1 Introduction

Chinese citizens who persevered into the tail end of the war of resistance against Japan were given, albeit not for the first time, an intimate glimpse of their leader. Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) set for his compatriots an example of efficiency in organizing one's everyday life in a time of crisis. According to a slim volume published by the main organ of the Nationalist Party, the leader maintained strict discipline and regularity, getting up at five in the morning and retiring to bed at eleven in the evening.[1] Chiang's incredible industriousness allowed the chairman of the Nationalist government to preside over a vast bureaucratic machine, all the while taking meals and exercises at regular hours through the day. After completing official business at six and before dinner at half past seven, the head of China's state, party and military establishments even found the time to take his Methodist wife, Song Meiling (1898–2003), to Chongqing's suburbs for walks. On his drive to the wartime capital's outskirts, Chiang would take mental notes of military or police officers who did not wear proper uniforms or of other inadequacies in the city's appearance. The leader billed to deliver his country from Japanese enslavement had superhuman stamina, but was also perfectly ordinary, piously keeping to a work–leisure routine and enjoying quality time with his family. This blend of the grandiose and the everyday is well encapsulated in the title of the volume, which promised insights into the elevated figure's private life and his teachings on everyday life.

What messages can readers take away from this carefully curated publication? More charitable observers would see Chiang's fastidious obsession with order and punctuality as testament to his military background and Neo-Confucian upbringing.

They might take comfort in the Japanese-educated officer's regular evocations, as indeed seen in his calligraphy in the book, of propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), rectitude (*lian*) and a sense of shame (*chi*).

[1] Tao Baichuan, ed., *Jiang zhuxi de shenghuo he shenghuo guan* [*Chairman Chiang's Daily Life and His Outlook on Daily Life*] (Chongqing: Zhongzhou chubanshe, 1944).

Detractors might associate the authoritarian leader's puritanism with a witty Shanghailander slight: "There's a Methodism in his madness," an allusion to his sudden but zealous conversion to the Protestant faith.[2] Like many a colorful twentieth-century leader, Chiang's mediated persona drew admiration and contempt, awe and ridicule.

But no personality cult worthy of its name is just about the politician. The political leader's putative qualities also revealed much about the state over which he presided and its enemies. In the case of the Guomindang (GMD, the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang), stage-managed adoration for Chiang, who was far from the undisputed leader throughout its history as China's ruling party, betrayed the state's aspiration to build a modern, salubrious and orderly society. Chiang's attachment to his spouse could be intended to compensate for his notoriety as a womanizer, but it was equally plausible that the family man persona served as a counterpoint to the lax personal life many of the GMD's detractors led. Chiang's Spartan daily routine contrasted sharply with the Communist leaders' peripatetic and supposedly loose lifestyle. His clockwork discipline sent a message to workers and students who slacked off their duties, indulged in consumerist pleasures or, worse, disrupted production and social order by joining strikes and boycotts. Bureaucrats were warned not to get too comfortable in their positions as their superiors were keeping a constant eye on them. The Nationalist chief personified the vision of a hierarchical, efficient community where members knew their places, toiled meekly and conscientiously, maintained good health and went about their daily life with military-like precision. The aspiration to turn China into a well-oiled social machine free of class conflicts, held even more dearly in such times of vast displacement and precariousness as the Second Sino–Japanese War, was the hallmark of Nationalist rule. Chiang's daily routine was, in this sense, a shorthand for the GMD's *raison d'être*.

The Nationalist government was the product of a revolution. The GMD party-state claimed custody of the incomplete national revolution (*guomin geming*) Sun Yat-sen launched in 1924. Founded in Guangzhou, and settling into Nanjing in April 1927 after deposing the warlord-led Beiyang regime, the Chinese Nationalist Party presided over the first government that had brought unity, albeit tentative, to China since the end of dynastic rule. At the same time, the Nationalists governed in contention with elements of the very revolution they claimed to inherit. Sun Yat-sen never envisaged a communist China, but he countenanced Soviet assistance and participation of Chinese

[2] James Burke, *My Father in China* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), 347.

Communists in his enterprise.[3] As such, the Communist movement gathered strength and prestige among workers and peasants with whom it engaged as the national revolution gathered steam. Despite substantial differences among themselves, Chiang and his colleagues devoted their careers to neutralizing whatever gains the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) achieved in the three years during which it acted as the GMD's revolutionary partner. Their political careers were inseparable from the bloody crackdown against Communists and labor unionists on April 12, 1927.

For the next decades, the one leitmotif that underpinned the Nationalist administration that lasted for almost half a century was responding to the threat of revolutionary socialism. This response took on board the rhetoric and methods of the radical left but committed itself to consolidating, rather than eradicating, unequal social relations. Hailing the nation-state as the only legitimate organizing principle of social life, it promised social development by managing capitalism and neutering modernity's disorienting effects on social norms and culture. Confrontations between classes and radical anti-imperialism, Nationalists charged, would derail China's political and economic revival. If the coupling of the nationalist and social revolutions defined Chinese Communism, the GMD led a nationalist revolution that had decidedly conservative socioeconomic goals. It demanded, just as radical right activists elsewhere did or still do, capitalism without capitalism.[4]

China's conservative revolution, like any revolution, entailed both destruction and consolidation. The April 12 purge, multiple encirclement campaigns in the 1930s and the doomed "bandit suppression" (*jiaofei*) campaign from 1946 until the early 1950s were the GMD's most obvious responses to the Communist threat. Censorship of the media and limitations on political freedom also attested to the party-state's unease with its left-wing opposition. Yet Chiang's national revolution was also a proactive program; it set out to form a social bloc, focusing on intellectuals and the urban middle class, in contention with proletarian politics. It worked assiduously to channel popular and elite sympathy away from left-wing or class politics and to cultivate social movements

[3] In this book, "Communist" refers to the Chinese political movement that was founded in 1921, while "communist" denotes political ideologies that aspired to a classless social order, which also inspired, but not always defined, the Chinese Communist Party's agendas throughout its existence. The same distinction applies to "Fascist" the Italian party and "fascist" the ideology.

[4] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 131. "Capitalism without capitalism" is, of course, Žižek's definition of fascism.

and an everyday culture that engaged the masses in renovation of the spirit, rather than realignment of property relations. Suppression of political activism accompanied carefully choreographed expressions of civic enthusiasm. Deploying the political machinery of a radical revolutionary party, the GMD embraced industrial capitalism, but rejected Western materialism and imperialism. It sought an ethno-communal solution to China's semi-colonial status. Instead of confronting the capitalist system, it appealed to the nation and, by extension, Eastern civilization as aestheticized communions in which acute class tensions were imagined away, citizens worked harmoniously under an apparently apolitical state's tutelage and China's independence was achieved through alliances that, in rhetoric but not in substance, transcended the international liberal order.

Placing China's Conservative Revolution in Global History

By characterizing the national revolution since 1927 as a conservative one, this book situates a core period in China's modern experience within the context of global history. At stake is how to understand the Chinese revolution's nature. Rather than seeing China's revolutionary process as one of continuous state-building presided over by successive regimes, I highlight dimensions of the Nationalist experiment that set it apart from the Communist movement it fought against. The Nationalists as described in the following pages shared resemblances not primarily with their domestic nemesis but with international counterparts that valorized the nation – defined as a hierarchal, spiritual and productive community – as the primary subject of history. The GMD differed from the Chinese Communists not because it proved much less successful in maintaining an effective, centralized state but because Nationalists saw confrontational class politics as the ultimate threat to national rejuvenation and social health.

Of course, placing the Nationalist government under a comparative light is no new strategy, even though past scholarship has tended to see China as epiphenomenal to the radical right-wing ascendency in the interwar world. An earlier generation of historians debated on the GMD's fascist nature, considering the regime's connections with its right-wing counterparts in Germany and Italy. They homed in on Nationalist leaders' fascination with fascist experiments in Europe, particularly the efforts of such party groupings as the Blue Shirts or Lixingshe to emulate the organization, trappings and ideological

dispositions of the Nazi Party in the 1930s.[5] Despite similarities between the ruling parties of China, Germany and Italy, historians tended to see the GMD's right-wing politics as superficial. Lloyd Eastman, credited for revealing the GMD's fascist tendencies, believes the party that governed China from 1927 to 1937 lacked ideological identity and those who looked to Continental Europe for inspiration on how to mobilize the disaffected populace were at the margins of an ossified bureaucratic behemoth.[6] The GMD could lay claim not to a conservative revolution, but to an *aborted* one. William Kirby, a specialist in twentieth-century Sino–German relations, argues that "there was no 'fascist movement' in China but rather a vogue that coincided with the emergence of a close Sino–German friendship." Nationalists were attracted to national socialism for diverse reasons, and such interest did not translate into concrete action. The same allegedly applies in the case of Italian Fascism insofar as China's relationships with Italy and the Vatican became increasingly cordial, with anticommunism as the common denominator.[7] Chinese admiration of fascist movements was thus ephemeral, superficial and lacking in historical significance. It follows from this line of argument that the global ascendance of the radical right had cosmetic effects on China's development, just as the GMD's prolonged campaign against its erstwhile revolutionary partners was a domestic matter that had little relevance to political developments beyond Chinese borders.

In returning Nationalist China's crusade against Chinese Communists to the interwar moment, I stress the ideological import of a revolution that not just imitated but shared qualities manifest in fascist movements that raged from Tokyo to Buenos Aires.[8] These affinities were not confined to the paraphernalia – adoption of Nazi military drills, interfusion between

[5] Lloyd E. Eastman, *Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), chap. 2; Frederic Wakeman argues that contemporary and historiographical accounts often confused the Lixingshe with the Blue Shirts, which were in fact two distinct organizations (*Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 63). For an alternative viewpoint on the Blue Shirts, see Maria Hsia Chang, *The Chinese Blue Shirt Society: Fascism and Developmental Nationalism* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1985).

[6] Eastman, *Abortive Revolution*, 83–4, 303–6.

[7] William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 175; Michele Fatica, "The Beginning and the End of the Idyllic Relations between Mussolini's Italy and Chiang Kai-shek's China (1930–1937)," in *Italy's Encounters with Modern China: Imperial Dreams, Strategic Ambitions*, eds. Maurizio Marinelli and Giovanni B. Andornino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 89–115.

[8] Recent major book-length studies of the radical right beyond Europe include Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence,*

left-wing and right-wing aesthetics in cultural products such as films and literary writings or even the proliferation of cult-like, secret sects that answered directly to the Leader.[9] Instead, they struck at the very core of the right's approach to the reigning sociopolitical order and were internal to China's own history. Margherita Zanasi's pioneering study of Nationalist economic thoughts argues that China confronted the same political and economic crises that plagued interwar Europe. The currency autarky, corporatism and military industrialization enjoyed among Nationalist leaders cumulated in a "brand of state fascism" in 1930s China. They were tools anticommunist nationalists took from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to resist foreign imperialism.[10] This book builds on Zanasi's insight but shows that fascist tendencies in China needed no borrowing from abroad. Instead, they were intrinsic to the country's experience of what historical sociologist Giovanni Arrighi called the "long twentieth century" – the convergence of territorial and capitalist expansionism that propelled established colonial empires and more recent predators such as Germany, Italy and Japan.[11] For economically backward and (semi)colonized societies like China, the choice was one between joining the capitalist interstate system and, as in the case of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, challenging the premises of property and imperialist hegemony. What made the conservative revolution distinct in modern Chinese history and typical of contemporaneous radical right movements is the promise to overcome capitalism and its deleterious effects on the national community without challenging its structural foundation.

Nationalism and Opposition to Class Struggle

There were two core dimensions to the conservative revolution: nationalism and an obsession with the aesthetics of mass society. Nationalism lay at the heart of radical right attempts to offset the alienating effects of

and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[9] Robert Culp, *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 197–206; Liu Jihui [Joyce C. H. Liu], Xin de bianyi: xiandaixing de jingshen xingshi [Perverted Heart: The Psychic Forms of Modernity] (Taipei: Maitian chuban, 2004), chap. 7; Wakeman, *Spymaster*, chaps. 7–8.

[10] Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 14–15.

[11] Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 1994), 60–6. See also Karatani Kojin, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, trans. Michael K. Bourdaghs (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 170–5.

capitalist modernity. Cultural historians of Europe have emphasized populist nationalism as the basis of fascist mobilization. Fascist agitators appealed to emotions, brandished the nation's mythic qualities and promised rebirth out of collective malaise while embracing industrial modernization. They claimed to have brought about a synthesis of conservatism and socialism, energizing the populace to challenge a skewed international order without damaging social cohesion.[12] For example, Benito Mussolini found in the nation a substitute for class, identifying Italy as one proletarian collective to be saved from international bourgeois domination. The former socialist participated in a wider intellectual trend in late industrializing Europe, prevalent since the Great War, that valorized the ethnic community as the oppressed group while jettisoning class politics.[13] Suppression of communist and liberal opposition, building a dirigiste economy and crafting mass rituals and monumental architecture all contributed to the radical redefinition of the state's role in commanding social and political processes.

Investing in the nation-state's transformative potential was characteristic not only of fascists but also noncommunist revolutionaries and reformers with ambiguous socialist sympathies. The illusion that the nation was an affective, organic community where each citizen could be taken care of informed those politicians who were fed up with the crumbling liberal global order. Despite their jarringly different reputation and policy outcomes, progressives such as Franklin D. Roosevelt shared with the radical right on the European Continent belief in the nation-state's ability to bring meaning, order and succor to a crisis-ridden and demoralized populace.[14] The displacement of class politics by appealing to an underprivileged national community, which characterized Mussolini's position, resonated with Sun Yat-sen's (1866–1925) Principle of Livelihood (*minsheng zhuyi*). Rejecting Marxism, the *minsheng* theory posited that all Chinese people partook in the nation's poverty. "Since China's largest capitalists are poor men out in the world," Sun argued,

[12] Prominent examples include Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1999); Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
[13] Mark Neocleous, *Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.
[14] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

"then all the Chinese people must be counted as poor."[15] The revolutionary leader went on to lay out strategies conceived to prevent class divisions as the country industrialized. Sun's lament of China as a proletarian nation caught up in a world dominated by imperialist powers anticipated his anti-Communist followers' rejection of class confrontations as the bases of political action.

While nationalism had inspired all major modern Chinese political movements one way or another, the Guomindang's conservative revolution was unique in seeing the nation as an end in itself and irreconcilable with social revolution. Nationalism and statism, Peter Zarrow observes, undergirded modern China's participation in the international system, as the Qing empire transformed into a "people." Yet the nation-state was not consistently the ultimate ideal of the Chinese revolution; Mao Zedong (1893–1976), for one, was famously ambivalent about the party-state throughout his long political career.[16] To the contrary, the regime Mao's Communists replaced was singularly committed to the nation. GMD luminaries such as Dai Jitao (1891–1949) and Hu Hanmin (1879–1936) promoted national revival to counter proletarian internationalism. While nationalist goals were shared across the political divide, an appeal to the nation as an ideal community inherently incompatible with communism and social revolution was peculiar to conservative revolutionaries around the globe.

The GMD's unique brand of nationalism set the conservative revolution apart from the governments that preceded and succeeded it. It is, therefore, misleading to argue that the GMD had nothing specific to it but was only a stage in China's strengthening authoritarianism and departure from liberal democratic ideals. Narratives of the Nationalist period from the 1990s and the turn of the twenty-first century, produced against the background of the Communist state's political consolidation and economic liberalization in the People's Republic, situate the GMD state in the *longue durée* of modern nation-state formation and downplay its particularities. Characterizing the Nationalist regime as a case of "Confucian fascism," Frederic Wakeman notes Chiang Kai-shek's attraction to Germany, Italy and Turkey as ascendant interwar powers.

[15] Sun Yat-sen, *Sanmin zhuyi* (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1954), 210. Translation taken from Sun, *San Min Chu I: The Three Principles of the People*, trans. Frank W. Price (Taipei: China Publishing Co., n.d.), 173.

[16] Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 4, 288–9. As Alain Badiou observes, Mao's Cultural Revolution was a "revolution within – and largely against – a socialist state," in line with the communist commitment to the state's eventual demise (Badiou and Jean-Claude Milner, *Controversies: A Dialogue on the Politics and Philosophy of Our Times* [Cambridge: Polity, 2014], 46).

However, while the GMD party-state embraced the latest fascist organizational form, Chiang's "nativist" Confucian moralism "lent a fussy air to his imitative fascism," indebted not to Hitler and Mussolini but to China's dynastic past. Its defining features were comparable much less to Continental Europe's latest political fad than fidelity to imperial China's reigning ideology.[17] Taking as his points of comparison revolutionary movements, A. James Gregor posits that the radical right was no different from its left-wing nemesis. Defining fascism as a mix of "nationalism and Marxist revolutionary syndicalism," Gregor lumps Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong together with figures as diverse as Mussolini, Lenin and Stalin as redemptive nationalists committed to developmentalism and an aggrandized state. As for Chiang's GMD, Gregor offers the following:

> It was not Italian Fascism or German National Socialism, *per se*, that Chiang Kai-shek or the Blue Shirts recommended to the revolutionaries of China. What the Blue Shirts found admirable in Italian Fascism and German National Socialism was the same thing they and Sun Yat-sen found attractive in Bolshevism. All these movements had succeeded in restoring dignity to their respective national communities.[18]

From this line of argument, one infers that all Chinese political movements were merely nationalist and statist, rendering the radical right indistinguishable from revolutionary socialists. Of course, Gregor's intervention concerns not only China but all revolutions, which he saw as inherently antidemocratic and united in opposition to liberal democracy. This typology, drawn from totalitarian theorists prevalent in Cold War political science, erased fundamental differences between communist and right-wing approaches to revolution.

Making a Conservative Revolution

The GMD's nationalist revolution, like other movements on the radical right, was conservative. Yet, to the extent that it intersected with state politics, Chinese conservatism as an intellectual position was only partially aligned with the GMD. Historians have drawn attention to Republican conservatives' elevation of traditional culture as central to their nationalism but have stressed their varied and ambiguous relationship with the governing regime. Scholars also wrestle with the apparent

[17] Frederic Wakeman, "A Revisionist View of the Nanjing Decade: Confucian Fascism," *China Quarterly*, no. 150 (1997): 395–432.
[18] A. James Gregor, *A Place in the Sun: Marxism and Fascism in China's Long Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 15–16, 80; Gregor, *The Faces of Janus: Marxism and Fascism in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

paradox of China's modern elite espousing a conservative agenda. Benjamin Schwartz believes that China had no conservative tradition in the Euro-American sense. His example is none other than Chiang Kai-shek, who was a "conservative modernizer" and did not hold onto the political status quo. For Schwartz, therefore, conservatism in China was a cultural position, not a political one that called for the conservation of existing state institutions. For Guy Alitto, conservatism in China was similar to those of societies outside the "Western European cradle of modernization" in presupposing the binary between the national spirit and material modernity. While the latter was necessary, it was the former that lent meaning to social life. Conservatism in China, for Edmund Fung, was likewise part of the global questioning of Enlightenment rationality and progress.[19] Even as it did inform politics, conservatism, in these accounts, describes an intellectual disposition on national traditions that ran parallel to or tempered the modernizing thrust of twentieth-century Chinese society.

Nationalist revolutionaries' conservatism was not a cultural temperament but a form of political activism that was self-consciously modern. GMD ideologues were future-oriented because and not in spite of their espousal of national essence (*guocui*) and its relevance to modernity. Their cultural nationalism was articulated with the party's alacrity in leveraging an expanding state to build new social hierarchies and alliances to neuter challenges to unequal production relations.[20] Like fascism in general, conservative revolutionaries appealed to precapitalist and archaic forces not to conserve an idealized past but to create it for the first time. While claiming to recover what many Nationalists called China's "primordial traditions" (*guyou chuantong*), they joined radical right-wing activists around the interwar world in mobilizing popular sentiments and imagination through industrial-scale spectacles and political

[19] Charlotte Furth, "Culture and Politics in Modern Chinese Conservativism," in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, ed. Charlotte Furth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 38–9; Edmund S. K. Fung, *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity: Cultural and Political Thought in the Republican Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 65, 96–127; Benjamin Schwartz, "Notes on Conservatism in General and in China in Particular," in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, 16–19; Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, 2nd edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 9–12.

[20] GMD theoreticians' fascination with national essence as they charted a course for China's future mirrored that of early twentieth-century revolutionaries such as Liu Shipei and Zhang Taiyan. See Tze-ki Hon, *Revolution as Restoration: Guocui xuebao and China's Path to Modernity, 1905–1911* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).