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#### **Author**

Smith, Craig A.

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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **China as the Leader of the Weak and Small: The *Ruoxiao* Nations and Guomindang Nationalism**

Craig A. Smith, Australian National University

#### **Abstract**

Frustrated with the “white imperialism” of the League of Nations and the “red imperialism” of the Third Communist International, a number of Chinese intellectuals began discussing possibilities for a third option during the interwar years. Turning away from liberalism and Marxism, they examined Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People and began working to promote his Principle of Nationalism as a concept that focused on the *ruoxiao* (weak and small nations) and could liberate people around the world that were suffering under imperialism. This discourse often centered on the possibility of creating a new form of “International,” the International of Nations, which would unite the oppressed nations of the world in opposition to the imperialist nations, rather than divide nations along class lines, as Chinese critics perceived the Comintern to do. This article examines Chinese intellectual discussions of a China-centered “International” by a variety of writers, including Dai Jitao and Hu Hanmin, from 1925 to 1937. The author shows that, although this discourse on a China-centered “International of Nations” influenced intellectuals’ perceptions of China’s position and responsibility in the world, it was consumed and invalidated by Japanese imperialism, as the Japanese Empire employed a similar discourse of pan-Asianism to justify militarism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Keywords: Asianism, International of Nations, New Asia, intellectual history

#### **Introduction**

The establishment of the League of Nations in 1920 immediately opened up new possibilities for Chinese intellectuals, just as it brought disappointment as a result of its failure to deliver on promises of equality and justice. Although the League often served as a venue for China and Japan to vent their frustrations with each other, representatives of both countries agreed on the need for a clause on racial equality to be a defining feature of the Covenant of the League of Nations and both argued for this during the Paris Peace Conference (Burkman 2007, 80–84). Chinese intellectuals’ frustration with the League accelerated after China failed to be awarded a

seat on any of the nonpermanent councils and was unable to compel the League to follow through on promises for arms reduction (Chiang 1924; Wang 1925). Despite frustrations with the Western powers' refusal to concede racial equality, the inability of Chinese representatives to protect Chinese interests at the League, and the shock of rising costs, intellectuals remained optimistic about the concept of large-scale international cooperation, seeing it as an inevitable step in global political development.

In the mid-1920s, particularly after Sun Yat-sen delivered his speeches on "Nationalism" and "Great Asianism," the possibility of a China-led Asia gained popularity among some intellectuals. Following Sun's assertions that Chinese nationalism must not be closed minded, but should rather be supportive of other nations' independence, these intellectuals saw China as a leader of the "weak and small," what the Guomindang (GMD) called the *ruoxiao* nations (Sun n.d., 50; Sun 1941, 144). Asian nations remained the focus of this leadership, although many hoped for a wider-ranging leadership in the future as these intellectuals tried to incorporate popular ideas of benevolent assistance into discourse on the future spread of China's revolution across Asia. This was reflected in the GMD's January 1924 reorganization at the First National Congress, during which the party, aligned with the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, proposed to unite the world proletariat and oppressed nations against imperialism. A united Asia was therefore a shared part of the discourse between the GMD and the CCP, and it was influential in Chinese intellectual discourse amid a global zeitgeist of internationalism seen in the League of Nations, the Third Communist International, and international movements in Europe and Africa. In the 1920s, a great number of urban Chinese organizations were established with Asianist goals, and GMD elite joined international organizations, such as the short-lived, Comintern-sponsored Anti-Imperialist League (Piazza 2002).<sup>1</sup> However, even after the bloody end of the United Front finished cooperation between the CCP and the Comintern in 1927, GMD discourse on the mission of global leadership continued to expand.

This article concentrates on official discourse positing the GMD as the leader of a united global movement against imperialism. In the 1920s, the GMD took a new approach to its position in China, to the Chinese revolution, and to its position and responsibility in the world. I argue that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, if only in discourse, the revolution entered an expansionist stage, pushing out to China's frontiers with the goal of bringing the Three Principles and the nationalist revolution to China and all Asian nations due to a belief in the

cultural centrality of China that wedded modern Asianism to the Sinocentric tribute system. To an indeterminable degree, this discourse was GMD propaganda initially intended to abrogate the authority of the Communist Party and its Comintern backer. The same was later used to refute the propaganda of the Asian Monroe Doctrine that was often used to justify the expansionism of the Japanese Empire. However, beyond propaganda, the new Sinocentrism of GMD leadership discourse led to a wide-ranging research program for China's frontiers, borderlands, and neighboring countries. This research program, in turn, furthered a spatially defined nationalism that raised intellectuals' consciousness of territory.

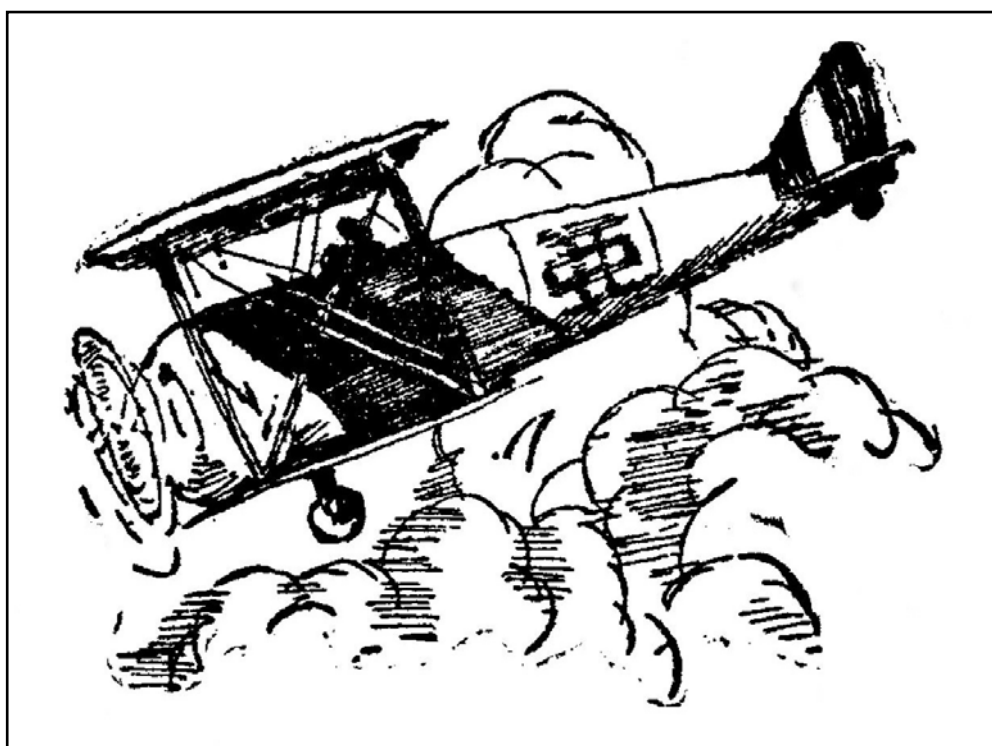


Figure 1. Image of a war plane with the character *ya* signifying “Asia.” *Source: Xin Yaxiya* editors (1930, 91).

### **The Limits of China and *New Asia***

According to Charles Maier, the twentieth century was the century of territoriality (Maier 2000). This was certainly true in China. In her PhD dissertation on China's borders, Zhihong Chen makes use of Maier's understanding of the twentieth century to explain and contextualize Chinese intellectuals' fascination with territoriality during the Nanjing decade of 1927–1937

(Chen 2008). As elusive political authority was finally consolidated with the dissolution of warlordism and the reestablishment of the Republic of China in Nanjing, and with Japan, Russia, and other powers still eager to slice off China's extremities, the question for China's thinkers became the territorial boundaries of China. This had crucial importance in defining the territory of the later People's Republic, but was also important in defining China's relationship with neighboring countries.

A concrete example of this is Xie Bin's *History of China's Territorial Losses*. First published in 1925, it was republished seven times by 1941 and even used as a middle school textbook in Shanghai (Xie 1926). Xie Bin was a military officer, but also a prolific writer in the 1920s and 1930s, penning a number of books on military strategy, development, and China's frontiers, especially Yunnan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Mongolia. Talk of China's losses was a form of nationalism based on shame and trauma. Such writings on the history of territorial losses and national shame were repeated continuously, producing a collective trauma that emotionally prepared this new generation for action against further incursions, forecasting the rise of a positive form of nationalism that would sweep the country in the 1940s.

The map that Xie published in 1925—*The Lost Land and Sea Territories of China* 中國喪失領土領海圖 (figure 2)—was distributed with his book and remains widely available. The book's far-reaching impact could be seen in the pages of the journal *New Asia* 新亞細亞 a few years later (Chen 2008, 47).

Disseminating this territory-based nationalism in the early 1930s, the GMD began a political movement with the long-term goals of reasserting Chinese control over lost territories in the spirit of the Chinese Revolution and Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles. The desire for this was articulated in the publications produced by the New Asia Research Association, a society of university professors, intellectuals, and politicians interested in China's frontiers and neighbors. The GMD subsidized the organization, but members also contributed through donations and membership fees (Chen 2008, 44). Although the group was created with an academic focus, there was little distinction between scholarly and ideological purposes. Established in Shanghai in 1931, the New Asia Research Association's birth almost coincided with China's latest loss of territory and the birth of a new pseudo-country. The Japanese invaded and occupied Manchuria in late 1931, proclaiming the state of Manchukuo in 1932. Unable to resist Japan with force,

Chiang Kai-shek and the Nanjing government turned to the League of Nations for help (Mitter 2000, 5). The failure of the League to deal with the Manchurian Incident was the final straw for Chinese politicians and intellectuals who had maintained lingering hopes for its intentions. The New Asia Research Association, however, was established on the eve of this disaster by elites who were aware of the possibility of the cutting up of China and were preparing for this through efforts to assert China's authority over the frontiers.



Figure 2. This map from the 1941 edition of Xie Bin's *A History of China's Territorial Losses* was published for schoolchildren just months before the Japanese occupation of Shanghai's foreign concessions. It became a standard image for displaying China's territorial losses since the Opium Wars. The colors indicate areas once under the authority of China. *Source*: Xie Bin (1941, map insert).

The association was a “who’s who” of politicians and intellectuals with interests or research on the frontiers or in other Asian countries. Chiang Kai-shek and Dai Jitao were its honorary chairpersons. The real chairpersons and senior researchers included Tan Yunshan 譚雲山, the famous researcher of India; noted researchers of West China Ma Hetian 馬鶴天 and Xu Gongwu 許公武; propaganda specialist and acting Minister of Information, Fang Zhi 方治; and university professors Xin Shuzhi 辛樹幟 and Chen Daqi 陳大齊. A number of intellectual and political leaders from the frontier areas also attended meetings and sometimes contributed articles, including Prince Demchugdongrub 德王 of Mongolia, who would become the leader of the Japanese-sponsored state of Mengjiang almost ten years later, and Kesang Tsering 格桑澤仁, an important GMD operative of the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission (*Xin Yaxiya xuehui* 1934).

The foremost activities of the group were research, translation, and publishing. Although *New Asia* was the primary outlet of the group’s research and essays, the list of books published by the group indicates the extent of its work. These works included: *The Chinese Frontiers* (中國邊疆), *Issues in Manchuria and Mongolia* (滿蒙問題), *Issues in Xinjiang* (新疆問題), *Issues in Tibet* (西藏問題), *Issues in Yunnan* (雲南問題), *Industrial Projects for Building up the Frontiers* (實業計劃之邊疆建設), *Manchuria and Mongolia* (滿洲與蒙古), and *Strange Tales from Malaysia* (馬來搜奇錄).

Only one book published by the New Asia Research Association was translated from English: *Asia Reborn* (1928), by American journalist and spy Marguerite Harrison. This was due to Harrison’s assertion that an Asian federation was on the horizon, a claim of great interest to the association. The 1932 translation was edited by Zhang Zhenzhi 張震之, who excitedly announced in his introduction, “China’s rebirth is the beginning of the rebirth of the Asian nations!”<sup>2</sup> This echoed Harrison’s own words, as she assumed that China would pass through the present turmoil and experience a strong rebirth, and that China, Japan, and Korea could create a race-based alliance (Harrison 1928, 274). Hua Qiyun 華企雲, one of the most prolific of *New Asia*’s essayists, used his translator’s preface to remind readers that “the Republic of China contains one half of the population of Asia. Thus, the responsibility for leading the other nations in our mutual struggle falls upon us!” (Hua 1932, unpaginated).

The primary publishing organ of the New Asia Research Association was the *New Asia* journal, which was produced from 1930 to 1937. This journal, a mouthpiece publication for the GMD, wedded the Nationalist objectives of securing the former territorial holdings of the Qing dynasty with Chinese leadership of the Asian continent, under the theoretical outlines of both Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles and Great Asianism. The three goals of the journal were declared in the opening pages of the first edition before a reprinting of the complete text of Sun's 1924 "Great Asianism" speech:

1. To establish the central theories of the Three Principles.
2. To research issues concerning China's frontiers from the perspective of the Three Principles.
3. To research the liberation of the Asian nations from the perspective of the Three Principles.

The centrality of East China to the frontiers, and to all of Asia, was an assumption that would be clarified through the research of this association. The modern disciplines of geography, history, and anthropology were put to use as an unprecedented level of specialization materialized in the new generation of Chinese graduates from Japanese and Western universities, including Ma Hetian, Chen Daqi, Xin Shuzhi, and Tan Yunshan. Judging by the team assembled, one would imagine the frontiers to be the focus of the journal, and they were for most articles. However, the introductory essay by the editors did not mention China's frontiers. Rather, "The Future of Asia" extolled the greatness of Asia compared to other continents, repeatedly called for Asian nations to unite, and detailed Sun's Asianism in relation to the Three Principles:

Our president was always discussing Great Asianism. Is this an independent principle? No, Asianism is certainly not an independent principle. The Great Asianism discussed by our president is the application of the Three Principles of the People to the International of Nations [*minzu guoji*], just as our president explained "The Three Principles of the People are principles to save the country."... In the East there is a country that has already reached a privileged position that uses Great Asianism to flaunt its pipe dream of a unified Asia. And there are those military and political figures who ingratiate themselves to imperialist motives. They, too, call for Great Asianism. Despite the fallacies of the Great Asianism promoted by the common people, our president did not shy from using the term because it stands on the resolute position of the Three Principles of the People. He speaks of a Great Asianism that is based on the Three Principles'.... Chinese people hoping for the revival of China must resolutely trust in the Three Principles of the People. Asian peoples hoping for the revival of



Asia's peoples of color must resolutely trust in the Three Principles of the People.  
(*Xin Yaxiya* editors 1930)

This vision of Great Asianism as the international incarnation of the Three Principles was continually propagated, from Sun's "Great Asianism" speech of 1924, through the repeated discussions by Sun's closest supporters, Dai Jitao and Hu Hanmin, until the fall of Chen Gongbo's government in 1945. It stemmed from an unassailable belief in China's eventual return to dominance and a nostalgia for the traditional Sinocentric tribute system, which Sun himself had helped to stimulate. The crucial category of analysis that GMD supporters utilized to imagine Chinese leadership was that of the *ruoxiao*, or "weak and small," nations that would turn to China for benevolent tutelage and support.

This understanding of a coming reorganization of the global system appropriated Marxist understandings of imperialism and global capitalism, yet the key concept of *ruoxiao* was not derived from classical Marxism.

### ***Ruoxiao* Nations: Reunderstanding the Colonial Situation**

*Ruoxiao* is almost invariably translated in English as "weak and small." This is a fine direct translation, but it misses the more nuanced connotations of the term. *Ruoxiao* nations are defined in opposition to capitalist imperialist nations. And imperialism is defined in the Leninist sense of the term, as a transnational extension of financial capitalism. Imperialist nations were those in the stage of financial capitalism, and *ruoxiao* nations were those that remained in an agricultural and craftsman stage of development. The difference was defined temporally (Du n.d., 1–3). Further, nations that were defined as *ruoxiao* were usually made up of colonized and oppressed peoples of the Western and Japanese Empires. Therefore, the term *ruoxiao* must be understood within an international system. It was used to understand China's place between the weak and the strong. It was never used to refer to minorities within China, such as Tibetans, although it was often used to refer to minorities in other countries, such as Jews. In 1928, Li Zuohua 李作華 published a popular book that listed the *ruoxiao* nations and their individual circumstances.<sup>3</sup> The book was reissued a number of times, but soon had to compete with similar collections that were expanded, updated, and regionally focused as *ruoxiao* nations became a popular topic of study in the 1930s.

Definitions of *ruoxiao* included “colonized,” “semi-colonized,” and Sun’s idea of a “sub-colony” 次殖民地—a colony of all countries, referring to China (Sun n.d., 10). These last two categories emphasized external control over the economic production or markets of the nation (Du n.d., 9–13). *Ruoxiao* was thus sometimes a term that was more specific than “oppressed,” but more inclusive than “colonized.” Unlike the latter term, it emphasized economic over political oppression. As Rebecca Karl has shown for the decades immediately preceding this period, Chinese intellectuals redefined China and the world by appropriating uneven global spaces “translated” through the colonized and oppressed nations of the world (Karl 2002, 10). This was explicit in the formation of the concept of *ruoxiao minzu*.

In what is likely the first application of the term *ruoxiao* to a nation, Chen Duxiu used it to blast the abuse of China at the Paris Conference during the height of the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Although the concept may have had a Leninist background, as Lenin used a similar term in 1917, Chen coined the term in literary cohesion with a popular expression from literary Chinese: *ruorou-qiangshi* (“The meat of the weak is eaten by the strong”) (Lenin 1964, 382; Chen 1921). In the early twentieth century, the strong (*qiang*) brought to mind the colonial powers *lie-qiang*. Chen was referring to China, Korea, and other oppressed nations when he used the term *ruoxiao*.

In the early 1920s, writers and translators began to show an interest in the literary output of so-called oppressed peoples. The popular writer Mao Dun and his *Short Story Monthly* 小说月报 were particularly instrumental in introducing works of Polish, Jewish, black, and Irish writers (Eber 1980). This focus soon began to include fiction from Asia, as the preferred term drifted from “oppressed” to “*ruoxiao*.” Collections of short stories from *ruoxiao* nations appeared during the 1930s and introduced the fiction of a variety of oppressed and colonized peoples, including Irish, Jewish, and those from New Zealand, as well as Korean and Taiwanese (Anonymous 1936; Chen 1942).

The term became particularly important in 1926, when it was used in the Second National Congress of the GMD, at which members agreed to sympathize with and unite with the “weak and small” nations of the entire world (Jiang 2003, 354). Delegates from across Southeast Asia attended the congress and began organizing to unite the Chinese in Nanyang in order to pursue emancipation (Belogurova 2014, 452). After the congress, the term *ruoxiao* regularly appeared in

writings by the GMD elite. Wang Jingwei clarified his own usage of the term, arguing that China was a special case among the *ruoxiao*, as it was not a small (*xiao*) nation, but a large one, and therefore might be called a *ruoda* nation. This was an even worse state to be in, and was due to China's concentration on spiritual, rather than material, development (Sun 1996, 732–733). However, it was Sun's use of the term in his Three Principles that authorized it as a crucial keyword for the late 1920s and the 1930s.

### **Chinese Paternalism and the Asian Elder Brother**

In his speeches on nationalism, Sun used the term “*ruoxiao* nations” to refer to peoples oppressed by imperialism. In Sun's sixth speech on nationalism, a speech that emphasized China's duty to lead the *ruoxiao* nations, Sun connected the term to another classical Chinese concept, *jiruofuqing*, meaning to “aid and support the weak.”

It was this policy, explained Sun, that allowed small countries like Vietnam, Burma, Korea, and Siam to maintain their independence before the Europeans arrived. For Chinese nationalism to succeed and for China to realize “our nation's true spirit,” the Chinese nation “must support the *ruoxiao* nations and oppose the world powers” (Sun 1996, 732–733). Sun integrated the assumed values of China's tributary system and a development approach for surrounding nations as his future foreign policy theory.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on China's glorious past as the center of the tribute system, Sun looked to a future in which China could lead Asia.

Sun Yat-sen's theory of nationalism was more complicated than strict ethnic nationalism. He emphasized the importance of giving preference to blood relations of nation and race, which he believed to be naturally constructed through *wangdao*, the Confucian principle of benevolent rule, as opposed to the state, a Western construct based on violent or coercive hegemony (Sun n.d., 3). Sun's return to this principle was nothing new. Indeed, it had recurred in Japanese writings regularly after the Meiji period (Brown 2007, 135). However, Sun's positioning of *wangdao* as the root of the Chinese nation and the Asian form of governance was unique. It would be even more emphasized by Wang Jingwei's Reorganized National Government during the Second Sino-Japanese War, when it became an important piece of Japanese propaganda (Yang 1942). This theory then provided a theorized and authoritative explanation offering many Chinese intellectuals morally imperative grounds for positing China as the destined leader of an Asian family of nations.

In discussions of Asia, its future, and its past, Chinese intellectuals asserted Asia's qualification as the "elder brother," or *lao dage*, due to the continent's area, population, history, and culture (*Xin Yaxiya* editors 1930, 11–12; Harrison 1932, unpaginated introduction). However, it was the ideology of the Three Principles that put China in an advanced position from which its leaders could tutor and support the surrounding nations. In a rather extreme religious analogy, Du Jiu 杜久 argued that Sun Yat-sen's "nationalism" was a "bible" for uniting the *ruoxiao* nations: "We must now endeavor to spread the word of this bible to all of the *ruoxiao* nations and bring them to believe that only once we are all united can we hope to overthrow imperialism" (Du n.d., 25). This missionary work of the GMD was a means by which the meek could find salvation and be liberated from their mutual oppressors:

The modern national revolution is a movement against imperialism. All *ruoxiao* nations must unite in a front for the anti-imperialist movement because we are in the same position, that of the oppressed. We have the same enemy, imperialism. Our objectives are the same; we want freedom and equality. Our hopes are the same, mutual aid. Our methods are the same: the overthrow of imperialism. The power we need is the same: the power to oppose imperialism. And the high principles on which we rely are the same: the realization of worldwide utopia [*datong*]. (Du n.d., 23)

For pro-GMD writers in the Nanjing decade, China and the GMD were poised to lift the world toward *datong* due to their centrality. As New Asia Research Group member Zhang Zhenzhi explained, "Asian culture can be said to be the center of world culture, and Chinese culture can be said to be the center of Asian culture" (Zhang 1930a, 83). Zhang further clarified his argument that Chinese culture, the root of "world culture," came from the high plateaus of what is now the far west of Xinjiang two issues later in "The Southward Development of Chinese Culture." In this article, he also conflated the Chinese nation with the Han ethnicity, saying "The Chinese people, who are the Han people" (Zhang 1930a, 65). This conflation was not acceptable in a 1930 GMD publication, and other scholars rose to challenge Zhang. Chen Yaobin 陳耀斌 wrote in to *New Asia* to argue that all the nations of China are actually part of the Chinese nation, so there is no need for any of them to claim independence. Zhang responded to the letter, explaining that his article was about the historical Chinese nation, which did not include minorities, while the current Chinese nation certainly did include all nationalities (Chen 1931).

This matter points to the difficulties and ambiguities of Chinese Asianism and Chinese leadership, particularly in contrast with Japanese Asianism, which also ostensibly stipulated that all nations must achieve independence and equality, including Tibetans, Mongolians, and Manchus, despite many Japanese writers' belief in Japanese superiority. Of course, any emphasis on Chinese or Japanese centrality was irreconcilable with the other. And although most Asianist writing from both countries maintained the argument that Asianism was about peace and equality, any plans for institutionalized Asianism inevitably slipped toward centralization. For some Chinese writers, this institution was the organization of the *ruoxiao* nations, the International of Nations 民族國際.

In a book titled *How to Unite the Ruoxiao Nations*, editor Du Jiu called for the unification of these nations under the GMD.<sup>5</sup> His understanding of leadership was the tutelage of equal nations:

China's Guomindang is the world's kindest, strongest, and earliest established revolutionary organization to seek equality among nations. We hope that every *ruoxiao* nation can have this sort of organization as it is necessary to have a strong revolutionary organization in order to lead the revolutionary movement. (Du n.d., 33)

Sun Yat-sen himself was never recorded specifically describing an international institution by which China and the GMD could lead the *ruoxiao* nations. However, he did make general calls for them to be united: "We must first unite ourselves, then through sympathy for others in the same state, unite the *ruoxiao* nations and fight the 250,000,000 [imperialists] together, using right to defeat might" (Sun 1924, quoted in Du n.d., 25). Based on these words, Sun's followers envisioned a global structure led by the GMD, a new form of the Communist International known as the International of Nations.

### **On the International of Nations**

Shortly after Sun Yat-sen's death in 1925, Dai Jitao and Hu Hanmin began calling for an International of Nations, an organized international league of oppressed nations to compete with the League of Nations and the Third International. The organization would be based on the concept of nationalism, particularly in connection with Sun Yat-sen's definition, rather than liberal imperialism or Communism. "Free" (*ziyou*) and "self-determining" (*zijue*) were keywords

found throughout promotion of the organization, and some intellectuals linked the movement to Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points.<sup>6</sup> Du Jiu explained:

The fundamental program of the operation is none other than political and economic alliance [*tongmeng*]. Political alliance refers to political integration in order to gather the strength of all the individual *ruoxiao* nations in order to resist the political invasion of the imperialists and to resolve the political issues of each *ruoxiao* nation. Just as the League of Nations is actually a political alliance to unite white imperialism against *ruoxiao* nations, the Third International is a political alliance of red imperialism. (Du n.d., 26–27)

Dai Jitao, who may have been the first to push for the International of Nations, brought up the idea for it on July 30, 1925, at a press conference at Shanghai University, where he was principal. He called for nations oppressed by the five imperialist countries—Britain, the United States, France, Italy, and Japan—to unite and oppose the imperialists' International, the League of Nations. Uniting *ruoxiao* nations all around the world, the movement would be centered in China and, in addition to fighting against imperialism, would engage with issues of the economy, culture, transportation, international law, and immigration (Wang 1999, 143). Soon after, Dai published an article called “International of Nations,” which argued that it was impossible for a country to gain independence and for a nation to gain freedom in the current international situation. The International of Nations could change this (Dai 1925, 2–5).

Coming just as Dai was beginning to openly oppose Communism, the call for this “International” can be seen as part of his ambition for the intellectual abrogation of the authority of the Third Communist International over “oppressed nations.” He had theorized the world into three camps: the capitalist imperialists, the Communist imperialists, and the nationalists, who would fight for independence and freedom under the banner of Sun's Three Principles. In 1925, Dai interpreted the Three Principles as fundamentally opposed to Communism. He argued that Sun was really a traditionalist who had based his writings on Confucianism, the belief structure at the heart of China and soon to be at the heart of the International of Nations. As someone who had once devoted himself to the study of Marxist thought, Dai was a particularly dangerous problem for Communist intellectuals due to his ability to employ the language of his enemies as well as they could (Lu 2004, 145–148).

Leftist intellectuals rose to the challenge, and articles attacking Dai Jitao were published in all major Communist journals in 1925. Michael Borodin (1884–1951), the Comintern advisor

to China, even went as far as calling Dai one of the “five evils” in China, the others being imperialism, warlords, comprador capitalists, and GMD rightists (Lu 2004, 150). Many responded with anger, but most also engaged with Dai’s arguments. In a published exchange, popular young socialists Dai Ying 代英 and Yu Zhongdi 于忠迪 discussed Dai Jitao’s call for an International of Nations. Yu explained that Communists also hoped for the liberation of nations but argued that Dai Jitao misunderstood the crucial contradictions when he argued for oppressed nations to unify against imperialist nations: “We must unite the oppressed nations with the oppressed classes of imperialist countries and organize a global anti-imperialist united front” (Dai and Yu 1925).

However, some leftist intellectuals who wavered between the CCP and the GMD supported the idea. The literary scholar Tan Pimou 譚丕模, writing under the penname Pimeng 披朦, wrote a lengthy article in 1929 supporting the idea based on the concepts of self-determination and equality. He quoted Sun Yat-sen’s call for China to unite and then join together with the *ruoxiao* nations as proof of Sun’s support of the organization, and argued that this was the will of the party representatives, as leading the *ruoxiao* had been established as a party goal during the Second Congress, in which representatives from the entire country had participated. Following up on Yu Zhongdi’s argument to continue supporting the Third International, Tan argued that the Third International was destined to fail because it concentrated only on the proletariat and “cannot represent the interests of the entirety of the *ruoxiao* nations” (Tan 1929, 1, 6–7, 8). As the Soviets had refused to support the GMD, Tan reasoned that they would never support all of China and would divide its strength:

We must organize the International of Nations, unite with the oppressed peoples or the proletariat of the West, offering them a firm and powerful force to struggle against the capitalist class. Then the capitalist class of the imperialist states will have no power left to oppress us. We must organize the International of Nations, unite the *ruoxiao* nations of the East, including India, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Burma, shake off the imperialists, and gain independence. Then the imperialists will have no time for colonizing and have no power left to oppress us. (Tan 1929, 8–9)

Drawing on Sun’s sixth speech on “Nationalism,” Tan connected the International to the countries of the former tribute system. Tan also extended Dai’s argument for the International of Nations to allow for the inclusion of Western proletariat forces, just as Sun had argued that

China should support the oppressed classes of imperialist nations (Tan 1929, 8–11). This was a logical and expected answer to Communist critiques. However, other theoretical approaches to the International provided even more obvious Marxist analysis.

The people [of the *ruoxiao* nations] are the commodities of imperialism, and the supplier of imperialism's industrial material at the same time. Their countries are sites for imperialists' surplus capital, and also the sphere of imperial rule. In short, the imperialists are the masters and they are the slaves. So the common masses of the oppressed nations, especially the worker and peasant masses, have a life of hardship beyond expression in words. (Jingpu 1928, 24)

In the above passage, Jingpu 荆璞 relates the subalternesque situation of the proletariat within the *ruoxiao* nations, showing the glaring difference between the workers or peasants of oppressed Asian nations and the workers or peasants of imperialist Western states.

From this we can also see that the International of Nations was a discursive strategy to deny Comintern leadership in the global revolution, calling into question its legitimacy as a global leader by debating the nature of a revolution that was limited to the proletariat. This was an important task for a revolutionary party whose own legitimacy was questioned by the Chinese Communist Party, which was now the sole Chinese party authorized by the Comintern and was therefore authorized as a legitimate part of the world revolutionary movement.

Responsibility for leadership for the global revolution, argued Jingpu, "has already passed from the proletariat to the *ruoxiao* nations" (1928, 23). Although the proletariat were leaders during the industrial revolution and before the consolidation of imperialist power, Jingpu saw the *ruoxiao* as the central revolutionary force in the 1920s because imperialist nations now oppressed all classes in *ruoxiao* nations.

On these grounds, Jingpu argued that the Fifth Plenary Session of the Second Congress of the GMD, which was about to be held in August 1928, should make it a priority to establish a committee for the International of Ruoxiao Nations and invite representatives from various countries to hold a provisional session (1928, 27). The Fifth Plenary Session did not establish the committee, but it was a crucial session in Chinese history, as Chiang Kai-shek was able to make changes to the constitution ensuring that the president remained commander-in-chief of the military and was no longer responsible to the National Government Council, but only to the chairman of the Central Executive Committee, which was himself (Zhao 1996, 75–76).



## The Guomintang Leading the *Ruoxiao* Nations

Of course it must be China's Guomintang that is the leader and China's Guomintang that is the nucleus [of the International of Nations].

—Tan Pimou (1929, 10)

In the first volume of *New Asia*, Hu Hanmin contributed an article on the International of Nations designed to capture the authority of Sun Yat-sen. Hu's article "On the International of Nations and the Third International" followed the opening articles on Sun's Asianism. He claimed that he had initially raised the idea with Sun, who generally agreed: "When the President was in Japan, I advocated for the idea of organizing an International of Nations so that our GMD could become the leader of the international nationalities revolutionary movement" (國際的民族革命運動). They then brought it up with Mikhail Borodin, the Comintern representative to the Republic of China. Borodin agreed, but stated that Hu should be responsible for initiating this international alliance. Hu humbly replied that his poor language skills would hold him back from this, but Borodin and Sun insisted (Hu 1930).

Not long after Sun's death, Hu left for Moscow. His official mission was to push for the GMD's entry into the Third International, but Hu later claimed that his plan was to promote the International of Nations. If Hu Hanmin did go to Russia to push for the International of Nations, mention of the International is not to be found in his speeches and writings from Russia in 1925. He did, however, make calls for the unification of the oppressed and the weak a number of times, particularly in his speech "The Solution of the Guomintang" (國民黨真解), in which he clearly explains the GMD policy of leading the *ruoxiao* in relation to Sun's Three Principles:

As for nationalism, Dr. Sun explained that no matter what nation or country people come from, those who are oppressed or wronged must unite together against power.... Aside from Japan, all of the *ruoxiao* of Asia have been brutally suppressed and suffered all manner of hardships. Sympathizing with each other's suffering, they must unite together and oppose those brutal countries. Once these oppressed nations unite, they will certainly devote themselves to war with the brutal countries. The international war of the future will not be interracial but intraracial. The white race will divide and go to war. The yellow race will divide and go to war. It will be a class war, a war between the oppressed and the oppressors.... In calling for nationalism, we will first unite ourselves, then through compassion for others' situations, we will unite all of the *ruoxiao* nations to defeat the 250,000,000 oppressors. (Hu 1926, 26–27)

Beginning in April 1927, not long after Hu returned from Russia, Chiang Kai-shek destroyed the United Front of the CCP and GMD with violent attacks against CCP sympathizers. Hu sided with Chiang, became the leader of the Legislative Yuan, and began to employ anti-Communist rhetoric, referring to the Third International as “red imperialism,” which he believed could be confronted by the International of Nations (Hu 1930, 18).

In the early 1930s, following Hu’s lead, other intellectuals took up the call for this International as the only structural alliance that could defend against both white and red imperialism. In response to the white imperialists’ organization into the League of Nations and the red imperialists’ organization into the Third International, Yin Weilian 印維廉 argued that “the first step shall be the uniting of Asia’s oppressed nationalities, the establishment of the International of Nations. Only with such a specific international organization can we establish common purpose and common action” (Yin 1930, 97). Explaining why only the Republic of China could lead Asia, Yin wrote:

Firstly, only the Chinese nation has such a population large enough to fight against the white race. Secondly, the Chinese nation has a completely superior national character [*minzu xing*] in terms of its national moral structure [*minzu daode*], national ideology [*minzusixiang*], and national ability [*minzu nengli*]. Thirdly, under the leadership of the Three Principles of the People, the Chinese nation will never succumb to riding the coattails of imperialism and use force to persecute other nations. (Yin 1930, 97)

*New Asia* continued to be used as a vehicle to promote the idea of Chinese leadership and the International of Nations. In 1932, Hong Weifa 洪為法, a member of Guo Moruo’s Creation Society, published a more detailed article on the need for the organization. Not unlike Hu Hanmin, he argued that there were three trends for power in the contemporary international struggle: imperialism, represented by the League of Nations; socialism, represented by the Third International; and nationalism, particularly the nationalism of the *ruoxiaominzu*, which needed an international organization to represent these nations and further their interests (Hong 1932, 31). Although he did not use the term “red imperialism,” he was critical of the “class struggle” for its role in “substantially detracting from the movement for the independence of the *ruoxiao* nations” (1932, 34). But again, the reasons Hong employed to argue for Chinese leadership

returned to China's history and the uniqueness of Chinese culture, a dominant and recurring argument throughout the 1930s.

### **Cultural Superiority**

Beginning in the nineteenth century and accelerating during the New Culture Movement of the 1910s, a debate on the merits of Eastern versus Western cultures imagined the two in the form of a dichotomy (Fung 2010, 31–37). By the 1930s, partly in concert with the rise of Chinese nationalism, a belief in the moral or spiritual superiority of a Sinocentric Asian culture was commonplace. This is reflected in the reasoning behind arguments for Chinese leadership of the International of Nations:

In the current phase, the *ruoxiao* nations are unorganized. The *ruoxiao* nation that will take the position of leader must have a glorious history, a solid foundation, and a noble culture. Of course, only the Chinese nation can fill these requirements and take on the responsibility of leadership. (Du n.d., 30)

In 1931, another group of activist researchers attempted to bring the idea of an International of Nations to fruition. They focused on Asian nations, calling their organization the Asian Cultural Association 亞洲文化協會. In their first meeting, held on April 5, 1931, at Nanjing's Central University 中央大學, representatives from China, India, Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan came together to discuss the future of their association (Anonymous 1931). Although the association was limited to Asian nations, it remained ideologically in line with the ideas of the International of Nations, particularly those outlined by Dai in 1925. The focus of the members was on the independence and freedom of member nations. The insistence on a dichotomy between material or hegemonic states and human or benevolent states remained in place, and Sun Yat-sen's "Great Asianism" speech and Three Principles remained at the core of the association, with the association's chairman, Huang Shaomei 黃紹美, quoting extensively from Sun Yat-sen's "Great Asianism" in his own opening address (*Shen Bao* 1931).

Other than the occasional mention of trips to India reported in the *Shen Bao*, news on the Asian Cultural Association slowed throughout the 1930s, yet the association continued to exist and promote the study of Asian culture and the organization of an International of Nations

through their journal, *Asian Culture* (*Yazhou wenhua* 1932–1937). Its six stated principles were posted on the cover of every issue:

1. Belief in the Three Principles of the People
2. Develop Asian culture
3. Revive the liberation of nationalities
4. Organize the International of Nations
5. Overthrow imperialism
6. Achieve global utopia (*datong*) (*Yazhou wenhua* 1932, 2)

Even more than *New Asia*, *Asian Culture* focused on culture and stated in every edition that “China is the mother of the Eastern nations.” But the 1930s was a difficult time for Chinese intellectuals to be insisting on the unity of Asian nations through a coherently related culture. Japan invaded Manchuria after the Mukden Incident in 1931 and withdrew from the League of Nations in February 1933 after the complete collapse of negotiations over Manchukuo. Although Chinese readers continued to show interest in Japanese Asianism and had opportunities to follow Japanese debates on Asianism through occasional translations, most were well aware that the Japanese government was at odds with the more egalitarian of the Asianists. It was therefore important to show difference with Japan’s aggressive policies.

### **Differentiating Chinese Asianism from Japanese Monroism**

Like most Chinese intellectuals, Dai Jitao had abandoned his pro-Japanese Asianism by 1931. His concerns about militarism had begun with a 1927 visit to Japan and only accelerated over the following years (Lu 2004, 164). Any talk of an Asian union ignored Japan during these years and concentrated on the *ruoxiao* nations. Although Dai Jitao turned more to his interests in education and the study of the Northwest after 1930, the momentum for an International of Nations continued to influence intellectuals, but differentiating China from Japan became a paramount issue.

The idea of a Japanese Monroe Doctrine for Asia was a recurring theme in Japanese writing (Hotta 2007, 95–97). Just as the United States had claimed itself the protector of the Americas, banning European powers from pursuing their interests there, Japan could have a Monroe Doctrine that defined the country as the protector and leader of Asia. Throughout the 1930s, Japanese leadership discourse, or what Eri Hotta refers to as *meishuron* 盟主論, or pan-

Asianism, came into dominance (2007, 49). Chinese intellectuals had regularly refuted these claims to Japanese leadership from the early days of the Republic.

Therefore, in the post-Sun period, differentiating Chinese Asianism from the Monroism that was gaining momentum in Japan was crucial for those Chinese intellectuals who continued to use the term “Asianism” in the 1930s, especially after Manchukuo became nominally independent. This problem with the term was debated early on in *New Asia* in an article by Ma Hetian.

Ma was a researcher of the frontiers and also a longtime proponent of Asianism, having been a key member of Beijing’s Asian Nations’ Alliance 亞細亞民族大同盟 in the 1920s and a representative at the Asia Peoples’ Conferences in Nagasaki (1926) and Shanghai (1927). He described *New Asia* thus: “The purpose of the publication of *New Asia* is what the president often called ‘Great Asianism.’ This New Asianism is the real Great Asianism, not the Great Asianism promoted by imperialists or those that admire imperialism” (Ma 1930, 139). Ma noted that the Chinese statist Zeng Qi 曾琦 had used the term Great Asianism to call for a more aggressive China that would make Korea, Annam, Siam, and Burma into “Chinese territory” (中國屬地). Ma clarified that the Asianism of *New Asia* was one that followed “benevolence and morality” (仁義道德) and Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles (Ma 1930).

Only a month later, Ke Xing’e 克興額 offered an analysis of Great Asianism that echoed Li Dazhao’s “New Asianism” of 1919, which saw Asianism as a necessary step toward a world government. Ke also turned to Sun Yat-sen’s speeches to prove that Asianism was not Monroism.

First we must unite together and unanimously oppose Euro-American powerful nations, as well as this continent’s imperious nation—Japan. Then the *ruoxiao* nations from other continents will naturally arise and oppose them, and the liberation of all *ruoxiao* nations and the collapse of imperialism that we have been anticipating will be successful. In this way, the party’s support of nationalism for *ruoxiao* nations around the world can accelerate and find success, and we shall be able to stride from this into the successful attainment of cosmopolitanism. (Ke 1930)

Ke was writing this not only for *New Asia*. A few years later, early in the war, Ke wrote to the GMD in Chongqing, exhorting China’s leaders to end the war and pursue peace for China and for all of East Asia. Peace for him did not just mean an end to the war: “We must unite all of the

nationalities of East Asia in order to construct the East Asian New Order, with the purpose of uniting against Communism” (Ke 1939, 16).

Unlike Ke, Ma Hetian did not cooperate with the Japanese during the war. His condemnation of Japanese aggression was clear early on. He was also absolute in his attack on Monroeism, listing Japanese scholars who promoted “the propaganda of the Great Asianist East Asian Monroe Doctrine” (大亞細亞主義東亞門羅主義) and its use to cover Japanese dreams of conquest through terms such as *wangdao* and by saying “the Far East is of one mind and one family” (泰東一心一家).<sup>7</sup>

Japanese leadership was a terrifying prospect for the researchers of the New Asia Research Group. Like other periodicals of the time, *New Asia* featured regular discussions of the Monroe Doctrine, lambasting Japanese attempts to control Asia. However, unlike in the articles on Asianism that Chinese intellectuals discussed during and after the First World War, New Asia researchers accepted that leadership was necessary, and they did not shy from saying that China should be at the center. Japan simply did not have the credentials to lead. In his speech to the association, Zhang Ji 張繼 stated: “Recently, the Japanese have been loudly promoting their Asianism... [but] I personally believe that only China can lead Asia.” Zhang believed that China, India, and the Arab world had the cultural history necessary for leadership, but only China had maintained its freedom (Zhang 1934, 1).

Chen Liefu 陳烈甫, a Chinese-Filipino scholar of Hui (Islamic) Studies, who had been able to study in the United States due to his Filipino citizenship, wrote a detailed article on the Monroe Doctrine for *New Asia*. Perhaps his education at the University of Illinois had contributed to his more positive stance on the concept. His opposition to Japanese leadership was unapologetic, but he concluded his article: “Only when Japanese imperialism has been overthrown can there be a true Asian Monroe Doctrine. This great mission and sacred duty is upon the shoulders of the Chinese nation” (Chen 1933, 32).

## Conclusion

The propaganda concerning the Chinese leadership of the *ruoxiao* nations and the International of Nations was designed largely to counter the aspirations of both Communist groups and the Japanese Empire. Chinese intellectuals involved in this project believed in

China's inevitable return to dominance. They had hoped that this rise would be benevolent, often basing this hope on their acceptance of a dichotomy that posited China as Confucian and righteous at essence, a dichotomy that was all too logical given the aggression of Western imperialism. And they wholeheartedly leapt into the global zeitgeist of internationalism.

With the postwar rise of the League of Nations and the Comintern, there was evidence all around that international unity was the future. And with talk of pan-Arabism, pan-Africanism, pan-Slavism, and pan-Germanism, regionalism was a powerful global trend. This led to an opportunity for the imagining of a China-centered international community, the International of Nations, an ersatz form of the Third Communist International.

Although the International of Nations and 1930s discussions of Chinese Asianism were usually intended to oppose Japanese expansionism, the discourse was not unlike Japanese propaganda and fed into wartime promotion of the New Order in East Asia and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. Once Wang Jingwei became president of the Nanjing-based Reorganized Nationalist Government in 1940, Asianist propaganda almost identical to that found in the above texts became commonplace, as newspapers and periodicals repeated Wang's argument that, "for China, the Three Principles of the People is an ideology to save the country. For East Asia, the Three Principles of the People is Great Asianism" (Wang 1984, 211). However, there was one unavoidable and defining difference between the Asianism of the International of Nations and that of the Wang regime: the acceptance of Japanese leadership.

*Craig A. Smith is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Australian National University's Centre on China in the World.*

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### *Notes*

- 1 Examples of the many Asianist groups that Chinese urban intellectuals established in the mid-1920s include the Asian Nations' Alliance 亞細亞民族大同盟 (1925), the Asian Nations Association 上海亞洲民族協會(1924), the Asian Culture United Progressive Foundation 亞洲文化共進會 (1925), the Asian Issues Discussion Group 亞細亞問題討論會 (1925), and the Asian Peace Research Association 亞細亞和平研究會 (1925).
- 2 Zhang passed away before the book was published and was replaced by Jiang Yonghong 將用, his colleague at the New Asia Research Association (Harrison 1932, unpaginated introduction and page iii).
- 3 See Li (1928), Hu (1929), Zheng (1936), and Zhang (1937).

- 4 In Sun's second speech on nationalism, he explained that Korea, Taiwan, Burma, and Annam were all Chinese territory, while Ryukyu, Siam, Borneo, Nepal, and many others were countries that paid tribute (是高麗台灣澎湖。這些地方是因為日清之戰才割到日本... 安南和緬甸本來都是中國的領土) (Sun n.d., 9; 1996, 681).
- 5 The book is undated, but appears to have been published in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Published works by the editor, Du Jiu, appear only between 1933 and 1937.
- 6 Tan Pimou provided a short history of the movement, finding "Wilson's lie" to have fanned the flames of nationalism (1929, 4–5).
- 7 This argument stemmed from Ma's opposition to a 1932 translation of an anonymous Japanese pamphlet intended for Chinese readership. The pamphlet was titled *Taitō isshin ikka no taigi o shōmei ni shite Chūgoku yōjin kakui no takkan ni kyōsu* [A declaration that the Far East is of one mind and one family for all the elite of the Republic of China] (publisher unknown).

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