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During the Anti-Japanese War (1937-45), Nationalist Party planners in China drew up ambitious plans that were intended to not only build an economic base that would aid in the defeat of Japan, but also lay the foundation for the country's postwar resurgence. The success of these plans, however, rested on their abilities to recruit a cadre of highly skilled technicians. According to an estimate from China's Central Planning Bureau uncovered by J. Megan Greene in her new book, *Building a Nation at War: Transnational Knowledge Networks and the Development of China during and after World War II*, postwar reconstruction campaigns would require a massive 1,656,659 skilled technicians (p. 61). The challenge that China's planners faced, however, was where the regime could find such a large pool of skilled laborers and administrators. At the center of Greene's important book are the efforts to resolve this challenge, as Chinese officials, working with their counterparts in the American government and the private sector, constructed a transformative training regime with the capacity to train the large numbers of technicians that China desperately needed.

The literature on Sino-American relations is littered with scattered references to the large numbers of Chinese students and professionals who received training in the United States during the war, as well as the steady stream of American engineers, scientists, and government officials who traveled to China during the same period to oversee on-the-ground training programs. *Building a Nation at War* finally offers a comprehensive institutional framework for understanding this exchange. In it, Greene lays bare the transnational institutions and networks that facilitated the flow of Americans and Chinese in both directions across the Pacific during World War II and after. Across five chapters spanning the early wartime period into the postwar, Greene offers a desperately needed window onto the formation and operation of largely unstudied Chinese institutions such as the Central Planning Bureau; the China National Resource Commission (NRC), New York Office; the Universal Trading Corporation; and the
Chinese War Production Board. More than an institutional history, however, Greene's book is an exemplary transnational history, revealing how Chinese officials in these organizations interacted with American government agents, scientists, technicians, and business figures to accomplish the goal of building a cadre of trained personnel capable of steering China toward a new economic future.

Despite powerful inequalities between Chinese agents and their American counterparts, Greene reveals that the Chinese were “active agents in the process of knowledge transmission and in the production of creole technologies and systems of technological organization” (p. 13). Focusing on these Chinese figures who were not mere “empty vessels,” as she effectively argues, Greene's work offers a much-needed inquiry into the nature and limits of American power in China in the wartime and postwar period. American government officials were primarily focused on rapidly winning the war against Japan and, after the war, on creating new opportunities and markets for American industry. Chinese officials, however, had their own interests that centered around not only winning the war, but also on building the connections and institutions that would aid in China's postwar reconstruction.

In contrast to the many portrayals of Chinese Nationalist Party officials as ham-handed and grasping in the literature on Sino-American relations in the wartime period, Greene offers a different perspective, highlighting their deftness in engaging with their American counterparts and at the same time advancing their own interests. Indeed, by the postwar period, she argues, Chinese agents exhibited their “agency in a process that had been largely dominated by US interests during the war” (p. 236). Her portrayal is a breath of fresh air and sheds new light on a Sino-American transnational engagement that was negotiated with Chinese officials as much as it was dictated by the Americans. Her work is an important addition to what we might call an ever-growing “revisionist” approach to the study of the Republic of China that tends to draw heavily on Chinese-language sources drawn from archives in China and Taiwan, many of which only opened in the 1980s.

[1] This approach, which is more sympathetic to the challenges faced by Chiang Kaishek and his Nationalist Party regime and more open to charitable interpretations of its policies, diverges sharply from the highly critical assessments of that regime and its flaws that dominated the literature well into the 1980s.[2]

Yet, while Greene's approach offers an important corrective to a literature that has long overwritten American power, at times one might accuse her of stepping too far in the opposite direction. China's dependence on American aid, technical assistance, and shipments of industrial equipment and weapons, which began in earnest in 1941, continued apace into the postwar period. Given this dependence and the desperation for American support to reconstruct China in the wake of eight long years of Japanese occupation (not to mention to aid the Nationalist's efforts to fight the Chinese Communist Party beginning in 1946), it is worth questioning just how much the actions of Chinese officials can be viewed outside of the prism of American power. The technical agreements negotiated by the NRC after the war were viewed by many at the time—and indeed, since—as mere “window dressing on Chinese development efforts in an attempt get more US aid.” Greene rejects this interpretation, noting “the Chinese government genuinely needed assistance with redevelopment, and it used the contracts to get ideas and develop connections” that could be helpful even if not fully implemented (p. 217). This is an important point, but at the same time, both things could be and, perhaps even Greene would agree, probably were true. The NRC could both be seeking to entangle American government agencies and companies in a larger sustaining aid re-
gime, and at the same time recognize the value in these plans being constructed.

The problem is that by underemphasizing the desperate need for American support, Greene risks obscuring a structural factor that circumscribed the so-called agency of Chinese actors. Beneath many of the Sino-American negotiations in the wartime and postwar periods was a clear recognition on the China side that the country desperately needed dollars, markets for Chinese raw materials, a mechanism for technical exchange, and a steady flow of industrial goods and weapons. Greene’s effort to lay bare the successes of NRC officials and others in finding the room to maneuver amidst the larger structural reality of China’s dependence on the United States is an extremely important contribution to the literature. But it is essential that we do not lose sight of that reality, lest we blind ourselves to the profound inequalities that shaped the Sino-American relationship during the wartime and postwar period.

At the center of Greene’s work are the plans and institutions developed by Chinese and American actors to help win the war and develop postwar China. The problem that Greene faces, however, is one that all scholars of Republican China face: How should we think about plans that are never implemented and which in many cases never leave the drawing table? Considering the collapse of the Nationalist regime in 1949, “it would be easy to dismiss the efforts described in this book as having been wasted and ultimately meaningless,” Greene bristles late in the book, responding to a larger literature that has tended to do just that (p. 238). Some scholars have sought a way around the trap that yawns at the center of the study of the Chinese Republic by trying to understand Nationalist Party plans as being intended for domestic or international audiences: part of a ploy to build legitimacy for a regime that as often as not lacked the capability and means to implement the ambitious plans issuing forth from government ministries in Nanjing and Chongqing. But for Greene, the plans are not “window dressing” and not part of what we might see as a Republican imaginary. Rather, they are the institutional, infrastructural, and personnel bricks that together construct the bridge across the 1949 divide. As she claims, they “constitute the antecedents of what has been called the Taiwan miracle and, in a much more limited way, the PRC’s own economic development” (p. 239).

This point is well taken, and her work does indeed help contribute to a larger literature that reveals the continuities that bind the two eras and cross an ideological and political gap that until only recently seemed insurmountable. Yet this focus on the implications of the training regime in China and Taiwan is a missed opportunity to understand the wider resonances of the transnational structures developed during the wartime and postwar periods. The training and exchange regime cobbled together by Chinese and American officials, scientists, and businessmen should also be viewed as a model and a blueprint later drawn upon for export to American Cold War allies who shared the desperate need for training and technical assistance that China had in the 1940s. In some ways, Greene’s work is held back by her desire to trace resonances solely through the limiting framework of the competing Chinese states in East Asia. The legacies of her story, it seems clear, extend beyond China and Taiwan to Japan, South Korea, South Vietnam, the Philippines and a wide ranging network of American Cold War allies in the Pacific and beyond.

Notes

[1]. One of the earlier works offering a more sympathetic assessment of the Nationalist Party regime and based on newly opened archives in China is William Kirby’s *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984). Since Kirby’s work, this approach has exploded in China, the United States, and Europe.

[2]. This approach, which not coincidentally lay at the center of the Chinese Communist Party’s
historical orthodoxy, was exemplified in a larger number of works including perhaps most notably the work of Lloyd Eastman, whose works, The Abortive Revolution: China Under Nationalist Rule, 1927 and 1937 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1974) and Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937-1949 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), had a powerful influence in the field.


[4]. This idea of plans as part of the Nationalist Party's imagination has been presented in work on Chinese borderlands. In his work on Republican Tibet, Hsiao-ting Lin argues that the Republic of China embraced an “imagined sovereignty” in the region. This imagined vision of Chinese authority in the region that exceeded the abilities of the state to enforce that vision was almost certainly intended for consumption outside of Tibet more than inside of it. Tibet and Nationalist China’s Frontiers: Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928-1949 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 15. I make a similar argument in my own book on Xinjiang, Natural Resources and the New Frontier: Constructing Modern China’s Borderlands (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 4-6.

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