Élitist Fascism: Chiang Kaishek's Blueshirts in 1930s China

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Chung Dooeum considers the Chinese Blueshirts organisation from 1932-1938. The book sets out the terms of comparison between the Blueshirts and Fascist organisations in Europe and Japan, indicating where there were similarities and differences of ideology and practice, as well as establishing links between them. The Blue shirts espoused many of the characteristics of a Fascist organisation, especially according to the Japanese model and to some extent to the European model. Although, they were in many ways typical of the power-cliques which were already an integral part of Chinese politics. The influence of Chinese secret society traditions is also examined as an aspect that clearly distinguished them from their European Fascist counterparts. The conclusion arrived at, is that the Blueshirts may properly be described as fascist - or an organisation with unmistakable links to Fascism. Not only does this study contribute specifically to the political history of China, it also examines the development of political and military movements in the Far East in the period preceding World War Two.

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Subjects
Foreword

China has been under Communist rule for over fifty years. Erratic political actions such as the Great Leap Forward, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution and the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Massacre notwithstanding, China has emerged as a major world power, and its people are enjoying the highest standard of living in more than a century. Would China achieve the same economic progress under a non-Communist regime, say that of the Kuomintang (Guomindang)?

Taiwan’s economic take-off in the 1970s and the prosperity that followed may tempt some staunch anti-Communists to say yes, but history would most likely prove otherwise. The defeat of the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kaishek (Jiang Jieshi) and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Tsetung (Mao Zedong) in 1949 was the inevitable outcome of a set of political, economic and social circumstances. There were both endogenous and exogenous factors, most of which may be traced back to the 1920s. These include the birth of the Chinese Communist Party, continuous and endless aggression by Japanese militarists, Dr. Sun Yatsen’s decision to enlist the support of the Communists in his strife against the warlords, the cooperation of the Nationalists and Communists in the 1927 Northern Expedition that eventually led to the unification of China under one government, and the subsequent ‘cleansing’ of the Party by Chiang Kaishek.

However, the political triumph of Chiang set the stage for a long drawn civil war, complicated by the Japanese invasion of China in 1931. Looking back, it may be said that the success of Chiang in 1927 sowed the seeds of his downfall in 1949.

The decade of 1927-37 was haunted by turmoil within the country and threat from an aggressive neighbour. However, the intricacies of internal unrest remained for many years an ambiguous chapter in China’s recent history. For instance, Chiang’s reign was viewed as the best and most enlightened since the founding of the Republic by its supporters, and no better than the worst in terms of treachery, intrigue, corruption and totalitarian rule by its critics. Official propaganda gave credit to Chiang and his government for launching the New Life Movement, for forming the Sanminzhuyi Youth Corps as a patriotic force, and for leading the Anti-Japanese War and attaining eventual victory in 1945. Liberals, especially the intelligentsia, portrayed Chiang’s government as Fascists and his reign as that of ‘White terror’. In view of such divergent views, the need for an unbiased study of this particular period in China’s history cannot be over-emphasized.

Dr. Chung’s present work is unique in the sense that it has unveiled one of the most mysterious and controversial aspects of Chiang’s rule, the Blueshirts or Lanyishe. Most Chinese who lived in China in the 1930s, especially in the capital city of Nanking (Nanjing) and nearby
Shanghai, were aware of the Lanyishe, but never dared to ask any questions about it. Some viewed it as a patriotic society engaged in killing traitors, a.k.a. collaborators with the Japanese. Some others saw it as the government’s secret service with the aim of silencing the opposition. Few, if any, understood its true function or mission.

Although scholars before Dr. Chung had done some research on the subject, none of the forerunners possessed the present author's language proficiency. Thanks to her multi-lingual abilities, Dr. Chung could delve into archives, documents and publications in the West as well as those written in Chinese and Japanese. These, coupled with a deep understanding of the Chinese or Confucian culture and an objective and unbiased view, have contributed to the in-depth study and interesting discussion contained in this volume.

After reading this book, one will no doubt appreciate my earlier remark that the seeds of Chiang’s downfall in 1949 had been sowed when he ‘cleansed’ the party and physically exterminated through mass execution its Communist members in 1927. In this book, the reasons behind the formation of the Blueshirts, Chiang’s collaboration with and even subservience to Shanghai’s underworld bosses, his unwillingness to fight the Japanese and insistence upon annihilating the Chinese Communists before and after World War II all came into light.

More important, the author pointed out that the lack of public support for Chiang’s efforts had spelled doom for his ambitious plans. Did he do the right things? Were the deeds of the Blueshirts justifiable? While it may still be controversial after so many years, Dr. Chung’s book represents a giant step forward in understanding why China underwent such a restive era before the War and perhaps even why China has become what it is today.

As a person who had spent his younger years in China when Lanyishe was the talk of the town and later came into acquaintance with personalities whose names appeared in this book, I enjoyed reading it thoroughly. I have no reservation in recommending it to all that are interested in China.

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