

In the early summer of 1936, the Chinese modernist writer Yu Dafu (1896-1945), famous for the decadent aesthetics in his novellas, made a visit to the Fujian provincial reformatory on its warden's invitation. Contrary to the erotic, the moribund and the perverse that characterize his earlier novellas, Yu's (1936: 26-27) speech to young inmates would not be out of place among the most sanctimonious of Nationalist officials. "In the past," he exhorted inmates, "you fell under the tyranny of violence due to momentary lapses of judgment and went wayward. It is now time to turn back and seek the right path." "I was," Yu confided to his audience, "like you a few years ago, unhappy with the political, economic and social system and scheming to use extreme violence to destroy the status quo." Having realized that his explosive idealism was futile, the writer urged inmates to repent, see clearly the incredible crisis that engulfed China, and "prepare to contribute to the nation-state in the future."

Yu's supposed beneficiaries were not just any young delinquents and the violence that the writer condemned had particular meaning under Jiang Jieshi's (1887-1975) Guomindang or Nationalist regime. Reformatories (*fanxingyuan*) in Fujian and other provinces housed political prisoners, specifically young Communists who turned themselves in to Jiang's anticommunist government. Yu, while never a Communist, was nonetheless a founding member of the League of Leftwing Writers. He identified with the young converts interned at the facility by reflecting on his delusion with leftist cultural politics and the realization that nationalist aspirations trumped revolutionary ones. He exhorted inmates to take the time in prison as a welcome respite from making a living and concentrate on acquiring knowledge.

Leaving aside for a moment the curious gap between Yu's confession of nationalist pieties and his supposed aversion to political straitjackets, the writer put his finger on the *raison d'être* of the reformatory experiment. Reformatories, as this

article reveals, were set up to not only banish leftwing political commitments but also create new political subjects. By taking seriously the literature reformatories published, I propose a new way of understanding anticommunism in Nationalist China as a productive enterprise that enlisted participation from its former enemies. Reformatories, administered under the highest court of each province, were set up in the aftermath of the 1927 anticommunist purge with leftwing revolutionaries in mind. These facilities, which existed until the Second Sino-Japanese War due to the rapprochement between the Communist and Nationalist parties, were not unknown to scholars. Historians (Dikötter 2002: 280-94; Kiely 2014: 196-208; Mühlhahn 2009: 130-32) have drawn attention to these facilities' distinctiveness in Nationalist China's prison system. Reformatories were concrete iterations of grand, slogan-filled Nationalist social experiments such as the New Life Movement. They combined elements of Neo-Confucian self-cultivation, penal incarceration and Leninist political training, targeting young men of some education who defected from the Guomintang's nemesis. Much less examined, however, are the concrete mechanisms of how reformatories were also productive channels through which Nationalist anxieties and prescriptions for China's challenges were articulated and displayed. Maggie Clinton (2017: 123-126) astutely observes that reformatories carried high symbolic value. They were deployed by the state to impress upon foreign audiences the reinvention of rebellious ne'er-do-wells under its care into worthy producers. Yet, she does not pinpoint their positive contributions to the Nationalist project at home. In fact, reformatories were parts of an ideological, as well as repressive, state apparatus (Althusser 1971); they worked to reproduce and strengthen the hegemony of the Guomintang's nationalist politics in everyday norms and values.¹ Specifically, their voluminous writings – confessions, treatises, salacious stories by and on inmates –

conjured up, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek (1997: 75-77), an anticommunist figure of the Communist.

The anticommunist figure of the Communist simultaneously trivialized and exaggerated the potency of the leftwing challenge to Guomindang rule, the purpose of which was to revive the Chinese nation by consolidating modern social hierarchies while banishing the ill effects of capitalism, particularly organized class politics, individualistic materialism and imperialist incursions into the national space. As I argue in the next section, on the one hand, Communists in accounts published by reformatories' in-house magazines appeared not as committed political activists but unstable and promiscuous juveniles. On the other hand, parallel to this condescending attitude towards individual cadres was the paranoia that their supposedly boundless libido epitomized all forces that undermined social hierarchies. Thus, in understudied confessional writings and sensational accounts, Communists featured as antisocial playboys and "red modern girls" who indulged in commercialized pleasures associated with treaty ports and foreign concessions. At the same time, they also constituted a demonic menace akin to those in folklore and popular customs. Lumping together the vices of modern urban capitalism with the fantastical qualities of a pre-modern sect, the Communist as discursively produced in the reformatories became the polar opposite of the Guomindang's ideal citizen: composed, self-disciplined, and invested in taming one's body and mind rather than challenging social relations (Tsui 2018: 3-4, 15-16). Communists embodied contradictory forces which conspired to frustrate the Nationalist vision.

While individual communists' renunciation of their sins was no doubt important, I argue that texts produced by reformatories allegorized the conversion of the Chinese nation from leftwing politics. As the other two sections of this article

demonstrate, converts' confessions employed familiar tropes in narrating their overcoming of putative trespasses as puerile Communists activists and enthusiastic embrace of the nationalist agenda as defined by the Guomindang. A "return" to the nation's wholesomeness on the Communists' part, akin to the *tenkô* phenomenon in Shôwa Japan (Ward, forthcoming), affirmed the Guomindang's ideological premise that social revolution was incompatible with nation-building (Tsui 2018: 8). It is therefore no wonder that in at least one instance, the reformatory also produced "nationalist literature and arts" (Anhui Reformatory 1936), a genre promoted by the state to turn China's urban public away from leftwing literature. This is also the reason why contributions by independent leftists such as Yu Dafu and economist Ma Yinchu (1882-1982), who lectured on the fallacies of socialism at the Zhejiang Reformatory (1931), were pivotal. For renunciation of capitalist dilettantism, licentiousness and loose social hierarchies, vices attributed to communism and external to the nation's organic solidarity, was as much a collective as an individual affair. At a time when China confronted aggression from Japan, mass conversion, albeit in textual performance, was for the Guomindang essential for national survival.

Sexual latitude – the purported core of communist politics

Of the many wrong-doings that Communists were supposed to have perpetrated, the most recurring one mentioned in confessional literature by Communists was sexual latitude. The Guomindang considered nuclear families as the building blocks of society and was invested in their maintenance. Gender relations incompatible with marriage were threats to the Nationalist vision (Glosser 2003: 83, 99). As communism challenged social relations, it is not surprising that the affective and sensual excesses of individual Chinese Communists, who supposedly held cavalier attitude toward marital relations, were broadcast widely and portrayed as

defining features of their political careers. Take, for example, the case of Liu Zhipen, a Hunan native who turned himself in to the Guomintang state in late 1928 upon returning from Soviet Russia. A graduate of the Moscow Sun Yat-sen University, one of the Comintern-run academies devoted to the training of Chinese revolutionary cadres, Liu was to return from Russia under disguise and wait for an assignment from the clandestine Chinese Communist Party. Instead, upon arriving in Shanghai, the erstwhile Communist sent a letter to his family asking them to facilitate his surrender to the local authorities. Liu's defection handed the Guomintang a major *coup*. In addition to a list of fifty-six Hunanese individuals still studying in the Comintern-operated institution and ten returnees operating in China, Liu penned a graphic insider account exposing the moral laxity of Chinese Communists and their Soviet sponsors. His exposé on life in Moscow, part diatribe and part ethnography, caught the attention of the central government in Nanjing. The education ministry forwarded Liu's luridly titled "An Veritable Record of Moscow Sun Yat-sen University's Bestial Character" to provincial educational bureaus, which in turn circulated the article among county governments and educational institutions under their jurisdiction. In Hunan, Liu's conversion to the Nationalist cause was celebrated by the province's reformatory and its in-house journal published his manifesto of withdrawal from the CCP in May 1929.

Communism featured in Liu's exposé as an alien and juvenile threat to public order and morality. If left-wing writers were adept in using reportage to incite antiimperialist and procommunist sympathies (Laughlin 2002), the Guomintang also saw potential in semi-journalistic accounts in mobilizing anticommunist sentiments. Sprinkled with the names of well-known Communists, Liu's widely circulated article reads like the exploits of rogue playboys, and its narrative simultaneously dramatized and infantilized the challenge the Guomintang's onetime allies posed to Jiang Jieshi's

regime. While supposedly presenting a grave affront to society's moral norms, the Communist movement was stripped of a coherent, positive political program and reduced to a gang of hedonists leading debauched lives abroad. Instead of a disciplined party committed to social revolution, the CCP created nothing other than spaces where, cut loose from familial obligations and traditional moral constraints, cadres could indulge in unseemly pleasures. In Moscow, Russian "red imperialists" enticed gullible men with female cadres while women were approached by other charismatic women or put in the company of men who flirted (*diao bangzi*) with them. At the Comintern-run institution, where only twenty percent of the five hundred Chinese students were female, women were "extremely loose and enjoyed romantic love with men as much as they wanted." For example, female cadre Tan Guofu (1908-1937) was alleged to have regularly "entertained" (*yingchou*) Qu Jingbai (1906-1929), the brother of CCP general secretary Qu Qiubai (1899-1935), despite her supposedly committed relationship with Xia Xi (1901-1936). A certain Zhu Hanjie took the dubious honor of "having sexual intercourse with the largest number of men" on campus, boasting that she had slept with some fifteen or sixteen men. Men treated women as prostitutes and "some female fellow-students, not entirely satisfied with Chinese flavor (*Zhongguo wei*), even had sex with Russians." Everywhere on campus from the sports ground to the reading room, "pairs of men and women could be seen engaged in bestial sexual intercourse." (Liu 1929a: 5-6). Promiscuity, decadence and lust for the exotic were integral to a youth culture which, as far as the Guomindang was concerned, turned its back on family values and the wider society.

Despite his colorful language, Liu's revelations did not altogether deviate from less diabolical accounts of what was then a movement of young cosmopolitans. Sheng Yue (1907-2007) (1971: 89), one of the most high-profile defectors to the

Guomindang, remembered a “secret meeting room” on the Moscow campus where married and unmarried couples frequented, leading to a boom of legitimate and illegitimate “little revolutionaries.” It was common, Trotskyist Zheng Chaolin (1998: 296-297) recalled, for female cadres to leave their lovers in China for someone else soon after they settled into Moscow. Set against changing gender norms unleashed by the New Culture Movement and evolving consumption patterns of urban Chinese, young Chinese Communists’ behaviors were hardly extraordinary.

If the Communists’ indulgences in sensual and sensory pleasure were not abnormal among China’s ascendant urban, intellectual community, it is not difficult to surmise that the Guomindang’s complaint was not so much about sexual latitude as such as the supposed threat to social hierarchies it represented. For senior Nationalist cadres like Hu Hanmin (1879-1936) (1928: 182), who was himself obsessed with the carnalism attributed to his leftist nemeses, young Communists’ indulgence in sex not only highlighted their frivolousness as individuals but also exposed the hedonistic (*zongyu zhuyi*) nature of their politics. It is perhaps due to the Guomindang’s association of the personal with the political that magazines run by reformatories regularly carried voyeuristic exposés of Communists’ romantic life, in spite of the risk that such contents might have run counter to its goal of edifying political converts and the masses.² Like Liu Zhipen, Wu Weimin (1935: 9-10), who defected from the Hubei-Hunan-Anhui Soviet, echoed Hu’s judgement on the Chinese Communist community in Moscow. He recounted the escapades of Zhang Qinqiu (1904-1968), a graduate of the Moscow Sun Yat-sen University, who served as a political commissar in the CCP-controlled region in 1932. Zhang was described as a glamorous, coquettish “red modern girl”. Despite her marriage to fellow-student Shen Zemin (1900-1933), she was attracted to Wang Zhenhua, another young, handsome Russian-

educated official. One evening, Wu heard from afar Zhang and Wang flirting with one another. The next thing he saw was the two Communists locked in tight embrace in bed. When Wu broke the news about Zhang's adulterous rendezvous to Shen, the latter was so depressed that it confined him to hospital until he finally died in 1933. Addiction to sensual pleasures, a quality Wu attributed to Communists, evinced for the Guomindang the fallacy of communist politics as such. Rather than a solution to the grave problems China was facing, communism was a symptom of the country's social entropy under its degraded modernity, which introduced Western thoughts, habits and colonial presence at the expense of the nation's sovereignty and putative wholeness.

Drawing on first-hand observations, Liu and Wu affirmed Nationalist anxieties by coupling left-wing radicalism with sexual permissiveness as dual threat to national solidarity. Chinese Communists, having capitulated to a foreign ideology, were purportedly hell-bent on tearing apart the social fabric. The Hunan Reformatory's magazine warned, in comical terms, that patriarchy was in danger. It briefed readers on a bizarre tale, without citing any sources, where a senior Russian cadre was being sued by sixty women for marrying two hundred women in just six months. To drive home the seriousness of the tale, the author calculated that based on the cadre's example, a powerful Communist official would marry eighteen thousand times in forty-five years. In other words, provided that there was an equal number of men and women in a society, the 17,999 women exploited to satisfy the official's boundless libido could have been wives devoted to other men. While acknowledging the pain and sufferings women were supposed to suffer under the Soviets, the article's assumed readership was male. Addressing (male) workers and peasants harboring leftwing sympathies, the article concluded thus: "Please examine this news from

Russia and then take a look at yourself,” the author (Xiang 1929: 8) prodded. “Do you reckon you will ever get a wife [under communism]? Think again!” Another article (Qing 1929: 4) in the same magazine was blunter in warning readers that a male-dominated family system would meet its demise under communism. “The world today is not what it was,” a female Communist cadre purportedly proclaimed as Nanjing was captured by the National Revolutionary Army on the eve of the 1927 anti-Communist purge carried out by Jiang Jieshi. “Women had always been married off (*jiagei*) to men. Now, things are turned around and men shall be married to women!” Putatively proper gender relations were turned upside down.

The communist overturning of familial bonds, practiced through everyday interactions between men and women, anticipated the collapse of an ideal hierarchal order. Chinese Communists, Hu Hanmin (1928: 182) argued, fanned youthful lust for sex and material comforts. The coupling of gender and class relations was underscored by “reformed person” Su Wei (1935: 165-170), who wrote for the provisional reformatory of the Nanchang general quarters for the Nationalist forces. The Communist platform of land redistribution, increase in wages and limits on working hours was, charged Su, sophistry that masked wanton banditry. Agitations for equality, between both genders and classes, put into jeopardy community bonds and human lives. Demand for equal rights for women “instigated women and hypnotized youths and children” into betraying their own kin and renouncing Confucian virtues of propriety, righteousness, honesty and sense of shame. Socioeconomic equality was an excuse for “red bandits” to loot and slaughter through the areas it controlled, leaving towns and villages where “families were torn asunder, people butchered, land left barren and filled only with the trail of beasts and birds.”

Su described the Communist threat as severe as floods and fierce beasts (*hongshui mengshou*). The metaphor alluded to Mencius's ideal of a non-egalitarian social order. When confronted with the suggestion that a good ruler should plough the field like the common people, Mencius countered with the argument that natural order dictated division of labor between rulers and the ruled. He recounted that when human civilization was decimated with flood water and "the prints of the beasts and the tracks of the birds crisscrossed each other" over inundated land, "Yao alone grieved anxiously over it." Yao delegated capable ministers to drain the water, expel the animals and return government to society. Furthermore, the Confucian philosopher added that rulers had the responsibility to teach people proper, hierarchal relationships between ruler and minister, husband and wife, elderlies and youths and friends lest their declining moral standards rendered them into little more than birds and beasts. "How could the sages," Mencius (2009: 57) retorted, "who were so anxious about the people, have the leisure to till the soil?" For Su, Jiang Jieshi and his officials were the modern sages who could stem the water, enlighten the populace and allow Confucian values to triumph over those they attributed to the Communists. Like ancient ministers who brought about moral uplift, the Guomindang set up reformatories to reeducate people who joined the wicked gang of foxes and dogs (*huqun goudang*), i.e., Communists, into capable modern citizens (Su 1935: 170). Asking rulers to share power, landlords to give up their land, or workers to have control over the means of production was a travesty to the traditional ethical principles that Su repackaged for the twentieth century.

Indeed, aside from casting communism as a modern fad popular among self-centered playboys and "red modern girls," another trope that appeared in reformatory publications was of communism as a superstitious cult. Like how the Nationalist state

fought popular devotion to deities and spirits (Nedostup 2009: 219-220), the seduction of communism was to be confronted with rationalism and state-sponsored public education. A case in point is a lurid piece titled “Red Demon” (Ping 1928). Taking the form of a fable, the article put the Communists in a light different from the accounts of young cadres located in Moscow or Shanghai. Instead of licentious, cosmopolitan urbanites, the menace to peace and harmony appeared as a mythical creature sporting “three red heads, six red arms, and a full layer of red skin.” While carrying indigenous folkloric attributes, the demon, it was revealed, actually hailed from the West and came to China to whip up red terror (*chise kongbu*). It cast a spell over an army of blind followers. Disciples “ate the red rice of historical materialism, drank the poisonous red wine of class struggle. ... Their bowls are filled with the red dish of capital accumulation and the red, soul-sucking soup of surplus value” (*ibid.*). Intoxicated and possessed, the demon’s foot-soldiers went about killing, pillaging and imposing their reign of terror on the Chinese people. The land was engulfed in filthy red smog. Fortunately, scientists and their students, armed with reason, brought back the Guomindang’s blue sky and white sun by dispelling the red air. In the end, the red monster was slain and doctors administered antidote to those who imbibed the communist poison, restoring their innate humanity. Whatever guise communism was dressed in, it remained, for the Guomindang, an addictive venom whose prevalence among young men and women was an impediment to building a salubrious, hierarchal national order.

Repent and reform – converts confessed their sins

The process of conversion, as described by both reformatory officials and inmates, echoed the narrative strategy “Red Demon” deployed. Guomindang-sponsored science, discipline and spirituality overcame deviances caused by

immaturity, lust and the failure of human will. Identification with the nation, specifically practices considered by the state as salutary, was the putative antidote to chaos. Akin to interwar Japan's consumer-subject (Silverberg 2006: 25), a feminized figure whose life was shaped as much by capitalist indulgences as by state and elite exhortations to transcend them, China's urban public was supposed to simultaneously buy into what the state offered through the market and voluntarily reform themselves according to norms considered proper by nation-builders within and without the government. During the New Life Movement, state-orchestrated fashions, magazines and films impelled the public to abandon their indulgences and re-channel their energies to the nation. Adept in incorporating the latest fads in China's commodity culture – be it modernist aesthetics, the star power of actresses like Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935) or feminized domesticity – these products of Nationalist China's thriving cultural industry, not unlike magazines published by the reformatories, aimed both to attract readers and viewers on the one hand, and edify urban practices on the other (Gerth 2003: 308-32; Liu 2004: 204-212). For both Guomindang cadres and many non-partisan opinion makers, the individual's overcoming of the ills of capitalism, which putatively included flirtations with communism, was an exercise in growing up, self-examination and embracing state-mandated spiritualities.

In practice, personal awakening entailed individuals realigning their everyday routine with the nation's needs. At the Fujian Reformatory, for example, inmates played two hours of sports, did forty minutes of morning exercises and received fifty minutes of training in martial arts daily. Inmates at the Anhui Reformatory (1934: 41), in addition to playing half an hour of sports, enjoyed two hours of recreation and performed chores such as paving roads, maintaining facilities and gardening. Physical exertion was to deliver Communists from their frivolous illusions. Like rehabilitation

of juvenile delinquents, political conversion was a process of self-transformation from unhinged juvenile bohemians to responsible adult nationalists. Indeed, the demographics of political converts lent the reformatory qualities of a youth prison. Figures from November 1934 reveal that the Anhui Reformatory (*Ibid*: 44) housed ninety-one inmates, most in their twenties. Although the landlocked province was no center of learning in Republican China, almost half of the interned attained at least secondary education. In terms of occupation, students constituted the largest group at twenty-three, followed by peasants and teachers at twenty-two and fourteen. Others were employed as workers, merchants, medical practitioners, civil servants and even police and military officers. In the more prosperous Zhejiang, fifty-six out of the 106 inmates in the province's reformatory in early 1931 (34) were students while fifty-one had finished primary school. As Wu Bofu (1929), an officer at the Hunan Reformatory, told inmates, "You are the nation's mainstay and capable members of the society." Reforming these wayward talents meant collecting thoughts, unifying actions, and cleansing them of antagonistic elements reflective of an urbanizing consumer society. Just as the New Life Movement would aim to militarize, productivize and aestheticize China's national body five years later, Wu tasked the reformatory experience with "socializing" (*shehui hua*) and "revolutionizing" (*geming hua*) character, "systemizing" (*xitong hua*) and "rationalizing" (*heli hua*) thoughts, and "ordering" (*jilü hua*) and "collectivizing" (*tuanti hua*) action. Fighting against communism was simultaneously an issue of, as Žižek (1993: 210) says about fascist corporatism, suppressing excesses associated with capitalism and pursuing the impossible dream of a balanced, stable national community while tapping on the dynamism of capitalist production. But if social displacement in general was a constant internal of capitalism, Nationalist China faced a more imminent threat to its

survival in the form of Japanese aggression. The need to mobilize the citizenry to defend the nation rendered communism, as Jiang Jieshi announced in 1931, an internal malaise which required immediate purging.

Like banishing the grotesque and the erotic from one's life, cleansing communist sympathies was an undertaking that touched upon the intimate, the base and the sublime. Intense experiences of personal transformation was a recurring theme in the writings by political converts, who invariably embraced the Guomindang's position that communism was a destructive force for both individuals and the nation. Autobiographical elements in confessions fit into a narrative, common since the New Culture Movement, whereby young people's coming-of-age involved abandoning corrupt ideas and practices for the sake of national redemption (Button 2009: 205; Jones 2011:105-6). Take, for example, Liu Zhipen's (1929b) confession, which began in the first person.

I am a youth who was once led astray but has now awakened (*juewu*). I have been under anesthesia (*mazui yao*) for two years at the Moscow Sun Yat-sen University. But no matter how numb I was, the things I saw with my eyes, heard with my ears and discovered from research all acted as detoxifiers. The poison was strong, but the antidote was even more potent.

Liu then addressed his imaginary readers, young idealists prone to be swayed by exotic fashions, material and spiritual. "We young people," he continued, "are short on life experience and full of energy. We react to the slightest commotion with little thought, offering our lives as sacrifices with little regret." Along with workers, peasants and subalterns likely to be sympathetic to the idea of class struggle, "we" capricious activists should stop "wandering about in the wrong way" before it was too late and worked to "root out communism" (*chan'gong*). The pseudo-scientific

language, not dissimilar to discourses that linked morality to corporate health of the Chinese nation (Rogaski 2004: 226), framed communism less as an ideology than a delirium that caused irrevocable harm to puerile minds. Rather than a decision to renounce a political creed, conversion from communism was rehabilitation from a crisis akin to drug abuse, cleansing of cancerous toxins that threatened to devour hapless young bodies.

The idea that communism was a deranged state of the mind was echoed in the teenager Tang Hongxun's account (1928), which confided that he was once a dispirited, depressed person (*tuitang de youmen zhe*). Tang had been languishing in the reformatory for seven months before "seeing guards filed in and noticing the bright, full moon." It was the Mid-Autumn Festival and the warden had allowed inmates to look at the moon in the courtyard. The warden's gesture stirred "an impulse of conscience (*liangxin chongdong*)" in the young man and plunged him into an excruciating, contemplative mode. "Society," he charged, "had forcibly led me astray. This is the biggest stain on my life." But instead of blaming society for his fate, he simply regretted not having discovered his faults soon enough. "On this date last year, I had yet to examine myself under a microscope and realize that I was infected with a baneful, terminal illness." Vowing to make today the beginning of his new life, he urged leftwing youths to follow suit. Echoing the Nationalist fetish for science, he added a modern scientific twist to traditional nature imagery and pleaded:

My young friends, in particular brothers who are once lost! Wake up! Examine yourself under X-ray (*aikesi guang*), as closely as we watch the bright moon of the fifteenth day of the eighth month! Repent on what we have done in the past, put an end to wrongdoings and cast everything aside! From today on, let us steer towards the future along the grand boulevard of light! Keep up! Keep up!

Tang's ability to overcome the depression at the penitentiary by devoting himself to the proper cause on the spur of the full moon, a common trope in Chinese literature, played into the reformatory's role as a rehabilitation center. Communism was here a youth problem, a sociological and health menace to be rectified for the nation's sake.

Tang's self-examination, drawing on transcendental forces from nature and the machine age, appealed to one major modern Chinese tradition of the sublime, which privileged the stoic and the muscular over the soft-minded and the enfeebled (Wang 1997: 56). Tang partook in the modernist fascination with psychology and science. Famed leftwing writer Lu Xun, for example, completed a translation in 1924 of *Symbolism of Depression* (*Kumen de xiangzheng* or, in Japanese, *Kumon no shôchô*) by Kuriyagawa Hakuson (1880-1923), whose meditations on "life force," human desires, depression and artistic creation were influential among Chinese intellectuals (Wang 2003: 529-30). The dialectic between depression and eruptive impulses, mythical and scientific imaginaries infused writings published under reformatories' auspices. The first issue of the Hunan Reformatory's in-house magazine, to which Tang contributed, editorialized that a great many young men and women acted out of a desire to life like hapless insects. Pursuing the light of life, they tragically dashed senselessly into the deadly glow of Marxism like moths to flame. The editorial (Gong 1928) concluded with a promise to people in distress (*youhuan de renmen*) – "Dear compatriots, depressed (*kumen*) people, new life, rebirth!" Yet, redemption, rather than stemming from a new set of social relations, was ultimately an individualized project. Insofar as communism was a psychological ill, recalibrating one's libidinal economy was the key and one leitmotif in confessional writings among former communists. Overcoming communism as toughening one's resolves against temptations was apparent, for example, in the account of the Shaoxing native Chen

Zhenlin (1931: 35-47). Chen, who once joined the Communist Youth League, became interested in politics in the wake of the May Thirteenth Movement of 1925 when his childish mind (*ertong xinling*) was stirred up in rallies and protests. As a junior middle school student, Chen followed his peers and joined the Guomindang. As the Northern Expeditionary force sponsored by the Nationalist and Communist parties deposed warlord rule in Zhejiang province, Chen met Shi Ping, a female Communist cadre who was working as a primary school teacher. Shi enticed Chen to join the Communist Youth League, taking every opportunity to approach (*jiejin*) the boy and making sure that he remained loyal to the youth movement. Chen was arrested in the midst of the anticommunist purge that began in Shanghai in April 1927 and dispatched to the reformatory. “Lacking steadfast will,” Chen confessed, “I immediately displayed reactionary tendencies by becoming dissatisfied with my circumstances when tempted.” Flirtations with communism, embodied by Shi the female cadre, were put down in Chen’s case to character flaws common among immature and excitable youngsters swept up by revolutionary fervor.

The sexualization of communism was palpable in the ways Chen described his struggle with the creed and the movement it inspired. Echoing Hu Hanmin’s description of communism, the intimate for Chen was intertwined with the social. Marxism held for the bookworm the aura of being the most “mysterious thing.” Will power wanting, “red, venomous flame still blinded me, whenever I saw red coquettes winking passionately, I would lose control of myself and fall under their spell.” After Chen was released from the reformatory on sick bail, his “spirit became very low” and spent short stints in the army and an engineering firm in Shanghai. It was in China’s foremost center of consumerism and underground communist activities that Chen once again ran into Shi Ping. Vulnerable and set adrift from his hometown,

Chen saw “the root of calamities being laid” in this inauspicious encounter. He rejoined the Communists, sacrificing his work and study. It was only after being put into jail for the second time in March 1930 that Chen, as the title of his published account confessed, “woke up from a long nightmare.” Having shaken himself off the communist curse, the young man was still recovering from its baneful side effects.

Now, I often lose sleep and am losing weight, my heart burdened with unbounded regrets. Because of my wrong faith, I wasted my youth behind bars. My unworthy loss and my mother’s painful thoughts are for me like knives, stabbing my heart and slicing it into small pieces.

Like Liu and Tang, Chen saw in communism less a political ideology than a cult preying on the uninitiated, less a set of principles than a mental disorder tormenting the weak.

That defection from communism pitched the sublime and stable against the sensual and vulnerable was made evident by the use of religious vocabulary. If communism was, like what the garish Shanghai marketplace had to offer, “exciting and enticing,” redemption was a sober, contemplative affair akin to religious conversion. “I pray in silence,” Chen submitted, “to the soul of Premier [Sun] and to thank the Guomindang’s kingly way (*wangdao*) for allowing me to reinvent myself.” Some reformatories deployed religious figures to help former communists repent. They brought in clergy from religious groups open to cooption by the state and its nationalist agenda (Nedostup 2009: 63). The Chongqing Reformatory, for example, drew on Buddhism. Inmates alternated between an hour of Buddhist teachings with another of sports through the week at six in the morning. A monk was invited to spread the faith, to which 90% of the facility’s population turned. The reformatory’s in-house magazine featured Buddhism-inspired literary works and confessional poems

(Chongqing Fanxingyuan zhi fohua 1932, 208). At the Hubei Reformatory, Zhang Zhiyi (1911-1983) (1988: 68-69) remembered encountering Buddhist monks among the institution's regular staff and Christian missionaries visiting the prison every one or two months. If Communists were possessed by a demonic cult, state-sanctioned religious pieties had a natural role to play in restoring their sanity.

The nation-state as the sure path to redemption

Much more than Buddhism and Christianity, however, the surest path to relief from the combined plague of communism, urban vices, and bodily and spiritual deformities was the nation itself. While religious faith might help inmates turn away from an atheist ideology, true redemption came through the nation, of which the Guomintang was the sole custodian. Pedagogy of nationhood was thus the highlight of any reformatory experience. The nation was where concord between the personal and the collective, balance between fidelities to the sureties of traditions and embrace of modern trends had to be moored. Instead of dabbling in bohemianism and communism, political converts were to become agents of the nationalist cause as defined by the Guomintang. Upon admission to the Fujian Reformatory (1936b: 30-32), inmates were divided into four groups based on their education level. Those who had primary education or above took classes in Guomintang theory, namely, Sun Yat-sen's thoughts, history and geopolitics. Central to what they learnt was that conflict between nations, not social classes, was the twentieth-century's core motif. Anchoring on the prospect of global war, a curriculum applicable to reformatories nationwide was designed to put ample daylight between the Guomintang's national revolution and a communist one. Inmates learned about "the absolute unviability of class struggle in China." They were "taught major international trends, alerted to the crises the nation was confronting, and instructed on how to revive national morality."

Literate inmates produced or, rather, reproduced the new knowledge they received; they kept a diary, participated in debates and made speeches, all with a view to transforming themselves from revolutionary socialists into loyal nationalist subjects. Topics examined included China's present predicaments, the intensification of nationalist consciousness around the world, and why communism failed miserably in various parts of the world. Rather than a prison, reformatories resembled a school where officers and inmates received nationalist catechesis.

One typical result of converts' embrace of the Guomindang gospel was Fang Huiming's (1932: 421-28) denunciation of class struggle. Citing the *Communist Manifesto*, Fang, incarcerated at the Zhejiang Reformatory, argued that it was not the case that "the history of all hitherto existing society [was] the history of class struggles." Recent events, particularly how socialists rallied behind their respective nation-states during the Great War, was for Fang proof that Marx's theory of history was faulty. To further consolidate his argument, Fang referred to Sun Yat-sen's *Three People's Principles*, denying that there class conflicts in China as the entire nation was being oppressed. The "national bourgeoisie," a term Fang learnt from an instructor of Guomindang party theory, were but those who were less poor in a poor country. "Family," he continued, "was society in miniature and society was family writ large." Instead of wasting energy on class struggle, every member of society must cooperate to "work, farm and conquer nature." Cooperation, Fang concluded, was the only means to achieve human progress. By rebuking class struggle and stressing the organic unity of family and society, Fang reconciled himself to the party-state's ideology.

Like Yu Dafu, inmates' political transformation meant embracing the nation and contributing to its survival. It entailed accepting the Guomindang's premise that

class struggle and socialist internationalism had no place in nation-building, especially in a weak country like China. The first set of questions new inmates in the Fujian Reformatory (1936a: appendix 1-2) was instructed to contemplate was China's precarious place in the interwar international order. Understanding the quagmire in which the nation was caught was both ideologically sound and personally edifying. It was not only the first step towards discerning the "revolutionary truth" but also a sure way for young idealists to avoid committing more "silly and reckless" acts after they were freed. Political and psychological maturity entailed taking up the nationalist cause with gusto. A September 1931 open letter penned by inmates at the Zhejiang Reformatory (1931: 165-168) addressed their erstwhile comrades. Referencing the ongoing Japanese military campaigns targeting Manchuria, which would result in the puppet-state Manchukuo's creation, converts to the Guomindang confronted peers still fighting under the Communist banner with the questions, "Where did we the Chinese nation stand now? Were we not at the threshold between life and death?" During the Great War, the plea reminded its assumed readers, socialist parties in Europe ended up supporting their respective countries' war efforts in defiance of Second International policy. Japan's encroachment, like European powers cutting into each other's throat two decades ago, attested to nationalism's primacy over proletarian solidarity and called upon Chinese revolutionaries to disabuse themselves of empty internationalism. Just as socialist commitments in the Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini dissolved fully into nationalist pieties with the Great War (Neocleous 1997: 22), the Mukden Incident should make Chinese Communists subsume class politics fully under nationalist agendas. "Friends of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth!" the open letter exhorted, "it is time to come to your

awakening!!!” Newly converted Guomindang loyalists were to see the nation-state as the only object of loyalty.

Awakening to the nation was as much an intellectual epiphany as the recovery of a sober and balanced lifestyle. Nationalism had served since the Great War in European societies as an ingredient of revolutionary reaction, an ideological position that sought a futural order by leveraging putatively traditional social relations to mask and contain constant disturbances to community brought about by capitalist accumulation. It embraced challenges of the modern world but appealed also to the myth of primordial harmony (Osborne 1995: 164-165). Hence political converts were to renounce communism because it was incompatible with both the latest geopolitical trends and China’s traditions. For individuals, nationalism likewise meant recognition of where the future lied and a return to authentic and wholesome existence lost to alien thoughts. By embracing nationalism as his sole political pursuit, Benito Mussolini found spiritual force and a mythic communion between himself and the Italian collective (Neocleous 1997: 20). For former Communists in China, coming to terms with the nation as the singular object of devotion could be both a reasoned analytical undertaking and an emotionally wrenching process. For example, an inmate in Hubei province named Liu Jing (1935: 17-18), similar to his peers in Jiangsu, conducted a coolheaded enquiry into the distinctions between national and class consciousness. A nation’s bonds, Liu observed, included common bloodline, way of life, language, script, religion and customs. In contrast to the ontological elements that underwrote national identity, class consciousness hinged on economic interests. Liu conceded that national and class formation was historically dynamic; in capitalist societies where the confrontation between labor and capital was stark, class identity might well trump national loyalties. Yet, as long as “the nation’s spirit and self-

confidence were in good health” and that “nationalist consciousness was strong enough, class consciousness could still be suppressed. This was precisely how Hitler managed to govern Germany with an iron fist.” The communist refrain that “workers had no country” was proven to be false; Japanese workers did not express solidarity with the victim nation when Japan invaded China. Mirroring Mussolini and general trends among the Guomindang ranks, and reflective of what inmates learned in captivity, Liu not only renounced revolutionary socialism but endorsed fascism as the best means to revitalize the nation’s spiritual essence.

Realizing the incompatibility of communism with China’s dire position in a conflict-ridden world led to the resetting of national and personal priorities. Exclusive devotion to the nation thus brought redemption and new purposes of life. Upon leaving the Hubei Reformatory, twenty-three former communists issued a manifesto (Xu 1935: 3-4) explaining their transformation into “brave warriors of the nationalist movement.” Prefaced with a litany of humiliating losses – land, indemnities, access to coal, rights to build and operate railroads, etc. – China sustained under imperialist military intrusions, the declaration observed that the Mukden Incident showed that the country was confronted with an imminent threat to its survival. Chinese Communists, the manifesto claimed, wreaked havoc on the rural economy and undermined national defense against Japan. It was “our misfortune to have been led astray by the lies and temptations proffered by these criminals.” Having completed their stint at the reformatory, converts attained “awakening and found the way back, having examined the objective environment China was in.” The only way out (*weiyi de chulu*) was to quash imperialism and round up red bandits (*chifei*). It was not stated explicitly whether the way ahead was one for the entire nation or just political converts; the two categories could well have been collapsed. Indeed, as another ex-communist Li

Nannan suggested, the nationalist project demanded the contributions of all citizens, even if some were to embrace it only after becoming disillusioned with communist thuggery. “Friends!” Li (1931: 249-252) exhorted,

it is time to wake up now! Know that the Nationalist government abides by Sun Yat-sen’s magnanimous and benevolent spirit. No matter what evil you perpetuated in the past, if only you could completely repent and give yourself in, nothing would put you in difficult situations. Friends! At the high tide of national unity against Japanese imperialism, calm down and think. Do not expend potent enthusiasm on communist agitations, sowing discord and participating in senseless activities.

The idea that communism was an opiate for the feeble-minded, the juvenile and the impressionable was matched by the characterization of nationalism as the embodiment of reason, maturity and responsibility. Li’s plea to young people to trade communist for nationalist revolution was couched in terms of individual growth. It was a petition from a once pitiable weakling (*kelian de ruozhe*), duly reformed and reinvented, to fellow citizens in similar situation. The appeal alluded not only to political idealism but also the urge for personal improvement.

Conclusion

The reformatory experiment shared similarities with other attempts in neutralizing threats to the governing power through political conversion. Thought reform under the People’s Republic immediately came to mind. Under the Communist government, supposedly politically-inspired deviances were treated as moral lapses to be rectified through state-sponsored penal settings (Smith 2013: 71-74). What distinguished the Guomindang’s treatment of Communists, however, was its identification of the nation as the sole organizing principle of social life. The nation

was supposed to be the guarantor of stability, maturity, hierarchy and order, underwriting organic wholesomeness in a capitalist world where imbalances, excesses and disorientation were the norm. China, no doubt, contended with serious external, imperialist threats to its sovereignty. Domestically, the Guomindang's grip on national power was neither complete nor unquestioned; for cadres, the Communist threat to the nation was as grave as that posed by Japan. The reformatory, however, underscored that communism posed not just a political but a more fundamental challenge. Communism endangered the nation's social order and undermined, as it did for fascist movements around the world in the same period, the *Gemeinschaft* (Žižek 1993: 209-11). It, according to the Guomindang, enervated China's corporate body and depleted it of ethical values, reducing the people into amoral individuals cut loose from hierarchal relationships, cultural certainties and communal attachments.

This article has shown that the reformatory produced a textual economy in which hurdles to China's unity were overcome by nationalist devotion and renunciation of socialist revolution and internationalism. Central to this affirmation of the Guomindang's ideological premises were the contributions of individuals who were being reformed. Deploying individual confessions to construct the ideal citizen-subject was by no means unique to China. Interwar governments in Japan (Ward forthcoming) and Russia (Haflin 2009), both of which had strong influence on the Guomindang's political culture, placed premium on confessions in political mobilization. Particular to Nationalist China, however, was how communism and individual Communists featured in eyewitness accounts and confessions as the summation of what Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s recognized as semicolonialism and semifeudalism, i.e. the co-existence of pre-capitalist and imperialist-capitalist vices (Karl 2017: 115-116). Communists were bohemian, countercultural, and

nonchalant in gender relations. They were also cloistered, self-absorbed, and psychologically unstable. Cosmopolitan and lacking concern for the nation, Communists were among China's urban subjects who were emotionally feeble, insular and effeminate. Their will to self-realization, as the suggestively autographical protagonists in the fiction of Yu Dafu or Ding Ling (1904-1986) suggest, was undercut constantly by sexual desires and internal psychological turmoil (Shih 2001: 115-123; Barlow 2004: 132-145). Communism, like decadent aesthetics and liberal feminism, further unsettled deracinated cosmopolitans who were already buffeted by new commodities, ideas, and styles brought into the country from abroad. At the same time, communism was also depicted as a backward superstitious cult that preyed on ignorant youths and to be swept away by reason and science. As penal institutions, reformatories exhorted ex-Communists to disown their myriad wrongdoings and embrace the nation as the Guomindang defined. As a literary enterprise, the reformatory experiment allegorized the conversion of the educated masses from nihilistic leftwing politics to working towards a hierarchical, orderly society. It is due to the reformatory's double nature that tied relatively unknown inmates in these institutions with famed public figures such as Yu Dafu.

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¹ Based on Louis Althusser's (1971: 143) typology, the reformatories combined legal, political, communications and cultural functions as ideological state apparatuses. I am indebted to Max Ward's forthcoming book on ideological conversion in interwar Japan for the relevance of Althusser's theorization to this study.

² Maggie Clinton (2017: 175-176) observes that works with ambiguous and potentially subversive contents, at odds with the overall tenor of "nationalist literature and arts," were catered to elite cadres and indicated the impossibility of a unified aesthetics across social classes. Regular presence of titillating contents in reformatory publications suggest that disunity was not confined to publications for the party elite but Guominding-sponsored literary and artistic production as such.