area of Guangxi. Donglan's population density was more than one hundred people per square kilometer at that time, making it the most densely populated county in the Right River and Red Water River region and one of the most densely populated counties in Guangxi.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly forty-three percent of Donglan's land area is mountainous and hilly—the ninth highest percentile among all the counties in Guangxi. The famous seventeenth-century geographer Gu Zuyu described Donglan as “a remote and dangerous area covered with endless stiff mountains.”<sup>19</sup> For a magistrate of Donglan in the 1920s, the county was a place hidden “in the middle of many layers of mountains.”<sup>20</sup> Most of the mountains and hills are about seven hundred to eight hundred meters above sea level and some are as high as one thousand. The highest mountain in the county is 1,214 meters above sea level.<sup>21</sup> The local people like to divide the mountains of Donglan into two categories: stone mountains and earth mountains. Most of the mountains in the northern part of the county are earth mountains, whereas most of those in the south are stone. For obvious reasons, the stone mountains are much less productive than the earthen ones. The stone mountains in southern Donglan can be divided into three sections, which are known to the local people as Western Mountains, Central Mountains (Zhongshan), and Eastern Mountains (Dongshan). The mountains stand between many stretches of arable plains, which are called Dong in the Zhuang language. Some Dongs are large enough to sustain a small city or a large village, and others are so tiny that they only had enough space for one or two families. On average each farming household in Donglan had only four mu (two-thirds of an acre) of paddy field in the early 1930s, making it the most land-hungry county in Guangxi.<sup>22</sup>

Another striking feature of Donglan as a frontier region was its economic and technological backwardness. Guangxi was among the poorer provinces in China, and during the late Qing the three nearby provinces—Guangdong, Hunan, and Hubei—had to provide annual financial subsidies to Guangxi.<sup>23</sup> Within Guangxi, the counties that are on the coast, close to Guangdong, or that have large plains, were much more advanced and prosperous than Donglan. By the early 1930s, Donglan still did not have any modern industries. Local handicraftsmen could only produce wooden and bamboo goods, pottery, tiles, cloth, and other traditional products. There had been ore mines in the mountains, but they were closed down because of a fuel shortage. Trade was limited to the sale of daily necessities such as cooking oil, salt, liquor, rice, and meat. Dongyuan was the largest town in Donglan. Although it made its first appearance in historical records as early as 1053 AD and had been the county seat since 1730 AD, the town had only four narrow streets up to the 1940s. In the 1920s and 1930s,

its population was smaller than that of the largest village of Donglan, which had nearly two thousand residents.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, Dongyuan in the 1930s was still more like a “stockaged village” than a substantial town.<sup>25</sup> Other towns in Donglan included Wuzhuan, Jiangping, Sanshi, Simeng, Changjiang, and Duyi. Local markets in these towns were opened once every five days.<sup>26</sup>

The lack of efficient means of transportation posed a serious obstacle to the development of the economy in general and trade in particular. The Red Water River, which is so named because of the red soil it carries, is the most important watercourse in Donglan. It passes through the county from the north to the south, providing a waterway of about one hundred kilometers. As a major branch of the Pearl River, it was the most convenient means of transportation between Donglan and neighboring regions. However, due to the rugged riverbed, it could only handle the navigation of boats with loads of no more than 1,500 kilograms. Guangxi’s mountainous terrain made it difficult and costly to build roads. During the rule of militarist Lu Rongting from 1911 to 1921, only three paved roads totaling 150 kilometers were built in the province, and none of them passed through Donglan. Governor Ma Junwu, who took office in late 1921, had an ambitious plan for road construction, but only paved 2.5 kilometers before stepping down the following year. The New Guangxi Clique, after consolidating their power in Guangxi, began to construct an efficient road network, and by 1928 Guangxi was listed as having more good roads than any other province in China. Unfortunately, this road system had not extended to Donglan by the early 1930s. In Donglan, automobiles were completely absent in Wei Baqun’s time because there were no paved roads.<sup>27</sup>

Partly because of the lack of a modern transportation system, the prices of imported commodities were very high in Donglan. Traders had to hire laborers to carry local products such as tung oil from Dongyuan to Tianzhou, which was located about 140 kilometers to the west of Donglan, and then to carry back imported goods such as salt. This long and narrow rugged mountain path between Donglan and Tianzhou was properly called the Salt Road.<sup>28</sup> Another less frequently traveled salt road extended eastward toward Jinchengjiang in Hechi or Huaiyuan in Yishan.<sup>29</sup> Some traders would use boats to ship out medicinal herbs, leathers, and rice and ship in salt, cotton, scissors, needles, and other goods.<sup>30</sup> These trading routes were not only rough but also dangerous because of the presence of bandits in the mountains and along the rivers. All this added to the cost of imported goods. Sometimes half a kilogram of salt was worth a good horse or fifty to one hundred kilograms of grain, and the Yao people living in the mountains at times had to pay 2.5 kilograms of corn for a needle.<sup>31</sup> Even today, of the 3,676 villages in the county, 915 are still not connected to the paved road system.<sup>32</sup>

Agriculture formed the foundation of the local economy, and peasants made up the great majority of the local population. A large number of the

peasants were independent but poor. In the early 1930s, among all the peasants in Donglan, sixty-five percent were owner-peasants, thirty-one percent were semi-owners, and only four percent were tenants.<sup>33</sup> However, most owners or semi-owners only possessed a small amount of land. On average, each landlord or rich peasant family owned only between twenty and thirty mu of land, and very few families had more than seventy mu of land (Chinese mu is equal to one-fifteenth of a hectare or one-sixth of an acre).<sup>34</sup> Tenant peasants were even poorer than small-owner peasants. In Donglan, tenants had to submit three-fifths or even two-thirds of their yields to the landlords,<sup>35</sup> and that rate was much higher than the national average.

Politically, Donglan was ruled as a special frontier region during most dynasties. The area was first brought under Chinese control by the First Emperor during the third century BCE. However, the long distance between Donglan and the political centers in the north, the rugged terrain, tropical climate, and epidemic diseases prevented immigration, integration, and efficient administration, so the region was able to maintain its distinctive culture and identity as well as some degree of political autonomy long after the Qin conquest. The Qin used appointed officials to rule the plains, but created a quasi-feudal system for mountainous regions like Donglan. This feudal system permitted the powerful local families hereditary rights to rule their domains as long as they pledged allegiance and paid tributes to the Qin court. During the Tang Dynasty, the imperial court expanded the feudal system to cover the Left River, Right River, and Red Water River region. In the late eighth and early ninth centuries, some powerful local leaders revolted against the Tang court and were able to maintain their control over the Left River and Right River region for about a century.<sup>36</sup> During the Song Dynasty, Nong Zhigao, a powerful local leader from western Guangxi, launched another rebellion with the aim of creating an independent state in the region. Although Donglan never became part of the rebel domain, it was so close to the rebel territory that it was inevitably affected by the rebellion and its suppression. According to one account, after General Di Qing of the Song Dynasty defeated Nong Zhigao, Nong fled to Yunnan and one of his younger brothers moved northward along the Red Water River trying to escape to Guizhou. Di Qing then sent his subordinate Wei Jingdai to pursue Nong's brother. Wei reached Donglan and was then appointed as the ruler of the region. It is believed that Wei Jingdai was from Shandong in northern China, that his descendants ruled Donglan as hereditary lords from the Song until the early twentieth century, and that local families that carry the family name of Wei, including Wei Baqun's family, were all related to this common ancestor.<sup>37</sup>

It is hard to prove both the northern origin claimed of Wei Jingdai as well as the supposed blood relations between him and the Wei families of Donglan. Although it was recorded that imperial troops fighting Nong Zhigao were mostly from Shandong and that some of the troops settled down in Guangxi



after the end of the conflict, it was also common among the non-Han people in the south to forge claims about the northern origins of their families,<sup>38</sup> possibly for the purpose of avoiding discrimination. The Wei family that ruled Donglan during the Qing Dynasty could trace its origin to the early Ming, but not as far back as the Song Dynasty.<sup>39</sup> Even if General Wei Jingdai were truly of northern origin, his family would have to be indigenized in a few generations and become just like the previous local powerful families. In other words, the Song conquest, like that of the Qin, did not result in immediate political and cultural integration of the region. Powerful local families were given free hands in collecting taxes, recruiting free labor, maintaining private armies, and passing their positions onto their offspring. As late as the early twentieth century, some local rulers were still demanding the archaic *droit du seigneur* from their subjects, and in some places, this forced people to hold secret wedding ceremonies at midnight.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike the scholar-officials of the Chinese heartland, these local rulers of the frontier region were better known for their military power and skills than for their literary or scholarly achievements, and the Zhuang soldiers from the Right River region were particularly famous for their bravery and the special formations they adopted during battles. One of these formations prescribed the creation of small fighting teams, each consisting of seven soldiers. During battles, four of the seven soldiers would focus on attacking and killing enemies, whereas the other three were responsible for protecting the attackers and chopping off the heads of fallen enemies, which would bring rewards to the team.<sup>41</sup> The Zhuang fighters were so famous that on some occasions even the imperial court would solicit their assistance in dealing with troubles in other parts of the empire. For instance, during the Song and Ming dynasties, the imperial court enrolled Zhuang soldiers to fight against the Vietnamese and the Mongols.<sup>42</sup> In the sixteenth century, the Ming emperors at least three times ordered the lords of Donglan to travel to the southeastern coast with their troops to fight the international pirate groups. The first time occurred in 1509, when the Lord of Donglan, Wei Zhengbao, was dispatched to Guangdong with more than one thousand of his troops plus his son Wei Huchen. The lord and his soldiers fought fiercely and when the lord died of a battle wound a year later, his fifteen-year-old son took over the lordship and defeated the pirates. Wei Huchen then escorted his dead father home. In 1513, the emperor ordered Wei Huchen to take his troops to the southeast coast again to fight the pirates. Huchen was a brilliant commander and repeatedly defeated the bandits and pirates in Jiangxi, Guangdong, and Fujian. Unfortunately, just before he was about to return to Donglan in 1516, some rival officials poisoned him. However, his military achievements eventually earned him an honorary title from the emperor and a status of semi-deity in the local folklore. In 1555, Huchen's son, Wei Qiyun, was sent to Zhejiang by the imperial court with about one thousand of his

soldiers and he performed as well as his father.<sup>43</sup> The Ming court also frequently sent the lords of Donglan and their troops to subdue rebellions in neighboring provinces and counties, and in return the lords won monetary rewards and titles, as well as official appointments for their children.<sup>44</sup>

As a frontier county with a strong martial tradition, but not an equally strong literary tradition, Donglan thus stood in stark contrast to the more economically and academically advanced counties in Guangxi, such as Lingui near Guilin, which produced as many as 53 jinshi during the Ming and 190 jinshi during the Qing, but very few generals.<sup>45</sup> The civil service examinations were not introduced in Donglan until 1777. During the late Qing, for every prefectural exam, fourteen students from Donglan and the neighboring Fengshan and Nadi would be awarded the title of xiucai, which was the lowest degree. Among the fourteen, eight were literary xiucai, and the others were martial xiucai. By 1905, when the civil service examinations were abolished, only two students from Donglan had won the title of juren. Guangxi Province produced 173 jinshi during the Ming and 570 jinshi during the Qing, but not a single one of them was from Donglan.<sup>46</sup> The uneven distribution of degree holders in Guangxi is thus comparable to that of Qing Dynasty Zhejiang Province.<sup>47</sup> By 1949, only nine students from Donglan had earned college degrees and six others were studying in college. Altogether they made up 0.01% of the total population of the county.<sup>48</sup> If the Han-dominated areas of Guangxi represented a *semi-periphery*, a term William Rowe adopted to describe the area around Guilin,<sup>49</sup> then Donglan and most other Zhuang-dominated counties in northern and western Guangxi apparently were part of the full periphery of China. Yeh Wen-hsin used a different set of concepts to define the spatial hierarchy in Zhejiang and the Yangtze Delta. She described Jinhua and other middle counties in the Qiantang Valley as the provincial backwaters, Hangzhou as the provincial capital, and Shanghai as the metropolis.<sup>50</sup> If we apply these concepts to Guangxi, then Donglan was definitely part of the provincial backwaters, Guilin and Nanning were the provincial capitals, and Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Shanghai were the nearest metropolises. However, it is important to point out that in the early twentieth century, Donglan was much less “modern” and much farther away from any metropolis than Jinhua.

Despite repeated proposals about replacing the hereditary lords with appointed officials, the emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties chose to maintain the system in much of the southern frontier mainly for the purposes of appeasing the indigenous people and reducing the administrative cost. In 1730, as a result of the administrative reform initiated by the powerful Manchu official Oertai in southwestern China, southeastern Donglan became a regular county ruled by non-native appointed officials, but northwestern Donglan remained the domain of the Wei family till the early twentieth century, although the Weis now had to submit to the county magistrate. However, the appointed outsiders

did not always behave better than the hereditary lords. Part of the reason was that because Guangxi was a remote area replete with tropical diseases, the court would only send second-rate officials or those officials who had made mistakes or committed crimes to the province, and as a result the morale and efficiency of the officials was low. In fact, these officials could be more exploitative than the hereditary lords. Their appointment always came with a time limit, giving them a sense of urgency in making the most profitable use of their power. Besides, they could afford to be brutal because they were outsiders who did not share local and ethnic identities with their subjects and did not have to worry about the safety of their relatives who often chose to stay home. Like their feudal predecessors, these officials must have been familiar with the ancient adage “The heaven is high and the emperor far away” and knew that it was difficult for the emperor to keep a close eye on their behavior.

Surrounded by “barbarians” who were perceived to have a penchant for violence, these appointed officials would attach great importance to defensive measures and would sometimes overreact to a real or imagined threat. One of the first projects initiated by the appointed magistrate was to order the erection of a garrison complex, which was completed in 1732. In 1903, Magistrate Tao Qigan was very brutal in suppressing a secret society whose members were anti-government and refused to pay taxes. He would round up all the suspects and subject them to cruel torture until they confessed. He would then put them to death or release them after collecting fines or bribes. The leaders of the secret society reacted by launching a midnight attack on the county seat and killing the magistrate. Tao’s successor, Yi Zhenxing, responded with even greater brutality than his predecessor. He brought in a large number of soldiers and claimed that he wanted to kill all the people in Donglan. Five years later the local elite organized a protest campaign against Yi. After an investigation, the Manchu court discovered that Yi was guilty of “using excessive torture and punishment and was both greedy and atrocious.” Yi was demoted and exiled to Xinjiang, a frontier region even more remote than Donglan.<sup>51</sup>

Rebellions were frequent under such repressive hereditary or appointed rulers, and most were not as successful as the movements against Tao Qigan and Yi Zhenxing. The official records of the Ming Dynasty are full of accounts of rebellions launched by the Zhuang and Yao in Guangxi and the imperial campaigns against such rebellions. There were 218 rebellions in Guangxi during the Ming Dynasty, averaging nearly one every year. The Ming ruled China for 276 years, and in Guangxi only 29 of those years were peaceful.<sup>52</sup> Rebellions continued to break out during the Qing period and both Han and minorities participated in the revolts. Secret societies and the so-called roving soldiers—members of Qing army units that had been disbanded—played a large role in many of these rebellions. Some of these uprisings took place in or near Donglan. In 1763, a group of Yao revolted in Donglan and was defeated by government

forces after being besieged for forty-six days. In 1858, a secret society leader from neighboring Tianzhou began an attack on the county seat of Donglan. He fought the official forces for two days and then had to withdraw. Three years later, a group of Taiping rebels entered Donglan and many locals joined them. They won some battles, but were eventually crushed by the Manchu forces. In the 1890s, army officer Lu Rongting was promoted by the Qing court for his successful suppression of rebellions launched by secret societies and roving soldiers in Donglan and other places. Mo Rongxin, another army officer, also earned promotions by helping end unrest in Donglan from 1905 to 1910.<sup>53</sup>

Bandits formed a special group among the rebels. In the late Qing, Guangxi was described as a province where “you cannot find a place without mountains, you cannot find a mountain without caves, and you cannot find a cave without bandits.”<sup>54</sup> This depiction applied much better to poor and mountainous counties like Donglan than the counties in the prosperous plains. In the Republican era the bandits of Guangxi were often compared with the pirates of Guangdong. Phil Billingsley attributes the prevalence of banditry in Guangxi to both international political factors and a sharp social differentiation. General Li Zongren, a native of Guangxi and the actual ruler of the province during much of the Republican era, emphasized ethnic conflicts, lack of education and poverty as causes of banditry in Guangxi.<sup>55</sup> The bandits in Guangxi sometimes became so powerful that the Qing government had to offer amnesty and official positions to their leaders. Lu Rongting, who ruled Guangxi from 1911 to 1921, was a former bandit who was offered a powerful position in the Qing army, as were many of his subordinates. Their good fortune caused many to see banditry as an easy path to upward mobility.

In 1912, shortly after the founding of the Republic, the Yao in Donglan launched another rebellion that was immediately put down by the provincial government.<sup>56</sup> In 1919, some Yao from Lingyun, Fengshan, Donglan, Enlong, and Tian’e staged a large-scale revolt against compulsory military conscription, forced labor service, and heavy taxation. The rebels demanded freedom and the right to subsistence. Although most leaders were Yao, nearly two-thirds of the rebels were Zhuang and Han. The uprising was crushed in 1921 and Deng Bucui, one of the Yao leaders of the rebellion, was executed in the county seat of Donglan. Many rebels who survived the suppression would later join Wei Baqun’s movement.<sup>57</sup>

The recurrent conflicts between local government and the people confirmed the stereotypical impression that in a frontier region like Donglan the officials were brutal and greedy and the people were violent and rebellious. One striking feature of this violent and rebellious society is the popular obsession with weapons. Firearms were one of the most popular commodities in the region. Wealthy families would buy modern weapons, whereas poor people could only afford primitive guns, and sometimes several poor families would

collectively buy and own one or more firearms. Guangxi's proximity to Guangdong, Hong Kong, and French Vietnam made arms smuggling easy. A list of weapons confiscated by the government between March and December 1907 shows that more than twenty types of guns were used in the province.<sup>58</sup> Even after 1949, when the Communists ordered all villagers to turn in their weapons, some Yao people in the Western Mountains protested that they needed guns to defend themselves against possible attacks from the Zhuang.<sup>59</sup> It therefore did not require much effort for efficient instigators to turn peasants in this region into bandits, rebels, or revolutionaries.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Guangxi as a frontier region was more exposed to foreign influence and more severely affected by foreign encroachment than many interior provinces. In this aspect, frontier Guangxi was similar to coastal areas like Guangdong and Fujian. In Guangxi, foreign influence in both positive and negative forms came from two directions: Guangdong to the east and Vietnam to the south. The opium trade centered in Guangzhou began to affect Guangxi in the early nineteenth century. Initially, foreign opium was brought from Guangzhou to southwestern China by way of Guangxi. Later, as the Chinese began to cultivate poppies in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan, opium started to flow along the opposite direction, with Guangxi, particularly the Right River region, still making an important link in the trading network. Caravan bands would bring opium from Yunnan and Guizhou to Baise to exchange for salt, cloth, and other goods, turning Baise into the most important economic center and the largest city in western Guangxi.<sup>60</sup> In the early twentieth century, taxes from the opium trade sometimes formed almost half of Guangxi's revenue, and of the taxes from opium trade nearly half came from Baise and the Right River region. Opium smoking became one of the "three grave evils" of Guangxi Province, the other two being banditry and gambling.<sup>61</sup>

Economically, Guangxi became more and more connected to British Hong Kong and French Vietnam. Three cities of Guangxi—Wuzhou, Nanning, and Longzhou—were opened as treaty ports, and currencies issued by the two colonial regimes were widely circulated in Guangxi.<sup>62</sup> The city of Beihai in Guangdong functioned like the fourth treaty port of Guangxi because of its proximity to the latter. Although the Right River region is closer to French Vietnam than to Guangdong, most imported goods sold in the area were brought from Guangdong rather than Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> Foreign religions were also brought to Guangxi and the spread of a distorted form of Christianity contributed to the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in southeastern Guangxi in 1851. As the French began to conquer and colonize Vietnam, Guangxi felt the threat of French encroachment and eventually became directly involved in the conflicts between France and Vietnam and between France and China. Liu Yongfu, the fierce leader of the Black Flags who fought the French conquerors in northern

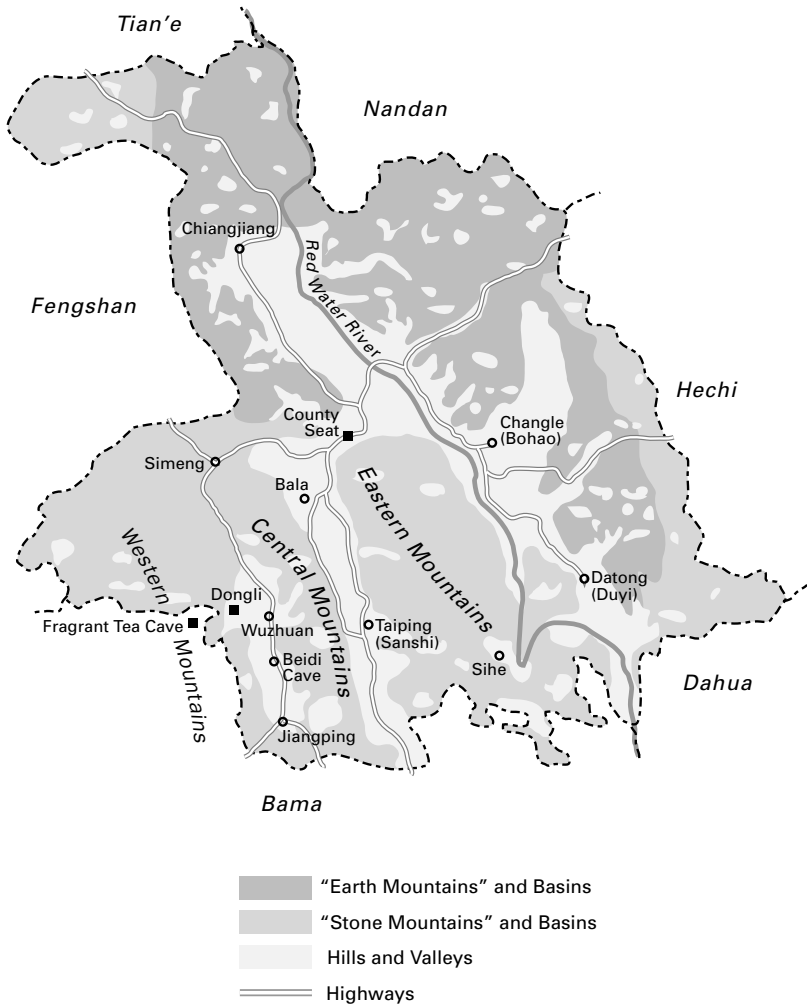
Vietnam in the late nineteenth century, was from Guangxi and most of his soldiers also came from Guangxi.<sup>64</sup> In 1884, Qing China and France fought a war along the border between Guangxi and Vietnam. Although very brief, the war shook Guangxi and further awakened the nationalist consciousness of young scholars and students such as Sun Yat-sen and later Mao Zedong. Twenty years later, Sun Yat-sen would launch rebellions against the Qing court in the same border area and Sun, with his imported Republicanism, had more followers from Guangxi than from many other provinces.

Although Donglan was more isolated than many other counties in Guangxi, it was not immune to foreign influence and threat. Donglan was not very far away from Baise, the most important center of the opium trade in western Guangxi, and some in Donglan later even began to cultivate poppies.<sup>65</sup> Many from Donglan were involved in the Taiping Rebellion, and some Donglan natives also joined Liu Yongfu's Black Flags and participated in the anti-French movement.<sup>66</sup> However, it is true that within Guangxi Donglan was much less exposed to foreign economic, political, and cultural influence than the counties nearer to Guangdong and French Vietnam. The closest treaty port was several hundred kilometers away, and in the late 1920s most people in Donglan still used homemade cloth rather than imported textiles. For lighting they used locally produced tea-seed oil or tung oil rather than imported kerosene.<sup>67</sup> Foreign currencies were not as widely circulated in Donglan as in some other areas, and there were no Catholic or Protestant groups or churches in Donglan. A British Christian arrived in the county seat of Donglan in 1935 to preach his religion, and he was very likely the first Westerner to ever visit Donglan. He played his accordion and sang on the streets to attract people. Once he gathered a crowd, he would begin to preach, and his Chinese companion would translate for him and hand out the pamphlets they had prepared. He spent several days in the county seat, but failed to find any serious followers. The two then traveled to Wuzhuan to repeat what they had done in the county seat. Again they did not get a positive response. Disappointed, they spent only one night at Wuzhuan and then moved to the neighboring county.<sup>68</sup>

It was into this frontier society that Wei Baqun was born on February 6, 1894. His birthplace was the scenic village of Dongli, which was located on the edge of one of the larger plains in the county and had about eighty to ninety families in the early twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> There were mountains near the village and one of the most famous was Mount Yinhaizhou, 747 meters above sea level. Dongli was known for having three beautiful ponds formed by water from mountain springs, which served as the source of the small Dongping River flowing through the village. In front of the village lay the flat paddy fields on which the villagers farmed and lived. A few kilometers away was the town of Wuzhuan, and Dongyuan, the county seat, was about forty kilometers to the east of the village. These were the two most important towns in the county, and both were located on small basins. Not far to the west of the village loomed the Western Moun-

tains, home to a large Yao community. Dongli was on the borderline between the plain around Wuzhuan and the Western Mountains, two areas that would play significant roles in Wei Baqun's peasant movement (Map 1.3).

Some in Dongli village reportedly predicted at the time of Wei Baqun's birth that the boy was not an ordinary human being. They found multiple omens showing that Wei Baqun would grow into a great and powerful person.



MAP 1.3 Topography of Contemporary Donglan.

Wei Baqun was born on the new year's day of the year of the horse, which was a lucky day of a lucky year according to folk beliefs. He was much bigger than most other newborn babies at that time, weighing 4.5 kilograms at birth. He was also a handsome boy who was believed to carry the facial features of an extraordinary man. This handsome boy later grew into a handsome man. Wei Baqun's friends, relatives and followers described him as a good-looking man with a medium stature, a stalwart body, a square face, a dark skin, and a full beard.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the boy was the first son of his parents and the first grandson of his grandparents, destined to be the pillar of the Wei family.<sup>71</sup> With the hope and belief that his son would one day become a great man, Wei Baqun's father, Wei Erzhang, decided to name his son Bingji, which means "bearing luck."<sup>72</sup> The name was changed to Bingqian, meaning "to control the world," when Wei Baqun started school at the age of eight. Wei Baqun himself was very likely familiar with all the talk and expectations of his auspicious future and considered himself different from his peers. In 1917, he adopted the new name Cui and styled himself Baqun. Cui means "outstanding" and Baqun, which is the colloquial equivalent of the classical word "Cui," literally means "to stand above the crowd." If the omens heralding Wei Baqun's birth had failed to predetermine his path in life, they probably played a part in shaping and foretelling his character. One of the most striking features of Wei Baqun's personality is that he was a strong-willed person with a strong sense of mission who liked to be in control and who knew how to command people.



FIGURE 1.1 Dongli Village Today. Photograph by the author.



Despite all the folk beliefs regarding Wei Baqun's future power and greatness, few would have been able to foretell that he would attain his power by becoming a rebel. It was hard to find a single reason to envisage Wei Baqun's career as a rebel and revolutionary at the time of his birth. Wei Baqun's family had about ten members when he was born and owned more than two hundred mu (sixty-six acres) of paddy field, making it the wealthiest family in the village. The Wei family had quite a few tenants and nine laborers to cultivate their land.<sup>73</sup> Baqun's father was involved in the tobacco and textile business and had anywhere from three to five wives. Villagers recalled that Wei Baqun's family had not always been wealthy and that it suddenly became rich in the hands of his grandfather. There are at least three different accounts about how the Wei family made its fortune. According to the first account, the family became rich by pure luck. Wei Baqun's grandfather's sister accidentally dug out an urn of silver dollars while laboring in a plot of land on a mountain slope. Baqun's grandfather had only three small pieces of land before that, but he was able to buy one piece of land after another with the silver dollars. He also bought water buffalos and horses and began to involve himself in the usury business.<sup>74</sup> The second account attributes the wealth of the family to the business skills of Wei Baqun's grandfather, who sold firewood and straw sandals in his early years and tobacco and rice wine later in his life.<sup>75</sup> A third account combines the first two.

Villagers also remembered that although Wei Baqun's family was wealthy, it was not politically powerful.<sup>76</sup> There were other wealthy families in Donglan that had produced powerful lords in the feudal era and influential officials in the Qing or Republican governments. Wei Baqun's grandfather became a rich landlord, but held no official positions, and Wei Baqun's father was able to purchase a low-ranking military degree from the Manchu government, but was never able to land any official position. Besides, his father would die at a young age, which was a devastating blow to the family's dream of political power. It is logical to argue that Wei Baqun's grandfather did have a strong aspiration for political power after he acquired wealth, and that might be the reason why he bought an official title for his son. After the son died, it was only natural for him to transfer his hope for power from his son to his eldest grandson, because there is no indication that Wei Baqun's father had any male siblings. The grandfather might have expected Wei Baqun to have an education and then enter the government. Although Wei Baqun would reject that arranged course of life, he may still have inherited his grandfather's dream of influence and prestige. However, contrary to his grandfather's expectations, he would take rebellion and revolution as his path to power.

Most historians in China would discard this familial factor as a motivation for Wei Baqun's rebellion. They argue that Wei Baqun became rebellious at a very young age primarily because of the sufferings of the poor families living around him. There are many stories about how, as a little boy and teenager, Wei

Baquan was already resentful about the inequality he observed and sympathetic toward the poor and the exploited. According to one story, there was a poor villager in Dongli named Wei Nai'en, and her family was so poor that they could only afford to eat thin porridge for almost every meal. One day in 1904, after making sure that there was no one at Nai'en's home, ten-year-old Wei Baquan brought some uncooked rice to Nai'en's home and cooked a solid rice meal for the family. Another story tells that in summer 1905, Wei Baquan went swimming with his friends, one of whom, a poor boy named Chen Qinglian, was wearing tattered clothes. Wei Baquan decided to trade clothes with him. Knowing that it would be hard for him to persuade Qinglian to take the deal, Wei Baquan got out of the pond before the others, put on Qinglian's clothes, and went home. When Qinglian finished swimming he could not find his clothes and had to put on Wei Baquan's new clothes. Qinglian later went to see Wei Baquan to exchange clothes, but Wei Baquan refused. Later that year, as a third story goes, Wei Baquan gave a shirt to another poor friend named Chen Henglong.<sup>77</sup>

There is also a story about a more extraordinary event supposed to have taken place in 1907. On a certain day before the Spring Festival of that year, so the story goes, Wei Baquan was playing with the other kids from the village. His friends were called home by their parents one after another. Their parents told Wei Baquan: "Your family is rich, so you don't have to work and can play all day long, but we are poor and our kids have to work. Otherwise we won't have enough to eat." Wei Baquan was shocked and sad that the other families in the village could not even have a happy Spring Festival because of their poverty, and he decided to do something to help them. He went home and pried open his father's money box. He took more than one hundred dollars from the box to distribute among the poor families, telling them that this was his pocket money. His father soon discovered that someone had stolen his money, but was not sure who the thief was. He then pretended that he had lost the key to his money box and asked people for help. Wei Baquan volunteered and easily unlocked the box with a piece of iron wire. His father then asked him about the lost money, and Wei Baquan admitted what he had done. He was then severely beaten.<sup>78</sup> A different version of this story lists the grandfather as the owner of the money box and the one who punished Wei Baquan. Instead of taking one hundred silver dollars, this account holds that Wei Baquan stole only eighty dollars.<sup>79</sup> The father was a main character in one version of the story, but completely absent in the other, probably because although some people believe that Wei Baquan's father died when he was only nine years old and hence would not be able to be present in this story, others insist that the father did not pass away until Wei Baquan reached sixteen.<sup>80</sup> There are similar stories about how Wei Baquan stole grain from the barn of his own family and gave it to his poor friends and how he disobeyed his grandfather by not collecting rent from a poor

tenant who made a living by growing pears.<sup>81</sup> The latter event is supposed to have taken place in 1912 when Wei Baqun was eighteen years old. The story mentions that this event occurred when he was about to attend a school in the county seat. However, most other sources convincingly report that in 1912 Wei Baqun had already dropped out of the school in the county seat and was away from home attending schools in Qingyuan and Guilin.

In some other stories, the young Wei Baqun's sympathy for the poor and the weak caused conflicts not only with his own father and grandfather, but also with other wealthy and powerful local families. There is a story about how in 1905 Wei Baqun and his poor friends stole grain from Liang Shi'e, a landlord.<sup>82</sup> Another frequently cited story features Wei Baqun's conflict with Du Ba, the son of a powerful landlord who liked to bully other kids. According to the story, one day when Wei Baqun was swimming in a river he heard a little girl crying. He jumped to the bank and found that Du Ba was abusing a little girl who was collecting wild plants to feed pigs. Du Ba had kicked her basket away and wanted to "touch" the girl. Wei Baqun ordered Du Ba to pick up the basket and return it to the girl, but Du Ba refused. The two then began to fight and did not stop until Du Ba was defeated and sued for peace. After Du Ba promised not to tell his father about the fight, Wei Baqun let him go. However, Du Ba later broke his promise and asked his father to take revenge for him. His father then complained to Wei Baqun's grandfather who in turn scolded Baqun. Infuriated by Du Ba's betrayal, Wei Baqun and his friends sneaked into Du Ba's house, grabbed three bottles of medicinal liquor that Du Ba's father had stored, poured out the liquor, and replaced it with urine. Since Du Ba had stolen his father's liquor before, the father, after sampling the urine, believed that it was Du Ba who had plotted the mischief, and had him severely beaten.<sup>83</sup>

The problem with this story is that in real life Du Ba and Wei Baqun were not even in the same age group. As a scholar who had taken and passed the lowest level of the civil service examination before the system was abolished in 1905 and who had served for two terms as a county magistrate in Guizhou by 1920,<sup>84</sup> Du Ba was much older than Wei Baqun. Chen Mianshu, a Communist friend of Wei Baqun, met Du Ba in 1926 and reported that Du was in his fifties in that year, which means Du was about twenty years older than Wei Baqun.<sup>85</sup> Although very likely untrue, this story serves as a preamble to a more serious and important conflict between Wei Baqun and Du Ba that would occur later in their lives. The story also foretells one of Wei Baqun's love relationships. In some versions of the story, the little girl bullied by Du Ba was Huang Xiumei, who would become Wei Baqun's fourth wife and loyal supporter.

The story about Wei Baqun fighting Du Ba was probably made up to glorify Wei Baqun. Judging from Wei Baqun's personality and his later deeds, however, the major episodes in these stories could have been real despite some

discrepancies, and these stories about Wei Baqun constitute the most recent chapter in a long folk tradition about local rebels and heroes. The earlier chapters in the tradition contain many similar stories about Wei Baqun's predecessors. It often has been suggested that Wei Baqun became rebellious at a very young age not only due to the inequity and sufferings that existed around him, but also because of the existence of moving stories about people fighting inequities and suffering in the past. These stories form an important part of the local culture and Wei Baqun was a very attentive listener of those stories and a product of that culture.

Among all the folk heroes in the local tradition, the aforementioned Nong Zhigao, who rebelled against both the Vietnamese and Chinese court in the mid-eleventh century, was one of the most prominent. As a brilliant military strategist, Nong commanded his army to attack Nanning, Guangzhou and other cities of the region, sending shock waves to both China and Vietnam. Nong was eventually defeated and died a brutal death. Since the Song Dynasty, the Zhuang people of Guangxi and Yunnan who live along the Sino-Vietnamese border have been worshipping Nong as a heroic ancestor, whereas the Zhuang in other areas have tended to condemn Nong as a "rebellious barbarian." Donglan seems to fall into the category of "other areas."<sup>86</sup> It is therefore hard to know whether Wei Baqun identified more with Nong Zhigao, the southern rebel, or Wei Jingdai, the northern general, who helped defeat Nong, and who was believed to be the ancestor of the Weis in Donglan. What is certain is that Wei Baqun was familiar with Nong's stories as all local people were.

Wei Baqun's perception of Lord Wei Huchen should be much less ambivalent than his views on Nong Zhigao. As a local man who managed to attain royal title and national fame with his martial spirit and skills, Wei Huchen was a symbol of the local martial tradition and a source of pride for the local people. He was born in Wuzhuan, the nearest town to Wei Baqun's village. In fact, local people believed that it was Wei Huchen who coined the name Wuzhuan, which means "the seal of Marquis Wuyi,"<sup>87</sup> to celebrate the title he received from the Ming court after defeating the pirates in the Wuyi Mountains in Fujian Province. His tomb was quite close to Wei Baqun's village and ruins of the training facilities he had built still stand on Mount Yinhaizhou.

Wei Baqun would also have been familiar with the stories of the anti-Qing rebels Li Dingguo and Hong Xiuquan. Li was initially a rebel against the Ming Dynasty, but after the collapse of the Ming, he turned against the Manchu invaders. After his movement was crushed, some of his followers settled down in Donglan, becoming the ancestors of some local Han residents. Whereas Li Dingguo's movement began in the north and ended in the south, Hong Xiuquan's Taiping Rebellion took the opposite direction, and both had direct connections with Donglan. A striking feature of the Taiping Rebellion is that it was a multiethnic movement. It is estimated that at the beginning of