

Comparing the New Life Movement to the Cultural Revolution

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MIKE PITSTICK, NOV 14 2013

In the 20th century, China experienced two major attempts by the national government to change the cultural landscape of the nation. General Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement and Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (known officially as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution) both attempted to unite the Chinese people under the banner of one, centralized ideology. The New Life Movement (1934-?) was fairly limited in scope, as was the power of Chiang's government. On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) lasted for roughly a decade and had far reaching negative consequences for the Chinese people and the leaders who brought forth the revolution. Both movements were attempts by entrenched leadership to fight off emerging ideological challenges to the status quo in China at the time. Sharing similar qualities, both movements failed to reach their established goals, instead revealing inherent truths about the Chinese nation and her people.

Under General Chiang Kai-shek, China was still bitterly divided after years of competitive warlord rule following an unsuccessful Republican revolution which had overthrown the Imperial government of China, which itself had been in place for nearly two millennia. As a contemporary of Republican China writing in 1943, Paul Linebarger argues, "the present governments of China are accordingly the successors of a wide variety of decaying imperial administration, experimental modernism and outright confusion." [1] In addition, Chiang's ruling Nationalist party, the Guomindang (GMD), was also divided, between the far-right, which Chiang largely identified with, and the more liberal leftists. Chiang was in the midst of two battles, the fight to unify China under GMD rule and the fight to unify the GMD under Chiang's rule. The first fight was fought largely against residual warlords, who maintained control over some areas of China, and against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which, at the time of the New Life Movement, had been significantly weakened by Chiang's efforts at purging them. The New Life Movement arose when Chiang and the GMD arguably had the greatest control over the Chinese national government, when the CCP was weakest. The second fight, between the competing ideologies of the GMD, was fought throughout the so-titled "Nanjing Decade" of GMD rule (1928-1937) preceding the Civil War. The New Life Movement served, in part, as a tool for Chiang and his far-right, fascist allies in the fight against the dissenting leftist liberals he came to abhor.

That is not to say, however, that the New Life Movement was strictly political. In fact, historians dispute the origins of the New Life Movement. The origins of the movement cannot be analyzed without first analyzing the movement itself and what it consisted of. Chiang himself describes the movement as follows:

"The New Life Movement aims at the promotion of a regular life guided by the four virtues, namely, li [ritual/decorum], yi [rightness or duty], lian [integrity or honesty], and chi [sense of shame]. Those virtues must be applied to ordinary life in the matter of food, clothing, shelter, and action. The four virtues are the essential principles for the promotion of morality. They form the major rules for dealing with men and human affairs, for cultivating oneself, and for adjustment to one's surroundings. Whoever violates these rules is bound to fail, and a nation that neglects them will not survive." [2]

In short, the New Life Movement sought to regulate every aspect of daily life, from greeting one's neighbors to spirituality. Unlike western peoples, who would automatically be more skeptical of such rules placed on behavior, the Chinese were used to such stringent moral codes. Confucianism, one such stringent ideology, had been the

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dominant philosophy in China for hundreds of years prior to the deposition of Imperial rule.

Similar to Mosaic Law, Confucianism came equipped with numerous rules for behavior, including a particular focus on hierarchy. While the rules were not nearly as specific as those of the New Life Movement, Confucianism ingrained in the Chinese people a particular tendency toward orthodoxy. An article on Confucianism explains,

“Confucius stated that the ideal person was one of good moral character. The ideal person was also truly reverent in worship and sincerely respected his father and his ruler. He was expected to think for himself, guided by definite rules of conduct. As Confucius said, he was expected to take ‘as much trouble to discover what was right as lesser men take to discover what will pay’.”[3]

The regard for filial piety and veneration of elders especially fueled the behavior of most Chinese, always acting with a special concern for what others would potentially think of their actions. The importance of the family in Confucianism necessitated that each individual must consider not only the impact of one’s behavior on oneself but also the impact of one’s behavior on one’s family. Inappropriate individual behavior, whether purposeful or not, negatively impacted society’s view of one’s entire lineage. The rigor of Confucianism explains why the Chinese people were not fazed by the strict requirements of the New Life Movement.

Confucianism’s influence on the New Life Movement is obvious. The “four virtues” (ritual, duty, honesty, and shame) are pulled from traditional Confucian thought. Paul Linebarger agrees, “it’s [the New Life Movement’s] principles consist of a simple restatement of the cardinal Confucian personal virtues, interpreted to suit modern conditions.”[4] The New Life Movement recognized the authority of Confucianism, and, more broadly, the authority of the past and of elders, just as any doctrine must in order to be successful in China. Yet, to accomplish Chiang’s goal of unifying the Chinese people under *his* fascist ideology (as opposed to pure Confucianism), he had to modernize the virtues. The result is, as R. Keith Schoppa puts it, “sloganized Confucianism,”[5] a sort of ideology based in an easy-to-follow set of principles but backed up by numerous (95, to be exact), specific rules.

While Confucianism was the largest influence on the New Life Movement, Christianity also played an important role in the ideology. Chiang was a sort of pseudo-Christian himself, having promised his mother-in-law that “he would study Christianity, read the Bible with an open mind, and pray sincerely for divine guidance to a right decision.”[6] General Chiang Kai-shek was eventually baptized a Christian on October 23, 1930.[7] Elmer Clark, in writing of Chiang’s conversion to Christianity, argues that the New Life Movement was, in fact, predominantly Christian. He writes,

“The most significant sequel to the Generalissimo’s adoption of Christianity for himself has been the inauguration of the New Life Movement for his country—an ambitious moral and ethical enterprise which proposed nothing less than a Chinese renaissance, a complete reformation of the habits, customs, and manners of one fourth of the whole human race, to bring them more in line with the accepted morals of Christian civilization. According to Mr. [Hollington K.] Tong’s biography, written in 1937, Chiang believed then—and perhaps still believes—that the future would find his chief claim to the gratitude of his people not in his military achievements but in this movement.”[8]

Clark takes a very Christian view of Chiang and his wife, and, since the publishing of his book in 1943, most historians have taken a differing view. Indeed, Christianity had an impact on the New Life Movement, but not so much as Confucianism. More telling is that Clark did not recognize the values as Confucian but rather as Christian, perhaps indicating a lack of knowledge on the predominant Chinese philosophy, but certainly indicating similarities between the general moralities of the two. The rules, such as “do not gamble or visit prostitutes,” “be polite and courteous to women and children,” and “do not get drunk,”[9] are common between the two. While the New Life Movement goes further than both, imposing rules such as “comb your hair” and “get vaccinated,” it does indicate a seeming bond between Christianity and Confucianism, a bond which also exists in Chiang himself, as a native of China who grew up in a Confucian society but converted to Christianity.

The New Life Movement’s compatibility with both Christianity and Confucianism is certainly not coincidental (Linebarger also writes, “it has presumably been influenced by Protestant Christianity.”[10]), but it is also not an

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indication of an attempt by Chiang to convert China to Christianity. Chiang was far too pragmatic of a man to think that a mass conversion in such a traditional society would be possible, and he was certainly too politically savvy to attempt such a move regardless. Clark's reaction, however, is what Chiang intended. Both Chiang and his American-educated wife, May-Ling Soong (often referred to simply as "Madame Chiang") knew that the United States would be more likely to rally around a Christian nation, as opposed to one seen as pagan. Clark, then, is a representation of what Chiang hoped to accomplish—creating Chinese sympathizers through feelings of Christian brotherhood—and, because Christianity and Confucianism are so compatible, the Chinese people were "Christianized" without even realizing it.

The greatest immediate goal of the New Life Movement, however, was not to illicit western support or to instill morality in the Chinese people, but to provide a clear ideological alternative to Communism. Linebarger writes, "a state in the full sense would require a type of organization so clear in its ideology that people would personify it willingly, would accord it existence whether leaders and governments fell or not, and would be loyal to it and to those who claimed to wield its power." [11] What he identifies here is the role that Confucianism had played in China for the past millennia, the role that Christianity played in most of Europe and the Americas, and the role that democratic values play today in the west. All of these are identifiable as institutions of sorts, the background from which all people of a nation operate. The New Life Movement was Chiang's attempt to modify (while still preserving) the national ideology, largely to prevent Communism from reemerging. Emily Hahn writes, "...the New Life Movement was originally inaugurated to stimulate the people in formerly occupied Red districts." [12] Chiang's "sloganized Confucianism" was simply Confucianism remolded as a populist philosophy to combat the inherently populist Communist ideology. Schoppa writes, "Chiang apparently hoped that New Life's ideological appeal to a resuscitated Confucianism might prove a potent alternative to Communism." [13] Interestingly enough, the New Life Movement would not see the great success Chiang hoped for.

Historians further removed from the New Life Movement have taken particular interest in the role of Madame Chiang in the development and implementation of the Movement. At the very base level, Madame Chiang influenced New Life in that it was a partially Christian movement. She was largely, if not entirely, responsible for her husband's conversion to Christianity. Clark speaks of the Movement as "conceived by Generalissimo and Madame Chiang," [14] and others mention her speeches at home and abroad in support of New Life (Hahn writes, "Madame Chiang always stresses..." [15]), but none go so far as Sterling Seagrave, who also takes a resoundingly negative view of General Chiang, Madame Chiang, and the Soong (Madame Chiang's) family. He writes, "May-ling [Madame Chiang] sat down with the missionaries to work out the details of China's 'new deal.' She called it the 'New Life Movement'... May-ling proclaimed, 'Except a man be born again he cannot see New Life.'" [16] Seagrave argues that not only did Madame Chiang participate in the formation of the New Life Movement, but that she was entirely responsible for its content. Seagrave continues, "the New Life Movement was the popular manifestation of Chiang's fascism—a toy for his wife and the missionaries—and it was comic enough not to be taken seriously by foreigners in general." [17] Seagrave paints a picture of Madame Chiang using China as her own personal sandbox to do with what she likes, a darker view of her as leading figure than many of the earlier portrayals. She is the puppeteer, unleashed by Chiang to do what she pleases. Whether the Movement was the brainchild of Chiang or his wife, its comicalness and ultimate failure seem accurate.

The New Life Movement was ultimately quite unpopular with the Chinese people, and failed on all fronts, as an appeal to the West, as an alternative to Communism, and as moral reform. Hahn argues,

"As a substitute for the promises of the Communists, we of the West would consider this code of ethics far too abstract and lacking in action to be useful. After all, Reds' teachers spoke sharply and to the point on taxation, distribution of land, and the disposition of the overlords, whereas Chiang's program, though ambitious enough, was almost too large and moral to take these practical matters into account." [18]

Hahn points out that Chiang's creation of a moral code was no substitute for a real ruling plan, which the Communists claimed to have. A Chinese citizen would certainly find the policies of the Marxists more coherent. From a Western perspective, the Communists seemed to have a better grasp on their ideology than Chiang. Further damaging the New Life Movement was the behavior of Chiang's cronies, the Blue Shirts. The Blue Shirts were the far-right fascist

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group that had taken it upon themselves to enforce the rules of the New Life Movement. Seagrave writes,

“by 1936, the Blue Shirts were running amok, driven by excesses of zeal and brutality, giving the New Life Movement a bad name. *The Literary Digest* observed that year, ‘Most likely to upset the teacups were Chiang’s own civilian, antiforeign, bombing, stabbing, shooting ‘Blue Shirt’ terrorists, who once useful, no unmanageable, have become something of a Frankenstein monster.’”[19]

Abroad, New Life became somewhat of a pariah. At home, the public failed to embrace Chiang’s complex list of rules, even though they weren’t necessarily opposed to them. The New Life Movement is now just a blip in the brief period of the Republic of China. Whether it was destined to fail or if it was doomed by circumstances, it is difficult to tell.

The New Life Movement of Chiang Kai-shek becomes even more interesting when compared to Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution. Fundamentally, the two movements had similar end goals. Both Chiang and Mao sought to preserve power by shaping the national culture in their image, imposing a unified ideology. The Cultural Revolution, in contrast to the New Life Movement, had far-reaching impacts on both the people under it and future generations. Mao’s implementation methods went far beyond those of Chiang Kai-shek, and, as opposed to being comical, Mao was often brutal—some would go so far as to say insane.

Li Cheng-Chung, in his analysis of the Cultural Revolution, writes,

“...the cultural revolution was not simply a rivalry for power. It was a new form of dictatorship for elimination of opponents and dissidents, for wiping out forces of resistance and silencing voices of discontent, for shattering party and state organizations that were losing faith in one-man dictatorship.”[20]

Li dismisses any pretense that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had anything to do with cultural reform, and, in that regard, he is partially correct. The Cultural Revolution was a blatant attempt by Mao to squash any opposition to his rule. However, the Revolution did have a profound impact on the culture of the people. Schoppa notes, “people with long hair were seized and had it cut off,”[21] a situation that is oddly similar to the New Life Movement. Seagrave also notes, “when a man approached with his hat on crooked... a Scout stopped him, climbed onto the box, [and] straightened the man’s hat...”[22] Read objectively, these two occurrences could easily be swapped, with the hat adjustment as part of the Cultural Revolution and the haircuts as part of the New Life Movement, the difference being that Mao took his movement much further than this.

Unlike Chiang Kai-shek, Mao did not acknowledge any deity. His moralistic teachings seemed to rely solely on the Marxist ideology, as opposed to Confucianism or Christianity. Mao’s reforms, which pushed out Confucianism almost entirely, went further against the grain of Chinese society than the modernized Confucian reforms of Chiang. The enduring Confucian spirit, perhaps, is what ultimately defeated the Cultural Revolution amongst the people. Fox Butterfield writes of a woman named Lihua whom he met while living in China. She was a victim of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Butterfield writes,

“To me she was the quintessential Chinese, proof that the Confucian character had not been wiped out... ‘I won’t be happy till I die. I’ve never lived a good day in my life. My mother was beaten to death, my father was left senseless, and I still have to beg for everything. That is what the Cultural Revolution did. It is unfixable. My scars will never heal.’”[23]

Her enduring beliefs—her anger at the loss of her family, her indignation at being forced to beg, and her sense of honor—are all fundamentals of Confucianism. While Mao sought to eliminate Confucianism entirely, he failed to consider the consequences of attacking the oldest belief system in China. Many people began to lash out, ultimately leading to the reversal of the Cultural Revolution by Deng Xiaoping after Mao’s death. In this regard, Chiang Kai-shek was the smarter of the two leaders. Rather than forcing a new, secular ideology on the people, he attempted to incorporate the old ideology with his own, just as the Emperors did before him. While the New Life Movement also failed to see success, it was not the ultimate cause of Chiang’s ideological demise, as it was Mao’s.

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Between the two cultural movements, the influence of wives is another key comparison to make. Chiang Kai-shek greatly valued the opinion of his wife, and she was a key leader of the New Life Movement. Similarly, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, played a crucial role in the Cultural Revolution. Schoppa writes of Jiang,

"In the 1930s Jiang had been a second-rate Shanghai actress; she had journeyed to Yan'an, where she linked up with Mao; until the early 1960s she stayed out of the political arena. Beginning in 1963, she emerged as leader of an effort to reform the world of culture and the performing arts. Her associates were men from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing and the Municipal Propaganda Department in Shanghai." [24]

Jiang and her cronies were responsible for much of the implementation of the Cultural Revolution. They started, as Schoppa notes, as reformers of the arts. Eventually, Jiang, as a member of the notorious Gang of Four, became the head of the entire Cultural Revolution. Much like Madame Chiang, Jiang came to wield such power because of her connection to her husband. However, between the two, Madame Chiang seemed to enjoy the closer and more equal relationship with her husband. Mao eventually parted ideological ways with his wife, after which they became estranged. Jiang continued to wield power, though she lost what influence she did have on Mao.

Just as the rest of the Cultural Revolution turned into a power struggle, so did Jiang turn from a focus on the arts to a focus on securing her own power. By 1968, Jiang was sponsoring violence. Schoppa notes, "In the Spring and Summer of 1968 another wave of violence erupted between competing rebel groups, purportedly encouraged by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who had emerged as the cultural dictator of the revolution." [25] Though near the end of Mao's life the two were no longer married in the fullest sense, Jiang's fate was nonetheless tied to her husband. Butterfield mentions, "the most famous downfall, of course, was that of Jiang Qing, who was arrested less than a month after Mao died in 1976." [26] That isn't to say that Jiang shouldn't be considered a criminal in her own right. She was not taken down simply because she was Mao's wife, but because she, too, represented the insane brutality of the Cultural Revolution. "An estimated 400,000 to 500,000 Chinese were killed in these three years [1966-1969]," at the hands of Jiang and the rest of the Gang of Four. "Altogether about 3 million people were purged." [27] Jiang Qing certainly deserved her death sentence, though it is unlikely that she would have ever been punished had she died before Mao, her husband.

The greatest contrasts between the two women, Jiang Qing and Soong Mei-ling, were their situations at their deaths, Jiang of suicide in a Chinese prison at age 77 in 1991 and Madame Chiang of natural causes in a New York apartment at age 105 in 2003, and reporters' treatment of them at their death. Jiang died serving a life sentence for her work on the Gang of Four; Madame Chiang died in relative peace after living abroad since her husband's death in 1975. Of Madame Chiang, the New York Times had this to say:

"As a fluent English speaker, as a Christian, as a model of what many Americans hoped China to become, Madame Chiang struck a chord with American audiences as she traveled across the country, starting in the 1930's, raising money and lobbying for support of her husband's government. She seemed to many Americans to be the very symbol of the modern, educated, pro-American China they yearned to see emerge — even as many Chinese dismissed her as a corrupt, power-hungry symbol of the past they wanted to escape." [28]

Even at her death, Madame Chiang remained a popular figure in America, though largely from a historical viewpoint. Since recognizing the PRC as the legal government of China in 1971, Madame Chiang lost any influence she had in the United States. No love was lost in Taiwan, however, as the now largely democratic nation has sought to distance itself from the fascist Chiang Kai-shek. Jiang Qing, on the contrary, was largely despised at home and abroad at the time of her death. The New York Times wrote this about her:

"To many young Chinese, there is not much difference between Ms. Jiang and some of the neo-Maoist hard-liners who remain in power. Ms. Jiang was faulted for persecuting intellectuals, for insisting on an inane uniformity in the arts and for joining in the violent suppression of a democracy movement at Tiananmen Square — an earlier one, in 1976. Those are precisely the complaints that young people have about some of today's leaders." [29]

Jiang, not popular with the Communist Party, the Chinese people, or leaders abroad, died a sad, lonely death,

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remembered only as a former leader of the extreme dictatorial sort. Just as the two movements, the New Life Movement and the Cultural Revolution, are remembered differently, so are the two women.

When taken alone, the New Life Movement of Chiang Kai-shek and the GMD appears to be a massive failure. However, when compared to Mao's Cultural Revolution, the New Life Movement appears to be a grand success. Though the New Life Movement failed to create lasting change in China and her people, it did not fail because of any inherent flaw. Chiang correctly approached the movement with an eye toward tradition, embracing Confucian values combined with his own Christian beliefs and populist mantras. Perhaps the movement was too complex in its numerous rules, and perhaps the implementation went awry. On the whole, the New Life Movement was a potentially successful reform that could not stand against Civil War and a crippled economy. It did achieve some longevity, following Chiang and the GMD to Taiwan where he continued to implement it. Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, while seen by many as fascists, are still admired abroad for what they attempted in China with New Life. On the contrary, Jiang Qing, who was explicitly connected with the Cultural Revolution, was reviled at her death. Though less well known than the Cultural Revolution, the New Life Movement is certainly less infamous. It may be just a blip on the history books, but had everything fallen into place, perhaps with increased foreign support, New Life could still be the defining doctrine of Modern China today.

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