

CHINA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

MODERNIZATION
AND TRADITION



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THE SECOND UNITED FRONT, 1936–1941

Thus began the period known as the Second United Front. Since the anti-Japanese war effort involved a joint effort between the KMT and the CCP but not individuals from one party joining the other as had been the case with the First United Front, it is also called the Block Without. However unwillingly, Chiang Kai-shek had been placed at the head of a movement to resist Japan and gained much stature as a patriot.

The CCP immediately renamed its soviet the Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia (Shaan–Gan–Ning) Special Region of the National Government, and party members expanded their organizing activities in the parts of those three provinces the region encompassed. Various other names were changed in order to conform to the concept of the united front. The Red Army was renamed the Eighth Route Army to indicate that it was now part of the KMT military system. Remnants of forces left behind in central China when the Long March began formed the New Fourth Army. The Red Army Academy was renamed the Resist Japan Academy. Social clubs, variously named Lenin Clubs or Workers' Clubs, now became Salvation Rooms.

In addition to the benefit of reducing Chiang Kai-shek's attacks against it, the Xi'an settlement had other positive effects for the CCP. Patriots applauded the party's initiative to organize resistance to Japanese pressures, and many Chinese students made the long journey to Yan'an to participate in the resistance movement. The need to resist seemed all the more pressing when, in 1937, the Japanese began full-scale war against China. The incredible, often carefully calculated, cruelty of the Japanese assault was documented by foreign photographers and played an important part in mobilizing world opinion on the side of China's struggle.

At a more mundane level, the party's agreement to modify its land redistribution plans enabled it to reach out to a wider spectrum of the population. CCP functionaries experimented with, and gained expertise in, the techniques of household registration and tax collec-

tion. They were also able to provide the base area with a stable currency, an achievement that would later prove crucial. The population of the Shaan-Gan-Ning base area grew rapidly, from an estimated six hundred thousand in 1938 to about a million and a half in 1944. As it had in the Jiangxi soviet, military power proved the spearhead for party expansion. Since high-ranking CCP leaders typically held leading military positions as well, the issue of whether the party controlled the gun or vice versa was moot. The majority of these leaders had no formal military education, but sheer day-to-day existence in an environment surrounded by hostile forces—landlords, some of whom had their own armies, plus the KMT and the Japanese—provided excellent on-the-job training.

The circumstances surrounding the Xi'an agreement did nothing to allay the distrust that the CCP and KMT had for each other, and it would appear that each was more concerned with the other than with fighting the Japanese. For example, by 1938 the Eighth Route Army had moved into Shandong province, beyond the limit the KMT government had assigned to it, and the New Fourth Army began organizing the population in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Anhui area, which was also beyond the scope of the agreement. Chiang Kai-shek became quite annoyed, with concomitant effects on the functioning of the united front.

Meanwhile, the CCP began functioning as a legitimate government. While Shaan-Gan-Ning was not the party's only base area, it was the only one where conditions were stable enough to allow the CCP's programs to be carried out with any consistency. Other areas, often located behind Japanese lines, had to be concerned with survival as a first priority. These bases took general direction from Yan'an, but since they had only minimal ability to communicate with Yan'an, exercised a significant degree of autonomy.

The techniques of *mass mobilization*, already seen in earlier CCF efforts to organize workers and, subsequently, peasants, were further developed and refined during the Yan'an period. The party, partly because of Leninist influence and partly because of the persecution to which it had been subjected, was a secretive, elite organization. Yet it wanted to encourage popular participation in its programs. One of the ways in which this was done was to create *mass organizations*, structured to channel the energies of specific groups within the population. There were, for example, a women's group, a youth

organization, and peasant and merchant federations. Party organizers who were knowledgeable about the problems of these specific groups and their feelings and perceptions conducted educational activities on behalf of the party with these groups. The goal was to have the entire population, including the lowest levels, involved in and supporting CCP programs.

The first of these programs to be carried out after the formation of the united front was *elections*. These had enormous significance both domestically and internationally. Even before the 1911 revolution, many Chinese intellectuals had come to believe that powerful nations were democratic nations, and that the holding of competitive elections was an important component of democracy. Foreign observers were impressed that a communist party would encourage and permit free elections, thereby contributing to the impression that CCP members were communists of a different and infinitely preferable sort.

The election law called for universal, direct equal suffrage by secret ballot to all those over sixteen years of age, regardless of social class. Rhetoric stressed Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People rather than Marxist-Leninist class struggle. In what became known as the "three thirds" system, the communists promised that party members would hold no more than one-third of the elective offices. One-third would go to nonparty members who were considered "leftist progressives," and the final third to those classified as middle-of-the-road in their views. Sometimes this was interpreted as one-third CCP, one-third KMT, and one-third nonparty; occasionally even those classified as "rightists" or "diehards" were allowed to run, though such people never collectively attained a full third share.⁵

Mass organizations were encouraged to nominate and campaign for their candidates. Discussion meetings were held in the villages and townships, with the aim of getting people to discuss local issues, formulate suggestions for the new government, and state their opinions on the candidates. For peasants who had never participated in elections before (indeed, some of them had never *heard* of the concept) this was an important educational technique.

Actual balloting took place at the end of a four-day meeting in one of the more important district towns, in an atmosphere resembling a county fair. There were performances by children's groups, athletic competitions, and potluck picnics in addition to reports by govern-

ment officials. Since it was difficult to implement the electoral law's provision for a secret ballot with a largely illiterate electorate, voting was sometimes done by a show of hands. Various other options were devised, including dropping beans into jars that had been placed behind the candidates' backs. However, the government thus elected was not the sole decision-making authority. It shared that responsibility with the party, the bureaucracy, the military, and mass organizations in a manner that almost certainly assured that the party's voice was the decisive one.

Although the process described above is far from that of the ideal democracy, most observers credited it with being a remarkable achievement under the circumstances. Elections also represented an important advance in the party's ability to mold popular sentiment.

Land redistribution was another important part of the party's program during the Yan'an period. Under the provisions of the united front, this had to be done in a restricted fashion. It had been agreed that the lands of all anti-Japanese soldiers and those involved in anti-Japanese activities would not be confiscated. This allowed even large landlords to escape redistribution by simply having one son enlist in the Red Army. However, it would seem that the redistribution that did take place succeeded in destroying large concentrations of wealth and reducing the numbers of poor peasants. A number of problems remained. For example, the party's program did not deal with the problem of rationalizing landholdings. Households might own a number of widely scattered plots, which took time and energy to commute to and limited the utility of machines that might be better used in a larger, consolidated plot. Nor did the party's program improve productivity, or prevent an elite group from reemerging. Nonetheless, the measures taken seem to have been quite popular with the peasantry, while at the same time not alienating members of the local elite whose support and talents the party wished to retain.

Control of *education* was a means of getting the party's message to a large number of people as well as teaching them things that would facilitate economic development. Although the number of primary schools increased greatly after 1937, nearly all were in district capitals. The pupils tended to have families who could afford to send them there, and the curriculum was not really relevant to rural life. Parents viewed education for their children as desirable but per-

ceived success as having the children become officials and move out of the village rather than bringing their new skills home with them.

The party attempted to deal with these problems through a series of experiments in popular education operating on the principle of "management by the people, with assistance by the government." This shifted the responsibility from party officials and professional teachers to village leaders and grass-roots activists, who presumably knew better what was needed and what techniques would work. Night schools, half-day schools, and winter schools (to take advantage of the slack season for peasants) were experimented with. A *xiang* (to-the-village) movement sent some of the educated youth who had come to Yan'an for patriotic reasons to the villages to teach the peasants. Equally important from Mao's point of view was what these educated urban youth would learn from the peasants: an appreciation of the problems that 90 percent of China's population faced. The new schools were also expected to help overcome the gap between urban and rural areas, and between mental and manual labor. They were an effort to unite thought and action.

At the apex of the educational hierarchy were institutions like the Resist Japan University (*Kangda*), the Higher Party School, and, for ethnic minorities, the Yan'an Nationalities Institute. Here bureaucrats and party activists were trained. Here also, however, one sees an effort to break down class barriers. Urban students were paired with those of peasant backgrounds to get them to exchange skills and learn to work with one another. Students were asked to build their own classrooms, raise their own food, mend their own clothes, and even knit their own socks. Still, increasing specialization was taking place.

Broadly speaking, two political impulses and leadership styles co-existed somewhat uncomfortably in the base area. The first, revolutionary, emphasized mass struggle and broad political participation. Its proponents tended to be illiterate peasants with leadership ability who were concerned with eliminating oppression and instituting social justice in their specific areas. The second, bureaucratic, stressed stable administration. Its proponents tended to be better educated and more concerned with patriotism and the future of the country as a whole. They were also likely to be more committed to the united front and to modernization. Their outlook tended to be closer to that of classic Western liberalism than to the Marxist-

Leninist worldview. In addition, the base area was growing rapidly and its population becoming increasingly diversified. This complicated the tasks of administration and called for yet higher levels of specialization.

The means chosen to deal with the disparate impulses and centrifugal forces that were increasingly prominent in the Yan'an base area was a *zhengfeng*, or rectification, campaign. It would become the forerunner of larger, more spectacular mass movements after the founding of the PRC. The object was to create a party with common interests and a unified will. Peasant activists who were almost exclusively concerned with rural reorganization and urban intellectuals whose primary motivation was anti-Japanese had to be brought together under a common program if the party was to succeed. Not surprisingly, this program would be Marxist. Since knowledge of Marxism was actually not widespread, and most of the expertise was concentrated at the higher levels of the party, much study was required.

Those who participated—and several thousand people did so—were divided into small groups and given study materials. Many of the documents had been written by Mao; others were strongly influenced by him or contained interpretations of Marx that he favored. While aiming at orthodoxy, the campaign certainly did not construe orthodoxy as rigidity. Indeed, under conditions of guerrilla warfare, and because of the isolation of many villages and the differing circumstances they faced, blind adherence to party directives would have been suicidal. Mao sharply criticized those who studied Marx and Lenin as religious dogma, asking his listeners rhetorically how they could tell the difference between dogma and dog shit. Dog shit, he answered, was useful; it could fertilize the fields. But dogmas were of no use at all.

Another of Mao's concerns was to make the theory of Marxism relevant to the Chinese situation. If theory could not be put into practice, then there was something wrong with the theory and it would have to be revised. This presumably was a reply to critics, such as the twenty-eight Bolsheviks who had pointed out that there were discrepancies between the Marxist-Leninist texts and the procedures of the base areas. While agreeing that a communist is a Marxist internationalist, Mao argued that Marxism had to take on a national form before it could be applied. Explicitly calling for "the sinification

of Marxism," he called for "an end to writing eight-legged essays on foreign models."⁶ For those who were imbued with Western liberal values and insisted on literature and art for the sake of literature and art, and on the supremacy of the creative impulse, Mao also had scathing words. All art and literature had a class character, he insisted. Proletarian art and literature must not be divorced from the masses, and must motivate them to struggle to change their environment.

The organizational techniques employed in the *zhengfeng* movement show their planners' grasp of the principles of small group dynamics. Documents were read and discussed, with group leaders and members criticizing deviant points of view so that errant members could correct themselves. Mao compared the process to a doctor dealing with a sick person; the object was to save the patient, not to cure him to death. The healing process was not normally a gentle one, with the sessions typically deserving their name of "struggle sessions." Group pressure was brought to bear against the "ill" person, with the understanding that when he changed his mind and came around to the correct point of view, his standing within the group would be restored. The underlying assumption here is that education can be effective in transcending self-interest and class background.

Yet another technique developed during the Yan'an period was the concept of the *mass line*. No matter how successful a *zhengfeng* campaign might be in uniting leaders on the basis of correct views, it would mean little if the masses were not brought along in this consensus. Fundamentally, the motivation behind the mass line was antibureaucratic: Cadres were warned not to divorce themselves from the common people and their concerns. "Commandism"—that is, the giving of orders rather than persuading people to do the right thing—was to be avoided. Again, education is placed in a pivotal role. Occasionally, the masses may not want to behave in the proper manner ("It sometimes happens that the masses objectively need some reform but are not yet subjectively awakened to it and willing or determined to bring it into effect"⁷). With time and indoctrination, they will adopt the proper view. The essence of the mass line is interaction between the bureaucracy and its constituents: "from the masses, to the masses."

The significance of the Yan'an era is that it provided the party

with experience in actually administering a territory. This was an enormous benefit, and one not commonly available to movements that seek the overthrow of an existing regime. Techniques of taxation, allocation of resources, education, and popular participation were developed and refined.⁸ While Yan'an provided a blueprint for the future development of China, it would later be charged that Mao Zedong had become too rigidly attached to the "lessons of Yan'an," and unwilling to face the fact that techniques that had worked well in the 1930s and 1940s had become counterproductive by the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, the Yan'an spirit is part of the founding myth of Chinese communism and continues to be honored, particularly in periods of ideological and economic uncertainty. A May 1990 meeting to inaugurate the China Society for Study of the Yan'an Spirit defined that spirit not in terms of the techniques enumerated above but as self-reliance, plain living, and hard struggle. Speeches at the meeting noted that, although the problems facing the party and the nation were different today than in Yan'an, studying the period could yield valuable lessons and "make the past serve the present."⁹

The stunning success of the CCP at Yan'an compared to its relative lack of success during the Jiangxi period has led to speculation on the reasons for this. One explanation is that the communists were able to appeal to the patriotic spirit of the peasantry better than the KMT. The CCP was helped immeasurably in this endeavor by the tremendous cruelty that characterized the Japanese occupation, and also by the fact that the Japanese were more firmly ensconced in the areas of north China near the communist base areas than they were in the areas of south central and south China to which the KMT had fled. Thus the party was able to win over the peasantry in the course of the struggle against Japan.¹⁰ An alternative explanation downplays the nationalism of the peasants, crediting instead the appeal of the party's economic reforms.¹¹ Leaving aside the question of which cause attracted the most people, the two explanations are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that some people responded primarily to the CCP's anti-Japanese message, others to its economic program, and still others to both.

CIVIL WAR AND VICTORY, 1941-1949

The united front remained nominally in force during the war with Japan, despite severe strains. In 1939, for example, three hundred communist guerrillas who moved into Shandong in violation of the Xi'an agreement were massacred,¹² presumably on Chiang Kai-shek's orders. The presence of the New Fourth Army in central China, which was legal, was also of concern to the higher levels of the KMT. These troops provided the CCP with a strategic presence in the Yangtze delta, one of the country's richest food-production areas. It was also the site of a large industrial center, although the latter was controlled by Japan during the war. Hence, Chiang Kai-shek ordered the New Fourth Army to withdraw north of the Yangtze. When, after a month, no withdrawal had taken place, KMT troops attacked, killing more than three thousand members of the New Fourth Army. Cooperation between KMT and CCP against the Japanese, which was minimal at best, became still more perfunctory. Following what became known as the New Fourth Army Incident, Chiang ordered a cessation of subsidies that had been paid to the communist government under the united front agreement and began a blockade of the Yan'an base area.

An American diplomat resident in China's wartime capital of Chongqing noted that the news of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was celebrated as a holiday by both communists and KMT, since it meant that now the United States would declare war on, and presumably defeat, their common enemy. This, of course, left the two more freedom to fight each other.¹³ The United States, now formally fighting on the same side as China, gave Chiang Kai-shek's government substantial sums of money to aid it in fighting Japan. There was little accountability, and much of the aid appears to have found its way into the pockets of high-ranking government officials. Foreign observers were struck by the contrast between the opulent living style of KMT leaders in Chongqing despite the poverty all around them and the spartan, relatively egalitarian conditions that characterized the Yan'an base area.

Meanwhile, the population suffered horribly under the Japanese occupation. Imperial forces had a ready answer to Mao's notion that the people were the water and the army the fish: Drain the pond.

The "three alls"—kill all, burn all, destroy all—were ruthlessly applied in areas where the Japanese met resistance. Those not killed might be marched long distances away from their homes to serve as forced laborers and prostitutes, or become the subjects of grotesque medical experiments. Such measures discouraged popular resistance to the occupation but also created deep hatred of the Japanese, which the CCP took clever advantage of. Japanese control of China may be envisioned in terms of a net, with the enemy in charge of major cities, roads, and rail lines. The rural areas formed the interstices of the net. Japanese troops could, and did, move quickly into the countryside when they perceived a threat. But China is a far larger country than Japan, with a population many times as large, and Japanese troops had to fight in numerous other areas of the Asian-Pacific hemisphere. No matter how efficient and well trained, the emperor's troops could not be everywhere at once. Quietly and often unnoticed, communist organizers took over many of the interstices, especially in north China. They reinstated the *baojia* system as part of this effort.

The use of hitherto secret atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought Japan's surrender more quickly than most people had expected, causing certain difficulties for the change of power in China. Chiang Kai-shek insisted that the Japanese surrender to his representatives rather than those of the CCP and had the Americans transport his troops to the north, where the KMT had only a minimal presence, to do so.

The Soviet Union, also on the winning side and, for reasons of geographic proximity, the first Allied power on the scene, managed to delay this process. At the same time, the USSR quietly ordered its troops to dismantle whatever they could find of value in Manchuria, home of China's most advanced heavy industry, and bring it to the Soviet Union. Much of this industry had been built by the Japanese. The Soviets also turned over huge stocks of Japanese weapons to the CCP. Now the civil war was on in earnest.

Chiang, again using American transport, moved his troops into north China. His predilection for choosing the commanders who were most loyal to him rather than the commanders who were most competent to direct battles against the communists proved unwise. The KMT did enjoy some successes. In 1947, for example, it captured Yan'an, thus formally bringing an end to the Yan'an period.

But it also lost several key battles, along with large quantities of American-supplied weapons and vehicles. The morale of KMT troops suffered badly.

Military encounters were but one facet of the shifting power equation. Inflation is a common phenomenon at the end of wars, as pent-up purchasing power seeks to buy scarce consumer goods. Dealing with inflationary pressures requires the kind of strong, united, and scrupulously honest government that the KMT was not. Because it did not act quickly or decisively, exchange rates began to vary widely between city and city, with speculators moving from one urban area to another to take advantage of these variations. There was corruption reaching into the highest levels of government, including some members of Chiang Kai-shek's family. Strenuous efforts by dedicated and honest officials to damp down the inflation proved futile.

Runaway inflation is apt to disadvantage urban areas most seriously, since rural areas can more easily conduct barter exchanges in food and other crucial commodities. Unfortunately for the KMT, urban areas had provided its original base of support, and that support now slipped away. Meanwhile the CCP, ensconced in its largely rural base areas, was relatively little inconvenienced by the inflation. CCP morale had never been higher, and several KMT-affiliated warlords defected to the communist side. One of these was the general in charge of Beijing. His switch in allegiance was of great import, both strategically and symbolically.

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong entered Beijing in a captured American jeep and, ascending the rostrum at Tiananmen Square, proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China. Though a number of battles remained to be fought in south China, the end of the civil war was foreordained. The mandate of heaven had passed to the Chinese Communist Party.