

*China's Conservative Revolution: The Quest for a New Order, 1927–1949*. By Brian Tsui. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 291. £75.00.

When was China's revolution? 1949 will be on most minds, particularly in the seventieth anniversary year of the Communist ascendancy. Scholars (and some Taiwanese) may reflect more on 1911, and the overthrow of the imperial regime. But few these days reflect on 1927, the year that the Northern expedition brought Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (Guomindang) Party to power, and set the stage for a new regime that would last on the mainland for some two decades from 1928 to 1949.

Brian Tsui's outstanding new book is a welcome piece of scholarship that takes scholars back to the legacy of 1927, asking: what was the ideological nature of the Nationalist regime that preceded the Communist victory in 1949? Through much of the Cold War, the answers to that question were divided somewhat starkly. The majority of scholars, by no means all sympathetic to the CCP, painted the Nationalists as a corrupt and incompetent foil to a dynamic Communist movement that had succeeded in mobilizing the wider population. This analysis, of which perhaps the most detailed and thorough example is the two books by Lloyd Eastman, *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937* and *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937–1949* (1984),<sup>1</sup> concentrated on the deleterious effects of Nationalist rule, rather than analysis of the framework of the party's thinking. Major revisionist scholars of the Nationalist period such as Julia Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Polities: State Building in Republican China, 1927–1940*, and Morris L. Bian, *The Making of the State Enterprise System in Modern China: The Dynamics of Institutional Change*,<sup>2</sup> gave a more positive, if cautious, view of the regime's performance, but the concentration was primarily on the regime's actions rather than its guiding tenets.

In recent years, however, there has been a second revisionist turn assessing the Nationalist period in office on the mainland, in which analysis of the regime's thought is much more central to understanding its motivations as well as its performance. One of the most important monographs in this area is Margherita Zanasi's penetrating

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd E. Eastman, *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); idem, *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Julia C. Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Polities: State Building in Republican China, 1927–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Morris L. Bian, *The Making of the State Enterprise System in Modern China: The Dynamics of Institutional Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

*Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China*,<sup>3</sup> which shows the clear links between different types of economic thinking and modernity in the Nationalist worldview. Brian Tsui's book is a major contribution to this literature, an immensely important analysis of the thinkers and philosophy that made up the worldview of the Nationalist government. Rather than characterizing it as "feudal" or "reactionary," Tsui places the regime in the context of a wider range of conservative revolutionary forces that emerged in the mid-twentieth century across the globe, but in particular in interwar Europe. In doing so, he opens up a whole new debate on the precise nature of the Nationalist regime as a force that was simultaneously deeply anti-liberal in its assumptions but genuinely revolutionary in its desire to change society at home and assert China's case abroad. Lest this sound simply like historical nitpicking, it is worth noting that such a description is not wholly out of place for the Chinese Communist Party of today, which fears internal social turmoil (*luan* 亂) more than any other domestic factor, and which is seeking to substitute greatness on the international stage as a way of keeping the wider population patriotically stimulated. Tsui's book is a contribution toward the analysis of political ideology as well as modern Chinese history.

The book is divided into six chapters, with an epilogue. The introduction lays out the argument that the Nationalists' aim was always about "responding to the threat of revolutionary socialism" (p. 3). Chapter 2 addresses the "purification" of the revolution, in which figures of the "radical right" (p. 34), such as Dai Jitao 戴季陶, Hu Hanmin 胡漢民, and Li Shizeng 李石曾, argued for an active political creed that would oppose Bolshevism (and the CCP, by extension). Chapter 3 addresses the youth movement with which the Nationalists sought to mobilize wider society. This concentrates on the partial appropriation of the Boy Scout movement (which at that time was a genuine global force, for instance in Belgium) to create a patriotic, masculine movement that could reinvigorate society. Chapter 4 addresses the period of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945. It addresses the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement 國民精神總動員運動, founded in 1939, which was supposed to create a "postliberal future freed of communist strife" (p. 127). Chapter 5 addresses the paradox by which liberal intellectuals, such as Hu Shi 胡適 and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛, became complicit with the Nationalist regime, despite its profoundly non-liberal policies, as they sought a political solution that would bring stability and order. Chapter 6 explores the Nationalists' pan-Asian links, showing that the Indian independence movement played an important role in creating an idea of cross-border anti-imperialist solidarity for many Nationalist activists. Throughout, Tsui shows a masterly command of detail, with sources varying from the polemical works of Dai

<sup>3</sup> Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Jitao (rightly here analysed as the single most important exponent of a radical right Nationalist worldview), to materials from archives in Taipei showing the importance of relations between China and India in the interwar era, before either country was fully sovereign.

Tsui's book raises a whole variety of issues. First, perhaps most central for those who research Chinese history, is: how robust, really, was the Nationalist "radical right" revolution? After all, the central problematic of the Chinese revolution of the twentieth century was the ability of the CCP to mobilize successfully when its opponents had failed to do so. Tsui's account gives a convincing account that the Nationalist revolution was plausible, but only in parts. It was based on ideas of mass mobilization that clearly drew on important insights into Chinese society. One such was the ability to seize the "New Culture" movement of the 1910s and reorient it toward a view of society that downplayed social conflict and instead stressed the importance of creating a nation-state which embodied a solidarist view of society united by anti-imperialism instead of class conflict (as opposed to the leftist view in which both were important). In that sense, the idea of a "radical right" revolution, as Tsui puts it in his discussion, may be more accurate than the "conservative" one of the title.

For Dai Jitao, to name perhaps the most important theorist of this viewpoint, was not a "conservative" in the Confucian sense of a thinker such as Liang Shuming 梁漱溟. Rather, he saw an industrialized, and modernized future for China in which workers would play an important role; however, he also saw a technocratic elite as the major leadership caste that would bring this about, rather than workers' autonomous agency. Dai and his fellow-theorists were well-versed in Marxism, which they used to turn their opponents' views against them; by the end of the 1920s, he was also keen to find elements of Confucianism which could underpin his worldview. Yet he was always determined that the modern era should be one in which mass, not elite, politics would predominate, a very un-Confucian view. In the end, the radical revolution seemed to be mostly confined to the cities in the areas where the Nationalists had influence. In practice, the rural areas saw little ideological refashioning. We still need to know more about the extent to which Nationalist reformers genuinely sought to reshape rural economic relations, following on from pioneering work such as Charles Hayford's *To the People: James Yen and Village China*.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are indications of this here when topics such as rural reconstruction and hygiene are discussed, particularly during the years of the war against Japan, when the conflict ironically provided more ideological ballast to create greater national unity while contributing to the disintegration of the state.

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

Another key question, this time of particular interest to comparative intellectual historians, is what “conservatism” meant in Nationalist China, and its relationship to all-out fascism. In this context, Tsui’s book should be read in the context of another fine study, Maggie Clinton’s *Revolutionary Nativism: Fascism and Culture in China, 1925–1937*,<sup>1</sup> which I review in *The China Quarterly* (review scheduled in early 2019). Clinton argues that a key part of the Nationalist political hierarchy, the CC Clique under Chen Lifu 陳立夫, was fascist in inspiration and tactics, and is the key monograph to analyse the influence of both fascist thinking and aesthetics in its worldview. Tsui’s work deals with the related but separate question of how far the Nationalists were conservative/radical right, and how its undoubted fascist elements fitted into that political formation. Interwar Europe and Latin America saw plenty of regimes which combined overall conservative goals with fascist elements or subgroups (e.g., Franco’s Spain, the Catholic authoritarianism of which was combined with the fascist Falange element), or else a mixture of the two (e.g., the “Austrofascism” of Engelbert Dollfuss).

Tsui’s analysis gets to the heart of the complexity that marked the Nationalist Party’s politics. There is no doubt that the political discourse of figures such as Dai Jitao was against “political pluralism” (p. 127), and that the war against Japan was seen by the CC Clique as a chance to “undo the decadent consumerism and disruptive working-class activism capitalism begot” (p. 128). Yet it was still the state, not an individual leader (even Chiang Kai-shek) that was “the highest embodiment of popular sovereignty” (p. 129). There would be various, not terribly successful, attempts to create a wartime cult of personality around Chiang, but this would never become a serious source of political authority in the way that Mao Zedong’s personality cult would do (starting with the wartime Rectification movement and culminating in the Cultural Revolution). Despite the very real fascist trappings that were an important part of the Nationalist ideology, much of the political language of the movement seemed more in tune with more conservative ideas, including arguments against decadence (“sex, opium and dancing,” as Tsui pithily expresses it on p. 146), as well as arguments for a citizen body that would seek a sort of organic solidarity rather than the wicked temptations of class and economic warfare. This appeal to citizen solidarity also goes some way to explain the strange entente between the authoritarian Nationalist Party and prominent liberals of the era. Figures such as liberal writer Zhu Guangqian, Tsui argues, were in the end willing to support the stable state promised by the Nationalists, even if they did not endorse the conservative elements of the revolution, as they were ultimately more worried about radical, violent revolution. (Their fate after 1949 suggests they may have been right to be suspicious.)

<sup>5</sup> Maggie Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism: Fascism and Culture in China, 1925–1937* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

However, stressing the appeal of Chiang's regime to liberals may slightly underestimate the agency liberals themselves had, particularly in the wartime years. It would be ahistorical to argue that the Nationalist party was, overall, a "liberal" party in any meaningful sense. However, its leaders did see the merit in drawing on the presence of liberal figures to show that they were able to draw on a wide spectrum of opinions (in a way untrue of Nazi Germany and less true for regimes such as interwar Japan or fascist Italy). One reason for this was a factor that is relatively underplayed in Tsui's account: the relationship with the United States, which for senior Nationalists such as Song Meiling 宋美齡 and Song Ziwen 宋子文 (T. V. Soong) was an important connection for financial and political reasons. Of course, many Nationalist gestures in favour of liberal reform were carried out to give the US a reason to believe that China was turning into a full Western-style democracy, which was an unlikely outcome in the 1930s, to say the least. But there were real political changes because of the need to keep liberals on board, particularly in the wartime years when pluralism was more politically necessary. One example is the establishment of the National People's Consultative Council in the early war years, a multi-party organization that had genuine influence and, most important, embedded the idea that a multipartite system was legitimate in its own right. One could also consider figures such as the historian and politician Jiang Tingfu 蔣廷黻 (T. F. Tsiang), perhaps the most prominent liberal associated with the government, who played a prominent role in the immediate post-war reconstruction of China. Liberal figures were in no way dominant in the Nationalist party; but their influence is another element in the complex network of thinking that makes it hard to pin down the exact definition of the Nationalist ideology. Tsui's book astutely points out the importance of the war against Japan in crystallizing many aspects of Nationalist political thinking. The invasion by Japan was a moment of deep trauma for China's politicians. However, it also forced a political change of direction that meant they were not, in the end, comparable to the politicians, thinkers, or soldiers of Japan, Italy, and Germany who were responsible for an irredentist, aggressive ideology shaped by noxious ideas of race that were significantly different from even the most radical forms of Nationalist thought—even if they had wished to be. In the end, it is unclear how much transformative, as opposed to coercive, capacity the likes of Dai Jitao and Chen Lifu really had.

In the early twenty-first century, it is worth reflecting that the "radical right" of the 1930s may have more similarities with the present day than we care to admit. The comparisons often heard today with outright fascism or Nazism are often unhelpful because they invite comparisons with racist and genocidal regimes that have few direct parallels in the present. However, it is far less fanciful to see in the government of a Jair Bolsonaro or Rodrigo Duterte the combination of nationalism and an

opposition to class-based struggle combined with a desire for revolutionary social change against existing elites. Understanding China's mid-twentieth century revolution in these terms gives Tsui's book a startling freshness. Its contemporary relevance is just one element of its quality; in the depths of its research and complexity and seriousness of its historical insights, it is a deeply significant work.

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***Diaspora's Homeland: Modern China in the Age of Global Migration.*** By Shelly Chan. Durham, NC and London, England: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 264. \$99.95 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

How did Chinese migrants change China? During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some twenty million Chinese left China (along with an additional twenty million who settled in Manchuria), forming one of the world's largest migratory movements. This migration more forcefully tied China to the outside world and brought back transnational monetary, cultural, and intellectual flows to the Chinese mainland. Shelly Chan's brilliant new work invites us to rethink the relationship between the Chinese diaspora and mainland China, particularly by tracing its evolution over time and its historical contingency.

*Diaspora's Homeland* makes exciting contributions to Chinese history and overseas Chinese history more broadly. It responds to a thread in the scholarship which has turned against the concept of diaspora. In the view of these scholars, the word "diaspora" promotes an essentialized Chinese identity and dangerously suggests that Chinese overseas and their descendants are ever loyal to the mainland. While agreeing that depictions of the diaspora as somehow tied to China are misleading and remove the agency of diasporic migrants themselves, Chan nevertheless argues forcefully that the concept of diaspora continues to be useful to the experience of Chinese overseas. Beyond simply illustrating geographic variations and transnational flows, a diasporic framework also allows Chan to focus on "temporal disjunctions" (p. 189) between China and the diaspora. Chan uses "diaspora time" to get at these disjunctions, and "diaspora moments" to capture moments of tension, division, and recombination with the diaspora. This sophisticated conceptual framework allows Chan to capture the contingency of the evolution of the homeland, the diaspora, and the relationship between the two, as well as capture multidirectional flows between