The New Life Movement and Expectations of Self-Sacrifice

During the Japanese Imperial Army’s assault on the Nationalist capital Nanjing in December 1937, Chinese nurse Shui-fang Tsen and American missionary Minnie Vautrin kept diaries testifying to its chaos and brutality. While Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist high command, most of Nanjing’s foreign residents, and wealthier Chinese citizens fled from the city as the Japanese closed in, Tsen, Vautrin, and a handful of foreigners remained to establish a “Safety Zone” for civilians seeking refuge from the violence. Local leaders of the New Life Movement—a movement launched by the Nationalist government in 1934 to reinvigorate Chinese life with Confucian and patriotic values—also evacuated.1 In a diary entry dated December 12th, Vautrin shared an anecdote about a local tailor, identified as “Gwoh, the tailor opposite our east gate,” that captured the foreboding gripping the doomed capital. In her telling, Gwoh had “foolishly permitted the New Life Movement to store some of their things in a room of his house before they left the city.”2 He thereby found himself harboring materials that directly linked him to the Nationalist government, and he justifiably panicked that the Japanese would find him suspect. The incinerator at Ginling College, where Tsen and Vautrin worked,

2 Ibid., 31
was offered up as a solution to Gwoh’s potentially incriminating problem: “I shall never forget that picture of Gwoh and his good wife on December 13th [1937],” Vautrin subsequently recorded, “All day the two of them and all their relatives carried load after load of books and pamphlets over to our incinerator and there burned them. It was not until late in the night that they finished their task—but he was spared from possible misunderstanding and the thrust of an angry bayonet.”

Tseng Shui-fang, amid frantic efforts to prepare the Safety Zone for an influx of refugees, also found herself busy at Ginling’s incinerator, desperately burning papers abandoned by Nanjing’s Municipal New Life Organization. They had “left us a rather big piece of work to do for they evacuated quickly and left all their teaching materials for us to destroy.”

At first glance, there is cruel irony in the fact that the New Life Movement (NLM), which aimed to instill in Chinese citizens values of self-sacrifice and militant patriotism, passed the buck in this manner to people who were by turns unable and unwilling to flee from Nanjing. The NLM—launched in 1934 in Jiangxi province as the Nationalists were militarily expelling the Chinese Communist Party from the latter’s rural soviet base areas—held Chinese citizens to exacting standards of self-abnegation, collective devotion, and patriotic obedience. As part of a backlash against the 1915 New Culture Movement, the New Life Movement fused the Confucian precepts of li, yi, lian, and chi [propriety, righteousness, integrity, and humility] to Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People, insisting that these were bedrocks of Chinese national belonging and revolutionary purpose. Against the socially divisive and unpatriotic behavior allegedly encouraged by Chinese Communism and Western liberalism, the New Life Movement promised to foster national cohesion by resuscitating familiar values. Given the movement’s emphasis on patriotic self-sacrifice, the fact that NLM leaders—including Chiang Kai-shek and his wife Song

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3 Ibid., 183
4 Ibid., 183
Meiling—fled from Nanjing while passing custodianship of their own propaganda on to poorer residents facing near-certain disaster would seem to reveal the shallowness and hypocrisy with which it was implemented. Closer inspection of the movement’s social dynamics, however, reveals this scenario to have been fully in keeping with its expectation that decisions made by party-state leaders would be unquestioningly accepted and implemented. It was also in keeping with the movement’s implicit assumption that party-state leaders were the nation’s most valuable members, holding keys to the nation’s future and therefore not expendable in the present.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. The first part examines the kind of citizen that the New Life Movement sought to foster, focusing on the particular burdens that the movement placed on the poor and disenfranchised. This discussion will highlight how the NLM, which quickly became a centerpiece of Nationalist propaganda, worked to foster respect for social hierarchy and chains of command. The second part of this chapter highlights the global comparative framework that New Life leaders invoked to rationalize the movement in the first place. As a nationalistic movement generated in a semi-colonial context, NLM ideals were inevitably articulated amid what Benedict Anderson called a “specter of comparisons.” By the 1930s, local practices were viewed as if through an inverted telescope, with a “doubled vision…simultaneously close up and from afar.” What was indigenously Chinese could only be grasped and elaborated through a comparative lens. NLM publications therefore consistently compared and contrasted its expectations of Chinese citizens with practices and movements the world over, from the “itinerant lives” of Roma women to exemplary youth organizations in Turkey and Germany.6 The path to authentically national ideals invariably wound through other

6“Jipuxixia nüxing de liulang shenghuo” [“The Itinerant Lives of Gypsy Women”], Funü xinshenghuo yuekan [The New Life Women’s Monthly], 1 no 2 (1937), 56-7
countries. As NLM leaders settled on authoritarian, anti-liberal, and anti-Communist examples as guiding lights for Chinese citizenship, they valorized aspects of the Confucian tradition that helped to foster obedience and order in everyday practice. This comparative framing helps us to grasp the social and political purposes for which Confucian tradition was invoked. While the Nationalists presented NLM values as more truly indigenous than those championed by Chinese Communists or liberals, they also studiously avoided acknowledging as “Chinese” native traditions of insubordination, rebellion, or asociality. Instead, they honed in on Confucian precepts that most resonated with the anti-Communist, anti-liberal order that they sought to build, and found sanction in movements the world over for curtailing individual rights and vesting supreme power in the party-state.

National Responsibility

When the “rightwing” of the Nationalist Party (GMD) led by Chiang Kai-shek seized power in 1927 by violently expelling Communists from their Soviet-backed alliance and by sidelining the party’s “leftwing” led by Wang Jingwei, they straddled the “military” and “political tutelage” phases of governance that GMD founder Sun Yat-sen had outlined before his 1925 death. As scholars including Henrietta Harrison and John Fitzgerald have detailed, even before establishing centralized state power, the Nationalists worked to articulate the kinds of behavior that befit citizens of a modern Republic no longer encumbered by the deferential norms expected of dynastic subjects. At the same time, they also sought to limit the kinds of power that ordinary citizens and non-state organizations could expect to wield within the new republic.

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Once the Nationalist Party established a state in Nanjing (officially proclaimed at the start of 1928), their work of defining these limits began anew. Under popular pressure, in May 1931 Nanjing promulgated a “Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China,” with the idea that the eventual “realization of Constitutional Government may be accelerated and political power restored to a popularly-elected government.”\(^8\) In other words, the Republic was now officially in the phase of political tutelage, during which the party-state would oversee the citizenry’s maturation into one capable of engaging in electoral politics and abiding by constitutionally guaranteed laws. As observers including the liberal critic Hu Shi had been pointing out at least since Nanjing issued a “Rights of Man” decree in 1929, the Provisional Constitution gave the party-state great leeway to curtail individual liberties in the name of law and order and to determine what was ultimately in the “public interest.”\(^9\) For instance, it limited private property rights, such that “Where public interest necessitates, the property of the people may be expropriated in accordance with Law.”\(^10\) It also mandated that “all persons shall have the duty of undertaking military service and of performing compulsory labor (for the State) in accordance with Law.” “Public interest” as defined by the party-state generally took precedence over individual interests; the caveat “except in accordance with Law” was appended to qualify protections accorded to speech, press, assembly, association, etc.

The New Life Movement, launched in 1934 by the Nationalist government as the military campaigns against the Chinese Communist Party’s Jiangxi-area soviets were concluding, complemented the Provisional Constitution and the general ethos of the “political tutelage”

\(^9\)Dr. Hu Shih, “When are We Going to Have a Constitution? Democracy Only Learnt by Practicing It,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (1870-1941); Sept 7, 1929. Proquest Historical Newspapers: Chinese Newspapers Collection, p. 357.
\(^10\) Article 18, Full Text of the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China
period by spelling out how party leaders thought that Chinese citizens should conform to the public interest. As Wennan Liu has documented, different party factions had differing ideas about how NLM strictures were to actually penetrate into everyday life. Whereas Chiang Kai-shek favored using the police to enforce its strictures, Chiang’s erstwhile party rival, Wang Jingwei, favored allowing them to stand as persuasive rather than overtly coercive guidelines.11 Whatever the manner of enforcement, the NLM through its various phases articulated rules for proper decorum, ranging from generalized instructions to “put the public before the private” to extremely specific exhortations to brush one’s teeth and walk on the correct side of the street.12

As Nanjing attempted to govern and develop the country amid waves of crises—from Communist insurrection to warlord opposition to Japan’s seizure of Manchuria in 1931-32—the legibility and cooperation of Chinese citizens became increasingly important. The New Life Movement, with its aim to remold daily life in its entirety, soon anchored the regime’s many approaches to law, order, and national development. The more a given citizen outwardly conformed to NLM norms, the more assured the party-state could be that s/he was not doing anything subversive or unproductive, and could therefore proceed unobstructed with the work it had set out for itself.

As many scholars have elaborated, the NLM aspired to reinvigorate daily life with Confucian expectations of *li, yi, lian,* and *chi,* popularizing the idea that they animated Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People and were in turn the *only* beliefs and practices that suited

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While these differences may have reflected differing philosophies of state power, insofar as Chiang’s loyalty base was in the police and the military, we can also likely understand it as a concern on Wang’s part about Chiang extending his own power via the police into everyday life.

Chinese circumstances.\textsuperscript{13} Claims about time-honored Confucian norms conjured up mythic eras in which propriety, righteousness, integrity, and humility had held widespread popular purchase and thereby promised that, if adhered to once again, the nation could recuperate its rightful wealth and power. Indicating the NLM’s modern inception and modernizing aspirations, the movement also stressed public health and sanitation, as well as the importance of efficient behavior and rational economic practices.\textsuperscript{14} Via schools, hospitals, and specially designated public venues, citizens were told: “do not throw food on the ground;” “do not urinate as you please;” “everyone should keep himself clean all the time;” and “walk and sit with erect posture.” As for rationalized economic behavior, people were told to “reduce the number of meaningless parties or gatherings;” “be fair in business transactions;” “Be punctual for appointments.” Citizens were, moreover, instructed to make overt displays of patriotism: “salute the national flag when it is raised and brought down;” and “Stand while singing the Party song or the National anthem.”\textsuperscript{15} The overwhelming thrust of such exhortations was to consider the social before the personal, and how one’s personal habits contributed to or detracted from society’s efficient functioning. Society, in this view, had always been and should always be hierarchically


\textsuperscript{14}on hygene as a key trope of Chinese modernity, see Rogaski, \textit{Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty Port China} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004)

structured; knowing and abiding by one’s place within the hierarchy would allow the nation to recover strength on the world stage.

In China, the idea of remolding the population to conform to modern behavioral norms could be traced back at least to Liang Qichao’s late nineteenth-century call to “make the people new;” globally it had long figured as an integral part of the nation-building process (“peasants into Frenchmen,” as Eugen Weber put it). In this sense, it is necessary to consider not only the fact that that the Nationalists sought to remold Chinese citizens, but the politics of their attempts to do so. Before Song Meiling assumed leadership of the movement in 1936 and the NLM began to be implemented with varying success throughout Nationalist-controlled China, it was devised and inaugurated in Nationalist-pacified Jiangxi by men affiliated with powerful, albeit shadowy, factions of the Nationalist Party whose politics I have described elsewhere as fascist. As these factions envisioned it, the NLM was a vehicle for rightwing revolution; it aimed to reinvigorate an imperialist-corrupted, Communist-tainted polity with a native Confucian spirit that bound the nation together across vast terrain from the ancient past into a modern future. These factions of the GMD wanted to restore masculine authority, to school women in the proper way to inhabit the modern world, to tame the autonomous agency of peasant organizations and labor unions, and to assert the absolute power of the party-state. They understood themselves to be the most nationalistic of all nationalists (and Nationalists), and also authorized themselves to kill alleged enemies of the nation. Building on Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People, they regarded social analyses that divided China into potentially warring classes (e.g., the

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17 See, for instance, the differing ends for which people were approached and mobilized in Kate Merkel-Hess, *The Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
18 Maggie Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism*, esp ch 4
proletariat and bourgeoisie) inapplicable to national circumstances. In their view, China was instead stratified into hierarchical tiers of people—“vanguards” (*xianzhixianjue*); “afterknowers” (*houzhihoujue*); and the “ignorant and unconscious” (*buzhibujue*)—and these groups were inclined toward cooperation rather than conflict. Whereas, generally speaking, the Communists conceptualized this latter group as “the masses” (as workers and peasants dispossessed of means of production) and considered them to be vanguards of the revolution, Nationalists regarded them more like draft animals. Especially as the NLM spread, the Nationalists used terms like *qunzhong* (masses, or crowd) rather than *buzhibujue*, but the general assumption that said masses were ignorant and unconscious remained. To be sure, they performed necessary labor for the nation and had to be respected and nurtured as such. But they were not at the forefront of anything, least of all the historical process, or knowledgeable of what the nation’s future ought to look like. Instead, this kind of knowledge was possessed by vanguardist party leaders, men like Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. The autonomous thoughts and desires of the masses were inconsequential at best and dangerously subversive at worst.

As the NLM spread beyond fascist circles and became part of the Party’s nationwide propaganda, its virulent edges softened, but the movement still aimed to control and rechannel mass organization and initiative. The NLM worked to invalidate and eradicate the kind of cosmopolitan individualism championed by men like Hu Shi, as well as the kind of internationalist class-based solidarity championed by the CCP, steering such energies instead into a collective national struggle in the international arena led by the GMD. While the NLM celebrated the collectively struggling nation, it was also clear that party-state leaders were the members of the nation whose ideas mattered most, and it was the responsibility of the masses to fall in line and follow their orders. Invoking Confucianism, the NLM stressed social hierarchy:
“Be filial to your parents and love your brothers and sisters;” and “salute your elders,” NLM materials instructed.\(^{19}\) Society was supposed to operate with the rigid discipline of a modern military and the efficiency of a modern factory, with orders flowing from the top of the command chain to the bottom. In this vein, citizens were told to police their own conduct—this was especially apparent in NLM calls to “militarize,” “productivize,” and “aestheticize” everyday life. It was certainly the case that the NLM expected party-state representatives to hold themselves to rigorous standards of integrity and discipline.\(^{20}\) But, as many observed at the time and since, the NLM was overwhelmingly concerned with the improving the behavior of the untutored masses, placing the burden on them to demonstrate that they could behave as their betters expected them to behave. For instance, NLM materials did not instruct factory owners to “pay your workers fairly and limit their working hours so that they can be well fed and cleanly clothed;” for landlords to “share out your land so that local peasants do not have to starve, and so that they can walk with good posture because their work is no longer back-breaking,” or for men to encourage female self-determination. Instead, we see a reinvigoration of patriarchal norms, now suffused with modern ideas of discipline and efficiency. We also see a tremendous burden placed on society’s most vulnerable to amend their allegedly unsightly, irrational, and insubordinate behavior, as if it constituted an embarrassment on the world stage and otherwise sabotaged China’s prospects of annulling the unequal treaties and proceeding with economic development. As Chiang Kai-shek put it in a 1936 NLM speech, when foreigners visit Nanjing in wintry weather and behold the disheveled demeanor of rickshaw drivers, “they can clearly see our citizenry’s benightedness, our society’s backwardness, and our government’s incapacity—

\(^{19}\)Chen, Cheng, and Lestz, *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*, pp. 303-305
\(^{20}\)e.g. in Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), “Xinshenghuo yundong di'er qi de mudi he gongzuo de yaozhi—zai Nanjing xin shenghuo yundong erzhounian jinianhui jiangyan,” *Zhonghua Minguoshi dang'an ziliao huibian*, p.778
they can infer that our country cannot survive in the world.”^{21} Chiang expected that the NLM would prompt the rickshaw driver to become cognizant of the national injury his supposedly disheveled demeanor was causing, and to follow a state-prescribed plan to improve it accordingly. What the rickshaw driver thought about the alleged problem of his appearance, or of the plan to resolve it, was irrelevant. Such a top-down approach quite different from the communicative dialogue encouraged by the CCP’s burgeoning idea of the “Mass Line” (see Fabio Lanza’s essay in this volume). The GMD had the vision and the plan, it was up to ordinary citizens to carry it out.

From this discussion, we can see that it was in keeping with NLM expectations that Chiang Kai-shek and local New Life Movement leaders fled from Nanjing in December 1937, just before the Japanese attacked the city. They had already established themselves as the most important members of the nation; as the ones who gave orders while others received them. Over the course of its rule, the GMD increasingly equated the party with the state, and aligned both with the nation as such. This assumption gained its clearest expression in 1943, when Chiang Kai-shek published *China’s Destiny* on the occasion of the United States and the United Kingdom finally abrogating the by-then century-old unequal treaties. In *China’s Destiny*, Chiang insisted that China’s existence depended on the existence of the Nationalist Party: “If China today did not have the [GMD], there would be no China…China’s destiny rests entirely with the [GMD]. If there was no [GMD], or if the [GMD] should fail in its task, China would have nothing on which to depend.”^{22} Without Chiang and the GMD, China would be nothing and have nothing. We can see this logic at work in the decision to abandon Nanjing and relocate the capital to Wuhan in late 1937, we can also see it at work in Chiang’s June 1938 decision to order

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^{21} Chiang (Jiang), “Xinshenghuo yundong di’er qi de mudi he gongzuo de yaozhi,” p. 779

^{22} *China’s Destiny*, pp. 222
the Yellow River dikes breached, with the hope that a sudden devastating flood would stall the Japanese Army’s further advance and buy his government time to relocate the capital once again.  

23 Diana Lary called the breaching of the dikes “an act so drastic that it was virtually unthinkable.”  

24 With estimates of half a million civilians killed and some three-five million displaced, according to Rana Mitter “Chiang’s government had committed one of the grossest acts of violence against its own people, and he knew that the publicity could be a damaging blow to its reputation. He decided to divert blame by announcing that the dike had been broken, but blaming the breach on Japanese aerial bombing.”  

25 Chiang’s decision to breach the dikes was no doubt agonized, and clearly made under dreadful circumstances. The fact that he deflected blame to the Japanese suggested he clearly understood that such a devastating decision would undermine GMD efforts to equate the party with the nation and its worldly survival. At the same time, breaching the dikes to buy his government time was also a clear instance of placing the party and its future above that of the masses. We can see how the NLM helped to rationalize such decisions, insofar as it placed Nationalist leaders in positions of wisdom and authority, and ordinary citizens in a position to stoically accept their decisions for the good of the nation. It made sense that Gwoh the tailor, and hundreds of thousands of peasants in the Yellow River flood zone, shouldered the national burden in the present while Nationalist leaders saved themselves for another day.

**The Chinese Nation in a World of Nations**

25 Mitter, 162-3; also Lary, 199
NLM propaganda celebrated Confucian traditions as native to China, contrasting their indigeneity with foreign-imported and hence unsuitable aspects of the cultural practices associated with Communism and liberalism. At the same time, as Chiang Kai-shek’s 1936 discussion of Nanjing rickshaw drivers indicated, NLM exhortations were framed with other countries in mind. The NLM aimed to reform daily habits that were viewed, as if through an “inverted telescope,” as hindrances to modernization and to the recuperation of Chinese strength on the world stage. As Xiaobing Tang has underscored, the conceptual transformation of China during the late Qing from an imperial “world” to a “nation-in-the-world” involved a profound reconceptualization of global space and China’s role as a nation within it.26 Rebecca Karl has further stressed that Chinese nationalist consciousness emerged amid a reckoning with the nation’s newfound placement within a world of colonizers and colonized.27 By 1934, when the New Life Movement was launched, the GMD had made considerable headway challenging the terms of the unequal treaties to which China had been subject since 1842 and had constituted the foundation of its “semi-colonial” status (as an independent nation subject to imperialist political, military, and financial dictates but not under formal colonial control). As Nationalist spokespeople skillfully amplified the strength and rapacity of Chinese Communism to foreign-imperialist audiences, the latter grew increasingly amenable to Nationalist demands to amend the treaties. After Pearl Harbor, when Japanese occupation of foreign enclaves in China rendered Euro-American treaty claims all but useless anyway, Britain and America officially conceded them, supplying Chiang Kai-shek with the victory celebrated in China’s Destiny. As with many Nationalist policies and proclamations over the years, the New Life Movement was implemented

with acute concern not only for the domestic trouble being stirred up by Communist partisans and liberal activists, but also for China’s position on the world stage and its capacity to establish its sovereignty within the modern world order. NLM leaders perceived in China’s masses slovenly, disorganized habits that were developmentally retarding and undermining the government’s ability to demonstrate China’s fitness to be treated as a sovereign equal of the world’s colonizing powers. They therefore highlighted various movements around the world from which they wanted Chinese people to learn. In so doing, they walked a fine line between acknowledging that there was nothing nationally unique about the values celebrated by the New Life Movement and insisting that these values were uniquely Chinese. In this sense, the question for historians is less whether the values celebrated by the NLM were genuinely native to China, but why the GMD insisted that they were while also consistently framing them in global terms.

The *New Life Women’s Monthly*, for instance, evinced a strong interest in habits and expectations for women in countries throughout the world. As Song Meiling put it in the second issue, “for China to advance, we cannot but evaluate it in light of international standards.”

While the magazine touched on women’s activities in varying political contexts, it displayed particular interest in developments in Nazi Germany and its women’s organization headed by Gertrude Scholtz-Klink. The Nazi Women’s League was lauded for its dedication to nurturing the nation and encouraging in women a spirit of self-sacrifice and public service. The *New Life Women’s Monthly* went so far as to rebut a charge issued by the Ginling College campus newsletter that the Nazis wanted to send women back into the kitchen.

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29“Deguo muqinmen suoshou de jiaoyu” [Education Received by German Mothers], *Funü xinshenghuo yundong*, 1 no 2 (1937), 31-2
30“Deguo funü yundong mubiao” [“Goals of the German Women’s Movement”], *Funü xinshenghuo yundong*, 1 no. 2 (1937), p. 16
wanted, the *New Life Women’s Monthly* insisted, was for women to be strong and healthy, to assist in the beautification of life, and to recognize the importance of sacrificing one’s own interests for the national good, particularly in times of crisis. The fact that Scholtz-Klink herself had six children and still found time to head the women’s league exemplified this spirit.\(^{31}\)

Whereas this NLM women’s magazine also lavished praise on non-fascist examples—for instance, openly admiring the strength and sacrifices displayed by Soviet women—the emphasis was overwhelmingly on movements that curtailed individualism and fostered patriotic devotion.\(^{32}\)

In this spirit, the *New Life Women’s Monthly* also reframed time-honored Confucian expectations of women, especially to be a good wife and nurturing mother (*xianqiliangmu*) in a manner that rendered this norm essentially indistinguishable from norms that the magazine singled out for praise in other countries, including those promoted by the Nazi Women’s League. Readers learned, for instance, that *xianqiliangmu* was not a call for women to be submissive and return to the kitchen, but rather that domestic work should be understood as a form of patriotic public service.\(^{33}\)

It was also of course stressed that, insofar as the *xianqiliangmu* ideal had clear roots in Chinese tradition, it was far more in fitting for national circumstances than ideals of autonomous female agency that had been promoted by Chinese feminists since the late Qing, or as represented in the present by the “Modern Girl.” In other words, this Confucian norm was explicitly redefined and buttressed with reference to conservative-authoritarian, and often fascist, national contexts around the world, and it was also presented as nationally rooted and historically continuous.

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\(^{31}\)Ibid.

\(^{32}\)“Su’e de funü shi shidai de funü” [“Soviet Women are Women of the Age”], *Funü xinshenghuo yundong*, 1 no. 1 (1936), 54

\(^{33}\)“Dangqian Zhongguo funü yingyou de juewu” [The Consciousness that Modern Chinese Women Must Possess”], *Funü xinshenghuo yuekan*, 1 no 1 (1936), 6-8
Likewise, NLM materials focused on youth invoked a global comparative framework with an eye toward fostering deference to authority and national cohesion. This was manifestly the case with Shen Jieren’s booklet on *The New Life Movement and Youth Training in Various Countries* (*Geguo qingnian xunlian yu Xinshenguo yundong*). Here, Shen surveyed youth movements in Germany, Italy, Japan, the USSR, Turkey, Czechoslovakia, France, England, and the U.S. Of these, he deemed movements in Germany, Italy, the USSR, Turkey, and Czechoslovakia the most relevant to China’s circumstances—the last two especially because they were, like China, “weak nations.” The United States, the author asserted in the preface, was more interested in fostering “good citizens” than in cultivating a unified and coherent youth movement capable of effectively serving the nation, while in France individualism was so deeply rooted that it offered China few examples to aid its own reconstruction process. Nazi Germany, by contrast, offered quite a lot. Hitler, Shen explained, instructed German youth to destroy Marxism, to “ostracize Jews,” to cultivate hostility toward their ancient enemy of France, and to make overtures to the UK and Italy in the interest of checking the power of the USSR. At the same time, Shen also saw Soviet Young Pioneers as a sound model for China’s youth. This was despite their Communism and because the Young Pioneers were organized and coordinated by the state in a coherent manner. Soviet youth grew up with militant discipline and learned to sacrifice themselves for the nation, just as the NLM was attempted to foster in Chinese youth.

What Shen gleaned from and promoted about youth movements around the world was their capacity to foster order and national unity. He was far less interested in the fact that the U.S., the UK, and France had become colonial or industrial powerhouses than in the fact that

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35 Shen, *Geguo qingnian*, preface, 2-3. Though the booklet is undated, it was clearly written before 1939.
36 Shen, *Geguo qingnian*, main text, 25-6
Germany, Turkey, Japan, and the USSR had apparently mobilized their young people in a way that was helping to facilitate their respective national resurgences. They were excelling at fostering citizens’ sense of duty to the national whole. This was precisely what the NLM wanted to do, and a key purpose for which it invoked Confucian values. According to Shen, the NLM provided a starting point for youth organization, as the “sons of the Yellow Emperor” should no longer be content with falling prey to stronger national predators. They had to develop a consciousness of the nation’s Confucian morality and of China’s glorious history. They had to discard selfish and degenerate inclinations, temper their own resolve, and commit themselves to a patriotic spirit of public service grounded in the Three Principles of the People.\(^{37}\) Shen, incidentally, saw examples of bravery lacking in the Chinese tradition. Instead, Chinese youth should learn from the example of Christopher Columbus, whose bravery enabled him to “open up a new continent,” and from that of Hitler, who was able to unify Germany.\(^{38}\) He went on to underscore that fostering li, yi, lian, and chi in everyday life, and abiding by NLM directives to militarize, aestheticize, and productivize daily routines, would facilitate China’s own national renaissance.\(^{39}\)

From the NLM women’s monthly as well as Shen’s tract, we can see how closely Nationalist leaders observed movements around the world. The lenses through which they viewed Chinese behavior, and its alleged lack of conformity to time-honored Confucian norms, invariably kept the wider world in focus. The Confucian values that the movement celebrated were inseparably tied to Nationalist aspirations to stamp out Communist as well as individualist sentiments, and were reinterpreted with an eye toward movements in other countries that seemed

\(^{37}\)Shen, *Geguo qingnian*, 91-2

\(^{38}\)Shen, *Geguo qingnian*, 96

\(^{39}\)Shen, *Geguo qingnian*, 97
to be doing these things effectively. It is important to note that NLM publications did not characterize movements in other parts of the world as potentially in solidarity with those in China. There was a rigorous effort made to keep the focus of solidarity on the Nationalist Party state, rather than on what Chinese youth might share in common with youth in Czechoslovakia or Turkey, or points of empathy and solidarity between women in China and Germany. While there were nods to camaraderie between weak nations as self-contained entities, the NLM was actively trying to thwart any sense of solidarity that might emerge between social groups in China and those elsewhere in the world. All affinities were directed upward to the party-state, which in turn identified itself with the nation as such. The CCP, by contrast, amplified the idea of internationalist worker and peasant solidarity, while Chinese civil rights activists were drawing connections between critics of the Nationalist government and those silenced by repressive regimes elsewhere in the world. Instead, the NLM framed every nation as autonomously developing, each with its own problems to solve, vying for strength in an international arena. As Shen stressed, China’s problems involved corrupt bureaucrats, warlords, red bandits, and generalized disunity despite having realized a strong central government. These could only be resolved by implementing the NLM, prompting all citizens to understand themselves as entwined in a hierarchical web connected up to the state, and that national survival depended on their conformity. The point here is not that NLM leaders falsely invoked Confucianism to consolidate their political program. Rather, it is to stress that they re-presented this tradition in a manner that rendered it virtually indistinguishable from authoritarian and often fascist ideals promoted around the world at the time. It is hard, for instance, to substantively distinguish NLM demands for filial obedience from Italian Fascism’s Catholic Church-gleaned demand to heed patriarchal
authority structures. In this sense, the global, comparative framework within which the NLM was articulated helps us to understand its social and political dynamics.

**Conclusion**

After Nanjing fell to Japanese soldiers, Shui-fang Tsen noted despairingly in her diary: “I feel so sad. Nanking has not had peace since four months ago and fell only after three days’ fighting. It is really pathetic. I have no idea what’s going to happen tomorrow. Today, two more poor babies were born. Their mothers are suffering too and all sleep on the ground.”

Throughout the Japanese assault on the capital, Tsen tirelessly continued her work of nursing and midwifery. Whether New Life Movement exhortations motivated her heroic self-sacrifice is unclear. What is clear is that, amid the overwhelming task of caring for internal refugees, she found herself incinerating New Life Movement propaganda that had been abandoned to Ginling College by the movement’s fleeing leaders. Like Gwoh the tailor, she was placed in charge of destroying evidence of outward fealty to the Nationalist government, and thereby potentially avoiding the wrath of the invading Japanese. Tsen and Gwoh soon learned that even civilians with no evident connection to the Nationalist regime were sexually assaulted and murdered; they could no doubt imagine what might have befallen them if Japanese soldiers had found them with NLM materials.

Chiang Kai-shek clearly made the decision to abandon Nanjing under an excruciating set of circumstances, likewise the breaching of the Yellow River dike. The purpose of this essay has not been to adjudicate Chiang’s decisions, but rather to show how the New Life Movement helped to rationalize them. When the NLM demanded that people act with propriety, integrity,

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40 Vautrin et al, *The Undaunted Women of Nanking*, p. 34
humility, and shame, and that they militarize, productivize, and aestheticize their lives, considerable emphasis was indeed placed on the import of national leaders setting good examples. But the overwhelming burden was on those on the receiving end of orders. Party state leaders gave orders, ordinary civilians were supposed to heed them. With regard to the breaching of the Yellow River dike, Diana Lary has written that “The Guomindang government, after the false start of claiming that the Japanese had caused the breach, focused on patriotic sacrifice. They used the scale of the casualties as a sign of the huge sacrifices the Chinese people had had to make to save their country.”41 In other words, after failing to pin blame for breaching the dikes on the Japanese, the GMD turned to its well-worn exhortation to self-sacrifice—even though people in the flood zone had never been asked or forewarned about such an unimaginable sacrifice. There was a profound lack of equality and reciprocity to the Confucian ideals invoked by the NLM. They helped to identify party-state leaders with the nation’s future, and the masses as members of the nation whose lives could be sacrificed so that the party-state could endure. As we have seen, NLM ideals were framed in global terms even as they were presented as specific to the Chinese nation, thereby clarifying the political ends to which allegedly enduring national values were put.

41 Lary, “Drowned Earth,” 205