

Prompt #2) Benjamin Schwartz and Lydia Liu focus their work on Chinese intellectual “nationalists,” who had little role (in Lu Xun’s case, no role) in actually making government policy. Our next four readings – Duara, Rogaski, Wakeman, and Hershatter – are all, to varying extents, about unintended consequences of concrete efforts to achieve “wealth and power.” Choose 2 of these readings and discuss the following: Is the understanding of how early 20th century nationalists saw the world that one derives from Schwartz and Liu sufficient for making sense of these specific initiatives? Why or why not? If not, do the other authors provide the additional insights into nationalist thought that you need?

Convergent Nationalist Ends and Divergent Practical Means

The intellectual elite nationalism of Yan Fu and Lu Xun did not lack vision for what needed to be done to strengthen China and set it on the path to modernity. That neither gained much actual policy-making power, nor seemed particularly thirsty for it, was probably for the best. Of the two, only Yan Fu in his early years seemed to believe the monumental task of cultivating and channeling the individual spirit of Chinese citizens could be achieved, and observation of misconceived attempts at nation-building had all but disabused him of the notion by his later years. The luxury of detached pessimism, however, can never be possessed by a party in power, and in times of struggle realistic caution and modesty fail to inspire, as only overly ambitious mass movements can. While the GMD may have shared a vision of a transformed nation and strong state, as indeed was the primary *raison d’être* of the regime, the practical burden of realizing it proved to be well beyond its considerable constraints of time, resources, and ability to penetrate rural areas or the lives of individual citizens.

Even with his belief in over-arching processes of evolution and Social Darwinism, Yan Fu was by no means blind to the practical challenges of modernizing the Chinese population and cultural practices. As Schwartz points out, Yan Fu did not agree with Spencer and Durkheim that “the movement toward the goal is carried forward by the vast impersonal socio-historic forces” and instead saw essential roles for “an elite of legislators and educators” to infuse their work with nation-strengthening goals.¹ A strong leader was certainly needed to push society onto the prescribed path, and respect of the social hierarchy (working in synergistic

¹ Schwartz, pg. 159.

harmony) would be a useful aspect to retain from Chinese tradition. In agreement with Lu Xun, China's problems lay not in its national body but in the minds of its people. And minds can be changed, even reprogrammed to work together toward common goals.

This essay will focus on three examples of conflicting agendas for increasing Chinese wealth and power in the Nationalist Era, and while Yan Fu and Lu Xun are key to highlighting these conflicts, distance renders their vision insufficient to make sense of the specific initiatives enacted by those who did wield policymaking power. Their nationalist ideas may explain why many modernizing policies were enacted, but they cannot explain the "how" nor especially the reasons why they generally failed to empower the GMD regime. An underlying ideology of nationalism by no means unified the diagnoses of national doctors, and as a result, national "cures" resembled the fragmented, fragile, and mistake-laden process of experimentation which finally led to a scientific medical consensus.

Modernization of the nation, like the simultaneous processes of achieving "hygienic modernity" and a scientific approach to curing diseases in Rogaski's book, was often excruciatingly painstaking, even fatal for reputations and legitimacies of many key actors. While Lu Xun famously abandoned medical studies to cure the maladies of Chinese "national character"², others who stayed with the profession claimed that the problem truly did lie within Chinese people's physical bodies³, and probably more numerous among the population clung to the nativist nationalism of Dr. Ding Zilang, who maintained that Chinese ways remained superior, only in need of

² Liu convincing describes both the concept of national character and the concomitant diagnoses of deficiency as previously non-existent in China. Many conflicts described in this essay focus on the categorical rejection of plans to increase national wealth and power due to the underlying xenophobia of many strands of Chinese nationalist thought, especially that contrasted with intellectual elites.

³ See Rogaski's introduction (pg. 240-244) of the Ivy League-educated Chinese eugenicist Pan Guangdan, whose evolutionary beliefs may have been similar to Yan Fu's Social Darwinism but led to contrary conclusions: fitness of the Chinese race could only be improved over generations of careful breeding, and any investment in changing the current population for the better would be a misallocation of resources. While he certainly believed his prescriptions to be based on science, which was undoubtedly cutting edge at the time, most would now describe his agenda as driven by an extreme form of ideology.

further development. Thus, priorities differed in terms of where change should be enacted, what could possibly be changed, and whether abandoning traditional Chinese practices for modern and Western ones was necessary.

With his socioeconomic status among the elite never endangered, Yan Fu's nationalistic vision failed to account for how personal ambitions and conservative forces such as an intractable "cultural nexus of power" might conflict with or at least retard radical reform efforts. The other texts all show, to varying degrees, that the battle for realizing modernization as a national goal was lost in the diversity of mid- and lower levels of society, among those who had to dirty their hands with detailed implementation, balance personal and national advancement, and who did not have the luxury of detachment from the immediate consequences of reform. Schwartz and Liu's pieces point out that prominent cultural commentators such as Yan Fu and Lu Xun largely shared a coherent "big picture" for how to transform the nation, but the very fact that their central concepts and transformative agenda were imported was initially a great impediment to their realization.

The modern era forced China and its people out of a dichotomy between itself as the civilized world and outsiders as uncivilized barbarians. Yet the transition from this dichotomy to being merely one nation among many, all having to struggle and compete among each other for supremacy, did not occur instantly with the shattering of the old framework. Among the many who clung to the notion of "Chinese" as nearly equivalent to "civilized", as well as the many more who downgraded only slightly to the belief that Chinese civilization was the greatest in the world, the blasphemous claim that the Chinese nation was deeply, perhaps irredeemably flawed was completely anathema—an undeniably foreign, unacceptable untruth which some elites had unfortunately absorbed like pestilent qi disguised as Western medicine⁴. That the government too was convinced and soon wished to collaborate with foreigners in disseminating pernicious policies and mass education derived from the West could not have instilled the confidence or trust necessary to follow national leaders.

⁴ Again as Rogaski describes, it was much easier to deny the superiority and "microscopic hegemony" of Western medicine than, say, its weaponry, as she notes that most of the medical texts initially translated into Chinese were done so by either total quacks or moonlighting non-specialists. The great number of failures attributed to Western medicine, even the generally sound and accepted practice of quarantine in cases which could not be cured, could only have steeled the nativists' convictions.

Nationhood and nationalism first require a national consciousness, one which is best cultivated through mass education. Elites such as Yan Fu knew that the nation could not be strong without a transformation of its masses, with education at the center. What a contrast, then, with the lukewarm reception Duara describes when modernizing villages took it upon themselves to renovate local temples as public schools. While he does not describe anything near overwhelming resistance to these re-appropriations, it is evident that villagers themselves did not initially share Yan Fu and elite nationalists' priority of education, if it meant giving up all that had been revered in the "cultural nexus of power". Ultimately, all must agree that a literate nation will be stronger, made up of stronger and more versatile nationalists, than an illiterate one. It is also likely that, while villagers over time found education more useful and important than their particular religious practices (which only needed to be transferred elsewhere rather than eliminated), they themselves did not view their own education as part of a larger goal of nation-building. A failure to see the value of national consciousness may have prevented its formation, and this failure could be attributed to the attempt not only to completely reorient the loyalties of the villagers toward an extractive state, but also a choice between either doomed paths of restructuring the cultural nexus too quickly or circumventing it to achieve national goals.

An isolated rural population, which may still be representative of the Chinese majority, could better maintain the view of China as civilization itself. Only minimal loyalty could be felt toward a state whose most visible influences were its despised tax extractions and compulsory education at the expense of traditional religious practices⁵. Yet Chinese elites and urban policy-makers could better be described as isolated from the

⁵ Due to the need for funds to modernize urban areas, seen as the more achievable priority among the GMD's grand modernization projects, predatory "entrepreneurial brokers" who skimmed taxes from both peasants and the urban destinations of the funds, villagers may never have seen the benefits of their ever-increasing *tankuan*. Only slightly better, but too little, too late for the GMD's rural legitimacy, were the slowly-accurring benefits of rural education and literacy, themselves far more emphasized under the Communists. Duara notes that, at least initially, the more pertinent and deeply felt processes than modernization which villages underwent were "state involution", by which higher priorities of those in power did not bring benefits for the "wealth and power" of those directly affected by their prioritization. In less convoluted terms, village elites became less concerned with ceremonies and the cultural wellbeing of the village, moreso with their own wealth and power to leave and prosper in the cities. In their absence, the state became a primarily extractive, punitive entity represented physically by the crassly self-interested entrepreneurial tax brokers. This was certainly no way to engender loyalty to the state.

majority of the population. For those who did or could not transcend the harsh reality of foreign exploitation by adopting and disseminating modern ways, the concept of the Chinese nation in competition with others would seem a much lower concern than for elites such as Yan Fu, perhaps even an absurdity⁶.

National consciousness evidently came more naturally in urban areas which were more directly and forcefully confronted with alterity in the form of foreigners and their concessions. With consciousness also came a sense of inferiority for lacking the power of modernity, however vehemently denied in public by modernizing governments and perhaps internally within each Chinese citizen as a matter of pride. For those urban natives eminently low in the social hierarchy, such as night-soil carriers, it is difficult to say whether inferiority could ever be internalized, but clearly modernity in the otherwise innocuous or even glamorous form of sanitation systems posed an existential threat. It is for these casualties of modernization that progress may have seemed irredeemable in a different sense, un-Chinese, and thereby a threat to the nation rather than the means to increase wealth and power.

Duara's and the subsequent books show that a failure to engage the masses in nationalist efforts is a certain sign that the goals will be unmet.⁷ Even the GMD's focus on urban areas may have been too concerned with showing how the Chinese population could be just as modern as the foreigners who'd flaunted their refinement in the concessions in the decades before the Civil War. The reformers and modernizers clearly found

⁶ Circular ideologies of nationalistic modernization for both the population and the state are fine motivations for policy, but they are vastly insufficient for ensuring successful implementation. Better instead to rely on technocrats as today, and who apparently had a cognate in the village gentry of the late imperial era. By Duara's account, in the era before absentee landlordism, the gentry had earned their status because they were able to wield power within the particular "cultural nexus" in which rural villages existed. Despite being the polar opposite of modern, often atomized rather than united, they functioned in a manner which seemed appropriate to those most affected. That modernization projects are still struggling to reach some villages today, while others did so fairly successfully, attests to the mixed successes of such efforts and real explanatory value of Duara's nexus, however nebulous.

⁷ That the Communist Party has been ultimately more successful in its modernization project than the Nationalists because of its greater support in rural areas is an undoubtedly blasé point to make, yet it must be made. In both urban and rural settings, Nationalist reforms were top-down impositions which modernized institutions, mostly for the benefit of prioritized cities, but rarely were the people convinced to place national goals over their own immediate concerns.

more fault in Chinese “national character” than those who remained true to the pre-modern Chinese way of life. As Liu especially observes, however, the very concept itself and most of its critical points were themselves foreign imports. As most forms of nationalism rail against foreign influence, it is striking that such central concepts were so thoroughly absorbed by so many of China’s early proponents. Lu Xun is given to satirizing overly simplistic, orientalist assessments of Chinese national character, ridiculed in his fiction and written with the motivation to criticize as a first step to change, but one can’t ignore the evidence that he himself sincerely believed in the concept and much of its critical content. Undoubtedly, raising the literacy of the Chinese masses to the point where they too could appreciate the approved messages in *The True Story of Ah Q* has had considerable utility for national strength.

It is very easy to satirize pride in that which is weak, out of fashion or utility, that which professes to be strong but which through irresolvable internal contradictions and disunity is revealed to be even less than a paper tiger. Early intellectual accounts, whose authors had little power, did not provide a step by step guide to realizing national power because such grand projects cannot be operationalized in the same way as, say, how to patronize a courtesan house. Their more abstract and allegorical writing is useful for understanding the motivations of policy, especially those beyond the realm of possibility, but the more practical accounts such as Duara’s are indispensable for evaluating their implementation and how such grand ideas impacted people’s actual lives. Knowing the nationalist fervor and justification behind some policies, as is often the case for ideological motivations of any kind, helps to explain what seem, in retrospect, like misconceived and naïve overreaches and failures which more competent leaders would have foreseen.

In closing, the turbulent Nationalist Era in China shows clearly that ideologically-driven policy is perilous. If the ideology is not shared by the majority, the policies lose much of their attractiveness and potential to succeed. To love one’s nation is not difficult; as Yan Fu points out, it is one of the basic expectations of the modern citizen. When nationalism requires fundamental changes in lifestyle, or when the nationalist quest for

wealth and power by modernization obviate your livelihood, to remain a nationalist requires a great deal of trust in government and other leaders carrying it out. As the costs of many GMD policies were borne immediately by the population, most of which embraced scientific and Western aspects of modernity much more slowly and even more reluctantly than the Nationalists, the benefits which accrued generations later would not be attributed to them. Gradualists, even if grossly misinformed in the case of Pan Guandan, are eventually vindicated more often than not, and one can take some comfort in that the countless Chinese proverbs stating as much will never go out of style. It is not surprising that in a global era which saw the rise of fascism and other extreme examples of high nationalist movements, an isolated Chinese nationalist regime whose tenuous grip on power was challenged from all sides, legitimized by a grandly ambitious intellectual ideology and modernizing mandate, over a nation which was very weak, was itself fractured, short-lived, and largely unsuccessful in its most fundamental goals. Comprehending the ideology and its many sources will only take overall understanding so far.