MUNICIPAL POWER AND LOCAL ELITES[1]

by Christian Henriot

The coming to power of the Guomindang (GMD) in 1927 was supposed to herald a new era in Chinese history. The Nationalists invested the State and set up new institutions, spearheaded by a multitude of projects designed to free the Nation from foreign tutelage, rebuild and modernize the economy, and set in motion a process of cultural renewal. The establishment of the Shanghai city government (Shanghai shi zhengfu)[2] was part of this movement in which the Nationalist regime sought to implement new political, economic, and social policies through the local vehicles of its power.

However, this programme meant that the State had to find the relays in society through which to transmit its projects and have them accepted by the entire population. Here then, at the outset, is the central theme of this article, one that has already been dealt with many times in this journal by historians of Republican China: that of the relationship between the Nationalist regime and society at large.[3] It is not my intention to provide a definitive treatment of this essential issue but to try and throw new light on it through the study of a specific institution, the Shanghai city government.

Shanghai, in many ways, represented a special case in China[4]: it was a metropolis divided, politically and administratively, into three parts (the International and French Settlements and the Chinese sector); it had a local cosmopolitan society that concentrated the essence of the Chinese bourgeoisie and a modern, flourishing economy from which the Nationalist government drew a substantial part of its revenues. It is easy to understand why the new regime should have striven to take control of the city and assert its power with respect to both foreigners (which it did in moderation) and the social groups that traditionally dominated local political and economic life. From the top ranks of the latter came the Chinese bourgeoisie with its numerous strata of elites and intermediate layers[5] each with its representative institution (examples of these were the Chambers of Commerce, the Chinese Bankers' Association, the guilds, and the Street Unions).

Politically, the Nationalist regime was represented in Shanghai not only by the city government but also by the local bureau of the GMD which strove, at least until 1932, to take over the political leadership of the city by a series of moves that were aimed as much against the bourgeoisie as against the municipal administration itself. The purpose of this article is to describe the development of relations between the city government and these two groups and the three-sided play that resulted, and to try to place this story in the broader context of relations between the regime and society.
The relations between a local government and a bureau of the GMD at the same level were theoretically defined by texts that delimited their respective roles[6]: that of the party was to guide and oversee. However, this broad definition lent itself to all manner of interpretations depending on the personalities or wishes of local political and administrative officials. As many studies have shown, party-government relations at the local level were at times difficult and even conflict-ridden.[7] They were set, above all, in a web of subtle relationships that is barely glimpsed in the written sources of the period.[8]

The Local Bureau of the Guomindang

In 1927, after Jiang Jieshi's sanguinary blow against the Communists, the local branch of the GMD, whose membership had swollen inordinately in the previous year, underwent an extensive purge. In 1929, after the official reorganization of the party, only a third of the 1927 membership remained in the ranks.[9] In the meantime, the direction of the local party passed into the hands of representatives appointed by Nanjing and by the city's new strongman, General Bai Chongxi. None of the leading organs set up in Shanghai was truly composed of local activists. It was only with the establishment of the Guiding Committee (zhidao weiyuanhui) in April 1928 that there emerged some of those personalities, like Pan Gongzhan, Wu Kaixian, and Wang Yansong, who were to dominate the Guomindang in Shanghai for the next few years.[10]

The Young Leaders

The completion of the two-year reorganization marked the coming to power of a group of young activists (most of whom had not entered the party before 1925 and 1926) to the detriment of older officials of the party in Shanghai.

It is worth noting the origins of this fairly homogeneous group of political leaders who, by spring 1927, were already active cadres in various departments of the local party machine (Chen Zheng and Tao Baichuan were in the propaganda department and Wu Kaixian in the organization department).[11] The scanty information available indicates that many of them were young intellectuals, graduated from the universities or engaged in the teaching profession. Five leaders had been to the same university (Shanghai fuzheng daxue--Shanghai Law School) and, if their ages are any indication, had probably attended about the same time. The only exceptions were Pan Gongzhan (St. John's University), Chen Zheng (Hangzhou Christian College) and Wang Yansong (Shanghai College of Commerce). I have no information on the other officials. It appears that the GMD's new leadership in Shanghai was remarkably homogeneous. Most of its leading members were affiliated with the C. C. Clique, which was
close to Jiang Jieshi and, from 1929 onwards, was one of the most influential groups in the GMD's Central Executive Committee.[12] These men enjoyed a swift political rise as a result of political upheavals in Shanghai; and they found themselves confronted by numerous problems which they tried to solve in the context of party doctrine. It is difficult to trace the activity of the party from 1927 to 1928 when it was in the throes of reorganization and divided into rival factions. There were many causes of tension between the party and the city government. Very crucial was the party claim of exclusive control over two sectors for which the city government was responsible: social affairs and education.

The strategy of the local party bureau was to secure the appointment of its members to positions in the municipal administration. Pan Gongzhan was appointed to the Bureau of Social Affairs, the employees of which were selected by the local bureau of the party and which functioned more or less as an appendage of the GMD in Shanghai. He remained relatively level-headed and seems to have played the intermediary between an aggressive political bureau and a cautious municipal administration. This role was perhaps facilitated by the presence of fellow St. John's graduate Yu Hongjun in the town hall secretariat, from 1929 to 1937. In the Education Bureau, success came more belatedly to the party. To overcome the resistance of the city government, the party engaged in an effective war of attrition (four directors succeeded one another between 1927 and 1929) until Chen Dezhe's nomination in 1929.[13] Pan Gongzhan became director of the Education Bureau in August 1932. In 1936, he also became director of the Bureau of Social Affairs.

The GMD's local bureau did not begin to formulate its other goals until 1928, and these were aimed chiefly at the merchants. In July, the Guiding Committee adopted a resolution calling for the abolition of the municipal council system which it saw as a means by which local bullies (tuhao) might usurp power. This action came shortly after the proclamation of the Municipal Law of 1928 which stipulated the election of such councils in the big cities. The party bureau also asked the city government to prohibit the levy of a self-defense tax (baoweijuan) used for the maintenance of the merchant militias, one of the pillars of the power of the local notables.[14] The resolution declared that the running of municipal affairs had to come under the authority of the party.

The 1929 Congress and its Sequels

The frontal attack against the municipal administration came only in February 1929 at the Sixth Congress of the GMD's local bureau in Shanghai. After many days of deliberation and debate, the Congress adopted a highly critical report which, while it noted the progress achieved by the city government, asserted that this body had
not lived up to the expectations of the population. The bureaux, in particular those dealing with lands, public utilities and education were attacked for their feeble attitude in the struggle to regain national sovereignty. The Bureau of Finance was sternly called to order for not having published any accounts or even taken the trouble to present a report to the Congress. And serious questions were raised about the efficiency and integrity of the police. The only departments to win favor in the eyes of the party critics were the Public Works Bureau for its accomplishments and the Social Affairs Department under Pan Gongzhan.[15]

The General Secretariat of the Shanghai government, which had to formulate a general reply to the criticisms made at the Congress, either took refuge in vague formulations or plainly denied the accusations made against certain aspects of the municipal records. In the main, it cited financial difficulties to justify the delays with which it was taxed, and appealed to the whole people for cooperation in accomplishing its tasks in the face of limited resources.[16] In fact, the two sides did not speak a common language. The secretariat furnished purely technical responses to issues (such as those of national sovereignty or the struggle against the bourgeoisie) that were political in nature.

The municipal administration was very clearly in favor of the status quo and did not wish to enter into conflict either with the local elites or with the authorities in the Settlements. It feigned ignorance of the demands and ambitions of the local party machine which grew more radical in the months that followed the Congress—a development illustrated by the conflict over the General Chamber of Commerce.[17]

The party officials were all the more enraged as the new mayor, Zhang Qun, strove to restore the confidence of the local elites and used their backing to finance his development projects for the city. At the end of 1929, these officials renewed their campaign against police corruption and denounced the police chief, Yuan Liang, a close friend of the mayor, accusing him of having a doubtful past (he had been a member of the Beijing Government) and of not belonging to the GMD.[18] It is certain that these attacks were indirectly aimed at Zhang Qun who had himself participated in the Beijing Government before 1927.

1930: A Maturing

At Shanghai Guomindang's Sixth Congress in April 1930, there were evident differences of opinion and even conflicts between the party and the municipal administration. Although the Congress judged the technical bureaux (lands, public utilities, hygiene and public works) in rather favorable terms, it continued to make the distinction between "good" and "bad" departments. The former
category included the offices directed by GMD members (Social Affairs under the Pan Gongzhan and Education under Chen Dezheng) whose record was judged to be very positive despite a clear record of failure. [19]

To this unstartling assessment must be added an element that throws further light on the ambitions of the GMD's local machine. The party officials drew up a draft law for the supervision of municipal governments (jiandu shi zhengfu banfa) which the Congress adopted and sent on to the Central Political Council. This draft stipulated that the annual plans and budget had to be made known to the party's local bureaux before they were implemented. Similarly, an end-of-year balance sheet of accounts and accomplishments had to be presented to the council. All regulations, changes in the fiscal system, and nominations to any positions of responsibility in the municipal administration had to be examined by the local officials of the GMD.

If the local officials found any contradiction in these matters, with the party programme, they were to return the projects of the city government along with their amendments, or they could veto these projects if they disagreed with them totally. The proposals meant that the municipal administration could no longer implement any measure without first obtaining the views of the local bureau of the GMD. The Congress also claimed all the powers that belonged, in theory, to the municipal council, and denied local elites any say in the governance of the city. The party sought thereby to obtain a veto to prevent the installation of a new municipal council similar to the one named in 1927 (and described below).

The Congress justified its position by the following principle: "The government exercises its capacities; the party exercises its right to rule (zhengfu jin qi neng, dang jin qi zhiquan). At the local level, the party does not exercise the rights of the people. The local bureaux (of the GMD) are getting weaker while local governments are growing ever stronger."[20] Clearly, the local bureau of the GMD in Shanghai (whose draft regulation was not accepted in the end by the local political Council) had no desire to play the role of an extra on the local political scene. What interested it was the leading part and even the director's role.

1932-1937: The Slackening

The Seventh Congress of the Shanghai GMD was held in July 1931. [21] Following the Wanbaoshan incident in Manchuria, the Congress turned its attention to the revival of anti-Japanese activities which led to a prolonged boycott movement. This movement, which culminated at the end of the year when Japanese troops occupied Manchuria, raised tension between the municipal administration and the local GMD bureau. The conflict ended with the total defeat of the party. Its
officials brazenly broke the law and used force against students to preserve control over the anti-Japanese movement, and it made no small contribution to the rise in tension with the Japanese army which culminated with a brutal and savage assault on Shanghai in January 1932.[22]

Delegated by the Nanjing Government to put an end to the excesses, Wu Xingya was to bring a badly shaken organization back to its feet and, in a sense, to save it. Wu was affiliated with the C. C. Clique (which had previously sent him to take charge of local party organization in Hubei and Anhui provinces), a fact that partly explains his nomination—although he seemed less susceptible to considerations of ideological purity than the militants of the Shanghai GMD.[23] However, there was no purge.

The Eighth and last Congress of the Shanghai party, which met in September 1932, was held in a lower key (a fact that can be seen from the press which relegated it to the second page of the local news sections and covered it far less than earlier Congresses).[24] In the years that followed, the local GMD machine maintained a much lower profile and did not engage in any further duels with the city government. Social affairs and education continued to be its favored domains but it was rather through organizations that it manipulated indirectly, such as the Rent Reduction Committee (jianzu yundong weiyuanhui), the Committee for the Separate Management of Education Credits (jiaoyu jingfei duli weiyuanhui) and the Residents' Assembly (shimin dahui), that it sought to influence the decisions of the municipal administration from 1933 and 1934 onwards.

However, these moves lost the force that they possessed before 1932. Assured that its authority was no longer under threat, the city government paid them relatively little attention and made decisions in the light of its own criteria. From 1932 to 1937, relations between the local section of the GMD and the city government gradually became more relaxed. The government's leader Wu Tiecheng, a strong-willed man and one with influence at the national level, considerably buttressed the government's authority. At the same time, certain local officials of the party rose to the top of the political and administrative machine and took perhaps a more remote view of local issues.[25]

An Assessment

It appears that party-government tensions in Shanghai can be related to two broad sets of causes. The first lay in the ambiguous definition of the respective roles of the party machine and the municipal administration which gave the more vigorous elements in the GMD scope for a very wide interpretation of the rights and powers given to the party. In this sense, the rivalry that developed in
Shanghai between the city government and the local GMD machine was but one aspect of a wider conflict between state and party over the significance of the national revolution.

The second set of causes is related to the marked difference in recruitment methods. The municipal officials were appointed by the national government and came from the highest echelons of the central administration.[26] Their knowledge of local matters was not always adequate and they tended to rely on networks of personal ties established before their appointment to Shanghai, that is, ties with the "agents" of the local bourgeoisie who had rallied to the regime. By contrast, the GMD officials generally came from the local training ground of activists and were imbued with the party doctrine which they sought to implement even at the risk of violent confrontation with the municipal authorities whom they considered to be far too committed to the path of peaceful management, in contradiction with the principles of the party.

The Small Circle of Notables

The power of the city government came under pressure from another group traditionally engaged in municipal action, the local bourgeoisie. However, it is important to start by defining the scope of this vague term since, after 1927 and the installation of the GMD regime, it was no longer the bourgeoisie, in the broad sense of the term, that played the preponderant role that it had assumed during the first decades of the twentieth century[27]--but only a fraction of this bourgeoisie. Here, I shall try to define the composition and development of this group in Shanghai and discuss the modes of action through which it obtained a right of inspection over municipal business.

My approach is based on the workings of the provisional municipal councils established in 1927 and 1932. The first council was set up by Huang Fu, pending a law to provide for the election of municipal councillors by universal suffrage. As it happened, the council, in its composition, acknowledged (as it had done after the Revolution of 1911) the part that certain personalities had played in Jiang Jieshi's victory in Shanghai. Their assistance had not been disinterested: its tacit implication was that they expected to be consulted, especially over local affairs. It is possible that they counted on a return of the tide that they had earlier missed because of Yuan Shikai's centralizing policies.

The Municipal Council of 1927

In 1927 the large majority of the thirteen councillors were what may broadly be defined as local notables. Their provincial origins point to a definite knowledge of Shanghai: those who had not been born in the city had settled there very early in life. Two of them
were Shanghaians by birth; six--of whom all but one belonged to the famous Ningbo Clique--came from Zhejiang; the provinces of Jiangsu and Guangdong accounted for one councillor each. Although it is difficult to determine the exact branches of activity of these persons, they can be broadly put under the following categories: three bankers (Chen Guangfu, Lin Kanghou and Wang Yansong), five merchants (Feng Shaoshan, Gu Xinyi, Wang Xiaolai, Ye Huijun and Yao Ziruo), four entrepreneurs (Li Zhongjue, Wang Zhen, Yu Xiaqing and Zhao Xi'en) and one journalist (Guan Ji'an). There were two representatives of the GMD among them: Guan Ji'an, an old campaigner who was removed from the leadership of the local bureau after the reorganization of 1928, and Wang Yansong, a rising star of the party in Shanghai.

To what extent could these persons lay claim to any knowledge of local affairs? The answer to this question brings out certain specific traits--in particular, the personal ties between the mayor, Huang Fu, and the people he had nominated. Six of them belonged to the old guard of the bourgeoisie which had inspired the creation of municipal institutions in Shanghai in 1905 and which had played an active role in the victory of the revolutionaries in 1911.[29] The others were younger; their participation in political activity had not come so early but they had already held positions of responsibility in the representative organs of the merchant community before 1927 (nine of them had been presidents of the General Chamber of Commerce or members of its executive committee; seven had been on the executive committee of the Chinese Rate-Payers' Association).

Most of the municipal councillors of 1927 came from Shanghai's 'traditional' bourgeoisie which had battled for the recognition of its rights in the Chinese sector and in the Settlements. It was prepared to cooperate with the new regime, to which its representatives (notably Yu Xiaqing, Wang Zhen, Zhao Xi'en and Chen Guangfu) gave unstinting support, on condition that it was allowed certain prerogatives. There was thus a tacit agreement, a convergence of viewpoints, between the new political establishment in Shanghai and a large fraction of the Chinese bourgeoisie. This situation did not last because of circumstances peculiar to Shanghai itself and as a consequence of the general evolution of the regime which gradually and deliberately alienated a large section of the bourgeoisie.

In Shanghai itself, two factors contributed to a decline in the influence of the representatives of the bourgeoisie. After the departure of Huang Fu, the town hall came under the control of Zhang Dingfan who enjoyed neither the sympathy of the municipal councillors nor their confidence in his capacity to resolve local problems. Since the local GMD bureau also questioned their legitimacy from the very beginning, the councillors had hardly any opportunity to initiate measures, although they did have a decisive influence in
financial matters. They also frequently acted as mediators in the numerous conflicts provoked by the city government's tax reforms. Deprived of some power as they were, these men continued to be indispensable and inevitable partners of the new administration.

The Small Circle of Notables

When the Municipal Law was promulgated in 1928, the Municipal Council had to be dissolved. In fact, Zhang Dingfan was not sorry to be rid of this obstacle to the monopoly of power that he sought. The GMD's local party machine was also pleased by this development which almost totally removed the representatives of the bourgeoisie from the running of municipal business. However, the arrival of Zhang Qun in April 1929 gave the latter an opportunity to make a discreet but decisive comeback.

They re-entered by the rear door, the municipal commissions. Beset by constant financial differences and wishing to implement its development projects, the municipality sought to float a loan for which it needed the cooperation of the local merchant and financial community. It therefore set up an Urban Development Commission and then, in September 1930, another commission specifically in charge of the city government's financial affairs. It was in these commissions that a group of local notables asserted itself, negotiating with the municipal officials the reforms to the fiscal system, investment policy, etc. In Zhang Qun, they found a reliable and easy-going partner and one who was close to Jiang Jieshi, with whom these notables had established numerous ties.

1932: The Comeback

After the Japanese attack in 1932, the city government was close to financial bankruptcy. Wu Tiecheng, who had succeeded Zhang Qun, felt obliged to turn to those who could afford him financial assistance. As soon as hostilities came to an end, he asked the central government for permission to set up another provisional municipal council, the composition of which is indicative of the change in relations between the regime and the bourgeoisie.

The new council had nineteen members, a sign that the authorities wished to broaden representation on the body so that it covered the various professional sectors of society. The native place distribution was appreciably modified: in terms of origin, five councillors were from Jiangsu, ten from Zhejiang, two from Guangdong, one from Hubei and one from Hunan. This distribution confirmed the clear predominance of the Zhejiang group. The presence of Cantonese councillors was probably the doing of the mayor, Wu Tiecheng (one of them came from his very xian). The councillors from Hubei and Hunan were chosen for their eminence in Shanghai's educational circles.
On a professional basis, the bankers--Chen Guangfu, Li Ming, Qian Yongming, Qin Runqing, Zhang Gongquan, Wang Yansong, and Du Yuesheng[30]--were the most numerous and actually managed to increase their proportionate strength on the council. All the big names of Shanghai's--and even China's--world of finance were there, that is, every member of the powerful Zhejiang-Jiangsu group described by Coble.[31] Entrepreneurs and merchants were in second place with five representatives (Chen Bingqian, Guo Shun, Wang Zhen, Yu Xiaqing, and Wang Xiaolai) to whom we might add a chartered accountant (Xu Yongzuo). The new categories represented were intellectuals, with three university academics (Liu Zhan'en, Wu Jingxiong, and Wu Yugan) and one newspaper manager (Shi Liangcai); trade-unionists (Lu Jingshi); and the GMD (Tao Baichuan--as well as Wang Yansong, already counted among the bankers).

Although a difference in composition was inevitable given the enlargement of the municipal council, this simple observation does not suffice to explain all the changes that occurred. Of the council of 1927, only five members were reappointed in 1932: Yu Xiaqing, Wang Xiaolai, Wang Zhen, Chen Guangfu, and Wang Yansong. If we leave out Wang Yansong (whose appointment derived from his membership in the GMD's local party machine), these personalities were all faithful supporters of the Nationalist regime and allies of Jiang Jieshi. Their reappointment therefore came as no surprise. The elimination of the others can be explained by several factors of which an important one was age. Several members of the council of 1927 had been active on the local scene since 1905 when they were already quite old. They therefore had no wish to take up fresh responsibilities in 1932.

However, there were some significant departures. Feng Shaoshan, one of the Young Turks of Shanghai's merchant community--albeit of Cantonese origin--was eliminated. Similarly, Lin Kanghou, an active banker, was not to be seen in the new council. Their absence points to a struggle within the bourgeoisie itself which was divided between critics and supporters of the regime. Feng and Lin were excluded from the regime's circle of collaborators for their severe criticism of the GMD and Jiang Jieshi.[32] Conversely, the eleven new councillors had close links to the central government: they either had official positions or worked in close cooperation with the administration. They were linked with the policies of the Nanking government and some of them had gradually become quasi-bureaucrats. [33] Another newcomer of note was Du Yuesheng, the notorious leader of Shanghai's secret societies, who had acquired fame through his collaboration with Jiang Jieshi.

In general, the new councillors seem to have been chosen for their ties with the new political establishment. Although age played a part, those members of the 1927 council who were eliminated
clearly belonged to an intractable section of the local bourgeoisie which had not adapted to the methods of the new regime in Shanghai and in China. Finally, the relative widening of the council to include broader sections of society should not create a false impression: bankers and influential businessmen definitely had the dominant voice in the council. The university academics, as indeed the representatives of the GMD, had little weight in the face of their power as can be seen from the distribution of tasks in the municipal council.[34]

Although the council was empowered to supervise and initiate measures, it never had—and moreover never claimed to have—the right to censure the mayor and his collaborators. The management of business remained the monopoly of the city government. Within these limits however, the councillors were able to make themselves heard. On several occasions, they spoke out against proposals by municipal officials (to increase taxes, to raise a fresh loan in 1933). The council exercised strict supervision over the use of municipal resources, especially those derived from loans, and did not agree to any increase in taxes unless the city government first came up with a regular and proper budget. The budget was carefully examined every year. It was usually sent back with proposals for modification, and the municipal authorities never went against the decision of the council.

An Assessment

The municipal council did not constitute the organ of power that the bourgeoisie might have dreamed of at the beginning of the century or after the victory of the Nationalists in 1927. Yet it gave the bourgeoisie a legitimate framework for action, an arena in which it could express its point of view and hope to make the city government see reason. The power of money combined with past ties of complicity gave Shanghai’s financiers and entrepreneurs a definite advantage both within the council and in relation to the municipal administration. Between 1932 and 1937, there was no serious conflict between the councillors and the municipal leaders except in 1933 when a dispute over the use of funds led to the council’s resignation—which the mayor immediately rejected.

It is important, in my view, to emphasize the restricted composition of this group. Entire sections of this community—the industrialists as well as intermediate strata of merchants—were virtually absent; and these sections were not necessarily in agreement with those councillors who spoke in the name of Shanghai’s entire business community. In the main, it was always the same personalities who formed the core of the groups (that is, the commissions and the municipal council) created to collaborate with the city government. Their monopoly over political expression was an
illusion that actually concealed the growing enfeeblement of the rest of the bourgeoisie which was both economically and politically diminished.

There was, I feel, a clear convergence between the viewpoint of the small group of notables appointed to the municipal council and that of the municipal leaders who were concerned more with efficiency than with dogma and were content with the status quo in areas where the party activists sought to shake the established order. Through their social position, their influence in business circles and, above all, their collaboration with the Nationalist regime, these notables survived attacks from the party. It was this unnatural alliance that the GMD's local party machine found intolerable; despite political support from the central authorities in Nanjing (who wished to reduce the power of the Chinese bourgeoisie), the party simply broke on the wall of complicity between the municipal authorities and a fraction of the bourgeoisie.

Conclusion

This complex interplay of relationships raises the central issue that has preoccupied historians of the Guomindang period: namely, the nature of the regime and its relations with society and, in particular, with local elites. To what extent does the case of Shanghai contribute to an understanding of this two-pronged question? Should one emphasize Shanghai's special character here? Or can we perceive a paradigm of the mode of relationships that the regime sought to establish with local elites, of an aspiration that founded on the regime's own inefficiency and internal contradictions (those between State and Party) or of a failure due to external constraints and lack of time? Where and how, if ever, should we draw the contours of China's political and social map under the Guomindang?

An initial and fundamental distinction is the one between State and Party for, as many studies have established, the Nationalist regime identified itself with the State apparatus whose goals sometimes coincided with and, at other times, contradicted those of the latter. Secondly, the dividing line between power and society separated these two structures from certain groups of elites. Yet the active complicity between these two structures and certain social groups should not give rise to any illusions. The Party and the State embodied two parallel yet competing projects that they sought to implement by different means and with ends that were fundamentally different.

Through its grassroots activists especially, but also through the support that these activists derived from certain centrally placed, relatively radical and very influential factions like that of the Chen brothers, the Guomindang remained faithful to a certain
revolutionary vision. This vision encompassed political and social projects whose fundamental purpose was to establish a society without class conflict, an aim that presupposed the regulation of society by an impartial referee, in this case the Party, and implied an attack against the centers of resistance in this society, namely the economic and political elites, the bourgeoisie in the cities and the rural notables in the countryside. [35]

The source of inspiration and legitimacy of the Nationalist State was twofold. It sprang directly from the revolutionary struggle of Sun Zhongshan, the culminating point of which came with the Northern Expedition, the victory over the warlords, and the putting into practice of Sun's doctrine. In this sense, the Nationalist State was both the vector and the instrument of a project. The new State was also the heir to a long bureaucratic tradition that was predisposed to the domination of society. The political and territorial disintegration that had characterized China since the collapse of the Empire justified its claim to restore order and to become the supreme arbiter.

These two apparently contradictory currents were fused in the mold of a State which (although it placed its power at the service of new goals and a new ideology) sought to impose these goals and ideology on society and set itself up not as an arbiter between various social groups but as the repository of dogma, the guardian of order, and the promoter of its own interests to the detriment of those of society whenever it saw the latter as being contradictory to its own objectives. Seen in this light, the Guomindang could only be one of the means, albeit a preferred one, through which the social domain could be invested.

This was the backdrop against which the two organizations played out their relationship with society. Let us examine the extent to which it is possible to take the measure of the social actors and plot the pattern of their contrasting relations with the regime. The sector that interests us here is the merchant community with its two component elements, the high bourgeoisie and the intermediate strata with the former, by virtue of its concentration in Shanghai, representing a local as well as a national elite. It was by playing on these two sets (local and national) of relationships that this community sought to defend its interests at every level.

There are sharp differences in the ways in which the nature of the regime and its relations with society can be interpreted. Of the hypotheses put forward [36], three seem to be particularly relevant. The first tends to see the Nationalist regime as the embodiment of an autonomous power, impermeable to the demands of society and, at the same time, imposing itself on society (cf. Eastman and Coble). The second interpretation, while rejecting the caricatural depiction of a
State beholden to the interests of big capital, has shown that the Nationalist regime reacted to pressure from certain groups and was at times capable of making concessions (cf. Bush).

Both these interpretations emphasize the regime as a whole or the special role of the State, but the State/Party distinction is not truly relevant to them. It is here that the third interpretation differs, highlighting as it does the rivalry between State and Party wherein each of the antagonists relied on the group or groups that were closest to it or which it had managed to penetrate (cf. Fewsmith and Geisert). Some observers see, in this situation, the beginnings of a corporate State backed up by a circumscribed elite, namely the nationalist big bourgeoisie whose projects are supposed to have been hampered by opposition from the Guomindang party machine which itself was engaged in a struggle for the political and economic elimination of this circumscribed elite with the support of the intermediate strata of the mercantile community (Fewsmith).[37]

While these three interpretations complement one another in many ways, none of them provides a real answer to the questions raised by this multi-dimensional complex of relationships. This is no doubt linked to the fact that these interpretations (with the exception, perhaps, of the second one) seek to encompass, within a single, all-embracing patterns, a reality of many hues, one that refuses to yield to intellectual constructions. Perhaps a more empirical approach, more closely attuned to reality in its multiple guises, would be more appropriate here.[38]

Essential as it is, the State/Party distinction is not enough, as it differentiates only two large sectors which were themselves highly complex in nature.[39] We need to probe deeper and examine the ways in which the action took place at successive levels in both these structures. There definitely existed a degree of autonomy, depending on the balance of forces in each time and place; with respect to these two poles of decision, and within this degree of autonomy, the representatives of the State or the Party either confronted local elites or sought their support.[40] While they acted on the basis of general, explicit projects that emanated from the highest levels of the State and the Party, it is not certain that the local representatives of these two institutions pursued the same strategies and it is even less likely that they followed the same tactics.

In the case of Shanghai, the local bureau of the Guomindang played a very independent role. This independence flowed from the support it enjoyed in Nanjing (from the C.C. Clique), the local origins of its officials, and their internal rivalries which led them constantly to adopt ever more radical positions. The city government behaved like a true representative of the central authority and sought to assert its power over all its local rivals: the
authorities of the foreign Settlements, the local bureau of the Party, and the local social elite. With regard to the Settlements, it adopted the attitude of the central government which was one of seeking peaceful coexistence on the basis of a tacit modus vivendi.

With the Guomindang, it strove to assert its power as the sole and supreme repository of political authority and legitimacy. In Shanghai, and undoubtedly at the national level too, the organs of government came to see the Guomindang as a captive organization that they could use in order to pursue goals which were not necessarily contradictory but whose chief purpose was to give the State exclusive power over society, if necessary to the detriment of the Party.

As for the local social elite, the city government did not seek to diminish its influence. On the contrary, it sought its favors for economic (especially financial) reasons and for political ones as well (in particular, a common front against the GMD's activists). However, it must be recalled that this was not the local social elite in general nor even the city's economic elite but a small group of big businessmen who had opted, through interest or political opportunism, to support the regime and, in particular, to support Jiang Jieshi.

The bourgeoisie was a social group better organized than any other in terms of common interests. With its economic strength, it was potentially also the most powerful group. However, in 1911 as in 1927 or later, the Chinese bourgeoisie did not constitute a homogeneous and coherent group in the face of the political establishment.[41] It was incapable of forming a united front against the Nationalist regime. It barely managed to defend its local (as in Shanghai) or sectorial interest (cf. Bush). The importance of personal relationships in the success or failure of its undertakings is noteworthy in both instances.

Thus, without seeking to anticipate the results of current research[42], we might ask if it is not necessary to look for other linkages between the regime and society which would not only take into account the visible structures (the State, the Party and elite groups) but also penetrate those shadowy regions where it would seem that the notion of the civil society is more of a riddle than a tool of analysis. The case of Shanghai is a useful example of the complexity of State-Party-Elite relationships at the same time as it illustrates the limits of a method that would restrict itself to this field of investigation: we know little of the intermediate strata, of those embryonic middle classes which were sometimes opposed to the State and the elites and which the Party tried to manipulate (with no great success either in opposing the elites and the government organs or in extending its sway over increasingly broad sectors of society).
The social history of the Nanjing Decade remains to be written. For this the subject needs to be studied, not through the distorting prism of models whose descriptive interest barely manages to conceal their low heuristic value, but by seeking to identify every actor involved in each specific case, the nature of the interacting forces and the separate layers at which they are intertwined. Only then will we be able to uncover the hidden paths of Chinese society.

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NOTES


2. The Shanghai City Government was set up in the Chinese-controlled part of the city on July 7, 1927, with the avowed aim of eventually regaining jurisdiction over the whole of Shanghai.


5. I have deliberately used these necessarily vague terms. Although it is relatively easy to define the limits of the Chinese economic elite (the modern bankers, modern industrialists, etc.), its members (the so-called native bankers and the grain and cloth merchants) also came from the traditional sector of the economy and occupied a middle social position. As for the rest of the merchant community, in the present state of research, it seems to me that it would be more prudent to use a term which, while provisionally encompassing the group under one name, brings out its heterogeneous character.

7. Cf. the article by Cavendish (1969) and the studies by Miner (1973) and Geisert (1979).

8. Even when they exist, the sources are not always accessible. For instance, the local Guomindang's daily newspaper, the Minguo Ribao (The Republican) and its archives both remained in Shanghai after 1949, but I was denied permission to consult either. This article is therefore based essentially on the ordinary press and on private interviews with local personalities who played a major role during this period.

9. In October 1926, the Shanghai Guomindang had 2,266 members. In April 1927, the number went up to 16,000 and in the following month alone, 4,300 new members joined the party. Various sources put the total membership then at between 18,770 and 20,300. The membership fell to 5,919 in February 1928, and was at 6,207 in April of the same year. This figure remained stable until 1936 (6460). Dangwu Baogao, p. 97; Shi Nianjian, 1937, p. E16-17.

10. Shen Bao, (SB) 22 April, 1928, p. 13:6; Shi Nianjian, 1937, p. E1-2. Curiously enough Chen Bezheg was not on this committee. However, he was on the 1929 Executive Committee.


14. This conflict saw the Shanghai GMD and the representatives of the middle strata of merchants ranged against the City Government. The upper bourgeoisie, allied to the authorities, played a mediating role which resulted in eliminating the influence of the GMD and the middle strata to the sole benefit of the municipal administration and the merchant elites (of whom Du Yuesheng became an ally). Henriot (1983), pp. 81-83.

15. SB, 14 February 1929, p. 13: 1-6. The charity associations, for their part, successfully resisted attempts to take them over. The most that the Bureau was able to achieve was some degree of coordination of their activities.


19. SB, 1 March 1930, p. 13:1; 6 March 1930, p. 13:1. Neither of them accomplished the essential tasks set by the local section of the party: the assumption of control over the charity associations, the unification of the school system, and a programme of people's education (minzhong xunzheng) with a view to local autonomy.


22. There is an inexhaustible body of material on this tragic episode in Shanghai's history which I have tried to relate in all its dimensions, in particular that of the relations among the Party, the Government and the Merchants, in Henriot (1983), ch. 4, "La crise de 1931-1932."


25. In 1935, Pan Gongzhan was elected to the GMD's Central Executive Committee, Wu Kaixian was elected as an alternative member at the same Congress and appointed to the Legislative Yuan. Yearbook 1936, vol. 1, p. 198: Yearbook 1937, p. 138 and p. 227.


29. Huang Fu took an active part in events in Shanghai during the 1911 uprising. Two of the men under his command then were Jiang Jieshi and Zhang Qun.

30. Du Yuesheng's inclusion among the bankers may be disputed in view of his many varied activities. However, it was particularly in banking that he developed the legal side of his activities. Cf. Coble (1980), pp. 206-207.

32. Cf. Henriot (1983), Ch. IV.


34. Of the eight cells (zu) responsible for studying the city government's project sector by sector, the most important (those dealing with public security, finances, lands, hygiene, public works, and public utilities) were divided up among the bankers and entrepreneurs as were the special commissions (set up for the scrutiny of the budget, the rehabilitation of war zones, and the settlement of rent disputes). All that was left for the university academics and the GMD was education and social affairs.

35. It is not certain that the distinction between left and right is relevant here. The Shanghai GMD did not belong to the "left" but that did not prevent it from engaging in an active struggle against the local elites. And at the national level, the opposition between left and right seems to have been essentially a matter of power struggles. On this point, cf. Fewsmith (1984) and Fung (1985).


38. As the historian, Lucien Febvre, put it: "It is the little stubborn facts that demolish the most beautiful theories."

39. I am indebted here to B. Geisert's analysis, although I am not in agreement with his model; Geisert (1982).

40. There are many examples of alliances between the local elites and the local section of the GMD against a central State which eventually asserted its authority over them, cf. Osterhammel (1982), pp. 259-60, 263, 266, 290-293.


42. Bergère (1985).

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