

# The Blue Shirts Society: Why It Failed, 1932–1938

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## Abstract

The Blue Shirts were a clandestine political network that appeared inside the Chinese Nationalist movement in 1932, and its most important organization was the Lixingshe; it became one of the most influential right-wing formations of the Nanjing Decade, but it was dissolved in 1938 without any resistance. Research on the movement has mainly asked how it should be classified in ideological terms, that is, whether Chinese fascism was a faithful reproduction of the European models or an unsuccessful one. This paper puts forward a different explanation, in which the decisive factor was organizational. Chiang Kai-shek's patronage gave Lixingshe members postings in the military, responsibilities in the growing secret police and participation in political training in the army, but it withheld ownership of any of it; they controlled no budget themselves, the membership rolls did not belong to them, and no institutional base would outlast the withdrawal of Chiang's favor. Organizational autonomy here has three criteria, that is, supervision of recruitment, the possession of independent financial and institutional resources, and the ability to reproduce organizational power after a change of patron. The Blue Shirts satisfied none of these criteria. The Xi'an Incident of December 1936 exposed this dependence, and then, as the Nationalist state was reorganized during the Sino-Japanese War, larger state institutions absorbed Blue Shirt personnel and political functions. The organization itself disappeared, but its political techniques did not.

## Keywords

Blue Shirts Society, Lixingshe, Chiang Kai-shek, Chinese fascism, organizational autonomy.

## 1. Introduction

The Blue Shirts at first campaigned openly for Chiang Kai-shek as a fascist dictator: "We must have our leader," they asserted, "without him we cannot solve our national problem – we need our Hitler" [1].

In the spring of 1932 a clandestine political organization appeared inside the Chinese Nationalist movement. Most of its members came from the military and political networks around Chiang Kai-shek, and they advocated discipline, political unity, anti-communism, national regeneration and a powerful state able to overcome the fragmentation that had characterized Republican China. This movement was later associated with European fascism by foreign observers and by historians, and its members were referred to collectively as the Blue Shirts. In fact the name hides the institutional reality of the movement. "Blue Shirt" was never the official designation of one conventional political organization. The term comprised a network of organizations, and the most significant of these was the Lixingshe, that is, the Society for Vigorously Carrying Out the Three People's Principles [2].

The Blue Shirts have therefore been an unusual problem for historians. They were secretive, organizationally loose and difficult to document, but they still became one of the most influential right-wing political networks in Nationalist China during the Nanjing Decade. In his

foundational study, Lloyd E. Eastman reconstructed the movement from memoirs, interviews and Japanese intelligence reports, and his conclusion was that the Blue Shirts were more than a terrorist organization or a collection of conspirators; they were a political faction that reflected important concerns inside Nationalist China [2]. Later research has made Eastman's interpretation more complex, and Maggie Clinton has stressed the specifically Chinese character of Nationalist fascism, in her view a combination of fascist political practices with nationalism, Confucian moralism and a conception of revolutionary modernity [3]. Frederic Wakeman, in his reconstruction of Dai Li and the Nationalist intelligence apparatus, has drawn attention to the organizational relationship among the Blue Shirts, Chiang Kai-shek and the expanding secret-service state [4]. Xu Youwei and Philip Billingsley have shown that the Lixingshe was a significant participant in the factional politics around the Xi'an Incident of 1936 [5]. Most recently, Xinyi Zhou has moved attention away from the Blue Shirts to Chiang Kai-shek's changing engagement with fascism, and her point is that research has too often taken fascism in China to be a fixed ideology instead of a malleable political concept which was appropriated differently according to the circumstances [6].

That scholarship has settled the ideological weight of the Blue Shirts, their political reach, and how deep inside Chiang Kai-shek's regime they were lodged. But a further historical question has gone unanswered. Political influence was theirs, along with entry into military and intelligence institutions, a coherent nationalist program and the patronage of China's most powerful Nationalist leader; why, then, was the organizational autonomy that long-term survival required never developed?

This paper argues that the Blue Shirts failed to become a durable political organization, and the main reason was not ideological inconsistency or an unsuccessful attempt to reproduce European fascism. Chiang Kai-shek's patronage gave the Lixingshe something specific, and at the same time it withheld something equally specific. Members of the organization obtained postings in the military, responsibilities in the growing secret police and a share in political training in the army; this was real power, and it was exercised from inside the Nationalist state. Ownership of any of it was withheld; the Blue Shirts controlled no budget themselves, the membership rolls belonged to the army or the party and not to them, and no institutional base would survive the withdrawal of Chiang's favor. The Xi'an Incident of December 1936 exposed this problem, and Blue Shirt members were forced to act in defense of a leader whose personal authority was also the foundation of their own legitimacy. The consequences of this dependence were then shown by the transformation of the Nationalist state during the Sino-Japanese War. The Nationalist government did not preserve the Blue Shirts as an autonomous political organization; instead it absorbed their personnel and political functions into larger state institutions.

To test the above argument, organizational autonomy is measured by three criteria: control of recruitment and the socialization of members into a corporate identity, the possession of independent financial and institutional resources, and the ability to reproduce organizational power after a change of leadership or patron. None of them applied to the Blue Shirts. Their recruitment was secretive and relied on military networks; their resources came through state channels under Chiang's control; and their identity remained tied to the leader they claimed to serve.

## 2. Origins in the Whampoa Network

The organizational origins of the Blue Shirts lay in the military networks around the Nationalist movement. Among these institutions the Whampoa Military Academy, founded in 1924, had an important function. Chiang Kai-shek was its superintendent, and a generation of officers was trained there who later became important participants in the Nationalist movement. Therefore

the academy produced more than a military institution; it produced a network in which military advancement, political loyalty and Nationalist revolutionary ideology became intertwined [2]. How the Blue Shirts developed owed a great deal to that setting. Formal institutions counted for little in the political world the Nationalist movement worked in. The warlord era had broken political authority into pieces, Nationalist control was under challenge from the Communist movement, and China's territorial integrity was under mounting threat from Japanese expansion. Therefore military discipline and political unity could be put forward as conditions of national survival, not as qualities that were merely desirable. The Blue Shirts emerged from this setting in 1932, when a group of young Whampoa graduates, a good many of them veterans of earlier political and paramilitary work, founded the Lixingshe with Chiang's sponsorship [5]. The movement's structure mirrors that same environment. An ordinary political party puts public branches in place, recruits openly, builds electoral constituencies and acquires a visible organizational identity. A clandestine organization works on other lines. Secrecy shields members and eases political penetration, though it narrows public recruitment and leaves the organization leaning on the institutions it works inside. Influence was accordingly what the Blue Shirts were after, not mass legitimacy. Blue Shirt members worked their way into military, political and intelligence institutions, and they never needed to build a mass political party [6]. During the Nanjing Decade there was good sense in this strategy. Chiang's own government had yet to consolidate its authority, and influence came far more cheaply to a disciplined political network working inside the state than to an independent body obliged to assemble a nationwide constituency. Yet a weakness was built into the foundations all the same. State power was open to the Blue Shirts; state power as an institutional resource of their own was not. Their fate was settled by that distinction.

### 3. Ideology as Resource and Constraint

Chiang Kai-shek set out his own political premise plainly. In *China's Destiny*, published in 1943, Chiang held that the survival of China depended on unity and on the fact that "the strength of our state is centralized" [7]; national power therefore had to run through a single center instead of being divided among competing provinces, armies and parties. This was the leader principle, under which ultimate political authority belongs to one supreme leader who embodies the unity of the nation, and not to a constitution, an elected legislature or a set of impersonal rules applying to whoever is in charge. For Chiang only a single center of political power could overcome the fragmentation of China, such as warlordism, factionalism and foreign invasion; scattered institutions could not. This premise mattered directly for the Blue Shirts, and their own political legitimacy rested on the same premise.

The attraction of the Blue Shirts to fascism developed in this institutional context. In the early 1930s European fascist regimes seemed to show that centralized political leadership could overcome parliamentary instability, ideological fragmentation and revolutionary threats. Examples of authoritarian nationalism organized around disciplined political movements were provided by Mussolini's Italy and, after 1933, by Hitler's Germany. Chinese Nationalists, however, did not simply copy these systems. Fascism instead supplied them with a set of usable techniques: strict political discipline, a single leader at the top, hostility to communism, state direction of the economy, mass rallies and propaganda, a rebuilt and modernized military, and the suppression of political opposition [3].

The Chinese adaptation of these ideas had its own character. Clinton shows that Nationalist political culture put the language of revolutionary change together with respect for Confucian moral tradition and Chinese national pride [3]. The Blue Shirts could therefore present authoritarian discipline as a means of restoring national strength, never as a rejection of Chinese political traditions. This ideological adaptation weakens the argument that the Blue

Shirts failed only through being an unsuccessful imitation of European fascism. Their ideology was not in itself defective. Their ability to combine foreign political models with Chinese nationalism was in fact one reason for their influence.

A more important question concerns the interaction between this ideology and Chiang Kai-shek's political strategy. Zhou's research shows that Chiang's engagement with fascism changed according to political circumstances. His interest in fascism grew stronger after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and during the anti-Communist campaigns of 1932–1934, and at that time fascism seemed relevant to questions of political discipline, military modernization and national mobilization [6]. Chiang therefore did not have to commit himself permanently to a single fascist model. He could use organizations, ideas and political techniques selectively; this strengthened his authority and kept his control over the competing factions of the Nationalist regime.

The position of the Blue Shirts was therefore unstable in itself. Chiang gained from their loyalty and organizational discipline. They in turn gained from Chiang's patronage. On the other hand, Chiang also had a reason to stop them from becoming independent enough to challenge his own authority. The relationship between patron and faction thus held a tension that neither side could resolve.

This leader principle stood at the center of how the Blue Shirts understood themselves. Their members considered themselves the shock troops of national revival, and their loyalty went to Chiang personally, not to an impersonal party or constitution. That personal loyalty made the Blue Shirts more focused and disciplined than many other Nationalist Party cliques; at the same time, any move to independence could be branded as disloyalty. Once ultimate authority belonged to the leader alone, the Blue Shirts had no legitimate claim to an independent right to exist, to recruit members on their own terms or to set their own policy. Their ideology thus strengthened their dependence on Chiang; the more faithfully the leader principle was followed, the less able they were to survive without the leader who was its object.

#### **4. Patronage and Political Power**

The greatest strength of the Blue Shirts lay in their access to the Nationalist state. Their greatest weakness was that they never got to keep this access. Chiang's patronage gave the Lixingshe postings, with officers embedded in the political-training apparatus of the army, agents inside the growing intelligence services and a voice in decisions affecting the regime. None of it was theirs to own; the Blue Shirts controlled no payroll themselves, no headquarters or roster of members belonged to them instead of to the army or the party, and no claim on the positions they held would outlast Chiang's personal favor. Dai Li's career shows this distinction clearly.

How the arrangement worked in practice can be seen in Wakeman's reconstruction of Dai Li's career. Dai Li's Special Services Department, later the Military Commission Bureau of Investigation and Statistics, grew out of the clandestine network of the Blue Shirts and became one of Chiang's most important instruments of internal security [4]. Through this the Blue Shirts could exercise power out of proportion to their public visibility. They gathered intelligence, monitored political opponents, cultivated loyal officers, took part in political enforcement and influenced government institutions. None of these capabilities, however, was an independent organizational resource. The Blue Shirts did not own the intelligence services. They were state institutions under the Military Affairs Commission, and Dai Li's personal loyalty went to Chiang, not to the Blue Shirts as an organization [4].

The same problem showed up in the relation of the Blue Shirts to military political training. Their influence over political indoctrination in the Nationalist army was useful, but it relied on their placement in the command structure of the army. The discipline and hierarchy of the Nationalist military and of the Military Affairs Commission governed that placement [8]. Their

military access could not be used to build a parallel organization outside Chiang's chain of command. Access to state institutions gave the Blue Shirts influence, but not ownership of those institutions.

Competition between factions aggravated all of this. Chen Guofu and Chen Lifu's CC Clique was a formidable rival, and the KMT's party organization, the youth leagues and a large part of the civilian bureaucracy lay under its control. Repeated attempts by the Blue Shirts to break into those areas ran up against the CC Clique's own patronage networks and party machinery [4]. But one disciplined party organization was not the basis of Chiang's power; his capacity to play rival cliques off against each other was. As a counterweight to the CC Clique and to other factions the Blue Shirts had their uses, yet dominance of the regime was never granted to any single clique [8]. Leaders were rotated, rivalries encouraged, and final authority withheld from every one of them.

Inside the Blue Shirts this factional setting bred permanent insecurity. Whether resources reached them turned on Chiang's favor from moment to moment, so their leaders competed among themselves for proximity to the Generalissimo. Internal solidarity suffered under that competition, and no stable collective leadership ever took shape. Where the first loyalty of members runs to an external patron, and where advancement within the ranks turns on that patron's personal approval, the impersonal rules and institutional loyalty that autonomy demands will not readily take root [4].

## 5. The Xi'an Incident as a Test of Organizational Depth

The Xi'an Incident of December 1936 tested the organizational structure of the Blue Shirts most severely. By 1936 the political environment had been changed by Japan's expansion. The Mukden Incident of 1931 and the Japanese pressure after it had produced growing demands for national resistance. Chiang Kai-shek meanwhile still put the suppression of the Chinese Communist movement first. Zhang Xueliang and Yang Hucheng opposed this strategy more and more. On December 12, 1936 they detained Chiang at Xi'an [9].

The crisis put the whole Nationalist political system under enormous pressure. For the Blue Shirts it created a particular institutional dilemma. Also, their political identity was tied closely to Chiang Kai-shek. What would happen once Chiang was no longer there to direct his own political network?

This uncertainty stayed not only in Xi'an; it also reached the American diplomats who were trying to make sense of the crisis from Nanjing. On January 4, 1937 the Counselor of the American Embassy in China cabled the Secretary of State that persistent rumors said Chiang had met Chinese Communist leaders while he was detained, and that he might have reached some understanding to stop the anti-Communist campaigns, to give the Communist forces financial support and to admit officials sympathetic to the Soviet Union into the National Government step by step. The Embassy could not confirm the rumors, but it considered them persistent enough to report to Washington [10]. The hedged and uncertain tone of the cable is itself evidence; weeks after Chiang's release, even the foreign officials with the closest access to Nanjing politics could not say whether a reassertion of his personal authority had settled the crisis, or some negotiated compromise that limited it.

In the years around the recording of his oral history for Columbia University, Zhang Xueliang himself gave only a few interviews, and in them his account of his role in the Incident carried none of the regret many observers expected. The Columbia transcript is still restricted and was not consulted directly. In a 1997 interview he held that he had "no regrets" about anything he had done, including engineering the Xi'an Incident, and he said plainly that "the person I admire most is Chiang Kai-shek" [11]. That last remark is a striking product of the same dynamic. For two weeks Zhang had ended Chiang's political freedom; even so, his own later account of the

affair organized his life, and his most serious political act, around the personal stature of Chiang rather than around any institutional principle. The man who orchestrated the Xi'an Incident still organized his own self-understanding around loyalty to Chiang the person; for Chiang's own subordinates, the Blue Shirts among them, a source of legitimacy that did not run through him was therefore almost impossible to find.

For the Blue Shirts in particular this created an unusual problem of political legitimacy. Military action and escalation of the crisis risked destroying the Nationalist regime they claimed to defend. Negotiation risked the appearance of compromise with the forces opposing Chiang. Waiting risked the loss of political influence. The problem was not only a strategic one. It was an organizational one. The Blue Shirts had no fully independent political principle able to resolve these competing choices. Part of their legitimacy came from loyalty to Chiang; thus, the absence of Chiang made the basis of their authority unstable [5].

The depth of the organization's involvement in the political struggle over Chiang's detention emerges from Xu and Billingsley's reconstruction of the Lixingshe's part in the incident. Complicated factional calculations run through the crisis as they describe it, and no single unified response came from the Nationalist actors [5]. So a structural weakness surfaces at this point. Orders from Chiang were not something the Blue Shirts could simply carry out. Chiang's authority was the ultimate warrant for their political activity, and Chiang was physically beyond reach. Chiang's interests had therefore to be construed without direction from him.

Tien-wei Wu's detailed study of the Xi'an Incident divides the crisis into separate stages: the December 12 coup, the divisions inside Nanjing, the negotiations over Chiang's release and the political aftermath [9]. The experience of the Blue Shirts during Xi'an therefore tests the organizational argument. In other words, the incident did not create the weakness of the Blue Shirts. It only exposed it. Their organization had been built to strengthen Chiang's political authority, not to work independently of it.

## 6. War and Institutional Absorption, 1937-1938

In July 1937 the outbreak of full-scale war with Japan changed the political environment once more. The Nationalist state now met a military threat which called for wider mobilization and institutional coordination. The political usefulness of clandestine factional organizations therefore changed. This does not mean that the Blue Shirts at once lost their relevance. Their intelligence capabilities, political discipline and personnel had not lost their usefulness. However, the organization itself became harder and harder to justify as an independent political faction. The government needed institutions able to mobilize society on a larger scale; the Blue Shirts, by contrast, had been built mainly as a clandestine network working inside the political and military establishment [8].

The difference was institutional, not ideological. The Nationalist state could take over the useful functions of the Blue Shirts and still not preserve the organization itself. The dissolution of the movement was therefore not simply a defeat of Chinese fascism. The more complicated reality was institutional absorption. The personnel and techniques associated with the Blue Shirts could survive in other Nationalist institutions even when the Lixingshe itself did not. Xu and Billingsley give 1938 as the year of the dissolution of the Lixingshe [5]. Wakeman's later chapters follow the continuation of the larger intelligence and paramilitary structures to which Blue Shirt personnel had been attached; thus, continuity of organization and personnel did not require the Lixingshe to be preserved as an autonomous faction [4].

Organizational survival and political survival are two different things. As an autonomous organization the Blue Shirts did not survive. Many of the practices and personnel associated with them did survive inside the Nationalist state, however. That outcome followed from an organization whose power came from state access and not from an independent social

constituency. With a broad membership base, independent finances, extensive local branches and an identity separate from Chiang, the Blue Shirts would have been more difficult to dissolve. As it was, the Nationalist government could absorb their personnel and functions. The faction itself disappeared. Its political techniques remained.

The wartime reorganization demonstrated something else as well, Chiang's freedom to discard one instrument and construct another. The Three People's Principles Youth Corps, which he founded in 1938, was meant to bring the KMT's quarrelsome youth organizations under one roof, the bodies tied to the Blue Shirts and to the CC Clique included [8]. Dissolution followed for the Blue Shirts, and their members either entered the new Youth Corps or received fresh postings in the military and the intelligence services. In fact no dramatic purge took place, only administrative absorption. No resistance came from the Blue Shirts, who had no independent base from which to mount any. Their leaders commanded no mass following, no autonomous finances, and no institutional identity separate from Chiang's favor. An organization that had once looked ready to turn into a Chinese fascist party disappeared without ceremony into the larger structures of the Nationalist state [4].

## 7. The Paradox of Personalist Fascism

The Blue Shirts illuminate a larger problem in the history of fascism, the relation between a movement organized around one charismatic leader and one built to outlive him; the term for this is institutionalization. Fascist politics commonly emphasizes a supreme leader who embodies national unity and political purpose. Charisma on its own, however, does not keep a political movement alive. Institutions have to be there. Members matter as well. Funding does too. Local structures cannot be absent. And a change of leadership must leave the movement's identity intact. The Blue Shirts brought none of this to full development. Their political influence rested instead on a capacity to work inside Chiang's state.

In the circumstances of the early 1930s that strategy was rational. Politically China was fragmented. The Nationalist government had not finished consolidating its authority. The Communist movement was a serious challenge. Japan was pushing outward. Formal state institutions were relatively weak. In these conditions clandestine networks could carry out political tasks beyond the reach of conventional institutions. But the same conditions that made secret networks useful also stopped them becoming independent. A mass public constituency is hard for a secret organization to develop. A faction dependent on a ruler will not easily become autonomous from him. And where members belong at the same time to several political and military networks, a unified institutional identity is hard to establish.

The Blue Shirts therefore ran into a structural ceiling. They could grow powerful enough to influence the Nationalist state. They could not grow independent enough to replace the networks through which that influence was exercised. Their fate therefore shows a paradox that appears wherever power rests on a single leader instead of on parties, laws or institutions, that is, under personalist authoritarianism. A ruler can build a powerful political faction by giving it access to state resources, but that same access can stop the faction from building the independent base it would need to survive a change in political circumstances: its own finances, its own members, its own institutions.

## 8. Conclusion

The history of the Blue Shirts has usually been approached as a question of ideological classification, that is, whether they were genuinely fascist and, if so, how closely Chinese fascism resembled its European counterparts. That question is important. Lloyd Eastman set out the Blue Shirts as a serious political movement and an important case of fascism outside Europe. Maggie Clinton brought out the specifically Chinese character of their ideological program.

Frederic Wakeman reconstructed their relationship with the intelligence apparatus of Chiang Kai-shek. Xu Youwei and Philip Billingsley clarified their role in the Xi'an Incident. Xinyi Zhou's recent work has shown how important it is to examine Chiang Kai-shek's own changing relationship with fascism [2, 3, 4, 5, 6].

Those approaches open up a different question as well: why did the Blue Shirts grow influential without ever growing institutionally autonomous? The structure of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist state holds the answer. They had grown out of military and political networks closely bound to Chiang. Political influence, intelligence capabilities and coercive power all followed from their access to state institutions. A language of national regeneration and political discipline was furnished by their fascist and nationalist ideology. At the same time, none of these advantages stood apart from their dependence on Chiang's patronage.

The organization thus stood in a paradoxical position. Proximity to the state was the source of its power. And it was equally the source of its fragility. Secrecy opened institutions to it and spared it the work of mass politics. The same secrecy kept it from building a constituency of its own. Loyalty to Chiang conferred political legitimacy. That same loyalty bound its organizational identity to the leader's personal authority. Its members were in a position to wield power. Converting that power into institutions of their own lay beyond them.

The Xi'an Incident laid bare the practical meaning of patronage for the Blue Shirts. Chiang's detention obliged the organization to act on behalf of a leader whose personal authority alone rendered their own positions legitimate, and patronage had left them nothing to fall back on should that authority give way, for they possessed no independent finances, no membership base of their own, and no claim on the institutions they staffed that did not pass through him. Then the problem grew sharper as the Nationalist regime was reorganized during the Sino-Japanese War. The Nationalist state preserved no autonomous political organization; the Blue Shirts' personnel, their political techniques and their institutional functions were all absorbed into larger state structures.

The distinction is not a trivial one. The Blue Shirts did not vanish outright. The organization ended. Its political practices and its personnel did not. On that evidence the movement's failure was not necessarily an ideological one. Chinese fascism did not perish for having copied European fascism badly. Neither did a shortage of political influence bring the Blue Shirts down. Influence was never converted into autonomy, and that is why they fell. The power of the Nationalist state lay open to the Blue Shirts. It was never theirs to keep.

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