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Sovereign Foreign Affairs: Sino-German Relations in Republican China

 The Republic of China suffered through precarious circumstances throughout its early development following the abdication of the Qing emperor in 1912. Amidst internal political and social unrest and the vices of foreign imperialism, however, early Republican statesmen and scholars committed to the notion of a sovereign and united Chinese state. Despite an originally ineffectual transition, the Republic of China soon emerged as an increasingly sovereign global entity. However, external circumstances posed limits to the full realization of Chinese sovereignty through the exercise of foreign relations, and it was many decades before Chinese officials began to pursue relations beyond the preeminent global power elites, namely with the unsuccessful adversary of WWI, Germany. Sino-German diplomatic relations in the 1930s represented a transitional moment in the Republic of China’s state formation and realization of sovereignty when China first exercised productive, autonomous foreign relations.

 Scholarship on the history of foreign relations of Republican China has not received much attention from historians, and the scholarship that does exist predominantly outlines the broad chronological transformations as the Qing empire transitioned to a republic. Odd Arne Westad tracks the emergence of Chinese foreign relations and relates these developments to the broader foreign relations of the major world powers during this period.[[1]](#footnote-1) A close analysis of Republican China’s unique relationship with Germany was explored by William Kirby,[[2]](#footnote-2) who also worked to place this relationship within the broader trend of the internationalization of foreign affairs of the Republic of China.[[3]](#footnote-3) The scholarship regarding the intellectual debate within China around notions of sovereignty and the intellectual foundations for nation-building are vast,[[4]](#footnote-4) but generally do not give weight to the significance of foreign relations to the realization of theories of sovereignty. It will be the work of this paper to add a dimension of analysis to the history of foreign relations that contextualizes it within the literature regarding state sovereignty.

 The discussion of sovereignty in China begins with the intellectual introduction of the notion of sovereignty into late Imperial Qing thought as scholars, influenced by the Western intellectual tradition, began adopting political theory common to Western philosophies. One of the formative contributions to early ideas of sovereignty was Henry Wheaton’s *Elements of International Law*, which was translated into Chinese and widely circulated. If the Chinese were to operate within a Western-dominated system, they first had to “translate” the Western philosophical base from which the system was founded.[[5]](#footnote-5) Wheaton’s work highlighted the key ideals of sovereignty that would be utilized in the Chinese context:

Sovereignty is the supreme power by which any State is governed. This Supreme power may be exercised either internally or externally. Internal sovereignty is that which is inherent in the people of any State, or vested in its ruler, by its municipal constitution or fundamental laws...[or] constitutional law. External sovereignty consists in the independence of one political society, in respect to all other political societies...[or] international law.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The crucial emphasis of Wheaton’s ideas is the “supreme power” inherent to states, as well as the recognition of external relations as essential to realization of sovereignty; sovereign states have autonomous authority within their government, and autonomous foreign relations are a manifestation of this sovereignty.

 The Western notion of sovereignty became integrated into popular political philosophy among intellectuals in China. For instance, in an assertion synthesized from Wheaton’s ideas, the Chinese intellectual Yang Tingdong echoed similar sentiments:

The establishment of the state requires a certain order...But a certain order requires inherent powers before it can come into existence. The inherent powers domestically guarantee the peace of the populace and internationally protect from enemy invasion. This is generally called ‘sovereignty.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

The continuity in thought is evident in Yang’s writing; the “certain order” is reminiscent of Wheaton’s “supreme power,” and Yang echoes the significance of foreign relations to exercising sovereignty. However, Yang cites the specific threat from enemy invasion that is addressed through the exercise of sovereign foreign relations, which speaks to the historical paradigm of imperialism and the military threat of Japanese invasion relevant in China. Although not an exhaustive review, the sentiments expressed are representative of the broader discussions of sovereignty during Republican China, and the specific context in which this analysis of Sino-German diplomatic relations functions.

In order to understand the distinctiveness of Republican China’s relations with Germany, one must first consider the historical context of both Germany’s and Republican China’s international status and diplomacy following WWI. The story of Western-style diplomacy in China originates from the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which concluded the British-interventionist Opium Wars. This involuntarily-imposed treaty inaugurated a formal diplomatic legacy of unequal treaties and imperialism by Western powers in China. However, it was also through the inequities of foreign imperialism that China, still an empire controlled by the Qing dynasty in 1842, was first brought into the world order dominated by Western hegemons.

 The Republic of China was not the sole target of diplomatic inequalities. Germany also suffered through the austerity of Western-imposed diplomacy, albeit without the legacy of directly imposed imperialism. Following WWI the Western powers signed the Treaty of Versailles, which severely restricted rearmament of the German Republic in order to curb their imperialist expansion. With aspirations of industrialization and an unabandoned commitment to expansion, the effects of the Treaty of Versailles established the foundation for radical developments within Germany’s internal politics that later shaped foreign relations with China and catalyzed more devastating global developments by midcentury. The Treaty of Versailles also represented a contentious treaty for China in a waning era of Western imperialism in the region.[[8]](#footnote-8) By omitting China from the Treaty of Versailles and granting former German territories in China to Japan, the Western powers focused their diplomatic priorities on Japan in the East Asian region while promulgating a denial of sovereignty to the Chinese republic.

 Denied the opportunity to pursue legitimate diplomacy through elite Western powers and unable to pursue industrialization without international funding, China was increasingly driven to establish relations with alternate allies. China first pursued relations with Soviet Russia, which provided funding and training for military development as well as assistance in political reorganization. Forgoing any elaboration on the details of this diplomatic relationship, Chiang Kai-shek, pledged to purge the GMD’s internal organization of any Soviet or CCP ties, terminated formal relations with Soviet Russia in 1928. By this point, Chiang’s ambitions to industrialize, particularly his aspirations for a war economy, received little foreign support.

At the same time as China’s external relations were unable to find adequate international support, it’s internal political organization suffered an extensive but inefficient and uncoordinated bureaucracy incapable of realizing consistent, defined national interests. Indicative of bureaucratic inefficiency, independent bureaucratic factions burdened under unclear priorities, ill-defined and competing jurisdiction, and a general lack of funding; the Finance Ministry competed with the Industry Ministry, whose objectives were indistinct from the Interior Ministry’s.[[9]](#footnote-9) This lack of coordinated vision reinforced China’s inability to establish sovereign foreign relations externally. However, Chinese bureaucrats began to recognize complementary aspirations of their counterparts in the German bureaucracy, namely the German“Wehrwirtschaft” policy for a broad-based war economy aimed at finding new markets to secure raw materials and sell industrial products as they engaged in clandestine rearmament.[[10]](#footnote-10) Chinese domestic territory was rich in raw materials essential to German industrialization, such as tungsten and antimony, but an effective bureaucratic apparatus needed to be established to unify national interests in order to accommodate German investment.

 By the late 1920s China had a galvanizing national ambition for industrialization but lacked the capacity to implement such development due to lack of capital. As the GMD’s “Guideline on the Reconstruction of the People’s Livelihood” stated, “As a nation which lags behind in production, China has to make use of her domestic and overseas Chinese capital...In particular, she has to take full advantage of foreign capital and technology.”[[11]](#footnote-11) To realize this vision, the National Defense Planning Commission was hastily established following the Japanese annexation of Manchuria in 1931, which completely devastated China’s primary industrial stronghold, further inducing the Chinese officials to develop the necessary mechanisms to encourage German investment. The committee’s goal was to oversee the creation of a national defense economy to rally against Japan as well as to mobilize for German investment.

The subsequent plan for industrialization featured development of state-run heavy industries to be supervised by technical experts, more aggressive extraction of raw materials, and expansion of power-generating capacities.[[12]](#footnote-12) This streamlined bureaucracy and outlined national plan created the necessary circumstances for German investments in both finance and expertise. Trade relations were initiated between the two countries, at first bartering Chinese raw materials for German industrial products. To supervise and advise Chinese industrialization and military development was a cadre of German generals invested in the project of aiding China’s industrial and military development to protect the prospect of German investment. Chinese officials admired the German ethic since the days of their extraterritorial concessions in Qingdao. Although the presence of foreign imperialism was condemned, Germany’s internal organization of its colony was looked upon as a model for China’s own development.[[13]](#footnote-13)

 The first major German military mission to advise China was headed by Colonel Max Bauer in 1928, who laid the foundation for further military advisorship and consolidation of military commercial interests in China, while crucially avoiding any internal political activities.[[14]](#footnote-14) Following Bauer was General Georg Wetzell in 1930, who expanded Bauer’s initiatives but with mixed success amidst the intensifying Japanese invasion.[[15]](#footnote-15) The most formative of the German advisors was Wetzell’s successor General Hans von Seeckt in 1934. The consistent strain among these advisors was their espousal of an “inflexibly pro-Chinese attitude” and their commitment strictly to supervising, leaving the autonomous decision making to Chiang.[[16]](#footnote-16) As such, Chiang Kai-shek had great respect for Seeckt and even offered him the position of Senior Advisor in charge of overlooking military, political, and economic matters. Seeckt declined, but he did deliver in response a memorandum to China outlining a plan for industrialization and military development that drew on his own successes as a general with the German military.

Seeckt’s relations with Chiang Kai-shek secured and protected further German military and economic investment in China, which was formalized in the Treaty for the Exchange of Chinese Raw Materials and Agricultural Products for German Industrial and Other Products in 1934. This formalistically standard treaty provided credit to the Chinese government to be used on industrial products in exchange for raw materials sent to Germany. Implementation of the treaty was assisted through one of Seeckt’s contacts, the industrialist Hans Klein, who established the Hapbro firm to secure and facilitate Sino-German economic ties per the 1934 treaty.[[17]](#footnote-17) Beyond the material conditions, this treaty was revolutionary in the history of Chinese foreign policy because it intimately linked the economies of the two nations in an agreement of equal partnership and mutual benefit. Germany put itself in a position that was dependent on China’s resources and development, and as such had an invested interest in protecting Chinese industry through the complementary supervision of military and economic development.

The diplomatic relations forged between Germany and Republican China marked a distinct shift in the exercise of foreign affairs in China’s modern history. For the first time, China engaged with a major world power on equitable terms while maintaining and respecting each country’s respective sovereignty.[[18]](#footnote-18) The legacy of imperialism imposed a regime of extraction and exploitation on China that inherently violated their sovereignty by undermining economic self-determination. Even previous constructive relations with Soviet Russia were motivated by the ambition to establish a Soviet colony in China. Germany’s primary interests were economic, but they did not submit to the imperial mechanism of extraction. Rather, through financial investments China was offered the autonomy to pursue industrialization on their own terms without sacrificing sovereign autonomy. The 1934 treaty was representative of the first formal agreements to reverse the trend of foreign imperialism in China in which Chinese officials no longer had to rectify the legacy of imperialism but actively forged new equitable relations.

Although the formal treaties signed with Germany were a visible manifestation of the exercise of sovereign foreign relations, the internal political reorganization represented a less visible but still crucial element of national sovereignty. Recalling Wheaton’s and Yang’s theories of sovereignty, external and internal “supreme power” were necessary for the total realization of state sovereignty. Within this context of sovereignty, the restructuring and consolidation of internal governance through the National Defense Planning Commission facilitated a multifaceted approach to realizing sovereignty. These domestic efforts were pursued to streamline management of capital and resources in order to appeal to external nations to attract investment, and this development of internal sovereignty was the key to exercising sovereignty externally; sovereign foreign relations are an extension of domestic sovereign governance.

Republican China took great strides in realizing sovereignty by the early 1930s, but evidently the Nationalist government did not last. In fact, internal challenges to power, the continued onslaught of Japanese invasion, the rise of Hitler, and the ensuing world war obliterated the Nationalist project. Despite an increasingly consolidated bureaucracy, corrupt officials and a neglected populace portended the fall of the Nationalist government as the CCP garnered national influence among peasant workers. At the same time, Hitler began to take over foreign relations strategy in East Asia that was previously conducted by bureaucrats, and he identified Japan as the strategic ally in the East. In 1938 upon instructions cited directly from Hitler, the last of the German advisors, General Alexander von Falkenhausen, was recalled.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Regardless of the fate of Republican China, the diplomacy conducted during the Republican era served to facilitate an exchange of mutual benefit to both China’s and Germany’s military industrial interests. While consolidating internal governance for the sake of external relations, the exchange also indirectly preserved the territorial integrity of the Chinese nation as industrial products were mobilized to support a war economy rallied against Japanese invasion. Although the Republic of China today is contained on an island off the coast of southeast China, its diplomatic legacy leaves a lasting mark for reversing the trend of foreign imperialism that was hindering national development and for creating the conditions for China to become a global power.

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5. Ibid., 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Henry Wheaton cited in Zarrow, *After Empire*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yang Tingdong cited in Zarrow, *After Empire* 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Westad, *Restless Empire* 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Guideline on the Reconstruction of the People’s Livelihood, cited in Kirby, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Westad, *Restless Empire* 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Billie K. Walsh, “The German Military Mission in China, 1928-1938,” *The Journal of Modern History* 46, no. 3 (1974): 504-506. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 506-507. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 512. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China*, 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kirby, “The Internationalization of China,” 443-444. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Walsh, “The German Military Mission in China,” 511. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)