

9.6 SONG MEILING ON NEW LIFE MOVEMENT (1934)

Established in 1934, the New Life Movement was a calculated attempt by Jiang Jieshi and Song Meiling to instill the government with an element of traditional Confucianism. Framed in the moral language of China's traditional society, the primary tendencies of the New Life Movement mirrored the social movements popular in 1930s Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, though they were far from identical or as successful. The program had neither the hefty fiscal backing nor institutional depth of its European counterparts and, despite extensive propaganda, drew little public support or widespread interest. Initially, Jiang Jieshi focused the program on those segments and areas of the country he felt were most opposed to his rule: the Communists and labor organizers. Like many such programs, it was light on substance and heavy on idealism. Many critics suggest it displayed Jiang Jieshi's detachment from the true problems facing China.

Questions

1. What does Song Meiling identify as the problems facing China? How does she suggest the New Life Movement will resolve such issues?
2. How does she respond to the criticism that the government should first find a solution to feeding people before promoting a program like the New Life Movement?

China, like almost every other nation during the past few years, has felt tremendous enervating effects of world depression. Each nation, according to its lights, has sought to find a way out of stagnation into normalcy. Italy has its Fascism, Germany its Nazism, the Soviet Union its first and second five-year plans, and America its New Deal. The primary aim of each is to solve the economic problems involved and to bring material prosperity to the people. China, like the rest of the nations, is confronted with a similar problem, added to which is the necessity of rescuing the people from cumulative miseries of poverty, ignorance, and superstition, combined with the after effects of communistic orgies and natural calamities, and last but not least, the grave consequences of external aggression.

To this end, what is known as the New Life Movement has been launched, to strike at the very roots of the several evils. Conditions obtaining in China are so different from those facing any other country that it would be impossible for the average foreign mind to comprehend the reasons for the New Life Movement, its program, its actual working result, and its future, without a brief explanation of the background of the psychological and social state in which China finds herself after some three hundred years of oppression and neglect by the rulers of the Manchu Dynasty, followed by the chaos consequent upon the revolution which overthrew that regime.

[...]

Gradually, however, the leaven of the Republic began to work, and relatively great and far-reaching reforms and improvements took place through these changes were mostly confined to seaboard cities and to a number of the larger cities in the interior. But the country at large went unchanged, or difficult to change, and because of this fact communist agents soon discovered that here they had a more fertile field in which to work than any other country could provide. They seized their advantage and, before their activities were realized, they had contrived to impose upon the ignorance of the people to such an extent that they were firmly established in several regions. Military efforts against them became necessary.

The idea of the New Life Movement became crystallized in the mind of Generalissimo Jiang Jieshi during the anti-communist campaign. He realized that military occupation of recovered territory was not enough; that it must be followed up by social and economic reconstruction in the devastated areas; and that, to be effective, a national consciousness and spirit of mutual co-operation must be aroused. He saw that the immediate need was the development of the vitality of the spirit of the people, which seemed to have been crushed. He contemplated the perspective of history in the light of existing conditions about him; he realized how much depended upon the people's consciousness

of their heritage from the past; the conviction came to him that the four great virtues of old China, *Li*, *Yi*, *Lian*, and *Chi* constituted a remedy that could rescue the country from stagnation and ruin, because at the time when those principles were practiced, China was indeed a great nation. He decided then and there to base a New Life Movement upon them, to try to recover what had been lost by forgetfulness of this source of China's greatness. For it has become obvious that mere accumulation of wealth is not sufficient to enable China to resume her position as a great nation. There must also be a revival of the spirit, since spiritual values transcend mere material riches.

What significance lies behind these four principles which hold so much good in them for China, if they can be carried out in the spirit intended?

First is *Li*, which in the ordinary and most accepted form of translation means courtesy. And by courtesy is meant that which emanates from the heart—not a formality which merely obeys the law.

The second is *Yi*, which, roughly translated, means duty or service, toward the individual's fellow men and toward himself.

The third is *Lian*, meaning a clear definition of the rights of the individual and of the degree in which those rights may be enforced without infringing upon those of others. In other words, honesty. A clear demarcation between what is public and what is private, what is yours and what is mine.

The fourth is *Chi*, which denotes high-mindedness and honor.

Some people have criticized the New Life Movement on the ground that, since there is not sufficient food for everyone in the land, it is useless to talk about or seek spiritual regeneration. We reject the argument by pointing out the very evident fact that, if everyone from the highest official to the lowest wheel barrow man would conscientiously practice these principles in everyday life, there would be food for all. If we have the right conception of *Li*, we recognize not outward

pomp but the sterling native qualities of our fellow men. If we practice *Yi*, we feel an obligation not to hold wealth and enjoy it wastefully while our fellow countrymen may be on the verge of starvation or suffering from sickness or other misfortunes. Again with *Lian*: If officials recognize the rights of the people under them, they do not try to benefit themselves at the expense of the people just because the latter are too powerless and ignorant to fight in their own defense. And if *Chi* is a reality no one is shameless or stoops to mean or underhanded deeds.

Being a realist, the Generalissimo recognized that conditions in China are entirely different from what they were centuries ago when China was a great nation. At that time China could well afford to stand aloof, shut herself within the confines of her own boundaries, and keep out all intruders; but today she is part of a world-wide scheme of things, and in order to maintain and improve her present position, she must keep in step with world progress.

So the New Life Movement is based upon the preservation of these four virtues, and it aims to apply them to actual, existing conditions, in order that the moral character of the nation shall attain the highest possible standard. The Generalissimo observed that communism crushed the spirit of the people, in addition to robbing them of material things; that it struck at all the fundamental principles of moral character. He found the people bereft of ideas or ideals concerning either humanity in general or in their fellow men in particular. Communism was, indeed, the last abrasive in the destruction of a sense of law and order, unselfishness, loyalty and those other qualities necessary for the development of human kindness and the maintenance of a high national consciousness. It tortured and degraded the status of man and dispossessed human life of value. In the face of this dismal prospect, the Generalissimo decided that the New Life Movement could sow the first seeds of an effort to awaken the people an urge for a more-satisfying life.

9.7 ZHANG XUELIANG'S XI'AN INCIDENT SPEECH (DECEMBER 13, 1936)

In 1936, Zhang Xueliang kidnapped Jiang Jieshi who was about to engage in what Jiang Jieshi hoped would be the final extermination campaign against the Communists. After Jiang Jieshi's capture, Zhang Xueliang gave a speech to the nation outlining his motivation for the kidnapping and the terms for Jiang Jieshi's release. In this way he hoped to rally the nation (and Jiang) to the need for unity against the Japanese invaders. Zhang Xueliang's tone and his ability to capture the mood of the entire nation in his plea for Jiang Jieshi's resistance seem to support his later claims that he sought to save the nation