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# Interplay Between Nationalist Weaknesses and Communist Strengths in the Outcome of the Second Stage of the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949)

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## ABSTRACT

A year after the sudden ending of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the second stage of the Chinese Civil War began and ended in 1949 with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There is heated debate on the cause of the Nationalists' defeat: Was it the CCP's strengths or the Guomindang (GMD)'s weaknesses? The outcome of the war was ultimately an interplay between the GMD's weaknesses and the CCP's strengths. The GMD made serious tactical errors in areas where the CCP was strong, which exacerbated the GMD's deficiencies, and bolstered the CCP's status as a viable alternative. In terms of both popular support and military successes, the GMD fell short, which was in stark contrast to the CCP's immense gains. This essay demonstrates how, first of all, the Nationalists lost the support of key social groups while the Communists won their support through the attraction of their ideology and the promise of socio-economic reforms. Second, the GMD made errors that deeply weakened their military strategy while the CCP embraced mobile warfare. In the end, the GMD's failures were not enough to lead to their defeat, nor did the CCP's strengths alone cause their success.

*Keywords:* China; Chinese History; Chinese Revolution; Communist Revolution; Chinese Civil War; Chinese Communist Party; Guomindang

## Introduction

The Chinese Civil War was fought between the ruling Nationalist Guomindang Party (GMD) and the revolutionary Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The war was divided into two stages. Following the White Terror and fall of the First United Front in 1927, the first stage spanned from 1927 to late 1936. The war was interrupted in 1936-1946 by the Second United Front, an alliance between the two parties in an effort to resist the Japanese occupation of China. After the end of World War II and the surrender of Japan, several foreign countries, such as the United States, attempted to broker ceasefires between the GMD and the CCP. However, eventually, hostilities broke out, and the second stage of the internal war, which was arguably more decisive and is the center of this essay, commenced in 1946 and ended with the Communists' victory in 1949 (Fitzgerald, 1971). This essay posits that the debate on the cause of the Nationalists' defeat can be settled when considering the close interplay between the Nationalists' mistakes and the Communists' strengths. One may argue that it was the Nationalists' war to lose as the ruling party or that the Sino-Japanese War made it impossible for the GMD to recover, and others may claim the CCP's rapid growth in popularity was inevitable due to the social, political, and economic factors that made the Communists' ideology so appealing to the masses. However, it would be a stretch to assert that the CCP would have risen to power without the GMD's mistakes: only truly deep discontent could affect such massive changes. At the same time, if the CCP was not as strong as it was, the Civil War would have ended differently. This essay will first explore the interplay between the GMD's loss of popular support and the CCP's gain thereof, followed by an analysis of the relationship between the GMD's weaknesses and the CCP's strengths on the battlefield. The essay will conclude by addressing the counterarguments to the thesis.

## Defining 'Defeat' in the Chinese Civil War

The criteria for determining the Civil War's outcome are two-fold: one, either party's ability to retain or earn popular support, and two, military successes against one another.

This analysis explores popular support among key social groups: the middle class, intellectuals, and peasants. One may argue that the war can only be judged through military factors, and scholars in the West post-1949 contested the role of popular support in contributing to the outcome of the struggle. However, as historian James Sheridan (1975) posits, the desire of Americans to assess the war simply in military terms seems to be rooted in the context of the Cold War; many refused to acknowledge that a Communist party could have genuine popular support. First of all, given the conditions that existed in China during the civil war, the question of military victory and popular support are not separate issues, but two aspects of the same phenomenon. As demonstrated in this essay, the Communists' ability to garner support from the public, and in particular the peasants, lent immense strength to their military abilities given the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s use of "People's Warfare", or guerrilla warfare, which depended on cooperation from locals. Secondly, popular support was a key factor in the GMD's defeat as the Nationalists had proclaimed to adopt a democratic form of government under Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles, the second of which outlined that "China must be made a republic" (Gregor, 1981). The erosion of popular support thus undermined their legitimacy as a governing body, giving full reign to the Communists. Furthermore, following the Western idea of "Consent of the Governed", which states that a government "deriv[es] their just powers from the consent of the governed", the Nationalists no longer maintained the power to justifiably act upon the people (West, 2017).

Military successes, which are not contested as viable factors to assess the Civil War, are analyzed through military strategy, the competence of generals, and the morale of troops. Thus, the Nationalists' defeat in the Civil War resulted from their loss of popular support and military blunders, which contrasted simultaneously with the CCP's surge in popularity and decisive attacks. Historian James Sheridan (1975) shares this position, observing: "The Civil War can be described as the erosion of government strength, and the concurrent expansion of Communist power."

## Interplay between the GMD's Loss of Popular Support and the CCP's Gain

### *The GMD's Loss of Popular Support from the Middle Class*

A key effect of the GMD's economic mismanagement, in comparison to the CCP's capacity to maintain economic stability, was the rapid loss of support from the middle class. Hyper-inflation accelerated during the Second Stage of the Civil War, and a key cause was that Chiang Kai Shek, the leader of the Guomindang, failed to develop revenues sufficient to meet wartime needs as he expected a quick victory against the CCP. Therefore, this mistake meant the government was forced to resort to inflationary measures as a means of paying for the war (Bianco & Bell, 1971, p. 194). Furthermore, the GMD failed to institute effective exchange controls until 1948, and in the fall, 1 dollar in the US was worth approximately 12 million *fapi*, the legal currency of Nationalist China. In a drastic move, the government replaced the *fapi*, the legal Nationalist currency, with a gold yuan note. However, in November, the central bank began to sell gold again; a month later, the yuan collapsed (Campbell & Tullock, 1954, p. 8). The consequence of the inflation was large-scale income redistribution, which had adverse political effects on the GMD. The urban middle class suffered the most from the price hike and the devastating blow dealt to government officials made corruption prevalent (Hu, 1971, p. 3). These issues quickly eroded any remaining popular support as the public grew mistrustful of the government and became disgusted at the corruption. Weary cynicism pervaded public attitudes toward the GMD with the CCP finding favor with the middle class (Sheridan, 1975, p. 278). The communists had demonstrated their ability to ensure economic order on a regional level through their policies in line with Communist ideology in the Yenan Soviet and liberated areas during the Sino-Japanese War. This suggested they could deliver on the national level.

### *The GMD's Loss of Popular Support from Intellectuals*

Beyond the middle class, intellectuals had begun to doubt the GMD's leadership in comparison to the CCP as well. Intellectuals had been fiercely

anti-imperialist since at least the 1919 May Fourth Movement and fixed their disdain on the GMD's strong public reliance on the US, which subtly linked the GMD with imperialism in general (Shuja, 1976, p. 6). The CCP painted Chiang as against Chinese nationalism and capitulating to imperialist powers through the use of propaganda, building on the propaganda from the Sino-Japanese War that showed Chiang as reluctant to fight the Japanese. The CCP supplanted the Japanese in the popular mind with the American imperialist, whose evil nature Communist soldiers could verify by inspecting "made in USA" on captured GMD weapons. If the phrase was missing, commanders often inscribed it themselves before distributing weapons (Bianco & Bell, 1971, p. 186). Furthermore, the CCP effectively used ideology as they were the most uncompromisingly anti-imperialist party in the country. They viewed imperialism as a product of capitalism and used force to demonstrate this to the public. In Spring 1949, Communist troops clashed with a British naval frigate, resulting in many dead and severe damage to the ship (Ibid, p. 143). This made Chinese intellectuals see in action the kind of resolve toward imperialist powers that the GMD lacked. Moreover, many intellectuals accepted the idea that China could never be a world power until its peasants were brought out of oppression. While this view did not produce much practical action in the countryside on the part of the majority of intellectuals, the GMD's mismanagement and ensuing exacerbation of the situation was starkly compared to CCP's humane policies towards peasants (Westad, 2003, p. 351).

Whereas Communism had various appeals to Chinese intellectuals, the GMD seemed to only offer a step backward for society. The GMD's most appealing aspects, supposed commitment to democracy and Westernization, were so flagrantly violated that they had little positive effect on intellectuals. In practice, the GMD ignored the most progressive parts of its ideology, and instead, authorities and officials regularly abused their power, ultimately failing to inspire the masses (Sheridan, 1975, p. 23). The CCP was strengthened by this influx of support from intellectuals as they often aided in the organization of peasant masses.

### *The GMD's Loss of Popular Support from Peasants*

One of the main social groups that the GMD failed to gain support from was the peasants. Social context is key here as, even as the responsible ruling

party, the GMD failed to address the dire conditions facing the peasants caused by unequal land distribution, taxes, rent, and oppression by landowners, not to mention several years of military occupation and destruction. The conditions that prevailed in China had left nearly half a billion people in dire poverty and vulnerable to abuse and early death. However, there is a debate on whether such suffering was caused by objective factors, such as lack of available wealth to distribute or the Nationalist government actively contributed to the peasants' living conditions. Historian Lucien Bianco (1971) traces the cause of this failure to Chiang himself and his personal predilections, asserting that it would have been relatively easy to redistribute land through reforms. However, Chiang was initially only interested in peasant reform to weaken the communist support base, but later shortsightedly assumed that military means would suffice to defeat the CCP. In 1935-36, only 3.7% of the national budget was allocated to rural reconstruction (Bianco & Bell, 1971, p. 110). This perspective suggests a greater significance of the GMD's mistakes.

Furthermore, the Nationalists routinely used force on the peasants, exclusively subjecting them to conscription. To the peasants, the Nationalist military was the "quintessence of evil". Beyond this context, the GMD's failure to address these conditions even after 1945 cost them immense popular support (Lynch, 2016, p. 86). In 1945, some peasants merely wished to avoid conflict, whether under the helm of the CCP or the GMD. However, it became clear that the GMD's return meant the undoing of social and political advances the CCP had made in 'liberated areas' which the peasants took for granted. This included the repeal of reforms on interest rates, land tax, and land rent that they had presumed to be part of any postwar government programs (Van De Ven, 2017, p. 111). Thus, this deficiency encouraged continued CCP occupation of their land and doubled the appeal of the Communist's ideology.

### *The CCP's Gain of Popular Support from Peasants*

Accordingly, the CCP's strengths gained them peasant support, most likely their most significant source of popular support. For one, as demonstrated above, after 1945, the CCP's legitimacy and authority were perpetuated because of the lasting impression its policies and ensuing improvements left on peasants.

To the peasants in those regions, the Communist administration during the Sino-Japanese war was the best government system they had known (Fitzgerald, 1971, p. 334). The Communists continued the practices during the Civil War that had earlier commanded popular approval, such as the use of propaganda. Mao and the leadership were keen on contrasting the 'evil' of the government with the humane approach of the Red Army/PLA. For example, soldiers did not abuse civilians; they paid for what they used; troops helped the peasantry when the opportunity or need arose. The Eighth Route Army's behavior toward the peasants contradicted their entire previous experience of the military (Lynch, 2016, p. 90). The key effect of this *modus operandi* was that it facilitated the spread of ideology as wherever Communists acquired territorial power, they were able to institute a series of political and economic reforms along their doctrine, which also benefited the peasants.

Meanwhile, the CCP applied its goal of a comprehensive social revolution and enacted increasingly radical agrarian policies in the Communist base areas throughout the second stage of the Civil War, thoroughly addressing the mistakes of the GMD. In 1946, the Communist Party approved seizures by local authorities to return landlords' holdings to the poor peasants in some communities. The CCP leadership built on this momentum, and on October 10, 1947, Mao promulgated The Outline Land Law that abolished the land ownership rights of all landlords and authorized peasant associations to distribute land equally among all residents (Kuo-chün, 1951, p. 4). Also, the law canceled all debts incurred in the countryside. A key effect was that in the winter, while some rich peasants rallied to the side of government troops, tenant farmers, small proprietors, and farmworkers who made up the majority flocked to the Communists (Bianco & Bell, 1971, p. 255). Mao also used force in enacting Speak Bitterness sessions in the liberated areas. Such mass political participation was a method of propaganda with the effect of indoctrinating peasants in Communist values and commanding the enthusiasm of peasants as the CCP fully addressed the oppression they faced during the Nanjing decade, a term coined by Sheridan referring to the GMD's rule from 1927 to 1937.

Furthermore, given the pre-existing conditions in China and the nature of the PLA, the question of popular support and military victories are two sides of the same coin. Thus, the CCP's popular peasant support

led to the CCP's military strength of guerilla warfare. The PLA successfully developed links of intimate trust with the peasantry to operate the guerillas (Ibid, 203). As Mao said, no matter how much the GMD studied the Communists' combat techniques, the former could never hope to apply them successfully because it was incapable of winning the unwavering popular support that the latter commanded (Ibid, 186). The peasants also provided the food, intelligence, and various forms of help needed in guerrilla warfare. The enlistment rate closely reflected the progress of the agrarian reforms, such as in Manchuria, where the distribution of land was carried out most thoroughly, providing the PLA with 1.6 million recruits between June 1946 and June 1948 (Fairbank, 1986, p. 112).

## Interplay between the GMD's Military Weaknesses and the CCP's Strengths

### *Military Strategy and Traditional vs. Guerilla Warfare*

According to Sheridan, similar to popular support, the CCP had strengths in the exact areas where the GMD exhibited weaknesses, demonstrating the interplay between the two factors. For one, the GMD's traditional, prestigious battle strategy was severely damaging to the Nationalists, particularly in comparison to the CCP's fast, mobile warfare. Chiang and ineffective leaders played a significant role in misguiding its army (Westad, 2003, p. 102). Chiang's strategy envisaged the seizure and retention of cities, even where Communist control of the surrounding countryside left his troops dependent upon airlifted supplies. On occasion, Chiang tried to direct distant battles by telegraph. Chiang desperately attempted to modernize his army but maintained traditional warfare with marches and countermarches. On the other hand, Mao carefully dealt with military realities and gave no weight to considerations of prestige. He developed a clear strategy that put into effect swift attacks aimed at the destruction of GMD armies rather than the seizure of territory (Bianco & Bell, 1971, p. 190). In fact, Mao's army struck mortal blows against the central armies led by Chiang. The interplay between the strengths and weaknesses of military strategies is best exemplified by the 3 campaigns, Liaoshen, Huaihai, Pingjin from 1948-

49 (Li, 2012, p. 387). Chiang miscalculated, straining government finances and losing hundreds of thousands of troops by concentrating on Manchuria when he should have been defending the area south of the Great Wall. Moreover, the PLA's ability to adapt its warfare to both conventional (great battles and city sieges) and guerilla approaches led them to successfully attack the GMD troops while conducting massive infiltration of the countryside, facilitated by their peasant popular support (Ibid, p. 391).

### *Competence of Military Generals and Commanders*

Furthermore, the GMD generals were commonly chosen on grounds of political loyalty to Chiang, which led to incompetent military commanders, demonstrating the role of Chiang's pride and suspiciousness. Chiang repeatedly recalled and replaced commanders, resulting in a discontinuity in leadership that crippled any possible Nationalist initiative (Fairbank, 1986, p. 124). Not only incompetence but corruption was rampant among the GMD generals, who stole and sold government property, sometimes to the Communists. However, Communist field commanders were selected on merit, and given wide latitude to use their own judgment. They ran generally aggressive, sometimes brilliant campaigns. Communist armies were marked by a continuity of command. The same generals, Chu Teh, Peng The-Huai, Lin Piao, Chen I, and Liu Po-cheng had remained in command not only throughout the Civil War but since the Long March (Bianco & Bell, 1971, p. 192).

### *Morale of Troops*

With such dysfunctional leadership, morale in the government armies was understandably at rock bottom. This was exacerbated by the deplorable conditions pervading the army after the Sino-Japanese War. Desertion and defection of entire units were common as soldiers were inadequately paid and fed; training was poor to nonexistent; discipline was bad; men did not know what they were fighting for, and thus saw no reason to fight (Hsü, 1970, p. 288). To prevent desertion, the government went on the defensive to limit troop interaction with the Communist side. Conversely, the CCP soldiers were well cared for, well trained, and thoroughly indoctrinated about the need and purpose of the struggle (Ibid, 301). The intelligent Communist strategy of fighting only when success seemed assured

cultivated a feeling of victory and stimulated a spirit of boldness that contrasted vividly with the defensive mentality of the GMD (Van De Ven, 2017, p. 86). Communists encouraged defections by indoctrinating captured troops and then allowing them to return to their units if they wished. While the GMD defectors at first might not have known what they were fighting for, they knew that their Communist counterparts were not mistreated (Ibid, p. 87).

## Alternative Revolutionary Parties

Others may argue that the cause of the GMD's defeat lies entirely with the weaknesses of the Nationalists and that the Chinese Communists simply stepped into a vacuum as "any organization could have seized power in 1949". One may present the CCP as the only alternative due to their experience with regional governance, specifically in the Yanan Soviet, while simultaneously recognizing the active failures on part of the GMD after the Sino-Japanese War. However, Sheridan (1975) disagrees and points to Chinese liberals as a potential leading party as well. In 1944, China's Democratic League was created, which was the most organized political movement of Chinese liberalism, and it tried vigorously to become a third force in Chinese politics after the Japanese surrender. Even General George Marshall, who was sent by U.S. President Harry Truman to negotiate a ceasefire between the Nationalists and Communists, said that the "salvation of the situation ... would be the assumption of leadership by the liberals in the Government and in the minority parties, a splendid group of men..." (U.S. Department of State, p. 688). However, Chinese liberalism was much too weak for the task. In the end, no other party was strong enough to contribute to the demise of the GMD as the CCP was (Sheridan, 1975, p. 280). This was largely due to the CCP's experience in regional governance and because the social-economic conditions perpetuated by the GMD were innately addressed by communist ideology. Only because CCP strengths directly addressed the weaknesses of the GMD was a revolutionary party able to succeed.

## Role of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)

Arguing for a 'conditions' based perspective,

the historian Immanuel Hsu (1970) attributes the GMD's defeat to the impact of the Sino-Japanese War: "The single most important near cause for the downfall of the Nationalists was the eight-year Japanese war" (Hsü, 1970, p. 213). Hsu argues that while the Nationalist Army was a tired and weary force, the Communists did not bear the brunt of the fighting. While it is true that the GMD was involved in the majority of the conflict, based on the relative size of the opposing armies (the Communist troops were outnumbered four to one), and the arms and equipment at their disposal, the CCP still seemed destined for quick defeat (Sheridan, 1975, p. 67). To account for the GMD's initial successes, Hsu argues that its "credible performance before 1948 represented a last desperate thrust before the final collapse" (Hsu, 1970, p. 98). However, this argument is simplistic as Communist victories at the turning point of the war, such as in the Huaihai Campaign, were not caused because the GMD suddenly "tired" out. Rather, the CCP had adapted to conventional warfare and Chiang had made poor military decisions. Furthermore, even the heightened nationalism of the immediate postwar period served as an advantage as public opinion credited the advances China had made with the government to which people naturally looked for leadership in consolidating these gains. Chiang's prestige was at its "zenith" after 1945, argues Bianco (1971).

## Conclusion

The Chinese Civil War concluded with the Communists' victory in 1949. Chiang left mainland China shortly after with hundreds of thousands of GMD soldiers to establish the Republic of China in Taiwan. In terms of analyzing the cause of the outcome, the GMD's failures were not enough to lead to their defeat, nor did the CCP's strengths alone cause their success. Both contributed to some extent as there was significant interplay between them. For one, the CCP's gain of popular support directly addressed the mistakes of the GMD in its treatment of the middle class, intellectuals, and peasants. Similarly, the GMD's military weaknesses fell short in the areas where the CCP was notably strong: military strategy, the competence of commanders, and morale of troops. While the GMD did allow themselves to be defeated, the CCP's strengths were crucial as no other group could have brought about the GMD's demise as quickly if at all.

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