

“Begging the Sages of the Party-State”: Citizenship and Government in Transition in Nationalist China, 1927–1937*

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The premise of the Nationalist government at Nanjing (1927–1937) rested on a precarious balance of democracy and paternalism. The Nationalists drew their power from China’s citizens, but they also subjected them to a regimen of training and control. Petitions from the “Nanjing decade” highlight the resulting tensions between government and the governed. Citizens from all walks of life accepted the ruling party’s invitation to participate in the construction of the republic. Yet they also used petitions to seek redress when they believed the Nationalists had fallen short of their obligations. These documents mark a turbulent period of transition from imperial rule to representative democracy. They also characterize an era when new political ideas, new media, and new social organizations helped people take an old device and transform it into a useful weapon for asserting their rights as modern citizens.

TUTELARY GOVERNMENT AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN PETITION

The final Chinese dynasty had been overthrown in 1911 because it was unresponsive to the changing opinions of its subjects. The imperial government had maintained a tradition of court memorials circulated between local and higher officials, all the way up to the Emperor.¹ But this

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1. Silas H.L. Wu, *Communication and Imperial Control in China: Evolution of the Palace Memorial System 1693–1735* (Cambridge, MA, 1970); Jonathan K. Ocko, *Bureaucratic Reform in Provincial China: Ting Jih-ch’ang in Restoration Kiangsu, 1867–1870* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 68–72. A thorough account of the details of the Qing administrative process can also be found in Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: the Grand Council in Mid-Ch’ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley, CA, 1991).

system was increasingly taxed as the Qing government faced complex foreign and domestic crises, and in its final years the Qing dealt poorly with such challenges. The Chinese republic was founded on the idea that, by contrast, the new form of government would represent and be responsive to the will of the people. The promise of the republic was quickly thwarted, however. The revolutionary Sun Yat-sen was celebrated as its founder, and then unceremoniously chased from power. In the end, the 1911 revolution essentially replaced an ineffective imperial dynasty with an equally ineffective military dictatorship.²

Sun Yat-sen and his followers migrated south, where they retooled the organization and ideology of Sun's Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT). Sun eventually accepted Soviet advice and restructured the Kuomintang along the Leninist model. Having absorbed members of the Chinese Communist Party into the KMT ranks, the party leadership created political departments that would lead their companion government bureaucracies. Yet along with the notion that the "nation was ruled through the party", Kuomintang ideologues declaimed Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People, which consisted of pledges to realize nationalism, democracy, and an assured livelihood for the Chinese people. By 1925 the KMT was ready to claim its place as the ruling party of China. That year, however, Sun Yat-sen died without designating an heir. Immediately, the leader and his writings became the symbols of legitimacy for any would-be successor. Invoking the final instructions of the dead Premier, Chiang Kai-shek and other party leaders launched the Northern Expedition to reunify China.

When the Kuomintang finally swept to power in 1927, appeals to Sun Yat-sen's image barely concealed a party and government rife with divisions and conflicts. On the other hand, any would-be successor to Sun found parts of his legacy inescapable. First, despite the fact that, upon reaching Nanjing, Chiang Kai-shek had purged the KMT of its communist members, the new government was to be led by the Kuomintang in the same manner as the Soviet government was led by the Russian Communist Party. Second, the participatory democracy promised by the Kuomintang would not occur until the party and the government ensured that the citizens had successfully undergone the Period of Political Tutelage. This was to be a period where Chinese citizens would be purified from all qualities deemed backward and feudal, and taught knowledge essential for them to take their places in a modern economy, culture, and polity.³

Still, the Kuomintang presented Chinese citizens with an opportunity to refashion their relationship with political authority. The party promised a

2. Ch'ien Tuan-sheng, *The Government and Politics of China, 1912-1949* (Stanford, CA, 1950, repr. 1970), pp.61-80.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-149.

revolution that would realize the Three Principles and eventually lead to representative democracy. Such a promise spurred people both near and far from centers of power to rework the traditional mechanisms of supplication and protest. Well-connected Buddhists and party elders as well as lone schoolteachers and dispossessed fortune-tellers adopted the rituals of the imperial system by taking up the petition as the main conduit from ruled to ruler. But they did so to take advantage of Nationalist offers of rights and freedoms. Petitioners quickly caught on to the Nationalist political structure and vocabulary, presenting their requests in the language of the party's leaders. The petitioners' attention to language demonstrates that a wide range of people invested faith in the Nationalist political program, for reasons both ideal and practical. It also shows how the Kuomintang successfully publicized many of its revolutionary and governmental principles. The gap between principle and practice, however, proved to be the Nationalists' undoing.

THE VERY HUMBLE SCHOOLTEACHER, WANG
MINGDING

The Leninist legacy in the Kuomintang included a party hierarchy in which delegates from all over China would meet annually for a national congress to set party policies. Party leaders saw these congresses as opportunities to ratify their pre-existing positions. Yet dissent party members, local delegates, and outside interest groups such as merchants, doctors, and teachers used the party congress as an occasion to petition the leadership for a redress of grievances. One such petitioner, an undistinguished schoolteacher in the province of Jiangsu, handwrote a proposal imploring the party to reform the education system fundamentally in order to preserve the Nationalist revolution. This book-length petition, like many of its kind, was dutifully received and cataloged by the party secretariat, and then languished in bureaucratic limbo. The petition demonstrates how a loyal cadre managed to criticize the party's policies while couching the petition in the political language of the party's leaders.

In 1934, on the occasion of the Kuomintang's long delayed Fifth National Congress, a party member from Jiangsu Province named Wang Mingding copied more than 200 pages of his proposal on education reform, entitled "My Humble Opinion on Revolutionizing Education", and submitted it as a petition. The congress, pressed for time, barely had the patience to process the proposals submitted by party leaders, and did not take up Wang's manuscript. But his petition is a good example of the many similar proposals submitted by political nobodies from the localities who took to heart the party's call for all citizens to contribute to the Chinese republic. The Kuomintang, after all, had made education reform their top priority since coming to power, and promised radical and

important changes. Wang's petition shows that in 1934, after nearly seven years of KMT power, many rank-and-file party members were unimpressed with the party's progress, and were more than ready to compare the party's performance with its promises.

In this lengthy manuscript, Wang proposed many provocative remedies to reverse the crisis in Chinese education. He proposed an early dual track for vocational and regular education, steering 80 per cent of children towards the former. Wang asserted that the party must truly exert its will upon every aspect of Chinese education. The most useful feature of Wang's proposals is how he went about expressing his assessment, as a party member, of why Chinese education was in such dire straits.

After apologizing for his lack of insight and wisdom, Wang introduced his proposal by saying,

[...] [now] our nation is in great crisis, the state of the people's livelihood is less stable, and the corruption and poison in education increases by the day. Whether it's in the newspapers or magazines, or in speeches of notable people, the phrase "Failure of Education" frequently appears. And no matter where [one looks], those who have received education [in China] frequently complain that "schooling has ruined me". A generation of "to graduate is to be unemployed" university students are looking lost and aimless at the crossroads, at a loss for an answer.⁴

Wang continued with a devastating shot, "luckily education in China has yet to be universal. If it were, would not China immediately become the 'nation of the unemployed'?"⁵

His explanation was simple. The party's tutelage was in name only, not in substance, or in spirit.

Ever since our party finished the Northern Expedition, we have only applied the label of the party onto the existing education system [...]. Whether it is "Party Doctrine Education", "Participation of Education", or "Civics Education", these are merely changes in the title. Where is the application of the party's spirit in the promotion of education? What has been accomplished with the frequent changes in the name of the education program? The current situation is that after our victory non-revolutionary elements have, using guile and trickery, come under the banner of our party, added a title of party member [to themselves], and counted themselves as true revolutionaries.⁶

Returning to his view that the cause of the failure of Chinese education was

4. Wang Mingding, "My Humble Opinion on Revolutionizing Education" (1934), a petition submitted to the Fifth National Congress of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang); no pagination; Archives of the Commission on Historical Affairs of the Kuomintang, Taipei, Taiwan [hereafter, KMT].

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

the lack of party supervision, Wang succinctly outlined the relationship between the state and the people.

The people's understanding of the nation is very weak and superficial. They always relegate the important issues of the nation to very few bureaucrats and politicians [...]. After our party came to power and promoted mass movements, many people started to participate in politics. Yet they are adversely affected by the spirit of liberalism. They therefore lack a sense of responsibility. From now on the phrase "responsibility" must replace the phrase "freedom". As a son you must be filial and care for your parents – you have the responsibility of a son, not freedom. As a citizen you must be loyal to the nation – you have the responsibility to the nation, not freedom.⁷

Wang continued, "Based on [my] analysis, a revolution in education should infuse the masses with the Three Principles of the People. In other words, its goal is to Kuomintangize the Chinese people."⁸ What Wang proposed here would have found little dissent among most Kuomintang leaders, except for the fact that for seven years the party had claimed the revolution was completed. In a very careful way, Wang's petition laid out the case for why the 1927 revolution was as much a failure as the 1911 one.

From there, Wang proceeded to outline the root causes of the problems of the Chinese education system, citing the promotion of materialism, bureaucratism, and unprofessionalism. Wang pointed out that, far from the universal education the Kuomintang promised in 1928, in 1934 the tuition fees for elementary school, much less middle or higher education, were within the reach of only the wealthiest minority in China. The present education system, Wang concludes, "is not education for the common people, but can be properly seen as 'education for the rich'".⁹ Even more devastating, the prohibitive cost of education had attracted students who graduated with an attitude of entitlement. These students were not conscious of their responsibilities as citizens as defined by the Kuomintang. Here, Wang was repeating a well-circulated, and probably exaggerated, caricature of Chinese students in the 1930s. Drawn from the wealthiest minority, these students refused practical learning, and were unwilling to enter into practical careers after they graduated. "Most of our students today wear fancy Western suits, and are arrogant and without respect for others", Wang complained.

They see themselves as superior to others, their hands are unwilling to take on anything difficult, and their feet too precious to travel far. Their fathers and elder brothers might have gathered their family's wealth with hard work and perseverance, and due to the climate of the times, allowed their sons and brothers into [modern day] schools. How are they to know that [when the

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

students] graduate and return to their homes, often they disdain and look down upon their own families, and are arrogant and rude towards their fathers and elder brothers.¹⁰

On the problem of bureaucratism, Wang repeated a second common caricature of modern students. Kuomintang governance had, according to Wang, failed to resolve the legacy of the dynastic examination system, in which education was equated with a job as a government bureaucrat. “To Become a High Official and to Get Wealthy” was the catchphrase. Wang painted a vivid picture of this problem, but, like many who bemoaned the desire of the educated to seek government jobs, his conclusion was terribly simplistic. For Wang, students refused to apply their specialty towards the good of the nation. “Those who study agriculture want to enter into government service”, Wang said, “and those who study industry also want to enter into government service. What they study they do not apply, what they end up doing has nothing to do with their studies. To find those who study agriculture or industry working in their field of specialty is rare.”¹¹

Wang’s proposed solution was also widely advocated by people of very different political allegiances during the period. The government should drastically increase enrollment in vocational education, so that more graduates would apply their knowledge in professions that would benefit China. This would cut the unemployment rate as well. What Wang, and the many Kuomintang members who shared this idea, failed to account for was that maybe these students were not applying what they learned because there were no more jobs for agricultural, industrial, or engineering students.

Students were not only arrogant, unfilial, and incapable of hard work or work suited to their training. They were, for Wang, society’s dead weight.

From elementary school to college [a student] has about twenty years to become “lazy in four limbs and unable to distinguish among the five grains”, and to reinforce their lazy characteristics and become incapable of enduring hardship and poverty [...]. [These students] have become nothing better than wandering vagrants. Their status as wandering vagrant varies by their level of education. Sigh! What School! What Education! Nothing but production centers for wandering vagrants!¹²

Wang’s proposal was not taken up by the congress, which was busy with the task of reunifying the party in the face of increasing tension with the Japanese. In a way, it was a most unrealistic petition, given the length of his manuscript and Wang’s lack of standing or powerful personal backing in the party. On the other hand, his approach was not at all atypical. Often, a

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

member of the Kuomintang would take the occasion of the national congress to take a shot in the dark, hoping for the unlikely chance that his petition would be noticed by a key party leader. Wang's petition is also representative of the fact that, even as the party leaders continued their incessant plea for steadfast unity, and even as the party sought to quiet dissent, critics of the Kuomintang often adopted the language of the party to express harsh, albeit properly couched, criticism.

FREEDOMS PROMISED AND FREEDOMS CLAIMED

Harsh criticism came from outside the party ranks as well. The Kuomintang's extensive program of social reform frequently drew the public's ire, with one of the thorniest problems being the issue of religion. Party charters and draft constitutions affirmed freedom of belief as a basic right. At the same time, however, politicians across the political spectrum believed that "superstition" posed a grave threat to the strength of the nation and its citizens. The precise demarcation of the line between the two plagued the Kuomintang. Efforts to restrict practice and nationalize monastic property were met by angry protests from established Buddhists and leaders of new sects alike. In the crucible of the Nationalist campaigns against superstition, Buddhists forged a potent weapon in the petition. Their skilled deployment of the language of citizens' rights and government responsibility prompted the KMT to rethink the costs of attacking Chinese religion.

Since the beginnings of constitutionalism in the late Qing, drafters of national laws had scrupled to include freedom of religion among the rights guaranteed to Chinese citizens. The Nationalists did not diverge from this path. The platform of the KMT First National Congress (31 January 1924), for example, had promised that the party would "assure people have complete freedom and right of assembly, association, speech, press, residence and belief".¹³ But a second line of thought ran through the minds of many KMT members, particularly during the era of tutelary government. This stipulated that such freedoms were not "complete", but were granted "except in accordance with law".¹⁴

Thus a contradiction was generated. The party in power granted freedoms, but chose to curtail them as needed. The more abstract moral teachings of religion, combined with a proper sense of scientific progress, might contribute to the particularly Chinese essence that would form the core of the new nation. But the wrong kinds of religious practice would

13. *Zhongguo Guomindang dangzhang zhenggang ji*, in *Geming wenxian*, unfinished multi-volume series, 70 (Taipei, 1976), p. 384.

14. Such language appeared, for example, in the "5.5" Draft Constitution of 5 May 1936. Duan Xiaohu, *Jindai Zhongguo xianfa shi* (Shanghai, 1997), appendix.

not only complicate the KMT's job of governance, but actually threaten the nation's very existence. The Minister of Interior wrote in 1928, had tarnished more than 4,000 years of Chinese civilization: "In this era of constantly new culture and advanced science, we must reform these sorts of vulgar customs. If we do not, not only will it obstruct the knowledge of the people, but it really will arouse the laughter of other countries."¹⁵ Nationalist leaders also considered superstition an obstacle to their own leadership, and to the unfolding of the era of tutelary government. Party propaganda officers noted that "The premier [Sun] has said, 'without washing away the old filth, we cannot carry out the new rule' and also, 'if one wants to save China, one first has to revive China's ability to believe in itself.' This is the most practical reason why we want to destroy superstition."¹⁶

But the Nationalists found it difficult to draw a clean line between religion and superstition, because this was a distinction in many ways irrelevant to the main of religious practice in China. Though Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians certainly created and asserted canonical orthodoxy within their own teachings, the concept of "religion" as a discrete category did not appear in China until the late nineteenth century, as did the neologisms "science" and "superstition." Everyday lay practice was, and still is, functionalist in approach, centered around the concept of *ling*, or efficacy, which engendered a resolute syncretism. As local KMT party cadres and enterprising middle-school teachers set about dismantling temples and shrines that were deemed superstitious, however, clarifying the legitimacy of religious practices suddenly became less a matter of semantics than of sheer survival.

At the first signs of the antisuperstition campaign, religious leaders began petitioning individuals and institutions in the central party and government at a fast and furious rate. In their appeals, prominent Buddhist monks tacitly accepted the KMT regime's goal of combating superstition while striving to defend their own existence. "Right now," the educator and reformer Taixu wrote to the central government in 1929, "in this period when the Nationalist revolution has not yet succeeded, and all places are under tutelary rule, of course China's religion also follows the trend of revolution."¹⁷ Rather than accepting the methods of the KMT activists, however, he outlined his own ideas for the reform and renewal of Chinese Buddhism. The previous year, Taixu's colleagues and rivals Dixian and Yuanying had already petitioned Nanjing with their plans "to

15. Minister of Interior Xue Dubi to National Government, 20 October 1928, Academia Historica, Taipei, Taiwan [hereafter AH], National Government files, reel 259, pp. 1455–1459.

16. *Pochu mixin xuanchuan dagang* (Nanjing, 1929), KMT 436.24, p. 2.

17. Venerable Taixu, "Fosi guanli tiaoli zhi jianyi", in *idem* (ed.), *Haichaoyin wenku*, 34 parts in 26 vols (Taipei, 1975), vol. 6, pp. 80–91, 80.

put the monastic system in order and gradually erase superstition".¹⁸ The two acknowledged prevalent criticisms of the wastefulness of popular religious practices by proposing that a "superstition tax" be levied on the fees that clergy charged for performing rites for the dead, and by pledging to monitor monasteries more closely. In return for these changes, they demanded the right to form groups "with a pure and unadulterated [religious] purpose".¹⁹ Dixian and Yuanying noted that the Nationalists encouraged other types of regulated social organization – business associations, for example, or women's groups – as a means of ordering society and preparing citizens for representative rule. Buddhists, they held, should be permitted the same right of association. Not only would their particular reformist stance serve the party-state, but also they would pledge not to tolerate any (counter-revolutionary) political activity within their groups. Pointing out that local Buddhist societies had made cash donations to the new national treasury, Dixian coyly added, "we ask ourselves, this isn't completely without advantage to the party-state, is it?".²⁰

Other, less powerful, clergy also espoused the Nationalist cause to their own advantage. Keduan was a monk seeking government accreditation for his Buddhist academy in Yangzhou, Jiangsu province. In his 1927 petition to the education authorities he claimed that his "seminary for the citizen-monk" would allow "the Chinese *sangha* to realize the Three People's Principles and also promote Buddhism".²¹ He proposed to instruct his students as much in Sun Yat-sen's ideology, the KMT's charter and platform, and the founding principles of the Republic as in the Buddhist canon. In return, the central authorities praised Keduan's curriculum as containing nothing but "the promotion of science [...] and the tenets of pure, orthodox Buddhism". Therefore, the academy could receive protection, since "freedom of religion is [indeed] a principle under the law".²²

It is important to recognize the political context of such promises. In pledging to teach party ideology, Keduan was adopting the propaganda techniques the KMT had used during the Northern Expedition, and anticipated the push for "partified" education that Wang Mingding commented on several years later. When they claimed the "pure and

18. Executive Council on Education to National Government, 13 September 1927, AH National Government files, reel 214, pp. 1567–1572.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. Keduan, President of the Huayan Chinese Buddhist Academy, to the Executive Council on Education, National Government, 3 July 1927, Second Historical Archives, Nanjing, China [hereafter SHA], 5:2264.

22. Advisory Office [of the Executive Council on Education], "Report of the review of the Huayan Chinese Buddhist Academy's request for accreditation", n.d., SHA 5:2264.

unadulterated purpose” of their Buddhist group, Dixian and Yuanying alluded to the general KMT clampdown on popular organizations that had followed the communist purge, and more specifically to the party’s pursuit of new sects and secret societies, which had occasionally fostered anti-Nationalist sentiment and outright rebellion. Finally, in deploying the vocabulary of revolution and tutelage, Taixu not only acknowledged the Nationalist regime’s authority over religious practitioners, as over all citizens, but also argued for the active role of religion in creating the new Chinese nation.

To note the monks’ adept allusions to current political concerns, however, is not to argue that they simply toadied to the new government out of crass self-preservation. Many Buddhists, lay and clergy alike, had supported the revolution from its earliest days.²³ The most powerful argument against the portrayal of religious leaders as political sycophants, though, lies in the fact that they also skillfully employed Nationalist ideology to criticize the party’s own actions. Their greatest challenge came with the movement among party cadres and government leaders to seize temple lands. The physical battle took place in the towns and villages where the Nationalists asserted power – sometimes quite literally, with temple managers, monks, and enraged locals coming to blows with KMT cadres and enterprising reformers. The ideological battle, however, evolved through petitions and the press.

Buddhists saw the proposal of a young college professor and KMT member, Tai Shuangqiu, to the 1928 First National Conference on Education as the opening salvo in this battle. Pondering the problem of financing education during an era of serious fiscal deficit, Tai estimated that “the worth of temple property throughout the country must be 10 billion [silver dollars] at least”. “How is it not regrettable”, he lamented, “that such a big chunk of assets should have fallen into the hands of monks and nuns?”²⁴ He urged the government to confiscate all but a tiny portion of the nation’s temples, and the lands that supported them, and turn the proceeds over to education. Most of the clergy would be laicized, sent to “common peoples’ factories” to learn productive trades. Religious freedom may have been guaranteed, Tai argued, but it simply did not apply to this issue of property. No freedom could supersede the ruling ideology of a nation, and China’s present ideology, the Three Principles, called for the

23. Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), pp. 1–22.

24. Nanjing Special Municipality Bureau of Education, “Quan guo miao chan ying you guo jia li fa qing li chong zuo quan guo jiao yu ji jin an”, [proposal that temple property throughout the country should be organized according to national law to provide capital for education], Zhonghua minguo Daxue yuan (ed.), *Quan guo jiao yu hui yi baogao* (Nanjing, 1928) part 2, pp. 4–6; reprinted in Shen Yunlong (ed.), *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan xubian* no. 43 (Taipei, 1977).

equal distribution of land. In violating this ideal, he concluded, land-holding monasteries differed little from any other big landlord or powerful capitalist.²⁵

Tai's proposal ended up in the newspapers, and the story quickly found its way into the pages of *Haichaoyin*, the major Buddhist monthly. The then Minister of Interior's own ideas about abolishing all but a select few temples, the sort that would "concentrate the people's belief on the former sages and saints of old", also quickly made the rounds in the summer of 1928.²⁶ Besieged by the protest that resulted, government officials backed away from complete nationalization. They nonetheless passed regulations that gave political authorities majority or even complete control over the management of temple properties. The rules also subjected temples to confiscation if the monks violated their vows or "contravened party rule".²⁷ In response, Taixu and others took a two-pronged approach to fashioning the content of their petitions. One method was, once again, to affirm the KMT's antisuperstition stance. In a response to Tai that he submitted to the national government and published in the Buddhist press, Taixu admitted that over the centuries, the mixture of canonical Buddhism and local popular religion had caused people, some of them monks, to "create superstitions about spirits and ghosts bringing disaster or luck as a tool to fool the ignorant".²⁸ In their own appeals to the government, Dixian, Yuanying, and other monastic leaders sought to distinguish their great institutions from run-of-the-mill "illicit shrines" or local temples.²⁹ While distancing themselves from the bulk of everyday religious practice in China, the Buddhist leaders pledged to reform their own religion. To do so, however, the government had to allow them to control and manage their own property.

Thus the second line of argument was to assert full citizens' rights for Buddhists and other followers of true "religion". To begin, the Buddhists argued for their property rights by modifying the tenets of the monastic system to fit a modern vocabulary. In separately authored appeals, Taixu and his colleague Changxing both stated that, since the traditional principle held that the major monasteries and their branches were not owned by individuals but by the *sangha* as a whole, in legal terms each site

25. *Ibid.*

26. Minutes of the fourth internal meeting of the Ministry of the Interior, National Government, 7 April 1928, *Neizheng gongbao* 1:1 (May 1928), vol. 5, pp. 6–7.

27. "Simiao guanli tiaoli" [Rules for the Management of Temples], promulgated by the Ministry of Interior 25 January 1929, SHA 2:1039.

28. [Taixu], "Duiyu Tai Shuangqiu miaochan xingxue yundong de xiuzheng", *Haichaoyin wenku*, vol. 6, pp. 66–69, 67. See Venerable Yinshun, *Taixu fashi nianpu*, pp. 137–138 for attribution of this editorial to Taixu.

29. Jiangsu-Zhejiang Buddhist Federation to Executive Yuan 20 March 1929 and 14 May 1929; Dacan, abbot of Puyuan, Putuoshan, Zhejiang Province, to Executive Yuan, 5 June 1929; Buddhist Association of China to Executive Yuan, 6 June 1929, SHA 2:1039.

belonged to a “corporate owner”. It was neither public land nor individually owned. Therefore, the government should allow the clergy to exercise its property rights and afford its members survival under Sun’s Principle of Livelihood.³⁰ The monks argued that associations of Buddhists, now transformed from mere groupings of the faithful into corporate entities, did not differ from any other civic or financial association. Moreover, Taixu pledged that, left to manage themselves, monasteries would run their own programs of social services, including schools open to all. Thus, he aimed to place Buddhists and their property firmly inside an everyday social and civic framework.

Buddhist leaders also pointed out to the government that, according to the nondiscrimination principles found in the various draft constitutions and party platforms, monks and priests were to enjoy the same protections as ordinary citizens. When the Ministry of Interior attempted to pass the provision allowing local governments to seize temples based on the behavior of individual monks, for example, Dixian cried foul. In his protest, the monk implied that the government was not all that it seemed. “Now, when officials commit crimes”, he acidly remarked, “one doesn’t hear of his office being abolished, or his entire household punished”.³¹ Meanwhile, the Beiping Buddhist Popular Education Federation forwarded a document in which they employed an even harsher analogy:

How is this different from the way the English have treated the Indians during the past twenty or thirty years, or the Japanese the Koreans? How is it different from the way the Americans treated black slaves for more than a century? In the same fashion, descendants of the Yellow Emperor are being treated as if they were conquered foreigners. It is truly reprehensible.³²

Even monks who possessed fewer political connections than the likes of Taixu readily employed nationalism, and Nationalism, in their defense. A collection of more conservative Jiangsu abbots wrote to complain, “monks are citizens of the Republic of China as well. They too live under the flag with the blue sky and white sun. Why then this unfair discrimination?”³³

By late 1929, the Nanjing government backed off its more radical plans. KMT propaganda units continued to agitate against superstition, but the discord and fighting temple seizures had caused led them to use greater caution. Though this local chaos was the primary factor behind the center’s

30. Taixu, “Duiyu Tai Shuangqiu”, pp. 67–68. Changxing, “Simiao guanli tiaoli yu zongjiao weiyuanhui”, *Haochaoyin wenku*, vol. 6, pp. 76–79, 78.

31. Jiangsu-Zhejiang Buddhist Federation to Executive Yuan, 20 March 1929.

32. Juexian, Chairman of the Beiping China Buddhist Popular Education Federation, *et al.* to National Government Chairman Jiang, 17 April 1929, AH National Government files reel 323, p. 1869.

33. Yinbing, Abbot of Jiangtian Monastery, Jinshan, Zhenjiang, *et al.* to Executive Yuan Chairman Tan, 2 May 1929, SHA 2:1039.

reining in of widespread temple seizures, the Buddhist protests played no small role. The success of such petitions shows in the revised regulations governing temple property. By New Year's Day, 1930, the Ministry of Interior had drawn up new rules that freed temples from the most overt government control, although they still subjected them to a system of registration, approval and scrutiny.³⁴ Meanwhile, Taixu and his colleagues, driven by government challenges, finally overcame internal dissension and formed the Buddhist Association of China, the first enduring national Buddhist organization.³⁵ Its members' preferred weapon remained the petition.

That habit was learned during the early years of the Nanjing regime, when administrative processes were disorganized and court systems erratic. Even as these systems smoothed out during the 1930s, Buddhists continued to employ the petition to try to leapfrog the bureaucratic mire. Sometimes the Buddhist Association used petitions to bring the central government's attention to crimes of seizure and discrimination happening far from the capital, as when it complained that local efforts to develop tourism at the prominent pilgrimage site of Emeishan, in Sichuan province, were displacing and dispossessing monks.³⁶ Other times, the issue lay closer to home, and petitions proved useful to individual monks when the decisions made by local authorities weren't going the temple's way. For example, the monk Miaokong of the Baiyi Priory in Nanjing appealed to the central party and government for help in defending his temple property from "local bullies" using it to house a city fire brigade.³⁷ Frustrated by delays on the municipal level, Miaokong sent a deluge of petitions to an incredible array of party and government institutions: first to the Ministry of Interior, then to the Military Affairs Commission, finally culminating in a printed appeal addressed to Chiang Kai-shek, the KMT Central Committee, the national government and more than fifteen other ministries and offices.³⁸ He also got the Buddhist Association of China to write to central government on his behalf.³⁹

By this time – 1937 – the legal apparatus around the capital was fairly well-established. Local courts were in operation, and the central

34. "Jiandu simiao tiaoli" [Regulations for the Oversight of Temples] promulgated by the National Government 7 December 1929, in Lifa yuan bianyi chu (ed.), *Zhonghuo minguo fagui huibian* (Shanghai, 1934), 13 vols, vol. 4, pp. 814–815.

35. Chinese Buddhist Association to Ministry of Interior, 12 July 1937, AH 129:1802.

36. Miaokong to Nanjing Municipal Government, 25 July 1936; Nanjing Federation of District Fire Brigades to Nanjing Municipal Government, 20 October 1936; Miaokong to Nanjing Municipal Government, July 1937, Nanjing Municipal Archives [hereafter NMA] 1–1:1313.

37. Miaokong to Military Affairs Commission, 15 June 1937; Miaokong to KMT Central Committee *et al.*, 9 June 1937, NMA 1–1:1313.

38. Taixu *et al.*, Directors of Buddhist Association of China to Nanjing Municipal Government and Ministry of Interior, 24 March 1937, NMA 1–1:1313.

39. *Ibid.*

government had even set up an administrative court designed to take in complaints against ministerial decisions. The Nationalists did a much poorer job of advertising these developments, however, than they earlier had done for their ideology and for their major political institutions and leaders. Furthermore, they provided little assurance that such a framework stood free of corruption, nor did they vouch the same for local governments. Miaokong may have felt safer appealing directly to the top. But he was also following a well-established pattern of petitioning the highest KMT authorities to protest the loss of property rights. The phrases the Buddhist Association leaders used on his behalf – “please follow the law and investigate this matter”, they asked the Ministry of Interior, “so as to protect religion, and to value property rights”⁴⁰ – were ones they had rolled out on behalf of many dozens of other temples around the country since 1929.

The success of their appeals was not assured, but central government officials could not fail to notice that the Buddhists would not shrink from asserting their constitutional rights. Once threatened with virtual extinction, now the Buddhists claimed a national organization that had come up with a proven method of keeping their concerns in the regime’s sight. They possessed little outright political power. The fact remains, however, that while City God temples, shrines to the God of Wealth, and other sites of Chinese popular religion continued to come under attack in the 1930s, mostly with little defense on any but the local level, problems at Buddhist temples like Miaokong’s got national attention. Sometimes they ended up resolved in the clergy’s favor to boot. In the petition, Buddhists found a new way of making their grievances public, often circulating the texts to government newspapers like the *Central Daily News*, and private ones such as Shanghai’s *Shen bao* and Tianjin’s *Dagong bao*, as well as publishing them in their own periodicals. They also found a way of answering Nationalist charges about the excess and unseemliness of religious practice by first defending their own patriotic and reformist credentials, and then demanding that the KMT live up to its own promises and obligations. Though Taixu and his colleagues stood among the most skillful at wielding this two-pronged weapon, they were not alone among the targets of the antisuperstition campaigns. Some of the most surprising uses of Nationalist ideology against the regime came from persons much weaker than Buddhist monks.

“IMPOVERISHED LITTLE PEOPLE, CRIPPLED AND FRAIL”

The Nationalists’ disputes with fortune-tellers, and other fixtures of popular religious culture, also illuminate the increased expectations of

40. *Ibid.*

government from its citizens during the Nanjing decade. Threatened by KMT activism, blind soothsayers mobilized in protest. In defense of their “traditional” employment, however, they employed up-to-date methods, forming a professional association, and printing and circulating their pleas to the government. In citing Nationalist principles, the fortune-tellers not only strove to hold the KMT to its economic promises, but also hoped to shame the central authorities into restraining activist local governments. Even a group ostensibly on the outermost margins of economic and political power, then, saw the opportunities afforded by the tool of the petition.

Like the Buddhists and their temples, fortune-tellers formed a primary target of the antisuperstition campaigns. Politicians deemed the public’s reliance on diviners and popular healers unseemly behavior for the citizens of a modern, scientific nation. In addition, they claimed that the money people spent on hiring such charlatans constituted a drain on the national economy that could only further contribute to China’s impoverishment. Just as other “evil habits”, such as prostitution and opium, generated their own economic circles, superstition supported a world of mediums and geomancers, makers of spirit money and firecrackers, and monks and priests who made a living from funerary rites. The Nationalists recognized that this economy had to be broken if habits were ever to be improved.

Thus, not long after Chiang Kai-shek declared the new capital at Nanjing, the city’s mayor, Liu Jiwen, declared all fortune-tellers, whether they relied on hexagrams, astrology, physiognomy, or other methods to make their prognostications, as “the worst blot on a revolutionary capital”. He ordered them all to find new occupations by 1 September 1928. Soon the Ministry of Interior issued a nationwide seven-point plan banning many kinds of religious paraprofessionals. Included were people who predicted the future according to the *Yijing* or divination sticks, or who took guidance from the stars or the client’s physiognomy. Spirit mediums and geomancers were also prohibited from conducting business. The Ministry called on local public security bureaus to clean the nation’s streets of such people within three months.⁴¹

Police were also to spearhead a propaganda campaign, reminding people that “the future and fortune of humankind rested entirely on their own efforts”.⁴² An example of the sort of material they were supposed to use can be found in a KMT “Song for Destroying Superstition”, published in 1930. The chant uses rationalism to attack each superstitious practice and

41. “Feichu bushi xingxiang wuxi kanyu banfa” [Method for abolishing diviners, physiognomers, mediums and geomancers], promulgated 22 September 1928, *Fagui huibian*, vol. 4, pp. 794–795.

42. *Ibid.*

question the authority of each type of diviner. For instance, it mocks the practice of reading facial features to tell a person's fortune:

The cause of being poor
 Rests with one's own hard work
 Dying young or old
 Depends on public health
 The job you choose to do
 Relies on your own brains
 All these kinds of things
 Have what to do with a face?⁴³

A 1931 reading primer for adults similarly mocks belief in predestination:

Reckoning your stems and branches, assessing what is your fate [...] This sort of enterprise is really most crude. Fortune must be sought after, and advantage should be struggled for. That is "fate", that is "luck".⁴⁴

Encouraged by rhymes such as these, then, the diviners' customers were to learn faith in individual human will. Until that mental transformation took place, however, local government officials were required to go after supply as well as demand.

Overall, the program posed a tall order for city and county authorities. Those diviners who had not found new work on their own after three months were to be steered into local factories, or, if factories did not exist, "work appropriate to their responsibilities". Relief houses were to absorb the "aged and crippled" who could not find other jobs.⁴⁵ Though the Nationalists formed ambitious plans to expand the country's relief system, however, financial limitations and a growing refugee problem left few resources to provide for out-of-work fortune-tellers.

The Nationalists then found themselves facing another obstacle from a less expected quarter: the diviners themselves. KMT officials, particularly those in the party's Department of Propaganda, spoke of mediums, fortune-tellers and geomancers much as they did of Buddhist and Daoist clergy – as con artists who perpetrated ignorance. Yet despite claiming that such people possessed "a broad influence, enough to ruin families and destroy the country",⁴⁶ and "constituted the greatest obstacle to social evolution",⁴⁷ officials never regarded them as an organized social force. Though the collective harm they did was alleged to be great, in the

43. *Pochu mixin ge* (Hangzhou, 1930), KMT 436:173, p. 8.

44. Zhang Xiaoming (ed.), *Minzhong shizi keben* [People's literacy primer] (Shanghai, 1931), part 1, p. 23.

45. "Feichu bushi".

46. "Qudi mixin", *Nanjing shehui tekan*, 3 (1932), pp. 204–206, 204.

47. *Pochu mixin xuanchuan dagang*, pp. 10–11.

governmental mind diviners and *fengshui* experts were detached individuals on the margins of society. They possessed no learning, no skills, and no support other than the public's mistaken belief in their abilities. Who could be a more powerless figure than a blind fortune-teller?

Party leaders may have been surprised then, as they began to receive a steady stream of protests against the ban on diviners. In one case, a collection of Shanghai diviners, geomancers, and physiognomists recruited prominent businessman, Buddhist, and Chiang Kai-shek ally, Wang Yiting, into their corner. Wang used his position as chairman of the Shanghai Federation of Charitable Organizations to lobby the government against increasing the already staggering number of unemployed in the city and the country as a whole.⁴⁸ Diviner, Zhang Zhengming, and forty-five colleagues had begged for his help, noting that members of their profession were either physically handicapped, of great age, or extremely poor. They even acknowledged the distastefulness of their profession, pleading that "although our lives are insect-like, we have nothing else to rely on".⁴⁹

Even with this admission, however, the Shanghai diviners also pursued a rhetorical strategy similar to that which Buddhist leaders had used: heap greater blame on a third party. The "other" in this case was the spirit medium. The diviners argued that their form of fatalism was in fact safer for social harmony than the practice of spirit-channeling, which bore connections to the apocalyptic sects that had caused so many problems for Chinese governments in the past century. "We show people how to encourage good luck and avoid bad", they stated,

Isn't this really "aiding the masses"? If you wish for the signs of good fortune, you must not forget good acts; if you want to avoid bad luck, you oughtn't to create evil. You must wait for the cause, and the effect will follow; if there is no cause, there will be no effect. This is not like the way spirit mediums stir up the masses.⁵⁰

Finally, the diviners referred to the Three Principles of the People. They begged the government to show them mercy so as to "settle peoples' livelihoods".⁵¹ Despite such arguments, and despite Wang Yiting's patronage, the diviners' pleas fell on deaf ears. The Ministry of Interior went ahead with its plans to enact the ban.⁵² But this petition was soon followed by others, and the ban became harder and harder to carry out.

48. Wang Zhen [Wang Yiting], Chairman, Shanghai Federation of Charitable Organizations, to National Government, 25 October 1928; AH National Government files reel 324, pp. 2409–2412.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 2409.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Zhang Zhengming *et al.* to National Government, 25 October 1928, AH National Government files reel 324, pp. 2413–2419, 2419.

52. Ministry of Interior to Office of Civil Service, National Government, 10 November 1928; AH National Government files reel 324, pp. 2427–2428.

The next month, an even more surprising protest arrived in central government offices. It came in the form of an appeal printed and submitted by a group calling itself the “Shanghai Association of Blind Gentlemen”. The members of the group did not identify themselves except as “impoverished little people, crippled and frail”.⁵³ Yet their approach showed a certain amount of political sophistication. Not only was their petition typeset and printed, rather than the standard handwritten communication, it was accompanied by an appeal they called, in the manner of Nationalist Party congresses, a “proclamation” (*xuanyan*). Furthermore, by writing under the name of something called a “public association” (*gonghui*), a term usually used for commercial groups, the blind diviners rhetorically linked themselves to all the other professional associations and unions in the city. Indeed, the rhetorical connection soon became a real one. One month later the Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce itself would petition the center on the diviners’ behalf.⁵⁴

Beyond this stroke of genius in naming, the language of the petition and proclamation reveals a fairly thorough absorption of the ideology of the Nationalist Party and the concept of tutelary government, mixed as it was with leftover conventions of the imperial state. Lacing the language of humble memorials to the Emperor with the vocabulary of modern politics, the diviners wrote, “on bended knee we beg the sages of the party-state, and the good people of society, to permit some help for our benighted and dark lives”.⁵⁵ Born into poverty (for the blind children of the rich, they noted, need not learn to provide for themselves), they had chosen their field through necessity, and gained expertise in it only through lengthy study. The party-state had an obligation to recognize such efforts, and provide for an alternative.

We humbly note that the Three Principles of the People emphasizes the people’s livelihood above all. Furthermore, party ideology has specified that poor people must be the first to be helped. Blind fortune-tellers are both poor and crippled – among the impoverished they have the fewest opportunities. Only this beggar-like enterprise gives them a chance to earn a little rice. The day that they do not have this chance is the day they go hungry.⁵⁶

The diviners gently pointed out that the new regime hardly had sufficient resources to provide for this new group of indigents, as was its obligation. “Now is only the beginning of the construction of the party-state”, they pointed out, and “the execution of relief for the crippled is proceeding

53. Shanghai Association of Blind Gentlemen to Executive Yuan, December 1928, SHA 2:1032.

54. Shanghai Special Municipality General Chamber of Commerce to Executive Yuan, 8 January 1928, SHA 2:1032.

55. Shanghai Association of Blind Gentlemen.

56. *Ibid.*

none too speedily”.⁵⁷ Under such circumstances, how could the Nationalists ask them to give up their only livelihood? Finally, though, the diviners were careful to combine any oblique criticism with an affirmation of the regime’s goals. Ultimately they requested that “the government on the one hand use the power of education to destroy superstition, and on the other plan a way for the country’s millions of blind masters to survive. That way we may reap the benefits of education, as well as help it to advance”.⁵⁸

In one sense the message was that the diviners were pitiful creatures who needed the government’s help. This image was driven home by the line drawing that decorated the proclamation, showing a fortune-teller in long gown and cap, a lute on his back, walking stick in one hand and cymbal in the other, but most strikingly with a face composed of sunken cheeks and blank eyes. The contrast with the more literary, better-connected type of geomancer, for example, was notable. Even before the establishment of the Nanjing regime, published *fengshui* experts, as members of the literate elite, had already recognized a threat from government officials and cultural reformers. Rather than embrace the cause of combating superstition, however, geomancers tended to defend themselves as proud heirs to the best of Chinese culture. In a 1925 preface to *fengshui* text, *The Shen School of the Mystic Void*, for example, Gu Shibai called geomancers “China’s national essence” and demanded that their long history be continued unbroken.⁵⁹ The blind diviners, by contrast, threw themselves at the government’s feet. But they also made a second message clear: the proclamation of a new regime, with new ideals of universal education and social justice, generated an expectation among citizens that those promises would be fulfilled.

The Shanghai blind fortune-tellers’ adept employment of Nationalist ideology, mixed in with the remnants of classical education and imperial etiquette, leads one to wonder just how marginalized they were. Certainly the various types of professionals lumped under the Nationalist ban did not constitute a single unified social group, however KMT officials may have considered them. Richard Smith’s study of divination during the Qing, for example, shows that fortune-tellers might be imperial degree holders who provided private consultations for wealthy families, or they could be men (more rarely women) trained specifically for their profession, and who wandered cities and towns or set up in street stalls.⁶⁰ Some diviners – the ones who performed character analysis (*chaizi*), for

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. Gu Shibai, preface to Shen Zhureng, *Shenshi xuankong xue*, in *idem*, *Zengguang Shenshi xuankong xue*, Jiang Zhiyi and Wang Zexian (eds) (Suzhou, 1933; repr. Taipei, 1977), pt 1, p. 16.

60. Richard J. Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder, CO, 1991), pp. 205–206.

example – also provided general letter-writing services for the public. The blind and illiterate fortune-tellers, on the other hand, learned their methods by rote memorization.

It was the itinerants and the publicly visible street merchants who concerned Nationalist officials. Though many of these were poor and some illiterate, however, they did not necessarily lack social ties, as the KMT had implied. As part of its plan to enforce the ban on diviners, the Nanjing Municipal Bureau of Social Affairs happened to perform a survey that offers a rare glimpse of the social makeup of urban fortune-tellers. Among blind and sighted diviners, the vast majority were not refugees from elsewhere, but counted themselves as natives of Nanjing and nearby counties.⁶¹ The proportion of natives among fortune-tellers in fact exceeded that among Nanjing residents as a whole.⁶² Neither did fortune-tellers live a solitary existence. The vast majority of both blind and sighted fortune-tellers in Nanjing had families, supporting households of an average of four and five persons, respectively.⁶³ The image of stable households is consistent with portraits of diviners painted by outside observers, such as the nineteenth-century missionary John Nevius, who described blind fortune-tellers as fixtures in their neighborhoods, taking advantage of their itinerant occupation to deliver gossip as well as prognostications to local households.⁶⁴

Questions remain, however, about the extent of formal social organization among diviners and geomancers. In other words, was the “Shanghai Association of Blind Gentlemen” formed solely to respond to the Nationalist threat, or did it reflect a pre-existing professional organization? Certainly, traditional business confederations existed among the less socially and politically savory occupations. Beggars, for example, were known to divide up many Chinese cities into territories governed by specific groups.⁶⁵ Whether or not fortune-tellers ever made similar territorial arrangements, the groups that made their case to the central government were of a rather different flavor than beggar rings. The latter were more commonly referred to, by themselves and others, as “gangs” (*bang*) – the kind of “second-tier social group”, in Chi Zihua’s phrase, that despite its visibility in the social landscape, did not fit into the realm of legitimated organizations (*tuanti*) that could demand official government

61. *Nanjing shehui tekan*, 3 (1932), unpaginated chart following p. 204.

62. Ye Chucang and Liu Yizheng (eds), *Shoudu zhi* (Nanjing, 1935; repr. Nanjing, 1985), p. 503.

63. *Nanjing shehui tekan*, 3 (1932), unpaginated chart following p. 204.

64. John Nevius, *China and the Chinese* (New York, 1869), cited in Richard J. Smith, *Fortunetellers*, pp. 205–206.

65. Hanchao Lu, “Becoming Urban: Mendicancy and Vagrants in Modern Shanghai”, *Journal of Social History*, 33 (1999), pp. 7–37, 21–25.

attention.⁶⁶ By calling their groups “associations” or “societies”, the fortune-tellers clearly sought to move up to that more exalted plane. In that sense whether or not such groups existed beyond the leaders who spoke for them was immaterial: the government took notice anyhow. The soothsayers aimed for broad publicity as well. The Shanghai blind diviners, by printing up a proclamation, demonstrated that they knew well the 1928 methods for bringing grievances before the literate public of a large city.

Two years after the passage of the ban on diviners and mediums, long after the three-month deadline had come and gone, even fervent party activists lamented the situation. “We originally thought”, admitted cadres in the Department of Propaganda,

[...] that it would not be difficult to use political force to eradicate this kind of pest quickly. But it turned out the infection had gone very deep. [Such practices] had gradually turned into a profession. If we wiped it all out at once, with great severity, we could not avoid adding to social strife.⁶⁷

Though the Department claimed to be moving forward with a gradualist program of reform in the ban’s stead, in truth the regime had been frightened away by the specter of unrest. Blind fortune-tellers turned out to have social networks, and many of them turned out to have absorbed the regime’s lessons on party ideology. By combining arguments based in party ideology with the trappings of social organizations, the seemingly dispossessed diviners forced the government to see them in a new light. In doing so, they rewrote the Nationalist conception of the economic and political roles of superstitious ritual, and reminded KMT politicians that their promises could come back to haunt them.

THE FRUITS OF NATIONALISM

In the twenty-five years since the publication of *The Abortive Revolution*, Lloyd Eastman’s influential assessment of the Nanjing decade of Nationalist rule, the prevailing opinion on KMT politics and government has been that it failed due to extreme factionalism within the party, an inability to combat corruption, and ultimately a failure to capture the public’s faith. The very shapelessness of Sun Yat-sen’s writings, combined with the propensity of KMT leaders to use them mainly as weapons in the battle for inheriting his personal authority, has led many historians to de-emphasize the Nationalist ideological program. Eastman admitted that “although ideology held little meaning for most of China’s political actors,

66. Chi Zihua, *Zhongguo jindai liumin* (Hangzhou, 1996), p. 115. Outside the realm of the petitions and formal channels, of course, *bang* of all sorts did demand government attention by more forcible means.

67. *Pochu mixin xuanchuan dagang*, p. 10.

they by no means ignored it". But he judged that in the end "these ideological polemics and doctrinal explications were little more than froth covering the struggle for office and political power".⁶⁸ In recent years, historians have, however, greatly added to our understanding of the workings of some of the political institutions of the time, reminding us, for instance, that the KMT party and the KMT government were not interchangeable entities with identical concerns. Yet these studies have largely confined themselves to the workings of one locality (most frequently Shanghai) or one institution.⁶⁹ Now that scholars such as John Fitzgerald have begun to examine the broader roles of Nationalist propaganda and political activism during the party's years of exile from national power,⁷⁰ there is ample room to investigate further how they might have functioned after the party asserted rule over the nation as a whole.

Petitions such as Wang Mingding's, and the Shanghai blind fortune-tellers', open up new interpretations of the ways citizens conceived of their relationship to the government in the 1920s and 1930s. Even in 1934, when Chiang Kai-shek was completing his assertion of power over his party and government rivals, and stirring up fierce debates about the role of dictatorship in the new China, low-ranking KMT members such as Wang continued to see an opportunity in a party congress. Wang viewed the congress not simply as a chance for him to rubber-stamp the preformed decisions of the central leadership, but as a time to make his contribution to the building of the Chinese nation. Though he saw failure and missed opportunities in the education system as it had evolved under the Nationalists, he did not finger party ideals as the culprit, but rather the failure to realize them. His appeal, "Where is the application of the party's spirit in the promotion of education?" does not seem mere "froth" hiding an ambition to maneuver within the realms of party power – the fate of his petition speaks to his meager chances in that regard – but rather shows that, though KMT leaders may have acquired a patina of cynicism about ideology, the rank and file could still take it very seriously.

Similarly, the Buddhists and the diviners resorted to petitions to save their own skins, but the way in which they used them demonstrates that

68. Lloyd E. Eastman, *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937* (Cambridge, MA, 1974, 1990), p. 306.

69. For an assessment of the state of the field, see Julia C. Strauss, "The Evolution of Republican Government", in Frederic Wakeman, Jr and Richard Louis Edmonds (eds), *Reappraising Republican China* (Oxford [etc.], 2000), pp. 75–97. Notable local studies include Christian Henriot, *Shanghai 1927–1937: Municipal Power, Locality And Modernization*, trans. Noel Castelino (Berkeley, CA, 1993) and Frederic Wakeman, Jr, *Policing Shanghai, 1927–1937* (Berkeley, CA, 1995). A third model is the diplomatic history exemplified by William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford, CA, 1984).

70. John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA, 1996).

they had received the full complement of Nationalist propaganda, and had absorbed it well enough to turn it against its authors. Accepting the KMT's antisuperstition program, perhaps sincerely in the case of reformist monks like Taixu, and with resignation in the case of the Shanghai fortune-tellers, the petitioners refused to accede to the deprivation of their rights in its name. Tutelage, they pointed out, carried both power and obligation. They allowed that in the interests of building a strong nation the party and government might need to reform Chinese culture and society. But, according to the principles of Sun Yat-sen, they also had to provide for every citizen of that nation. The petitions written by religious professionals and paraprofessionals may show some lingering characteristics of the imperial memorial, most obviously in the language used by the blind fortune-tellers. They are also filled, however, with the vocabulary of nationalism and revolution, and the technique of political savvy.

The very existence of these petitions in such great numbers points to a weakness of political institutions, or perhaps more accurately, to the public's distrust of them and dissatisfaction with the way they worked. The Buddhist Association of China and its branch members preferred to plead cases of temple seizures directly to the top as well as through the courts and local administrations. The length and passion of Wang Mingding's party congress submission hints that he may have found only frustration in his attempts to instill change in his home county. Yet the petitions also bespeak a wish to become part of the Chinese revolution. The staple of the imperial meritocracy had been that learned men might present to the Emperor their humble opinions on the state of the country. In some ways these petitions carry a hint of that tradition. But their authors composed and presented them based on the very new idea that the government not only ruled society, it represented it, and took its authority not from Heaven but from China's citizens. It turned out that the Nationalists imparted these ideas very well, so much so that even the most disenfranchised individuals could complicate the Kuomintang vision of a tutelary regime.