

The roots of the Taiwan conflict

Part One: Origins of the Kuomintang

By Melissa Harrison

For decades the island of Taiwan, situated about 160km off the south-eastern coast of the Chinese mainland, has been used by Anglo-American powers to agitate against the People's Republic of China. This article is the first in a new Australian Alert Service series aimed at exploring the unreported story of Taiwan. This article documents the origins of the Kuomintang Party and the rise of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the future leader of Taiwan. Subsequent articles will document the machinations of US intelligence agencies; the weaponisation of "democracy" for political ends; and the exploitation of Taiwan, in service of Anglo-American geopolitical agendas.

In 1911 China's Qing Dynasty (established 1636) was overthrown by a republican revolution led by Dr Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), ending over two thousand years of monarchic rule in China. Sun, who had studied in America in his youth, was inspired by the ideals of American statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln. Sun was appointed president of the revolution's new provisional government but resigned shortly afterward, intending to focus on the reconstruction of China under an immense infrastructure, scientific and technological development program. Former warlord-turned-republican Yuan Shih-kai was appointed Sun's successor.

On 1 January 1912, the revolutionary base declared the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC). In August of that year, the new Kuomintang Party (KMT), which was rooted in an early resistance organisation Sun established in 1905 called T'ung Meng Hui, held its inaugural meeting. In December 1912 and January 1913 the ROC held elections, in which the KMT captured a parliamentary majority of about 45 per cent of seats. The first sitting of the new parliament was scheduled for April 1913, wherein the KMT expected to assume administration of the ROC. However, the nominated KMT leader, Sung Chiao-jen, was assassinated on 13 March while awaiting a train to attend the first parliamentary session. An investigation determined that incumbent President Yuan Shih-kai and Prime Minister Chao Ping-chun were responsible for the murder. While some factions of the KMT favoured a military overthrow of Yuan in retaliation, others attempted a legal solution to the crime; meanwhile, Yuan proceeded to subvert the KMT with bribes and the party was beleaguered with factional infighting. That same year, Yuan dismissed KMT governors and dissolved the parliament and the KMT itself. In 1915-16, Yuan attempted to restore an imperial dynasty with himself as emperor. Widespread opposition and a military revolt forced Yuan to abolish the monarchy, and he died shortly afterward. As a result of these events, its own disorganisation and internecine feuds, the KMT almost disintegrated. The KMT went through several transformations, culminating in Sun Yat-sen's 1924 reorganisation of the party, modelled on the organisational structure of the Soviet Communist Party. The KMT's new party program and constitution were formalised at the KMT's First National Party Congress in January 1924.

After the death of would-be emperor Yuan Shih-kai, China was overrun by warlord factions. It was not until 1923 that the KMT regained a territorial base in Canton (Guangzhou). In 1923 the KMT entered into an alliance with the fledgling Communist Party of China (formed in 1921), with the aim of

reuniting China and lifting it out of warlordism.

Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek

Chiang Kai-shek was the son of a salt merchant who lived in the mountain area of Hsikou, in China's north-eastern Zhejiang province. Chiang was educated in Chinese and Japanese military academies and was a military leader in Sun Yat-sen's pre-revolutionary forces. In 1924 Chiang was appointed to the KMT's military council and made commandant of the party's new Whampoa Military Academy, and was appointed garrison commander in Canton the following year. In March 1925, Sun Yat-sen died of liver cancer. In July of that year, the KMT established a National Government in Canton. Dramatic changes within the party's leadership structure, due to an assassination and a forced resignation, cleared the way for Chiang, already the KMT's most senior military leader, to become one of the most politically powerful figures in the party. In 1926, Chiang became Commander-In-Chief or Generalissimo of the National Revolutionary Army. Liberal factions of the KMT, including that led by Sun Yat-sen's widow Soong Ching-ling, feared that Chiang planned to establish a military dictatorship.

The KMT initially permitted communist delegates to simultaneously belong to the KMT and the newly formed Communist Party of China (CPC), a policy formalised during the 1924 National Party Congress. In early 1927, the KMT's left-wing-dominated Executive Committee, which was friendly towards communists, tried to oust Chiang by issuing edicts that his military authority was now to be subordinate to a military council, and his political positions were to be transferred to his chief rival. Shortly thereafter, right-wing elements of the KMT initiated a purge of communists, instigated by a proposal which was likely authored by Chiang. Aided by the Green Gang, a secret society and organised crime group with which Chiang had longstanding ties, Chiang's military forces executed a brutal campaign known as the Shanghai Massacre, which began 12 April 1927. Varying estimates of between 5,000 and 10,000 communists, workers, intellectuals, and peasants were executed, including by public beheadings. In July of that year, the KMT expelled CPC members from the party and government. KMT forces rounded up and executed CPC members, ending the alliance between the CPC and the KMT. In response the CPC allied with the ousted warlords to remove the KMT from power, initiating the Chinese Civil War which was waged intermittently from 1927 to 1949.

The left and right factions of the KMT split, and Chiang formed a rival government in Nanking. The following year, the left wing KMT government collapsed, consolidating Chiang's power. In January 1928 the KMT appointed Chiang Commander-In-Chief of the Republic of China (ROC). By 1930 the ROC was recognised as the legal government of China by most of the international community.



Chiang Kai-shek and US General Joseph Stilwell. Photo: United States Army

KMT influenced by fascism

During the 1930s Chiang Kai-shek and his government were influenced by the global rise of fascism. During this period, Chiang's regime increasingly relied on Italian and German military advisers, training, and equipment. In 1933 the Italian fascist government and the KMT brokered an agreement for an aviation mission which was stationed in China, establishing a factory to assemble Italian-manufactured aircraft, and implementing a training program for ROC pilots. The Italian government agreed that the airfield and Italian planes could be used against the Communist forces. The mission was headed by officers of the Italian Air Force and led by Colonel Roberto Lordi, Brigadier General of the Italian Royal Air Force, who was also appointed Chief of Staff of the Chinese Air Force.¹

The feared Blue Shirts Society, a secret organisation established by Tai Li, the KMT's military intelligence chief, was evidently a copy of similarly fascist organisations in Italy and Germany. The Blue Shirts defended the KMT, promoted its policies, and suppressed political dissent, often using violence and torture against the KMT's political opponents.²

In 1943 Chiang published two political tracts, titled "China's Destiny" and "Chinese Economic Theory". As described by Michael Schaller, Professor of History at the University of Arizona, in his 1979 book *The US Crusade in China, 1938-1945*, Chiang's ideology "proved a blend of feudal and fascist theory, one which looked upon Nazi youth groups as a model for political organisation". Chiang was fixated on leading a rejuvenated China into greatness, writing that "If China today did not have the Kuomintang there would be no China ... China's destiny rests entirely with the Kuomintang".

China and World War II

In the first half of 1930, China was besieged by a constant pressure of attacks from Japan, which occupied large areas of north-eastern China. Chiang Kai-shek was obsessed with eliminating domestic political opposition and believed that China's military was not ready to face Japanese forces. He therefore adopted a strategy of appeasement towards Japan, which was strongly opposed by the Chinese public. Instead of fighting Japan, Chiang concentrated his forces against the Communists and rival warlords. In December 1936 Chiang was kidnapped by two of his own generals, who demanded the Generalissimo cease fighting the Communists and ally with them to confront Japan. Chiang conceded, and the KMT and CPC briefly allied to form the Second United Front against the Japanese in 1937. However, the factions disagreed on military and political policy and there were soon military clashes. In 1938 the KMT deployed several hundred thousand of its best forces to blockade Communist-controlled areas, maintaining this blockade until 1945. After Chiang ordered a surprise attack against Communist forces in 1941 the fragile alliance broke down, although it officially remained in place until 1945.

In July 1937, a military clash between Japanese and Chinese forces near Beijing served as a pretext for escalation into full-scale war, marking the start of World War II in Asia. The Chinese people suffered terrible atrocities at the hands of the Japanese forces; it is estimated that between 1931 (the year that Japan invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria) and

1945, approximately 20-30 million Chinese people were killed. The Second Sino-Japanese War, as it is called, destroyed much of China's industrial base and infrastructure.

In the late 1930s American leaders began to believe that the Japanese invasion of China foreshadowed Japan's intentions to control all of Asia and the Pacific. US leaders believed that only a unified China could defeat the Japanese. Although official US reports and American embassy staff stationed in China had been critical of the KMT's poor governance, it was believed that Chiang was the only individual in China who could lead a united national defence against the Japanese invasion. The USA provided economic assistance to the KMT in the hope that China would be a bulwark against Japan's imperialism. The KMT's typical negotiating practice was to use the threat of surrender to Japan to demand more funds from America, and Chiang's inner circle speculated with American aid money, enriching themselves.

By 1941 supporting Nationalist China had become a cornerstone of US policy in East Asia. Early that year US President Franklin D Roosevelt's Lend-Lease legislation was passed, which authorised Washington to supply military equipment to any nation whose security was deemed vital to the interests of the United States. The KMT received its first shipment of military equipment shortly thereafter. In a message to US Secretary of War Henry Stimson, however, US General Joseph W. Stilwell, Roosevelt's military liaison with Chiang Kai-shek and commander of the American forces in the China-Burma-India theatre, wrote that Chiang intended to use US military aid to strengthen his domestic position, rather than for the war against Japan. Chiang controlled his factionalised army by making funds available depending on obedience; Stilwell believed that Chiang intended to use American aid to secure the loyalty of his military commanders. The KMT maintained firm control in only two provinces, and partial control in eight others. The remaining eighteen provinces were ruled by semi- or fully independent warlords and provincial officials. Chiang ruled through manipulating various factions and pitting them against each other. This prevented the rise of any would-be challengers but rendered the KMT unable to deal effectively with any major issue.

The US Crusade in China documents that while American policymakers hoped to "use Chinese manpower as a vast force against Japan", Chiang's regime "hoped to utilise its alliance to accumulate reserves of money, weapons, and influence which would help achieve domestic supremacy". *Birdless Summer*, the autobiography of Han Suyin, the wife of a KMT army officer under Chiang Kai-shek, described the KMT's and Chiang's ecstatic response to the news of the 7 December 1941 Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbour in Honolulu, Hawaii. Han wrote that KMT officials congratulated each other as if a major victory had been won; now that America was at war with Japan, China's strategic importance would increase and more American money and equipment would flow in.

The US Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency) estimated that during WWII, Chiang directed the bulk of his military efforts against the



Nationalist police take away suspected communists for execution. Photo: chinesehistoryforteachers.omeka.net

1. Orazio Coco, "The Italian Military Aviation in Nationalist China: General Roberto Lordi and the Italian Mission in Nanchang (1933-1937)", *The International History Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2022.

2. Orazio Coco, "Chinese Nationalism and Italian Fascism: A Decade of Political and Economic Cooperation (1928-1937)", *Giornale di storia*, 2017.

Chinese Communists rather than at the Japanese. As documented in the 1949 China White Paper (officially titled *United States Relations with China: With Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949*), US Foreign Service officials reported that to the KMT, “the war against Japan is secondary in importance to its own preservation in power”. Chiang conserved his forces “for utilisation in the maintenance of its political power” and intended to “eliminate all political opposition, by force of arms if necessary”.

General Stilwell, who also served as a Joint Chief of Staff to Chiang, was highly critical of Chiang’s refusal to go on the offensive against Japan, and his failure to dismiss corrupt or incompetent generals. Chiang reportedly refused to listen to anything except favourable reports.

Stilwell and Chiang shared a mutual dislike. Writing in his private papers, Stilwell was disgusted that America had manoeuvred itself “into the position of having to support this rotten regime”, which Stilwell believed mirrored the regime America was fighting in Germany. In both cases, Stilwell saw “a one-party government, supported by a Gestapo [referring to the KMT’s secret police] and headed by an unbalanced man with little education”. Stilwell realised that Chiang’s ongoing obstructionism to Stilwell’s efforts to achieve military effectiveness of the KMT was intentional—Chiang feared that well-trained forces might challenge his authority or be utilised by a political rival.

American relations with the CPC

During WWII America maintained contact with CPC leaders, although Chiang did everything in his power to derail cooperation between the Americans and the Communist forces, including by refusing to allow any American military assistance or access to Communist-controlled areas.

Marine Captain Evans F. Carlson was a former intelligence officer in China who became acquainted with Roosevelt while serving as a member of the presidential honour guard at Warm Springs, Georgia. When Roosevelt heard that Carlson was being deployed back to China, he asked Carlson to gather intelligence for the White House, requesting that Carlson keep the correspondence secret.

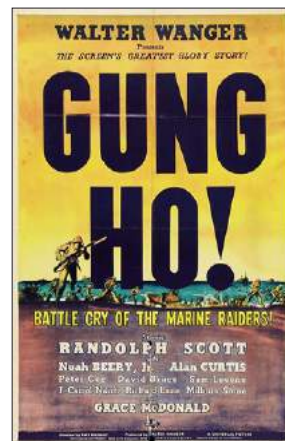
At the end of 1937, Carlson returned to China. He met American journalist Edgar Snow, soon-to-be author of *Red Star Over China*, a famed book which documented Snow’s findings as the first Western journalist to travel to Communist-controlled areas and interview CPC leaders. Roosevelt himself would later read Snow’s book, and invited the journalist to discuss Chinese politics with him on several occasions.

Snow’s glowing description of his experiences in Communist regions motivated Carlson to see for himself. He travelled as a military observer with the CPC’s Eighth Route Army (which was renamed the People’s Liberation Army in 1947), and reported to Roosevelt that it showed the best training and highest morale of any army he had ever seen. Carlson believed that if the Communists’ successful guerrilla tactics were applied to other regions in China, this would effectively halt Japan’s advance by throttling its supply and ammunition lines, giving the KMT time to train an army which could then destroy Japan’s forces. *The US Crusade in China* paraphrases Carlson that “while the Communists were undoubtedly social revolutionaries ... they were also *bona fide* nationalists, who were eager to cooperate with the United States to defeat Japan and reconstruct China”.

Carlson was impressed by the intelligence and camaraderie of the CPC forces and the emphasis on the spirit of “working together”, or “*gong he*” in Chinese (adopted into English as “*gung-ho*”). After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941, Carlson received permission to form two special Marine units

which utilised the tactics of the Communist guerrilla fighters, using *gong he* and “*gung-ho*” as their organising principle and motto, respectively. Carlson’s Marine Raiders achieved significant military victories. In 1943 a film about their feats, titled *Gung Ho*, introduced this term to the American public.

Towards the end of World War II, Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill clashed over Britain’s intent to continue its colonial “18th-century methods”. Instead, Roosevelt



advocated independence for former colonial nations, desiring to uplift them through national development programs. The British complained about American aid to Chiang and resisted cooperating with China, believing that the KMT’s nationalism was a threat to Britain’s colonial designs. In a December 1944 cable to the US War Department, US General Albert Wedemeyer reported that the British Ambassador personally told him that “a strong unified China would be dangerous to the world and certainly would jeopardise the white man’s position immediately in Far East and ultimately throughout the world”. During the war, Britain, aided by factions in the OSS, acted to keep China divided and therefore weak, by supporting alternately the warlord, communist and KMT factions, ultimately subverting the war effort in China.

In January 1945 a letter was presented to the US Dixie Mission, a small group of American military and OSS personnel which was dispatched to the CPC headquarters in northwestern Yenan on an observer mission. The letter stated that leaders of the CPC, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, were prepared to travel to Washington for an exploratory conference with Roosevelt, as leaders of a primary Chinese political party. However, responsibility for delivering the letter fell to staunch anti-communist US Ambassador Maj. Gen. Pat Hurley, who never forwarded the letter to Roosevelt. (The letter was only discovered in 1972, after President Nixon’s visit to China.)

According to Edgar Snow, during a February 1945 visit Roosevelt told Snow he was on the verge of giving military assistance to the Communist forces in the north. He intended to work both with the CPC and the KMT “until we can get them together”. However after Roosevelt’s untimely death several months later in April 1945, US cooperation with the CPC broke down. Roosevelt’s successor, Vice President Harry S Truman, was in office as a result of a British regime-change operation against former Vice President Henry Wallace. Although Truman briefly attempted to assist in negotiation of a coalition government between the CPC and KMT, this soon failed. American relations with the CPC deteriorated and would not normalise for several decades.³

Next—*The Kuomintang retreat to Taiwan*

3. Bibliography

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