

To What Extent Was There Western Influence over Chiang Kai-shek Leading up to the Chinese Civil War?

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Abstract: This paper investigates the extent to which Chiang Kai-shek's political ideology and strategies leading up to the Chinese Civil War were influenced by Western powers. By analyzing Chiang's interactions with European fascism, Soviet communism, and U.S. military and economic support, this work examines how foreign powers shaped his governance and anti-communist stance. The findings reveal that, while Chiang selectively incorporated Western methodologies, his leadership remained deeply rooted in Confucian principles and his commitment to China's sovereignty. Chiang utilized Western resources to further his nationalist agenda while resisting full alignment with them, as evidenced by his selective adoption of fascist methods, skepticism of Soviet alliances, and conflict with American military advisors during the war against Japan. This work highlights Chiang's malleable strategy of embracing foreign support while preserving autonomy, which offers an of his leadership regarding external influences.

Keywords: Chiang Kai-shek, Western influence, anti-communism, Confucianism, Sino-Japanese War

1. Introduction

Historians sometimes make the argument that only Europe has political beliefs, essentially claiming credit over all the modern political systems. A prevalent consensus today will define this as Eurocentrism, but it did seem to hold some truth when looking back to the shaping of the new China and the amount of influence foreign ideologies had on new thinkers, as well as the U.S.'s physical control over Kuomintang's decisions. To what extent was the Western influence over Chiang Kai-shek, from the shaping of Chiang's political philosophy, "Chiangism", to his anti-Communist stance to his actual leadership in the war against Japan? In this paper, it will be argued that while sacrificing partial autonomy to Western influence, Chiang leveraged this influence towards his personal goals, which generally did not sway his self-determination.

2. The formation of Chiang's political identity

Chiang's political stance might be based on Western ideologies, but it is fundamentally Confucian. He grew up in the late Qing dynasty when the imperialists had already destabilized the nation, which made him feel a sense of humiliation. This instilled in him nationalistic tendencies from an early age, where he eventually aimed to "expel the Manchu Qing and to restore China" [1]. He greatly admired Tseng Kuo-fan, a scholar and general who was inspired by Western beliefs but remained firmly rooted

in conventional Confucius Values. He also wrote Confucius's ideals in his diary [1]. Around 1910, Chiang went to study academics and the military in Japan. He thought the "greatest training [of his] whole life" was grooming horses, which inspired him to "consider worry to be happiness, and not to be afraid of difficulty" [1]. He concluded that a complete penetration of discipline into daily lives contributed to strengthening Japanese people, which led him to later rely heavily on militarism in the KMT. He launched the New Life Movement in the 1930s in an effort to revive Confucianism while promoting moral discipline and national unity as a broader effort to modernize China. Chiang's personal experience in Japan, to a great extent, shaped his ideals for national building and the importance of strength.

3. The influence of european fascism on chiang's governance

In his later years, Chiang was under the influence of European Fascism. After the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Blue Shirts Society was formed to revive China and advocated for Chiang to become a fascist dictator [2]. It was modeled after Mussolini's Blackshirts and Hitler's Brownshirts and acted as Chiang's paramilitary force. However, Chiang focused on consolidating his own authoritarian model instead of abiding by the Blue Shirts. European fascism often encouraged active participation from everyone and encouraged mass mobilization. Chiang instead gave the power to make decisions to a small group of people in a top-down structure [3]. This is primarily due to his persistence on the importance of military governance, which is shaped by his earlier experiences. He prioritized maintaining stability and authority, which meant that it would go against the typical trend for fascist states to involve a mass movement. Chiang also routinely returned to the Three People's Principles as a moral guide as he believed it would suit China's unique conditions, which routinely contradicted fascist ideologies [3]. Although fascism ultimately failed under Chiang, he took fascist methodology and applied it to his regime. Most noticeably, he maintained a strict authoritarian state and actively tried to create a personality cult with propaganda efforts to spread his printed images across his areas of influence [4]. Chiang would selectively adopt fascist methods to execute his ideologies, and when he recognized fundamental disagreements between the two ideologies, he remained loyal to his own.

4. Chiang's anti-communist stance and soviet influence

While Chiang appeared relatively flexible in terms of political methodology, he was persistently anti-Communist, which was revealed when the Comintern attempted to force amends between the KMT and the CCP through the United Front. Henk Sneevliet (who went by Maring) was a Dutch representative of the Comintern and one of the key figures in facilitating the First United Front as an attempt for the two parties to reach peace [5]. Where Maring was successful in convincing Sun Yat-sen that a unified China would fund the KMT with Soviet financial and military support, Chiang had always been skeptical of the alliance [5]. Because of the United Front, the Soviets were able to send diplomats to China to advise the KMT along with the CCP. Mikhail Borodin was a Comintern agent who was highly influential in KMT's military strategies and established the Whampoa Military. Throughout the training, Borodin integrated Soviet-style political education into the curriculum [6], which was an attempt to influence the KMT forces ideologically. Though Borodin is a Soviet, he represented the Comintern with Marxist-Leninist ideologies. Borodin is an example of how Chiang's regime might be unwarily affected, leading to a greater immunity or general acceptance of the Soviet culture, which is inherently communist.

However, Chiang maintained alert and attempted to keep an eye on the Communist influence. Since the alliance allowed CCP members to join the KMT as individuals, Chiang began to worry that the CCP's growing influence within the KMT would weaken it from within. By mid-1926, the number

of students and employees at Whampoa who were affiliated with the CCP had reached a significant amount. Those members tend to align themselves more with the left-wing faction within the KMT, which is led by Chiang's rival, Wang Jingwei [6]. Chiang held more distrust towards the CCP as he feared them leading an internal coup, along with Wang, within the KMT. By March 1927, the CCP had organized a series of workers' strikes and uprisings in Shanghai, which Chiang saw as a part of a broader attempt by the CCP to exert influence in Shanghai through labor unions, which were seen as Communist-dominated [7]. Chiang ultimately decided to suppress the Communists in Shanghai, resulting in the Shanghai Massacre, where Chiang violently cracked down on labor unions and Communist organizations. Thousands of communists and leftist activists were arrested, executed, or killed in the streets of Shanghai. Around the same time, he also ordered his men to kill any communists around the Whampoa Academy [6]. This massacre resembled Chiang's unwavering commitment to his ultimate ideal of consolidating control over China. While he tolerated the Soviet alliance and the United Front for the sake of short-term financial and military benefits, he was highly intolerant when it was perceived that the communists crossed the line of influence, which was threatening KMT's control. He maintained a clear vision of his ideals, which restricted his willingness to be influenced by the Comintern.

5. U.S. influence during the Second Sino-Japanese War

During the Second Sino-Japanese War, Chiang's mounting tension with the U.S. further exemplifies this principle since there is no major ideological contradiction between the two parties.

Initially, Chiang welcomed support from the United States. The KMT was one of the beneficiaries of the Lend-Lease Act, which provided military aid to Chiang in the form of arms, vehicles, and aircraft worth between \$44 million and \$64 million—aid that did not require immediate repayment. The U.S. also offered to help train Chiang's forces [8]. By the end of World War II, the KMT had received approximately \$700 million in financial aid through Lend Lease [8], an amount that was crucial for resisting Japan. However, there were conditions. The U.S. would use this aid as a means to gain more say in Chiang's military and political strategies. Still, it was no shock that Chiang took the aid and expected to give up some control over his military in return.

At around the same time, General Claire Lee Chennault from the U.S. Air Force was sent to Canton to train Chiang's soldiers. He set up a flying school in Kunming and was known for training the "Flying Tigers" to fight against the Japanese [9]. Chennault led Chiang's military to an air superiority against Japan and had a significant influence on Chiang Kai-shek's military decisions against Japan. Since Chennault kept his control within what was promised, which was the training of aero combat, Chiang was relatively accepting of the positive Chennault could bring to the efforts of his military.

On the other hand, Joseph Stilwell was a more aggressive figure of U.S. influence to the KMT, who threatened Chiang's sense of control and was met with resistance. During the Burma Campaign, Stilwell wanted to reopen land communication routes with China by capturing North Burma and linking it with the Burma Road. He believed this was the best way to help China during WWII by ensuring that lend-lease supplies could reach Chinese forces in significant quantities [10]. However, Chiang was hesitant to commit his troops fully, as his focus was on internal threats with the CCP. Stilwell lacked American troops and wanted to use Chinese troops to defeat the Japanese in British Burma, as he viewed this as crucial to reopening the supply. Chiang, however, was reluctant to commit his troops to operations outside China since his primary concern was the defense of Chinese territory [10]. This furthered the tension as Chiang showed his unwillingness to support Allied operations that did not concern his own, ultimately still due to Chiang prioritizing the defense of China over broader interests with the Allies. The Lend-Lease Aids also became a source of conflict. Stilwell was in charge of distributing the aid, and Chiang often felt that China was receiving insufficient aid and blamed Stilwell for the lack of supplies reaching Chinese forces. However,

Stilwell believed that Chiang was not maximizing efficiency when using the supplies and would rather conserve them for the future. Stilwell would eventually often threaten to withhold the supplies to push Chiang into abiding by his preferences in strategies [11]. The power dynamic created significant tension because Chiang resented Stilwell's attempts to control his decisions by holding onto resources. This heightened mistrust between the two and complicated their relationship.

The conflicts between Chiang Kai-shek and General Joseph Stilwell over the inclusion of CCP forces in the fight against Japan highlighted their diverging priorities. Stilwell saw the CCP forces as potentially valuable allies and argued for their inclusion in a unified front against the Japanese, believing this would make victory more attainable. However, Chiang viewed the CCP as a greater threat to his authority than the Japanese and famously stated that "the Japanese are only lice on the body of China, but Communism is a disease of the heart" [11].

In 1944, tensions reached a breaking point when Stilwell demanded "unrestricted command" over Chiang's troops. When Chiang refused, Stilwell wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, advocating for his position and belittling Chiang's strategy [11]. For all parties involved, these disagreements were about more than military tactics but rather touched on the fundamental subject of who would control postwar China. To express his earnestness about controlling Chiang's forces for the overarching Allied victory in WWII, Stilwell, along with Roosevelt, had to threaten Chiang's authority indirectly. This was unacceptable to Chiang, who promptly demanded that Roosevelt recall Stilwell [11]. The tension between Chiang and Stilwell showed how far foreign influence could push Chiang before he pushed back. Even with U.S. military aid, Chiang would not allow his focus on internal threats to be diverted. The U.S. exerted a considerable influence over Chiang Kai Shek's decision-making, primarily through financial aid and attempts to control military strategy. However, he was willing to accept only as much foreign influence as would help him attain his personal goal: control of China. This helps explain his reluctance to commit Chinese forces fully to Allied operations outside of China. Thus, while U.S. influence was indeed substantial, it fell short of being absolute. Chiang maintained a grip on control, particularly over decisions that affected his domestic political standing and matters related to the CCP.

6. Conclusion

While Chiang Kai-shek may have appeared to adopt Western ideologies and the influence of foreign powers, this acceptance was superficial and not deeply integrated into his beliefs. He took inspiration from European fascist models but remained rooted in Confucian virtues like moral integrity and social harmony, which made his authoritarianism unique and distinguished from its sources of influence. The Comintern was not successful in converting Chiang to be more lenient towards communism, and the efforts only increased his distrust and hostility. It was not just a matter of external pressures causing Chiang to take an anti-communist stance, his internal values were rooted in his desire to preserve China's sovereignty and Confucianism. U.S. interference during the Second Sino-Japanese War revealed Chiang's selectiveness when it came to accepting foreign influences. Although U.S. military and economic support were vital, Chiang did not fully cooperate with them, particularly when their strategies did not align with his top priority: maintaining control of his forces in order to counter the communist threat. His political flexibility in this period wavered, appearing obedient to Western influence at times and firm and uncompromising during others. External influences could not sway him from his own fundamental priorities and goals. Even when there was a chance of gaining supplies and support, whether from the U.S. or the Comintern, Chiang did not get carried away with the temporary advantages they might bring, and he kept his ambitions constantly in mind. So, while he had to give up some control over Western influence and even sacrificed a bit of the monopoly on power that he sought, he maintained level-headedness with his personal goals, which kept his autonomy.

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