

3. THE XI'AN INCIDENT

The CCP's revival from "the last five minutes"

It is very likely that the most successful application of the Popular Front strategy was the Xi'an Incident of December 1936, which neither the USSR nor the CCP had anticipated. The incident has yet to be fully elucidated, but it has considerable historical importance because it (1) crystallized the growing momentum toward cooperation between the GMD and the CCP, and (2) brought to fruition the CCP's scheme to revive itself through a confrontation between China and Japan, thus paving the way for the Lugou Bridge Incident.

As mentioned above, by the time they completed their westward migration in 1936, the CCP forces were an extremely feeble army indeed. Therefore, from their viewpoint, the key to survival was putting a stop to the Nationalist government's anti-communist sweeps and directing that energy toward the Japanese forces, thus causing a war between Japan and China. With its military strength decimated, the Communist army was close to obliteration. According to Chiang Kai-shek's diary, the Nationalists' "campaign had been prosecuted to such a stage that it would require only the efforts of 'the last five minutes' to achieve the final success."¹

The CCP's last-ditch plan was to adopt a communization operation that involved indoctrinating lower-ranking Nationalist soldiers. The Northeast Army troops under Zhang Xueliang (deputy commander in chief of the Northwest Bandit Suppression Headquarters) had been participating in communist sweeps in Shaanxi province. Since the outbreak of the Manchurian Incident, they had been unable to return to Manchuria, their homeland. Instead, they were compelled to remain in the North China heartland. Therefore, homesickness and anti-Japanese sentiment were extremely intense among them. The CCP toyed with their emotions with slogans like "Chinese do not shoot Chinese," "United against Japan," and "Let us fight our way back to Manchuria."

These rallying cries gradually ensconced themselves in the minds of the Northeast Army troops.

Zhang Xueliang began to waver as his subordinates and others in his milieu leaned politically to the left. Propaganda had shown its power, as Chiang Kai-shek keenly observed.

[The Communists] especially singled out Chang Hsueh-liang's [Zhang Xueliang's] troops for intensive psychological warfare and tried to provoke Chang into rebellion. Torn between "suppression of the Communists" and "resistance against Japan," Chang lost his head and succumbed.²

Xueliang had also learned, from personal experience, that yesterday's enemy could become today's friend. For instance, both Yu Xuezhong and Song Zheyuan had once been his enemies, but were now loyal subordinates and close friends. Furthermore, Zhang himself had once been opposed to the Nationalist revolution, but ended up doing an about-face when he became a willing

¹ Chiang Kai-shek, *The Account of the Fortnight in Sian When the Fate of China Hung in the Balance* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc.), 119; <https://archive.org/details/generalchiangkai00chia/page/n3/mode/2up>.

² Chiang Kai-shek, *Soviet Russia in China*, 83.

participant in the Northeastern Flag Replacement. He was convinced that since he was Chinese, and the members of the CCP were all Chinese, he and they might become good friends in the future.³ It was this sort of blind faith in the CCP that, at least in part, led him down the wrong path.

Unsettled by communist psychological warfare, Zhang made overtures to the CCP. He met secretly with chief political strategist and negotiator Zhou Enlai in Yan'an in the summer of 1936. The two men arrived at an agreement on 10 conditions for joint resistance to Japan, which they promised to make every effort to satisfy. They included the following:

- (1) The Red Army shall be incorporated into the Nationalist Army.
- (2) The CCP shall refrain from attacks on Nationalist troops.
- (3) The Nationalist government shall release imprisoned CCP members and grant them freedom of movement.
- (4) After victory in the anti-Japanese war, the Nationalist government shall recognize the CCP as a legitimate political party.⁴

After that meeting Zhang kept in touch with the CCP, providing it with material support and otherwise deepening his relationship with the party. As time passed, his appetite for suppressing the communists diminished.

Chiang Kai-shek abducted and confined

In late October of 1936 Chiang Kai-shek, (president of the Executive Yuan, chairman of the National Military Council, and commander in chief of the Northwest Bandit Suppression Forces) flew to Xi'an to supervise and invigorate Zhang Xueliang's communist-suppression campaign. However, by that time the Northeast Army's anti-communist activities had effectively ceased.

The incident occurred in the early morning of December 12. A group headed by a Northeast Army officer arrested and imprisoned Chiang Kai-shek, who was staying at Huaqing Hot Springs, a resort east of Xi'an. Some of the high-ranking Nationalist government officials accompanying Chiang were also arrested and imprisoned; others were shot to death. In Xi'an proper, Yang Hucheng's troops attacked and disarmed military and civilian police officers.

That evening Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng sent a telegram containing eight proposals to destinations all over China. The demands were:

- (1) Reorganize the Nanking government so that members of other parties and cliques might come in and help save the nation.
- (2) Stop all civil wars.

³ Zhang Xueliang, "Xi'an shibian canhui lu," *Confession of the Xi'an Incident*, *Ming-pao yüeh-k'an* (明報月刊), no. 33 (September 1968), 50, **as cited in** Tien-wei Wu, *The Sian Incident* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1976), 52.

⁴ Furuya Keiji, *Chiang Kai-shek, His Life and Times*, 510.

- (3) Release immediately the patriotic leaders⁵ who had been arrested in Shanghai.
- (4) Pardon all political offenders.
- (5) Guarantee the people's liberty of assembly.
- (6) Give a free hand to the people to carry out patriotic movements.
- (7) Carry out the leader's⁶ will faithfully.
- (8) Call a National Salvation Conference immediately.⁷

Since the proposals were similar in nature to demands the CCP had been making, their impact both at home and abroad was staggering.

When CCP members got word of the incident, many of them called for a people's court at which Chiang Kai-shek would be tried. Mao Zedong was committed to killing Chiang and resisting the Japanese. He looked to Moscow for instructions from Stalin. Stalin responded by telling Mao to join with Chiang in resisting the Japanese (meaning that he was to release Chiang). Upon reading the telegram from Stalin, Mao reportedly flew into a rage, swore and stamped his feet.⁸ Stalin was probably worried that the GMD forces would annihilate the Chinese Communist Army if Chiang was not released, and that the anti-communist, pro-Japanese Wang Jingwei might, in Chiang's stead, take up the reins of government.

Zhang seeks support from the CCP

The Xi'an Incident sparked strong public criticism against Zhang Xueliang within China, which in turn prompted the Nationalist government to punish him. Chiang Kai-shek's stance toward Xueliang was harsher than expected. Chiang had refused to acquiesce to any of Xueliang's demands. That stance triggered a growing outcry from young officers who demanded that Chiang be executed, putting Xueliang in a difficult position. Eventually, Xueliang requested support from the CCP and dissolved the Northwest Bandit Suppression Headquarters. To comply with CCP demands, he formed the Provisional Northwest Military Council of the Anti-Japanese United Forces. Subsequently Zhou Enlai, Ye Jianying and one other CCP official arrived in Xi'an, where they reportedly agreed to adhere strictly to the eight proposals, and to arrive at an expeditious, peaceful resolution.

Finally, on December 22, Soong Mei-ling (Chiang's wife), Soong Tse-ven (Mei-ling's brother), and Australian William Henry Donald (personal advisor to the Chiang family) arrived in Xi'an, as if entering a tiger's lair.⁹ Mei-ling lectured Zhang Xueliang on the error of his ways and asked him to release her husband. Zhang's reply was that Yang Hucheng was opposed to setting him free.

⁵ Anti-Japanese movement leaders.

⁶ Sun Yat-sen's wishes.

⁷ Chiang Kai-shek, *The Account of the Fortnight in Sian*, 149.

⁸ Edgar Snow, *Random Notes on Red China (1936-946)* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957), 2.

⁹ Chiang Kai-shek, *The Account of the Fortnight in Sian*, 93.

According to Mei-ling's recollection of the incident, she met with an "important person"¹⁰ on December 23.

According to generally accepted belief, the "important person" was Zhou Enlai. Zhou reportedly stated that the CCP had no connection whatsoever with the incident, and that only Chairman Chiang Kai-shek was capable of leading the entire nation. He believed that Chiang was sincere about saving China, and only resented his slowness in acting. During the interview, Zhou supposedly promised Meiling that he would urge Yang Hucheng to release her husband.

On December 25, the deadline for the end of the ceasefire between the Nationalists and communists, Zhang made the decision to release Chiang Kai-shek, to which Yang agreed. Chiang departed from Xi'an by plane that evening and arrived in Nanjing on the following day, at which point the incident finally came to a close.

Xueliang requested and received permission to accompany Chiang to Nanjing to take responsibility for the incident, and to demonstrate that his actions were not motivated by ambition and that he bore no malice toward Chiang. At a court-martial supervised by the Military Council, Xueliang was sentenced to a 10-year prison term and deprived of his civil rights for five years. On January 4, 1937 Chiang Kai-shek had him pardoned, but he remained under the supervision of the Military Council. When the Nationalist government moved to Taiwan, after World War II had ended, Zhang was moved there as well. He was alive and well as of September 1989.¹¹

Conditions for Chiang's release: still an unsolved mystery

Was Chiang able to return safely to Nanjing on the strength of promises he made to Xueliang and his cohorts? This crucial point remains unclear to this day.

The CCP argues that Chiang promised to end civil warfare and join it in resisting Japan. But the Nationalist government insisted that Chiang's release was unconditional. Chiang's personal account of the incident states only that Chiang harshly rejected Xueliang's demands from beginning to end.¹² The "reprimand" Chiang gave to Zhang and Yang upon Chiang's departure from Xi'an, which was made public upon Chiang's return to Nanjing, reads in part, as follows:

Since today you have shown due regard for the welfare of the nation and have decided to send me back to Nanking and no longer try to make any special demands or force me to make any promise or give any orders, etc., etc. ¹³

Here, again, Chiang emphasizes the fact that his release was unconditional.

¹⁰ Furuya, *op. cit.*, 519.

¹¹ Translator's note: Zhang Xueliang died in Honolulu in 2001.

¹² Chiang Kai-shek, *The Account of the Fortnight*, *passim*.

¹³ Chiang Kai-shek, *The Account of the Fortnight in Sian*, 177.

Both Chiang and Zhou are no longer of this world. Journalist Miao Jianqiu, who had many Japanese acquaintances, and is rumored to have been one of the masterminds of the incident, has passed on. The only person who can tell us what really transpired in Xi'an is Zhang Xueliang who is living out his golden years in Taiwan. However, there is no chance that Xueliang, still under house arrest, would make a statement that would stain Chiang's honor and the government's history. The truth is not likely to ever see the light of day.

What should we assume? My theory is that in Xi'an, out of respect for Chiang, the CCP did not insist upon his signature in exchange for his release. In fact, the CCP has attested to this. But the Communists must have secured some verbal concessions from Chiang. In other words, even if Chiang did not make any specific promises verbally or in writing, he must have uttered words that raised significant expectations among CCP leaders, Xueliang, and others.

The speed with which cooperation between the Nationalists and the CCP progressed after the incident seems to support, in one respect, the correctness of my reasoning.

Skepticism about a second United Front

The Xi'an Incident resulted in China's changing course. Besides precipitating an end to civil war and united resistance against Japan, it served as an opportunity to facilitate a second cooperation between the Nationalists and Communists.

Still, there were GMD members who both questioned and criticized this move toward cooperation, just as there had been with the first GMD-CCP united front. For instance, while the incident was still in progress, philosopher and public essayist Hu Shih published an essay arguing that the Communist Party, with its internationalist focus, could never be patriotic. He added that the CCP's proclaimed anti-Japanese stance was a shameless deception, and appealed to readers to be cautious of the CCP.¹⁴

Furthermore, pro-Japanese and anti-communist groups advocated achieving unification while avoiding conflict with Japan. Awaiting Wang Jingwei's return to Japan, they strongly opposed the anti-Japanese groundswell.

In March 1936, after being shot in an assassination attempt in November 1935, Wang embarked on a trip abroad to receive medical care and recuperate. However, at the request of the Nanjing government, Wang returned to China in January 1937 in the wake of the Xi'an Incident.

Wang pointed out the differences between the popular front in France, which was not backed by a Soviet state, and the popular front trumpeted by the CCP. He emphasized the danger in trusting the Communist Party, which blatantly broke promises and discarded loyalties in the name of revolution. He warned that the bitter experiences of the past deserve our attention. Wang expressed serious doubts about the Communist Party and about GMD-CCP cooperation, arguing that domestic stability should precede resistance to external forces.

¹⁴ Hu Shih, "The Treason of Chang Hsüeh-liang," as cited in Wu Tien-wei, *The Sian Incident: A Pivotal Point in Modern Chinese History* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1976), 122.

CCP is resuscitated; tensions heighten in North China

Still, in January of 1937 civil warfare, the anti-communist campaigns, came to a halt, and the CCP was resuscitated with only “the five minutes” to spare. On January 6 the Northwest Bandit Headquarters in Xi’an was closed, effectively putting an end to the 10-year-long strife between the GMD and the CCP.

Zhang Qun, the pro-Japanese foreign minister, was relieved of his position, and replaced by the anti-Japanese, pro-Western Wang Chonghui. The result was that the resist-and-negotiate diplomatic policy associated with Zhang Qun underwent a major shift towards a pro-Western stance.

As already stated, the anti-Japanese camp was not solidly unified. Still, preparations were underway for war against Japan, aided by a temporary upturn in economic conditions. In 1937 the Nationalist government’s military disbursements climbed to 70% of the national budget. These mammoth expenditures enabled the formation of an army of 700,000 men, and the launching of military training programs for more than a million Chinese civilians. Manipulated by the scheming of the Soviet Union and the CCP, China abruptly embarked on a headlong charge down the path to militarism and war.

The situation in North China grew tense. Four hundred thousand troops (100,000 from Song Zheyuan’s 29th Army and 110,000 from the Northeast Army) surrounded the 5,000 Japanese soldiers of the China Garrison Army. Additionally, 350,000 Central Army troops were positioned in the Xuzhou-Longhai Railway corridor, awaiting an opportunity to advance northward. During the period immediately preceding the Lugou Bridge Incident, resentment of Japan on the part of the National Salvation Federation and other anti-Japanese organizations was growing daily. The Xi’an Incident — a major driving force that transformed the Chinese civil war into a war against Japan — was an event of crucial significance in the modern history of East Asia.