

Factionalism and the Left Kuomintang

JAMES SHIRLEY

Northern Illinois University

Among factions of the Kuomintang, the *tsu-p'ai* ("leftist faction"), more commonly called the Left KMT, stands out as having been discussed far more often than any other faction of the Party. From Stalin and Trotsky on down, the subject has been worked over by communist theorists as well as by many non-communist students of twentieth-century Chinese politics. All the effort devoted to the subject has generally resulted in the observation that the Left KMT, if not the figment of someone's imagination, was so weak as to be insignificant. That so much time and effort should have been devoted to study of this aspect of the KMT, to the neglect of other aspects, is only partly the result of the involvement of the Left KMT in the dramatic events of 1927; it is more the result of the primary concentration of our interests on the history of the Chinese Communist Party. It may be (although I doubt it) that lost causes deserve less attention from historians than successful ones and that the neglect of Kuomintang history is thus normal. In the 1920's, however, the Chinese Communist Party represented the lost cause, the KMT the successful one; and to write the history of the 1920's as if the KMT were no more than an obstacle in the path of the Communists, or a vehicle that the Communists might drive, is to distort the history of the period seriously.

In the 1920's, the KMT rode to power in China with the assistance of the Communists, then attempted to smash its former allies. It may well be true, as Senator Knowland recently remarked, that Knowland and his friends are only using the Birch Society for their own purposes; and that after those purposes are achieved the allies will be cast away like squeezed-out lemons. To pose the question of who

is using whom is not entirely accurate—both are attempting to win political control for themselves by using the other. In the 1920's, the Communists clearly hoped to use the Kuomintang to attain their own goals; it is equally certain that the Kuomintang intended from the beginning of the Communist alliance to make use of the Communists for KMT purposes. It is true that the Chinese Communist Party grew rapidly through the alliance, but it is seldom understood that the KMT too profited immensely from Communist support. When Sun Yat-sen formed the alliance in 1922, he was the bitter, defeated leader of a small and dispirited revolutionary party. Before the alliance was broken off, his Party had achieved dominance in Chinese politics.

There is another dimension to this pattern of political alliance that is crucial to an understanding of the Left KMT. No significant political party can be expected to show total unity within; its membership is not likely to be fully committed to exactly the same goals. A political party is usually a collection of groups with competing interests within a common framework of goals. From these competing interests, and from the ambitions of individuals, factions are derived. As the party struggles together against outsiders to achieve its common purposes, there is a parallel struggle for power inside the party. This intra-party struggle is fully as serious and as important as the greater one in the world outside. When the Chinese Communists were admitted, on Sun Yat-sen's order, to the Kuomintang, they entered the Party as a ready-made faction, and came to participate in ready-made factional conflicts. It is true that the Communist faction attempted to make use of the Left KMT to gain its own objectives within the Party; similarly, the Left KMT made use of the Communists, with great success, to achieve its purposes. Properly read, I think, the history of this period shows that the Kuomintang was more successful in making use of the Communists than the Communists were in making use of the Kuomintang, and that the Left KMT was more successful in utilizing the Communist faction than the latter was in utilizing the Left KMT.

In describing the Left KMT as a faction, I am following Chinese usage. To do so, I think, distorts the actuality of the Left KMT a bit. The problem is that the Left KMT was no more a coherent entity than was the Kuomintang. One could think of the Left KMT

as something other than a faction, perhaps as a super-faction, or alliance of factions, to emphasize its unstable nature. It is better, however, to continue to think of the Left KMT as a faction, with careful notation of the fact that even factions have factions. The Left KMT was then a collection of groups that wanted to ensure that the Left KMT controlled the Party, but each group of which wanted to control the Left KMT. Once the first objective had been attained, the Left KMT quite naturally fell apart at the seams.

Those who discuss the Left KMT generally think of it primarily as it existed at the end, as the group that controlled the Wuhan regime in 1927, under the leadership of Wang Ching-wei. To insist that the Wuhan group was all there was of the Left KMT is unhistorical; one must look at the situation in considerably greater depth. It may be right, for example, to describe the Left KMT of 1927 as a "pillowcase stuffed with red feathers,"¹ but that is certainly no adequate description of the Left KMT in general. The dramatic conflict of 1927 between the Wuhan regime of Wang Ching-wei and the Nanking regime of Chiang Kai-shek is normally presented as a battle between left and right; it was, rather, an open struggle for Party power between the two chief constituent factions of the Left KMT.

One of the major difficulties in understanding the Left KMT lies in the definition of the term "left": what did it mean in the Chinese context of the 1920's? First of all, we have to recognize that "left" and "right" as political descriptions do not derive from the Chinese political experience. They are terms evolved from European parliamentary experience, and were apparently introduced to the Chinese scene by the Communists. I have never seen them used by Chinese before the Communists began to participate in Chinese politics, and the terms were certainly used more commonly by Communists than by KMT members. Kuomintang leaders seem always to have been uncomfortable with them. Sun Yat-sen, as far as I know, never used them; in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek specifically labelled the usage of such divisive terms as one of the crimes committed by the Communists against the KMT.²

Wang Ching-wei's usage of these terms is interesting, since he is generally considered the Left KMT leader *par excellence*. Wang never made a published reference to the terms until 1926. Then, although demonstrating that he knew the European parliamentary

context of the terms, he chose to confuse the issue by citing an ancient Chinese literary reference:³

Han Chou-po told the soldiers: "All in favor of Liu, bare your left shoulders; all in favor of Lü, bare your right shoulders." All the soldiers bared their left shoulders; Lü was destroyed and Liu was restored. We can see that the terms "left" and "right" come from very ancient times.

This passage, I think, suggests some peculiarities about Wang's leftism. Moreover, among the rare examples of Wang's usage of the term "left" is a private letter written at the height of the Wuhan regime. In it, Wang disclaimed any knowledge of what the Left KMT was—precisely at the moment he was being publicly proclaimed its leader.⁴ It is true that for the next few years Wang allowed his friends to describe him as a leftist, apparently hoping to attract support away from the Communists. After 1931, however, he abandoned this tactic; as his English-language spokesman, T'ang Leang-li, put it, the choice of the term "left" was unfortunate since it smacked of Communism.⁵ After that date, one seldom sees the term used by KMT members except in attacks on Wang, where it appears, derisively, as "the so-called left."

Wang Ching-wei wore the leftist label very lightly indeed, so lightly that we should know, even without the aid of his career, that he was no genuine leftist. His lack of commitment, however, was far from unique—virtually every other Kuomintang leader of the 1920's at one time or another wore the same label with equal unconcern. Through long years of usage in their European context, "left" and "right" acquired meanings which are relative and somewhat vague. In the Kuomintang, where their usage was new, the meanings associated with them were much too precise. A KMT leftist, by definition, was one who supported the Communist alliance; a rightist, one who opposed it from the beginning. In 1922, when that issue was first raised, virtually every KMT leader was a leftist. Wang Ching-wei may have been one of the rare exceptions to this rule; but the most prominent early rightist, Chang Chi, was no exception: in 1922 he was a leading leftist, and stood as Li Ta-chao's guarantor for admission to the Kuomintang.

This easy fluctuation between left and right was possible because the Communists fixed the definition of "leftist" or "rightist" on the

single issue of the KMT-Communist alliance. Those who favored the alliance were leftists, those who opposed it were rightists. If that issue had possessed necessary social content, if it had been a genuine test of the revolutionary positions of the various leaders in the Kuomintang, then the terminology would have had significant meaning. Sun Yat-sen chose to ally with the Communists not because he approved of communism, but because he needed desperately the assistance offered by Communists. Other Party members either followed the same logic, or accepted the alliance out of loyalty to Sun, or thought it could contribute to personal or factional advancement in the Party. Their decisions had nothing to do with ideology, and everything to do with tactics.

As a matter of tactics, the decision to support the alliance could be reviewed at any time. When conditions changed, KMT leaders reconsidered regularly the tactical value of the alliance, and, as an increasing number withdrew their support from the alliance, there was a gradual but steady decline in the number classified as leftists. By 1925, this drift had become significant enough to force the coining of the term "new right wing," to distinguish ex-leftists from those who had never held that position. In the spring of 1927, the Communists were reluctantly forced to add Chiang Kai-shek's name to the list of new rightists; that summer, virtually all the rest of the old leftists followed Chiang into that category, and there was nothing left that the Communists could classify as a Left KMT. Old KMT leftists could become new rightists overnight because the transition had nothing to do with their philosophical positions; it had only to do with their decisions on one aspect of revolutionary tactics.

During Sun Yat-sen's lifetime, the drift away from the alliance was insignificant. Sun rewarded those who favored his policy, and the careers of leftists like Liao Chung-k'ai, Wang Ching-wei, and Chiang Kai-shek boomed, while those of Old Comrades like Hu Han-min languished. It should not be surprising that opposition to the Communist alliance developed first among the Old Comrades, men whose power in the Party was already well-established. Hu Han-min was Sun's traditional deputy and expected heir; he could not look with favor on a disturbance of the power arrangements in the Party. Even the Russian advisers (who failed to understand much of what was happening around them) did realize that

Communists who obtained official KMT Party positions would alienate those officials they dispossessed.⁶ As long as Sun lived, there was little percentage in opposing him, however, and the dispossessed, the threatened, had to bide their time.

When Sun died early in 1925, Hu Han-min expected to enter into his inheritance. Since Hu was noticeably cool to the alliance, the Communists might be expected to oppose his succession to the leadership. As one might expect, all leftists also opposed Hu; but, unexpectedly, not all rightists supported him. According to the principles of factional conflict, no opposing faction must be allowed to become too powerful, and Hu's domination of the Party was no more palatable to most KMT rightists than to the leftists. The conflict in the KMT that arose after Sun's death was not one of left versus right, because the real issue involved was not that of the Communist alliance, but one more important. It was, who would take power in the Party, and whose factional supporters would receive the spoils of victory. The alliance issue was of crucial significance only for the Communists; and it is only because we have not given Kuomintang history the autonomy it deserves that we constantly misread that history by insisting that issues of importance to the Communists were the ones that mattered most.

In the months after Sun's death, what we must call the real Left KMT was formed with the purpose of bringing down Hu Han-min. It was composed of Liao Chung-k'ai's civilian party supporters; the small but growingly-important military following of Chiang Kai-shek; Wang Ching-wei; and most of the significant warlords of the Canton region. In June, this group pulled off a military coup at Canton that left it in control of the Party, its government, and its military forces.

Histories of the Kuomintang are peculiarly reticent about this coup and the forces behind it. The best official histories pass it over in silence; the worst explain it by blaming it on the Communists. "Borodin controlled everything" is the common dictum that exonerates the leaders of the coup. It is however, false; Borodin did not control everything, and there is no indication that he was even informed of the Canton coup. There is no evidence that the Communists were in any way involved in the coup, and the group that carried it out had no need of their aid—this Left KMT was no paper tiger. It had prestigious leadership, and both political and

military backing. Perhaps for that very reason, it was easier for the dispossessed to blame the Communists than the real culprits, and they publicly denounced the Communists. Among themselves, they talked of assassinating Borodin; but they shot Liao Chung-k'ai instead.⁷

By early 1926, the Left KMT had successfully read its opponents out of the Party and solidified its own control, but after Liao Chung-k'ai's death a polarization of forces within the Left developed. Wang Ching-wei emerged in control of the Party apparatus, and Chiang Kai-shek in control of its military forces. Chiang chose to demonstrate the superiority of military over civilian power in twentieth-century China through the Chung-shan Gunboat coup early in 1926, when he forced Wang into temporary exile and inserted his own friends into important Party positions. The Northern Expedition, however, diluted Chiang's power and Wang was able to form an opposition alliance, supported by the Communists, and backed by warlord military power. In the Wuhan regime, the results of Chiang's 1926 coup were undone, and in retaliation Chiang declared war on the Wuhan regime which he characterized as Communist-dominated.

Chiang's charges have generally been accepted by historians, and Wang Ching-wei's denials of them discounted. The common historical judgement argues that the Communists controlled the Wuhan regime through what are called "key lower-echelon positions," a statement that somehow ignores the still-more-key upper echelon positions solidly controlled by pure KMT leaders. Above all, as Chiang Kai-shek and others repeatedly demonstrated, the really key positions in Chinese politics were held by those who possessed military power, and there the Communists were hopelessly outclassed. Chiang easily crushed the Communists, and so did the Wuhan regime three months later. It is worth noting that Chiang's attacks on the Wuhan regime were paralleled a dozen years later by Wang's wartime charges of Communist influence on the Chungking regime.

What this formulation suggests about the history of the Left KMT is that the violent factional conflicts in the years after Sun Yat-sen's death had very little to do with either the activities of the Communists or with ideological conflicts within the Kuomintang. Both Chiang and Wang were leftists not because they favored radical

solutions to social problems—neither did—but because both favored, for a time, the tactics of the Communist alliance. On that issue they divided only over the proper moment for breaking the alliance. They were not split on questions of ideology, for both were above all else concerned with the problems of power—of who would control China, and who would control the Kuomintang.

That is not to deny that the Communists played a significant role in Chinese history during the 1920's. It is, rather, to attempt to place proper limits on that role, and to indicate the broader significance of the Kuomintang for the history of this period. To explain the phenomenon of the Left KMT, it is more important that we understand the processes of factional conflict in the KMT than that we follow out Comintern pronouncements, or the smoke-screens thrown up by those involved in power struggles.

NOTES

1. Jerome Ch'en, "The Left Wing Kuomintang: a Definition," *BSOAS*, XXV (1962), 576.
2. Chiang Kai-shek, *Declaration to Kuomintang Members (1927)* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, n.d.), p. 14.
3. "Tso-hsiang chou-k'an hsi" (1926), in Shih Hsi-sheng (ed.), *Wang Ching-wei jen-hsing lu* (Shanghai: Kwang-yih Book Co., 1952), II, 368-369.
4. "Ssu-yüeh liu-jih chi Li Shih-tseng shu" (1927), in *Wang Ching-wei chi* (Shanghai: Kuang-ming Shu-chü, 1929), IV, 6.
5. Tang Leang-li, *Inner History of the Chinese Revolution* (New York: Dutton, 1930), p. 330.
6. "Stepanov's Report on the March 20th Coup d'Etat," in Martin C. Wilbur and Julie Lien-ying How, *Documents on Communism, Nationalism, and Soviet Advisors in China, 1918-1927* (New York: Columbia, 1956), p. 617.
7. Lei Hsiao-ts'en, *Ssu-shih nien tung-liao Chang-kao* (Hong Kong: Ya-chou ch'u-pan she, 1955), pp. 27-28.