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Strong Institutions in Weak Polities

STATE BUILDING IN REPUBLICAN CHINA,
1927–1940

JULIA C. STRAUSS

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Joseph and Rosalie Strauss

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Nanjing University's history department, offered a very useful review of classical Chinese as well as a unique perspective of Chinese history. Zhu Jin, my 'research assistant' and friend, showed me the ins and outs of the local book stores and libraries, and was a delightful companion in research trips to Shanghai and Beijing to conduct interviews. The staff at the No. 2 Historical Archives in Nanjing, whom I saw every day and came to think of as family, were extremely patient as they continued to ferret out stacks and stacks of archives—even when they couldn't quite understand why I was straying so far from my original outline. In Taiwan, I benefited from the hospitality of the Institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica, and the knowledge of staff at the Guoshiguan Archives. Mr Wang Hua-chung, of the Examination Yuan, took a particularly kind interest in my work, and directed me to many of his friends and acquaintances for interviews.

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JCS

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Introduction: Institution-Building and State Transformation in China

In the 450 years between the dawn of the Age of Exploration and the decolonization waves of the mid-twentieth century, the European state system developed, consolidated, and expanded to encompass the rest of the globe, with momentous consequences for the non-European world. Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, the surviving members of the European state system achieved something remarkable: the global transformation of the political and economic landscape through the indirect influence of trade, the threatened use of force, and outright conquest. By the late nineteenth century, the rest of the world had been drawn into an international system of states and an international economy, defined by Europeans and largely dominated by them as well. Through the extraordinary and destructive dynamism of a small group of states in north-west Europe, Western ideas of state sovereignty became dominant in the international system, areas not under the direct or indirect control of European and Europe-derived powers decreased, and places not subject to the opportunities and vagaries of the world market largely disappeared.

The impact of these revolutionary developments on the non-European world was overwhelming, and the age of European dominance irrevocably altered non-Western states and societies in myriad ways. Europeans created new states and new administrations everywhere they went. In the sparsely settled Americas, they exterminated or enslaved indigenous peoples, physically taking over and creating European-derived states. In the more populated parts of Africa and Asia, where such strategies were unfeasible, Europeans set up colonial administrations. Even in those areas that escaped formal colonial rule, such as Ottoman Turkey, Japan, and China, the impact of European expansion had a strong echo effect: indigenous elites and rulers saw their neighbours succumb to Western power, keenly felt the West's economic and military pressure, and struggled hard to maintain their independence, typically by playing one European power against the other while attempting to strengthen their local administrative capacities. By the turn of the twentieth century, the world was covered with states that were either originally European, imposed artificially by Europeans, or attempting to replicate the Europeans' success. In both absolute and comparative terms, state building and its supporting processes of institution building have had a lasting impact on the global political landscape.

The issues considered in this work are as longstanding as the processes of state building in the non-Western world, and are particularly relevant to those states with strong indigenous traditions of statecraft and rule that survived intact into the modern era: China, Japan, Ottoman Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, and Thailand. In environments characterized by resource scarcity, small pools of potentially qualified personnel, and/or widespread external hostility to an increased central government presence, how can a state previously content with fairly minimalist goals of self-maintenance develop strong, proactive organizations capable of implementing new agendas of centralization and economic development? In societies in which the reach of the state is limited and intermittent while the claims of kith and kin are immediate and powerful, how can critical organizations inculcate their members with norms strong enough to transcend the individual's short-term interests and personal loyalties? In short, how can pre-existing administrative organizations be reconstituted and transformed to build a new type of state when institutional capacity is inherently fragmented, ambiguous, and weak?

STATES, INSTITUTION BUILDING, AND CORE ACTIVITIES

In one form or another, states have existed since the beginning of recorded history; and while authors vary in their respective emphases, there is substantial agreement on the minimal attributes of states and 'stateness'. Most draw on Weber's definition of the state as a 'compulsory organization with a territorial basis' that possesses an 'administrative staff [that] successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enactment of its order' and 'regulates more generally the interrelations of the inhabitants of the territory'.¹ By definition, a state is a centralized entity. Within a given territory, its organizations are formally coordinated with each other, distinct from other organizations in society, and claim authority over other these other organizations through its monopolies on authoritative rule making and the use of legitimate force. In its dealings outside its own territory, the state also claims exclusive authority to represent its society internationally.²

From the time of the great nineteenth-century sociologists onward, it has been recognized that central administrative structures, along with military and judicial organizations, are among the state's most critical components of extraction, coercion, and coordination,³ organizing and carrying out 'core activities' without which the state could not exist. Neither military, administrative, or judicial state structures are exactly coterminous with the state itself. Few would argue that the Inland Revenue is exactly the same thing as the United Kingdom: the former will never sign a peace treaty,

develop a weapons system, or administer aid to families with dependent children. But all can agree that the Inland Revenue is a crucial supporting component of the larger state, without which continued functioning in these other arenas of activity would be next to impossible. Administrative organizations hold the state together, providing the backbone that makes centralization possible. They collect the taxes, administer the justice, and, since the late nineteenth-century, have taken on a wide variety of new responsibilities and tasks, from redistributing wealth, to promoting economic development, to regulating industries, to guaranteeing social insurance, to establishing national educational bodies, to promoting public health.⁴

The first imperative of all state-building activity is to exert control over a territory: without a relatively secure central base from which to operate, there can be no state, and without at least primitive military and administrative organizations, there can be no centralized control over an area. As military and administrative organizations are the agents through which the state externally differentiates itself from other groups in society, most early state-building action has revolved around 'organizing the means of coercion' within a given area, guarding against incursions from without, and securing the revenue to make internal coercion and external security possible.⁵

For states in highly competitive environments, the likelihood of survival declines appreciably if the state does not either inherit or create reasonably effective, well functioning supporting state organizations in these core activities of coercion, extraction, and administration; thus, aspiring state makers across the board tend to place exceptionally high premiums on the modernization of the military and the creation of effective mechanisms for tax raising. Like organizations in any place or time, the supporting bureaucracies of the state that make the tax collection, judicial administration, and provision of social services possible are dualistic, with both functional and affective components. As entities designed and created to achieve goals, they are purposefully oriented towards realizing certain ends, but as bounded realms of social interaction, they are subject to the vagaries of human behaviour.⁶ For an organization to be successful over an extended period of time, it must become institutionalized on both affective and functional dimensions. Since highly coercive measures are unlikely to produce high performance over any sort of long run, the organization must first elicit the internal commitments of staff to its goals and projects by 'infusing [them] with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand'.⁷

Organizations become internally institutionalized and stable in so far as they socialize their members into administrative ideologies, reward those who believe in the organization's values, and effectively carry out the tasks deemed important, replicating those values for subsequent

generations of employees within the organization. As instruments designed for purposive action, administrative organizations are also expected by those inside and outside the organization to make visible progress towards achieving its goals. But organizations do not exist in vacuums. They stake out particular ‘domains’ (or policy environments) regarding the actions they will pursue and the clientele they will serve, they possess technologies for promoting organizational goals, and they operate in specific ‘task environments’, which encompass ‘everything in the external environment which are relevant or potentially relevant to goal setting and goal attainment’.⁸

An organization’s domain, task environment, and technologies have a strong objective influence on the likelihood of goal achievement, which in turn affects internal infusion with value, institutionalization and organizational morale. A organization that aspires to become well institutionalized must launch a two-front attack, simultaneously building internal commitments and organizational culture while externally realizing enough of its goals to stay in operation. In environments in which the domains of state administrative organizations are shifting rapidly, where the technologies are uncertain and external task environments are hostile and unpredictable, internal institutionalization and stabilization is, by definition, exceptionally difficult. These, of course, are exactly the types of conditions typical to non-Western states attempting to transform their administrative organizations into proactive, effective institutions.

In reality, states have more often than not fallen short of achieving the basic attributes suggested by the Weberian definition of the term: centrality, a monopoly on the legitimate means of force and binding rule making, and even the exclusive right to speak for the sovereign state internationally have not come easily or automatically. The feudal state in medieval Europe had nothing that even approached a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; some state administrations are so thoroughly the creatures of a particular class or group in society that the whole idea of state autonomy is sometimes called into question.⁹ Even the question of international representation may become blurred: in cases of civil war, a government claiming the sovereign right to manage its own affairs may not be accorded either *de jure* or *de facto* recognition by other states or external groups.

But even though states have varied tremendously in the degree to which they have exhibited the key Weberian properties of ‘stateness’, most states (or proto-states) have, when feasible, sought to become more ‘state-like’ by centralizing control over their territories, achieving a degree of autonomy from groups in society, becoming the internationally recognized legitimate authorities for the physical areas over which they claim jurisdiction, and in the twentieth century moving into domains of broad social regulation and social insurance.

Particularly before the nineteenth century, the historical record is full of examples that suggest the difficulties of successful state building. Under pre-modern conditions of production, transport, and resource extraction, states normally could realize only these more minimal attributes of ‘stateness’. At best, they could muster enough of the military and administrative organization to maintain a veneer of centralized control over a territorial area. Lacking the projective capacity to send central agents down to the truly local levels, where the bulk of the population lived, they ruled in a *de facto* partnership with local elites and notables. Regardless of their formally despotic power, they could not hope to vigorously control and regulate the relations between groups in society. Outside the highly competitive system of European states that began to emerge in the early modern period, until fairly recently the vast majority of states have had to be content with a loose degree of control and self-maintenance even while they typically claimed to be the sole source of legitimate political power in the territories over which they exercised nominal absolute rule.¹⁰

For all pre-modern states, even the most long-lived and successful, simply maintaining a bare modicum of ‘stateness’ could be precarious. Since central administrative structures were limited in their extent and reach and extractive capacity was severely circumscribed, states devoted much of their effort to maintaining some sort of equilibrium between centralized authority and local realities. Withdrawal of support from local notables often fragmented the state from within, and the development of new military technology or the rise of predatory neighbours perenially threatened from without. Continued existence at a minimum depended on the state’s capacity to successfully defend itself, with invasion and conquest constantly looming as threats. With the advent of new technologies, new forms of organization, and newly successful predators, pre-modern states large and small rose and fell, only intermittently exercising much of a direct presence at the local level. For all the splendour they may have accumulated at their cores and all the authority they commanded in the abstract, traditional states were, in comparison with their twentieth-century counterparts, fairly fragile.¹¹

The particular social and geopolitical circumstances of early modern Europe produced a new sort of state, one that was constrained to generate efficient extractive administrations domestically to provide for external security. Anomalous factors such as the feudal legacy, slow accretion of power under a number of different kings, the continued existence of corporate rights and privileged groups, and a traditional (if often imperfect) separation between temporal and ecclesiastical power all contributed to the inability of any to establish a lasting hegemony over the continent. Charles Tilly suggests that, in Europe’s late medieval environment of highly competitive proto-states, state building was largely a function of war making

and a desperate struggle for survival. Between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries, the landscape became littered with examples of those states that ultimately failed and were absorbed by bigger, more powerful neighbours. With the exception of England (which had the luxury of being able to depend on its relatively cheap navy for war making), in the European context of highly competitive proto-states, success in war was in turn closely related to the state's ability to field effective administrative organizations able to extract the resources necessary to maintain increasingly expensive military technology (such as standing armies), and to pacify recalcitrant groups within its putative boundaries.¹² Although the process was not in full swing until the added boost of the Industrial Revolution, European states began concurrently to *implode* in internal generative capacity and *explode* in bursts of externally oriented activities such as exploration, commerce, and colonial ventures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³

When European states met non-Western states and societies, the usual result was the destruction of the latter and the establishment of some sort of colonial administration. But for those who, through some combination of luck, skill, scale, and geographical isolation, managed to avoid direct colonization, very serious questions of state building and institutional transformation arose. How could strong states capable of standing up to the West be built? How could traditionally limited state administrations be reconstituted to carry out new tasks while retaining their legitimacy? What values would ultimately be encoded in these new state organizations?

Although Turkey, Iran, Thailand, Ethiopia, Japan, and China are all equally good candidates for research into these questions of state and institution building, the scope of this study is confined to the institution-building efforts undertaken in China during the Republican period (1912–49), and focuses in particular on the years between 1927 and 1940, when the National Government under the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) made the greatest, although still incomplete, strides towards state reintegration and central state rebuilding of any Chinese government between the fall of the empire in 1912 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. China was, in the early twentieth century, the longest-lived example of a non-Western culture, civilization, and organized political entity in the world, one whose imperial institutions had crumbled and whose political future was still uncharted.

Far from being an historical footnote of no consequence, the Republican period in general and the activities of Nationalist state and institution builders in particular are important for two reasons. Despite the Nationalists' eventual defeat in the civil war of the late 1940s, these were the years in which the institutional foundations for the subsequent evolution of the twentieth-century Chinese state were laid down. Further, the activities of the National Government offer an exceptionally well documented and

accessible case study for comparative state and institution building, as Nationalist state and institution builders were dogged, perhaps to an extreme degree, by a set of dilemmas common to state and institution builders the world over.

After half a century of reform efforts within the framework of the Celestial Empire failed to produce a rejuvenated and centralized China, the imperial system finally collapsed in 1911–12, leaving in its wake a set of fragmented military, political, and social organizations, and a proliferation of unanswered questions as to how to put the polity back together on a sound, and recognizably 'modern', basis. Given the weak state of China's central administration, how could imperialist encroachment best be turned back? How would republicanism and revolution be defined and operationalized? What was the most effective means to national wealth and power? How could a strong state be built? For elites in early twentieth-century China, the solutions to these questions were not of mere academic interest: they were a matter of national identity and survival. National identity and survival, in turn, depended on rapidly developing state institutions capable of taking on new tasks, and drastically increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and projective capacity, when nearly everything in the immediate environment served to undermine central institution building.

Like prospective institution builders elsewhere, state-building elites in Republican China were accorded no *tabula rasa*. Even as they struggled against it, the legacy of the late imperial state and society continued to exhibit a powerful influence on its Republican era heirs: providing the raw materials with which to work, offering deeply held symbols of legitimization, and constraining choices.

SUMMARY AND OUTLINE

Substantively, this work analyses patterns of attempted institution building in central state administration in Republican China (1912–49). It was during this period that the Chinese state disintegrated under the warlords (1916–27), was partially reintegrated by the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek (1927–37), largely disintegrated again under the impact of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), and underwent the trauma of full fledged civil war, which culminated in the triumph of the Communists and the flight of the Nationalists to the island of Taiwan (1945–9). While the political and administrative elites of the early Republic (1912–27) were no less concerned with state building and institution building than were the next generation of Nationalists and Communists, the regional militarism and political fragmentation of the warlord era in the 1910s and 1920s for the most part precluded effective central institution building. Since it was not

until the Nationalists succeeded in establishing a proto-state in the lower Yangzi Valley in 1927–8 that sustained *central* government efforts in institution building were possible, the descriptive chapters deal primarily (although not exclusively) with the time frame between 1927 and 1940, as it was during these years that the Nationalists made their greatest, although still incomplete, progress towards their announced goals of state reintegration, institution building and national development.¹⁴

My findings indicate that, for states confronting objectively unfavourable conditions for institution building, such as was the case for Republican China, success in institution building is contingent and unusual, but by no means random. Nationalist China, as a weak state operating in hostile environment with external and internal sources of competitive pressure, concentrated the lion's share of its attention on exactly those 'core' activities associated with state building in early modern Europe: on building up an effective military, focusing on resource (particularly tax) extraction to finance the military, and developing foreign relations to try to bring about a less precarious international environment by establishing a credible international presence, negotiating with other states, and joining alliances.

What is often overlooked is the degree to which the Nationalists were surprisingly *successful* in carrying out these critically important components of the state building process during the 1930s. Most of the standard assessments of Republican China tend to be highly critical of the Nationalist regime, reading the government ineffectiveness, corruption, and military weakness that led to eventual defeat in the late 1940s back into the 1930s and early 1940s.¹⁵ More sympathetic analyses of the Nationalist era have at best considered the Nationalist strategy of state building to have long-term promise until fatally undercut by the Japanese invasion of 1937.¹⁶ But whether critical or sympathetic, all of these works are primarily interested in explaining the Nationalist defeat in 1949 rather than evaluating what the regime attempted, given the context and constraints of its own times, in order to overcome its very real weaknesses.

I suggest that over a medium term, between the late 1920s and roughly 1940, not only were supporting state organizations of the National Government as different from each other as the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs successful, but their success hinged on two closely related variables: insulation of the organization from external pressures, and general perceptions of the organization as successful in meeting its goals. In a hostile external environment rent with patronage politics, success depended first on the degree to which the organization was able to insulate itself from the external environment while promoting the bureaucratization and professionalization of its personnel within. To maintain insulation against external pressures, the organization had to 'buy' its legitimacy through its effectiveness in carrying out services necessary to

the survival of the state. High performance in goal implementation, in turn, was in part a reflection of organizational insulation and bureaucratization, but was also positively correlated with two other factors: the degree to which the organization's tasks were specific and divisible, and the degree to which the organization was able to establish domestic control over its policy domain. Once established, a well insulated organization could creatively recast pre-existing symbols of legitimacy and statecraft, further boosting internal morale and prestige without.

This work synthesizes a variety of archival, secondary and interview materials into four in-depth case studies of central administrative organizations in the Nationalist state: the Examination Yuan, the Sino-Foreign Salt Inspectorate, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁷ Through the development of these case studies, the analysis focuses on two critical factors in institution-building success in hostile environments: the interaction between the incipient professionalization promoted by the organization's internal personnel policy, and its external results in goal implementation and achievement.

After reviewing the basic agenda of the late imperial Chinese state, the recasting of that agenda during the last years of the dynasty, and a description of the environment in which the Nationalists came to power in the late 1920s in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 focuses on the National Government's civil service personnel and examination systems as implemented by the Examination Yuan and the Ministry of Personnel. The goals of the Examination Yuan stood more as an ideal statement of intent for the design and operations of the National Government than it was a concrete guide to its workings, while the Examination Yuan's weaknesses and tactical retreats illustrated in microcosm the difficulties of the larger Nationalist strategy of co-option and inclusion in institution building. The Examination Yuan did regularly hold open civil service examinations in the 1930s and 1940s, but examinations never became what ideally they 'should' have been: the primary channel of recruitment into the civil service. This chapter also describes the limited gains made by the Examination Yuan and Ministry of Personnel as the units entrusted with implementing the state's ideals of technocracy, depoliticization, and quality control in the civil service at large. Since the Examination Yuan's *raison d'être* and organizational goals were in a domain over which it could not directly enforce compliance, it remained a weak organization, one that for the most part relied on moral suasion and normative appeals to institutionalize its values. In spite of their longstanding legitimacy in traditional Chinese culture and statecraft, open civil service examinations could not be effectively institutionalized without strong organizational boundaries, and ultimately depended on autonomous bureaucratic organizations outside the Examination Yuan to see that it was in their interests to accept new recruits qualified by the examination

process. Substantive power and the capacity to build strong, professional institutions remained with the organizations themselves rather than in an external coordinating body like the Examination Yuan.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the activities of one such body, the Sino-Foreign Salt Inspectorate. The Salt Inspectorate was a prefecturally organized tax collecting body whose effectiveness made it a veritable model of institution-building success. By self-consciously pursuing strategies of bureaucratization, rationalization, and professionalization, the Inspectorate systematically insulated itself from an environment it perceived to be hostile, unpredictable, and politicized. In focusing on a domain in which it could achieve visible and important results, it operated at such a high level of effectiveness that it remained one of the few organizations that retained a nationwide network during the anarchy of the warlord years (1916–27), and proved to be an indispensable source of revenue once it was taken over by the National Government during the Nanjing Decade. Because it was in part established by foreigners and retained a unique system of shared authority between Chinese and foreign tax inspectors, the Salt Inspectorate was an anomalous organization, whose particular structures were hardly likely to be replicated directly by a Chinese government that had come to power on the strength of its nationalism and anti-imperialist credentials.

Chapter 5, which considers all of the Ministry of Finance's tax collecting sub-organizations, provides a partial corrective to the anomalous example of the Salt Inspectorate. While the leadership of the Ministry of Finance borrowed heavily from contemporary Western ideals of centralization and efficiency, and explicitly set out to replicate Salt Inspectorate-style rationalization, bureaucratization, and effectiveness, there was no discernible foreign presence in the direct operations of the Ministry. Cobbled together from the remnants of pre-existing finance administrations, the Ministry of Finance began the Nanjing Decade more a *de facto* coalition of semi-autonomous sub-organizations than a smoothly operating, tightly centralized machine.

The activities of the Ministry of Finance illustrate two important trends in the institution-building processes of the 1930s. First, it attempted to mirror the types of state-building strategies being employed throughout the state at large: takeover of weak or illegitimate organizations, deployment into arenas weakly held by competing organizations, co-optation and gradual amalgamation of medium-strength bodies, and a declaration of monocratic authority while looking the other way for areas in which central power could not effectively reach. Second, the Ministry of Finance did contain one sub-organization, the Consolidated Tax Administration, which was without a heavy foreign advisor presence and gradually institutionalized and internally bureaucratized to produce impressive results by the mid-

1930s. The experience of the Ministry of Finance suggests that successful institution building need not depend directly on outside influence to instil and insulate core values, and may have more to do with organizational technology, manageability of domain, and the subsequent willingness of political leadership to refrain from micro-management.

Chapter 6 turns to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an elite, generalist organization whose patterns of institution building were in some ways quite different from those of the more technically oriented Salt Inspectorate and Ministry of Finance. Like the Salt Inspectorate, it maintained its organizational boundaries quite well, and achieved substantial results. But unlike the Salt Inspectorate and Finance, many of its activities were not particularly amenable to specific breakdown, and its control over domain was at best partial: political leaders frequently did intervene to recalibrate the general thrust of foreign policy throughout the Nationalist period. Furthermore, Foreign Affairs did not rigorously exclude anything that smacked of Party indoctrination, and instead opted to incorporate the norms of Party loyalty while still managing to maintain its high standards and recruit from the best and the brightest.

Chapter 7 concludes with an analysis of institution-building strategies in central state organizations in Nationalist China, and suggests future avenues for research. Institution-building strategies in Republican China, with all their failures and successes, have a significance that goes far beyond the particulars of the history of the state in Republican China. The types of problem faced by China during this period were far from unique, and it is entirely possible that the range of institution-building responses produced by China's central administrative elites has close analogues in other, similarly situated, non-Western states. However, principles that can be generalized to other contexts must first be well grounded in an understanding of the particulars from which they rise, and this work attempts to be equally faithful to both by developing its concepts in the context of specific administrative histories.

We will begin with an overview of the late imperial and early Republican legacy inherited by the Nationalist institution builders of the late 1920s and 1930s.

1

From Presiding to Centralizing State: The Late Imperial Legacy and Institution-Building Dilemmas

INTRODUCTION

Governance and statecraft in late imperial China was implemented within a political, institutional, and ideological context of extraordinary staying power. The key political features of the agrarian empire—an Emperor and ruling house, a bureaucracy staffed by a literati elite, and the socializing role of Confucian ethics—had, with modifications, survived such cataclysms as changes in dynasty, alien rule, and periods of political disintegration. These political and institutional arrangements were both long-lived and sufficient to meet the challenges posed by the immediate political environment, until the combination of internal social pressures and external imperialism of the mid-nineteenth century began to generate strains beyond its capacity to respond effectively. By any standard, China was an exceptionally successful non-Western state, with goals that, while significantly different from the goals of states in early modern Europe, remained remarkably consistent until the first years of the twentieth century.

In an extraordinarily long-lived marriage of Confucian ideological justification and tacit admission of the technical limitations of administering a vast agrarian empire, administration in the Celestial Empire was geared towards the maintenance of cosmic harmony and order from the mid-fourteenth to the end of the nineteenth century.¹ Although the late imperial Chinese state claimed exclusive political legitimacy and had no concept of ‘legitimate’ competing nodes of political authority, it was usually content to reign and loosely regulate rather than vigorously rule. For the most part, emperors and bureaucrats pursued activist intervention only when it was perceived that the natural, proper order of things was set to spiral out of equilibrium, with unchecked official corruption, famines or natural disasters, or banditry. Of course, circumstances that could be interpreted as destabilizing were often present, and under these conditions the late imperial state was capable of vigorous action, as it was in the eighteenth century with the establishment and maintenance of a complex system of state granaries.²

But even when actively intervening, the *raison d'être* of the late imperial Chinese state was to *yi an* (literally, to ‘hand down tranquillity to posterity’). *Yi an*, in turn, connoted a stable state of affairs in which the elements

of the hierarchically organized social order (scholar-gentlemen, peasants, artisans, and merchants) would coexist peacefully and go about their business properly, bringing about a state of balance that would be, in the ideal, unchanging. Thus, at the age of 9, the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662–1722) wrote: ‘I have no desires except that I wish the nation to enjoy peace and order, and the people to be content with their occupations, so that all will be able to live together in grand harmony.’³

Ideally, from emperor on down the hierarchy to the district magistrate, ‘Grand Harmony’ would be realized through the morally proper personal conduct of the ‘gentleman’ (*junzi*) who staffed the administrative system. His *modus vivendi* was to regulate, educate, and harmonize the relations between different groups and the state with as little direct government intervention as possible. A typical passage from a Ming tract on administration, still widely read until the end of the nineteenth century, read:

What is needed in administration at the present time is to keep troublesome business at a minimum, not add to it; to preserve the rules, not change them; to bring about tranquillity in all situations, not to stir them up; and to relax and simplify the control of the people, not to tighten and complicate it.⁴

For the late imperial Chinese state, benevolent government was minimal government: it kept taxes low, granted remissions, and provided grain relief to the common people in times of distress and famine; it legitimated quite extensive *de facto* deconcentration of power by tolerating the need to be responsive to the ‘particular needs of the situation’ on the part of the local magistrate; and it regulated social relations primarily by personal example, education, and moral suasion, resorting to coercion only when other means had failed.

Given China’s physical size and internal diversity, even achieving relatively modest goals of system maintenance and harmonizing was no easy task. The centralized Confucian bureaucracy maintained the cohesiveness of the vast, heterogeneous empire by administering the realm, and serving as a bulwark of order, standardization, and universalism in a society in which virtually all social action was informed by particularist groups (e.g. family, lineage, old school ties, secret societies). With variable success, the universalistic orientation of the bureaucracy was reinforced in two ways: through the hierarchical structure of imperial bureaucracy itself, and by the intensive pre-entry socialization of its members.

Formal state structure in late imperial China was highly bureaucratic in Weberian terms: hierarchically organized, functionally differentiated at the central level, and given to statute making and use of precedent. Under the Emperor and his advisory policy-making bodies (the Grand Secretariat and, later in the Qing, the Grand Council) in the capital, the central Six Boards (of Civil Appointments, Revenue, Rites, War, Punishment, and

Works) engaged in rule making, issuing orders, and checking on the activities and compliance of the lower levels. At the bottom of the official hierarchy, prefects and district magistrates served as the embodiment of state authority in the far-flung counties of the Empire, and were immediately responsible to centrally appointed provincial governors and governors-general; while financial commissioners, judicial commissioners, and several circuit intendants all reported directly to the central government on provincial affairs.

At its centre, the imperial bureaucracy exhibited an exceptional degree of functional differentiation, with the central Six Boards organized into sub-departments entrusted with specific tasks.⁵ But since system maintenance, rather than maximal efficiency, was the central administration's key goal, the central bureaucracy was also characterized by a good deal of shared authority, redundancy, and overlap. Functions were differentiated to process the large volume of documents coming in from the provinces, but responsibility was diffused rather than concentrated to provide the higher-ups with a number of independent sources of information and analysis.⁶

Since the metropolitan bureaucracy was designed to enforce uniformity and standardization, maintain control and responsiveness among the rank and file, and generally combat the natural centrifugal tendencies of an organization spread so thinly over such a vast area, the bulk of the central bureaucracy's activities were proscriptive rather than prescriptive or proactive. Initiation of programmes, works, and experiments was seen as something best left to the discretion of the officials in the provinces who were presumably familiar with local circumstances. Imperial central administration was occupied primarily with information gathering and control: receiving and writing reports, rule making, auditing, and meting out rewards and demerits.⁷

In addition to controlling its bureaucrats through direct rewards and punishments, the imperial Chinese state indirectly fostered identification with its preferred goals by holding open civil service examinations as the primary route of recruitment into the bureaucracy.⁸ By testing ancient texts written in classical Chinese and skills such as poetry composition and calligraphy, the state was able to select generalist Confucian gentlemen well versed in a universalistic culture that stressed an idealized past, the proper ordering of things on the basis of virtue, self-cultivation in the present, and obedience to hierarchical authority. Through the open civil service examinations, the state was able to standardize the values and educational experiences of its prospective bureaucrats while institutionally gluing the upwardly mobile to the state itself as the guarantor of prestigious official careers.

The competitiveness of the examinations was nothing short of murderous, and the 'wastage' was enormous: in 1850, only 0.05 per cent of the

eligible lowest degree holders passed the provincial level *juren* examinations that qualified (but did not automatically guarantee) one for a substantive post, and the chances of getting through all three sets of examinations to the palace examination were but 1 in 6,000 for those with the lowest *shengyuan* degree.⁹ With such long odds to combat, families aspiring to retain or increase their status started their sons on the road to 'Examination Hell' early. Success on the examinations required rote memorization of the over 400,000 characters that constituted the *Four Books*, the *Five Classics* and assorted commentaries, requiring years of preparation.¹⁰ Boys of the gentry began their classical education at around the age of 7, spending literally their whole lifetimes in pursuit of advanced degrees and eventual office-holding. Rarely was the lowest *shengyuan* degree attained before the age of 21, success on the difficult provincial *juren* examination, if forthcoming at all, occurred in the early thirties, and a minimum seven- to ten-year wait between provincial examination success and substantive appointment was not uncommon.¹¹

Given the long years of training and waiting for such uncertain success, the examination system in practice heavily favoured the already well-off gentry, despite its formal openness to all. Typically, it would be only they who had the resources to invest in the necessary years of education for their sons. The peasant eking out a subsistence living would scarcely have the leisure to learn to read and write, much less afford the expense of tuition and the loss of the productive labour of his sons in the fields. The rare exceptions to the rule of gentry-dominated examination success served largely to perpetuate one of the most enduring myths of social mobility in imperial China: the career open to talent.¹²

For all its widely acknowledged shortcomings, the civil service examination system in imperial China served as the lynchpin of state and elite perpetuation. Through open civil service examinations, the state created a self-confident, literate cadre of bureaucrats with remarkably similar values and pre-service experiences. Despite differences in diet, local custom, and dialect, the classically trained literati throughout the Empire had far more in common with each other in terms of culture and values than they did with the masses of illiterate peasants and artisans of their own local areas.¹³ By making performance on impersonally administered examinations the prerequisite to the only socially prestigious career, the late imperial state was able to in part pre-coopt large numbers of local elites whose commonality of interests with the state would otherwise have been much less. Even though the vast majority of prospective literati bureaucrats failed the examinations, every male with the ambition and family resources to do so devoted years to studying the same canonical texts, creating standards for elite values that went far beyond the minority who passed the examinations and achieved office. Direct central state penetration of local areas always

remained problematic, but since the local district magistrate and the local gentry tended to hold the same literati culture in common, there was at least the possibility of reaching a *modus vivendi* between the local representative of the state and local elites.

The Confucian bureaucracy was an exceptionally long-lived and self-replicating institution. From the Song dynasty until 1905, its formal structures of hierarchy and control maintained a modicum of administrative unity and standardization, while its rigorous examination system created a cadre of influential individuals pre-socialized into Confucian literati values congenial to bureaucratic perpetuation. But even with these two means of fostering integration and universalism, the state remained ‘pervasive but weak’, by twentieth-century standards, particularly with respect to finance and local administration.¹⁴

It was in the districts that the official representatives of the imperial state had the closest contact with the common people, and it was here that the stresses and strains inherent in the state’s relatively modest goals of balancing and harmonizing were most visible. The functional differentiation of the Metropolitan bureaucracy was not formally replicated in field administration, where the magistrate was the sole legitimate governmental authority in an area that could include up to several hundred thousand people. Although the long years of studying poetry and Confucian classics hardly prepared the aspiring magistrate to handle the specifics of fiscal, judiciary, or administrative problems, the district magistrate was expected to be a master of interpersonal relations. Folk characters such as the wise official Baogong served as positive models of exemplary magisterial behaviour,¹⁵ able to ‘see into the heart of the situation’, arrive at proper judgements, serve as a ‘father and mother official’ to all those in the district, and carry out state dictates. In practice, this meant that all formal responsibility for resolving litigation, tax collection, local security, and assorted emergencies fell to one individual.¹⁶

Unless he succeeded in resolving all outstanding criminal cases and forwarding tax quotas in full to the provincial authorities each year, the magistrate was unlikely to receive a positive rating when the triennial *daji* evaluations were held, and the threat of impeachment for not conforming to regulations and orders hung over his head at all times. The organizational imperatives of the state bureaucracy made things even more difficult. The centralized reporting and control system tended to quell most risk-taking and initiative; the law of avoidance (which forbade any official to serve in his home province) practically ensured that the magistrate would be unable to communicate with the vast majority of the inhabitants of the area in which he was the sole figure of state authority; and the low level of remuneration left him with no alternative but to condone informal (and quite often uncontrolled) fee-taking to make up the difference.

Given these very real structural constraints, actual performance in local administration tended to depend on the magistrate’s ability to coordinate and control the three unofficially recognized groups who processed the bulk of the paperwork and were the actual implementors of most administrative action: the *yamen* (magistrate’s residence) clerks and runners, the magistrate’s own private secretaries (*muyou*), and the local gentry elite. While the support of all three of these groups was necessary, only the private secretaries, who were personally hired by the magistrate, had a consistent incentive to work in the magistrate’s interests. Both petty sub-officials (*yamen* clerks and runners) and the local gentry were at least as likely to obstruct the magistrate as they were to aid him.

Clerks, runners, and other petty officials comprised a semi-permanent, local administrative staff that provided the actual interface between the *yamen* and the rest of the district, filing documents, posting edicts, processing litigation, and collecting taxes. Sub-officials were indispensable to the magistrate, who depended on them for their knowledge of the local dialect and customs.¹⁷ But the *yamen* staff’s low social status and minuscule formal salaries led inevitably to informal fee-taking and corruption, while their virtual stranglehold over local information meant that effective supervision was at best sketchy and at worst impossible.

The position of the local gentry was more ambiguous. As local notables, the gentry had every incentive to evade taxation, keep their holdings off the tax rolls, settle local disputes in their own favour, and beg special favours at the *yamen*. But, as elites with classical education who aspired to the high status conferred by examination success and officeholding, they usually held at least some of the literati high culture in common with the magistrate, and often could be prevailed upon to direct their natural leadership in the community to ends in accordance with those of the state. In order to implement any substantial administrative project such as dike maintenance, relief grain distribution, or restoration of shrines, the district magistrate had to have some sort of viable working relationship with the local gentry. The district magistrate’s resources—both human and financial—were limited: even when supplemented by his administrative staff of secretaries and clerks, he was an outsider whose reach did not extend very far beyond the *yamen* walls without the active collaboration of local elites. Despite the integrating factors of standardized Confucian education and a centralized network of bureaucratic control, the imperial state’s projective capacity—particularly in its own countryside—was practically limited by a lack of resources, a weak financial base, ambiguous partners and subordinates, and the intensive particularism of the society over which it ruled.

Confucian literati officials were also caught in an irreconcilable tension between two different value systems: the norms of a universalistic bureaucracy, which demanded uniformity and impartiality, and the even more

pervasive norms of a society, in which loyalty and the fulfilment of obligations to strong personal networks of kin, friends and neighbours remained the most important imperatives. Once a native son had achieved a position of such high status, he would invariably be besieged by relatives, friends, and neighbours to provide them with scarce resources—employment, favours, and donations. It was a rare individual that could openly refuse such requests: an official career was temporary, while family and local ties lasted beyond one's lifetime.¹⁸

While Confucian state doctrine trumpeted the virtues of impartiality (*xu*) and carefulness (*shen*), it also recognized the importance of filial piety (*xiao*) and human feelings (*renqing*). Most officials could ill afford to alienate the dense social networks from which they had come and to which they would eventually return by appearing to be 'lacking in human feelings'. Nowhere was the contradiction between these two different value systems more aptly expressed than by Wang Huizi, a mid-Qing official who wrote the widely disseminated *Xuezhi Yishuo* (Opinions on Apprenticeship in Government), when he sighed, 'Follow the law and you will destroy personal affection; follow personal affection and you will abuse the law.'¹⁹ Often the pressures on the individual bureaucrat did not present choices in terms of clear rights and wrongs: rather, the bureaucrat had to balance between two, only partially reconcilable, types of 'right'. The rules and proscriptions of the bureaucratic state, the interests of the locality to which the bureaucrat was posted, and the demands of kith and kin back home rarely neatly converged.

Social norms that reified status hierarchy and displayed 'sensitivity to human feelings' were also replicated in the bureaucracy itself:²⁰ gift-giving, courtesy calls, and elaborate greeting and sending off for superior officials were omnipresent features of informal bureaucratic culture. Despite repeated proscriptions against gift-giving, the central bureaucracy was unable to stamp out practices so widely legitimated in society at large. Given the wide-ranging formal responsibilities of officials and the structural weaknesses that made carrying out the letter of those responsibilities so difficult, promotions, demotions, and impeachments in the bureaucracy were in all likelihood as much a reflection of how well the individual kept on the good side of his superiors as they were indicators of objective administrative excellence.²¹ While the imperial Chinese state selected its personnel on the basis of the impersonal criteria of examination success and had an exceptionally well elaborated and formal code of law and administrative procedure, the informal culture of the Confucian bureaucracy was unable to maintain exclusively universalist, impartial norms.

These, then, were the primary characteristics of the late imperial Chinese state: committed to the stability, order and cosmic harmony of a vast, heterogeneous empire, it was none the less systemically and normatively constrained in fulfilling its goals. The contradictions between a universa-

listically oriented, cosmopolitan bureaucracy and the localized, diverse, highly particularistic society in which it operated were never completely resolved. In prosperous times of good harvests and vigorous emperors, as was the situation for most of the eighteenth century, a dynamic balance was established between the natural tensions existing between these dual-value systems. But stresses of any kind, such as increasing population, bad harvests, or decline at the centre, tended to magnify the structural weaknesses of the presiding state and tip the balance towards particularism.

THE RANGE OF RESPONSE AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS

The nineteenth century brought a series of additional crises to the late imperial state. Population pressure, the increase of real taxes on the peasantry (arising from the appreciation of silver *vis à vis* copper), and the humiliations and disruptions engendered by Western imperialism and economic penetration led to all the classic external manifestations of dynastic decline: increased banditry, corrupt and ineffective local administration, and the spread of uncontrolled heterodox sects. When central military units collapsed before the Taiping rebels in the early 1850s, the dynasty had no alternative but to allow loyal provincial officials hitherto undreamed-of discretion to form effective local armies to put down the rebellion, accelerating a process that would prove to be a long decline of central power.

The responses of the Qing government and its provincial viceroys to the twin threat of internal rebellion and external pressure resulted in the growth of a set of *ad hoc* organizational structures parallel to, but never completely integrated with, the formal Confucian bureaucracy in the second half of the nineteenth century. The interest in the creation of limited alternative organizations came first from reformist provincial viceroys, who advocated the establishment of a series of 'self-strengthening' enterprises such as arsenals, shipyards, and military schools to promote military modernization. But the achievements of the military enterprises and the new modern schools were mixed.²² The Metropolitan bureaucracy and the Court never threw its full weight in support of the self-strengthening projects, whose implementation was piecemeal and uncoordinated, invariably depending on the uneven strength and sponsorship of provincial leaders. Careers in arsenals and shipyards lacked the prestige of established careers in the traditional civil service, continuously suffering from high turnover and lack of sustained leadership.²³

Concurrent with this limited movement for military modernization from the top down, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable explosion of new types of administrative organization from the bottom up. The Taiping crisis greatly expanded the amount of official

degrees available for purchase, and the growing numbers of individuals who bought degrees created a vast reservoir of ‘expectant officials’ (*houbu*).²⁴ These purchasers of degrees, along with individuals ‘recommended’ by high-ranking provincial officials, were often assigned to the growing number of local offices and projects that were springing up everywhere in the late nineteenth century—*lijin* bureaus to administer the new local taxes on the inland transport of goods, reconstruction bureaus, local gazeteer bureaus, and foreign affairs bureaus. The expectant officials were also prevalent in the local versions of ‘foreign’-inspired (*yangwu*) offices—telegraph bureaus, steamship companies, and cotton mills.

Although *ad hoc* administrative organizations proliferated in the late nineteenth century, a position in the self-strengthening enterprises or local administrative bureaus never commanded the prestige of the ‘regular’ official career. The enterprises and local specialized bureaus were irregular organizations created (or allowed to develop) to meet specific needs that the formal bureaucracy was ill-equipped or unwilling to handle on its own. As marginal organizations whose norms were unproven and unincorporated into the regular bureaucracy, they were accorded neither adequate leadership nor central support, and remained poorly coordinated with each other and the central bureaucracy. Careers in these supporting and *ad hoc* organizations were seen to be a poor second best, and were frequently used by the ambitious as springboards into the regular official bureaucracy. Until the imperial civil service examinations were abolished in 1905, most individuals continued to memorize the classics and practise eight-legged essays in the hope of examination success and an eventual career in the regular bureaucracy. For the central state, too, the fundamental norms of balance and harmony endured until the end of the century, despite rapid social change, the proliferation of *ad hoc* bureaus in the provinces, and deepening military, political and administrative crisis.

THE XINZHENG ERA: RECASTING AGENDAS IN THE CENTRAL STATE, 1902–1911

In the wake of renewed imperial encroachment, the defeat of the Boxer Uprising, and rising nationalist demands for national pride and power, in the early years of the twentieth-century Qing court abruptly shifted course and proceeded fundamentally to re-orient the agenda of the central state, adopting a series of far-reaching measures known as the *xinzheng* (‘new government’) reforms. The *xinzheng* reforms established a fundamentally different template for political organization, state agenda, and political evolution in China: it projected nothing less than the rapid transformation of an agrarian empire, committed to balancing and presiding, into a cen-

lized, commercial, dynamic, and modern country. In the years between 1903 and 1908, the Confucian civil service examinations were abolished; the central government ‘Six Boards’ were reorganized into modern ministries; military, educational, and police reform was promoted; plans were drawn up to directly project central government power much further into the provinces than had ever before been the case; and commissions were appointed to draw up programmes for the phased implementation of constitutional reform.²⁵

If the *xinzheng* programme represented a fundamental shift in central state goals and agenda, the objective circumstances for realizing those new goals were distinctly unfavourable. The raw materials that aspiring centralizers had to work with—weak central institutions, the perennial tension between universalism and particularism, substantial power concentrated in the hands of provincial viceroys, a weak fiscal base, and limited direct projective capacity—remained fundamentally unchanged. Furthermore, the *xinzheng* central reformers had to contend simultaneously with new, provincially based alternative visions for national development, and to some extent incorporated these visions into the larger *xinzheng* project. Local and provincial elites had filled the vacuum left by the waning of central state power after the Taiping Rebellion; these same elites grew increasingly activist, vocal, and involved in a wide range of new projects by the turn of the century, establishing modern schools, recovering railroad rights, and convening provincial assemblies.²⁶

Not surprisingly, these groups had their own conceptions as to how China should pursue the creation of wealth and power. The *xinzheng* reform package was, in fact, exceptionally ambiguous on the issue of local and provincial self-government. Memorials flew thick and fast on the advisability of representative government throughout the *xinzheng* era, the Qing established a preparatory commission for constitutional government (Xianzheng Bianchaguan) in 1907, and drafted multiple plans for the gradual transformation of the imperial system into a constitutional monarchy; but the role that provincial and local assemblies would play in the policy process was left unclear when the general thrust of the other parts of the *xinzheng* programme was to consolidate and project central power. Designed to transform China rapidly into a strong, modern country, the *xinzheng* centralizing reforms ironically provoked widespread resistance and alienation in the provinces, and eventually contributed to the provincial gentry’s withdrawal of support during the 1911 Revolution.

Ultimately, the dynasty proved unable to cope with the simultaneous rise of regional power, growing nationalism among the provincial gentry, and increasing demands to render the country strong and powerful, and it fell in 1911–12 to an uneasy coalition of northern militarists and southern republicans, who proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of China. But, while the 1911 Revolution was able to topple the Qing dynasty and

decisively end the system of imperial rule, it did not quickly create a convincing set of replacement political institutions, and still less did it usher in the anticipated goods of republicanism: modern representative democracy, national unity, and renewed vigour in combating China's international weakness and underdevelopment. The political elite split between northerners, military figures, and those who had been strongly identified with the former imperial government, who tended to favour vigorous recentralization, and southerners, returned students, and those active in the new provincial assemblies, who usually pressed for greater representation and federalism.²⁷ And, once Yuan Shikai failed in his bid to crush the southern republicans and establish strong central control in 1916, no remaining group was militarily, politically, or institutionally strong enough to impose its vision on the rest of the country, initiating a progressively descending spiral of militarism, political fragility, and internal disintegration.²⁸

With the onset of warlordism, internal political fragmentation, and continued external pressure, the remainder of the Republican period did not lack for aspiring centralizers whose goals, orientation, and agenda directly descended from the *xinzheng* reforms so belatedly undertaken by the Qing in its last decade of rule: despite the political change from Empire to Republic, there was broad continuity of central state agenda from the late Qing through the Republican period. Like the last generation of imperial reformers, most political executives in the Republican period took a fairly statist approach to national integration in the quest to make China strong and powerful, stressing military modernization and educational reform, encouraging commerce, and strengthening central government bodies. In addition, the vast majority of the top political players in both the Beiyang (1916–27) and Nationalist (1927–49) eras were socially conservative military men who had a consistent collective distaste for all forms of political participation that they could not directly control.

Unfortunately for the post-1911 governments of Republican China, the last years of the Qing passed on to its successor regime a set of structural weaknesses every bit as consistent as the new *xinzheng* agenda of central state and institution building, with a gap between central state goals and implementing capacity that was, if anything, even larger in the early Republic than it had been in the twilight years of the Qing. The old problems of weak central administration, weak resource extractive capacity, a non-unified military, ambiguous loyalty of central government personnel, and increasingly localist provincial elites worsened, compounded by the political disintegration and regional militarism of the 1910s and 1920s. Under these circumstances, dramatically increasing the central state's institutional capacity remained problematic.

The bureaucratic elites of the Republic were as much influenced by the traditions and practices of the late imperial state as they were constrained

by the political pressures of contemporary reality. Even the self-consciously revolutionary Nationalists, who came to power significantly after the 1911 Revolution, continued to be powerfully influenced by many of the ideals and the institutional heritage of the late imperial Chinese state. Long after the political disintegration of the empire, the sheer weight of thousands of years of Chinese statehood, tradition, and cultural pride continued to exhibit a strong influence on the mind-set and actions of twentieth-century bureaucratic elites even as they struggled to implement new ideas, new programmes, and new goals in building a modern state.

BACKGROUND TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

When it established the National Government (Guomin Zhengfu) as the central government of China in April 1927, the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) was a weak, fractured entity still struggling with unresolved questions regarding its own identity. As a revolutionary party reorganized along Leninist lines by Soviet advisors in 1923–4, the Guomindang was unequivocably committed to national reunification, anti-imperialism, national dignity and salvation, and economic development. In practice, the Guomindang was a bewildering collection of groups and factions upon which a thin veneer of Leninist discipline had been lain. The best methods for achieving the laudable goals on which all could agree proved to be insurmountably far-ranging, with the Communists on the far left (who had been ordered by Moscow to cooperate with the Guomindang and accept Guomindang membership) advocating class struggle and radical social transformation, the 'left' Guomindang gravitating towards mass movements and social transformation but stopping short of endorsing class struggle, the revolutionary military elite (trained at the newly established Whampoa Military Academy) favouring chain-of-command discipline and focusing on securing military stability, and groups on the far right inherently distrusting the mass mobilization methods of the Communists and the 'left' Guomindang. Not only did these groups all promote different strategies for the achievement of national dignity and power, they were themselves shot through with personality-based networks of kinship, friendship, sworn brotherhoods, and old school ties. Thus, the history of the Northern Expedition to unify the country (launched by the Guomindang's National Revolutionary Army from its base in Guangzhou in July, 1926 and officially completed with the occupation of Beijing in June, 1928) and the concurrent formal establishment of the National Government in Nanjing in April of 1927 were crucial to the subsequent patterns of attempted institutionalization during the 1930s.

At what ought to have been the moment of its greatest success, as the National Revolutionary Army reached the big cities along the Yangzi River, the precariously maintained coalition openly broke apart. While the 'left' Guomindang established a provisional government in Wuhan, Chiang Kai-shek headed east to exploit the vast resources of Shanghai, the commercial heart of China. In so doing, Chiang tilted definitively towards the right. He entered into an alliance with the Shanghai capitalists and underworld, condoned the massacre of thousands of Communists in the city, established his own government in Nanjing, and set about extirpating Communist and leftist influence within the Guomindang and in the areas that it militarily controlled.²⁹

In retrospect, it seems surprising that the Nanjing government survived at all; in mid-1927 it was faced with enemies on all sides and dissension within its own ranks. The issues with which it initially had to deal included the existence of (1) a rival government set up by an equally credible wing of the Guomindang in Wuhan, (2) a group of ultra-conservatives in the Guomindang who claimed sole legitimate authority, and (3) a forbidding number of powerful independent militarists in the north who stood between Nanjing and the overriding goal of national reunification under its aegis. The Wuhan government crumbled from lack of incoming funds, the new centre-right coalition under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek reprimanded and re-included the hardline conservatives, and it then opted for a policy of cooptation and accommodation with the northern warlords. In exchange for the militarists' formal acceptance of the flag of the new National Government, they were brought into the government, given high positions, and, in the many instances in which the new government was unable to make good its claims to sovereignty in the provinces, were allowed *de facto* continued control over regional taxes and administration.

The process by which the National Government was tentatively established in 1927–8 had a resounding impact on the future direction of the regime. With the purge of the Communists and the Left, and the inclusion of warlords, industrialists, and various local elites whose commitment to any sort of revolutionary principles was highly questionable, the National Government under a Guomindang dominated by Chiang Kai-shek turned definitively away from bottom-up organization and social mobilization and opted instead for a top-down, elitist approach of simultaneous centralization and cooptation as the prevailing strategy to lead China from weakness, fragmentation, and humiliation to the national goals of unity, wealth, and power.

The circumstances for so doing in the late 1920s were hardly conducive to success. The struggle for unity had exposed irremediable divisions within the revolutionary movement; the upper echelons of the National Govern-

ment and the Nationalist Party were still riven with cross-cutting factional cleavages and personality clashes; the territory to which the new government pretended included only two and a half provinces under the direct control of the National Government; and the combination of continued threats from within and an extraordinarily hostile international environment meant that the regime could not relax its already substantially heavy military slant. Military and fiscal weakness, in combination with the political elite's real belief in the organic unity of the Chinese people, and an increasing fear of open divisions and 'chaos' (*luan*) led the regime to include virtually all those who did not openly oppose the new government beneath a thin veneer of formal authority.

In addition, many of the basic operations of the newly established National Government exhibited a curiously schizophrenic character. Once the Guomindang had narrowed the definition of 'revolution' to mean a statist 'revolution from above', the vast majority of the actions and policies of the government continued the top-down, centralizing, state-building imperative that had first emerged with the *xinzheng* reforms in the last years of the dynasty, pursued by Yuan Shikai during the early Republic, and pretended to by a host of Beiyang governments in the years since 1916. The legitimating ideology of Sun Yat-sen could not be completely jettisoned by the Nationalist Party he created and reorganized, however. Even as it sought to re-centralize military and administrative control, the Nanjing regime promoted a cult of Sun's thought as the moral and ideological underpinning of its own rule.

The ideas underlying these two quite different visions of state reconstitution were only uneasily reconcilable. Sun's thought, such as it could be compressed into a legitimating canon for an increasingly militarily dominated and socially conservative regime, were far from consistent and therefore were exceptionally open to a fair amount of redefining and reinterpretation after he passed from the scene. But in the *Fundamentals of National Reconstruction* and *The Three Principles of the People*, which were the major documents repeatedly used to ground and legitimate Guomindang domination of state and society, Sun stressed the idea that local self-government ought to be implemented after a period of time in which the people were properly trained by the revolutionary party in the arts of self-government. There is no question that he envisioned a new government with powers that were divided both in the central government itself and between the central and regional governments.³⁰ On the other hand, the centralizing imperative characteristic of the state-building efforts that were begun in the very late Qing and early Republic stressed a strong executive that reduced all other elements in the political system to an advisory and handmaiden status in the interests of standardization, integration, and the creation of a strong central state.

Sun's ideas about 'Five Power Government' drew heavily from American political concepts about the desirability of divided power, and stipulated the eventual organization of the central government with five separate but equal supreme government bodies, which would comprise the Executive, Legislative, Judicial, Examination, and Censorial Yuan. Equally, despite the due establishment of these five organizations as the basis of the National Government in the late 1920s, the bulk of central government action in the Nationalist years was, as it had been for the earlier Beiyang, Yuan Shikai, and *xinzheng* central governments, heavily slanted towards statism, central control, and central institution building, with the bulk of real power vested in *ad hoc* military commissions with no formal constitutional status, and in the Executive Yuan.

The institutional ambiguities of the Nationalist era were not confined to the relative distribution of power between centre and regions: they were inherent to the makeup of the regime itself. Despite the formal separation of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and the Guomin Zhengfu (National Government) that was established in 1927, the relations between the two organizations were similarly characterized by redundancy and confusion, particularly at the top, as typically the leading figures in the government were also leading figures in the Guomindang Central Executive Committee and/or in important military organizations. With such overlap in two hierarchically organized bodies, the question of whether government policy was determined on the basis of decisions made in the upper echelons of the Guomindang, the National Government, or simply on the basis of informal arrangements between the key elite that shared positions in both underscored the lack of institutionalization from above.

Certainly at the apex of the political system, party, state, and personalities all merged to produce policy orientations for state organizations to carry out. But, in contrast to the Chinese Communist Party in the People's Republic some twenty years later, the Guomindang, however much it may have wished to do so, was never able to act as a shadow government with Party committees that emasculated state organizations from within. Guomindang influence in the National Government's state organizations was indirect, implemented by virtue of responsibility to either the Executive Yuan or to a minister who took his cues from decisions reached by the Guomindang Central Executive Committee. Except at the very top, the Guomindang and the National Government remained separate and readily distinguishable entities throughout the Nanjing Decade. However, the overlap between the personalities and informal groups with dual membership in both the Nationalist Party and the National Government both generated confusion over authority and prevented institutionalization at top decision-making levels, as those in the key elite often held multiple positions in party, government and military organizations.

In few policy areas of the fledgling government were the government's goals, the stresses and strains of its inherited institutional weaknesses, and the difficulties posed by its inclusive and co-optive strategy of state reintegration more visible and more problematic than in the design and execution of the national personnel system, and it is to this topic that we now turn.