

# Imperialism in the New Life Movement

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**Abstract:** *This is a historical review that aims to explore the New Life movement (NLM) in the light of imperialist theory. The implementation of the Movement is characterized by cultural, racial and gender imperialism. In the context of colonization and war, the Kuomintang government used this movement to improve the quality and image of the nation, and to increase its control over local power. The study of the New Life Movement can be divided into three phases, 1970s to 1990s, 2000s, and 2010 onwards. The focus has shifted from the political ideology of leaders to the lives of people. Through the lens of imperialism reveals the government's indoctrination and discipline of the mass, and likewise explores the modern transformation of the people's lifestyle under the practice of the Movement.*

**Keywords:** The New Life Movement, Imperialism, Modern, Political ideology.

## 1. Introduction

The New Life Movement was launched in 1934 by Chiang Kai-shek and his wife Soong Mei-ling and ended in 1949 with the collapse of the regime. The ostensible aim of this movement is to revitalize the Chinese nation by regulating the social order and promoting personal hygiene. The deeper goal of Chiang Kai-shek is to gain the power. This study mainly discusses why Chiang Kai-shek used hygiene and social order to carry out the campaign. The Kuomintang government uses the European lifestyle and health system as the standards for policy implementation. And the discussion will include the stigma and blow of Chinese body by European and Japanese imperialist countries behind the movement. It reflects the close link between race, gender and imperialism.

The study will combine with the historiography of the New Life Movement to discuss. The historiography of the New Life Movement can be divided into three periods. The first period is from the 1970s to 1990s, and it focuses on political ideology, as well as the power of the leadership. The second period is the 2000s. Influenced by Foucault's theory, there is a "body turn" in the study of the New Life Movement, which is related to the concern of race and gender. The third period is from 2010 till now. The studies full of diversity and show the cultural imperialism that permeates the Movement. The scholars pay more attention to discuss the relation between the movement and modernity.

## 2. From the 1970s to 1990s: Totalitarianism and State Building

In this period, there are two historians influence further studies a lot. They are Lloyd Eastman (1929-1993) and Arif Dirlik (1940-2017). Eastman pioneered the study of Republican China and set a new standard for scholars working on the Nationalist regime. Dirlik made a contribution on political ideology in modern China. Lloyd Eastman studied the Blue Shirts (Lanyishe 藍衣社)[1] by various perspectives. The New Life Movement is one of the parts. In his article, there is an opinion put forward by Iwai. Iwai thought that the NLM was "created" by the Chinese Culture Study Association (Chung-kuo wen-hua hseuh-hui), which was a Blue Shirt front organization[2]. And Eastman didn't regard the fascist spirit as the main mean to advance the NLM by Kuomintang government. Chiang Kai-shek would use

Confucianism, and even Christianity, in realizing his desired transformation of the nation[3]. Arif Dirlik thought the movement was the Kuomintang version of a "cultural revolution" for China[4]. He analyzed different ideologies during the NLM. In Eastman and Dirlik's studies, they started with the perspective of government and leaders, and dug out the ideologies behind the movement.

In this period, the thought base of the study in the New Life Movement is that reality is fixed. It means that scholars have clear conclusions in their articles. The New Life Movement was "Militarization Movement"[5], mixed with fascism and Confucianism. And most of them hold the views that the consequence of this movement is failed. They also explain the reason of failure through their discussions. The New Life Movement is motivated by a single-minded preoccupation with the deficiencies of the Chinese people. Its hopes to mobilize popular energies in favor of the state ultimately foundered on its fear of the loss of control over those energies[6].

The movement discoveries inspiration in modern totalitarianism[7]. The two cores of the New Life Movement are "cleanliness" (qingjie) and "orderliness" (guiju)[8]. The slogan corresponds to the cores. The officials implement "militarization" (jun shi hua), "productization" (sheng chan hua) and "aestheticization" (yi shu hua). Personal hygiene is not the key point to study in this period. The image of the new Chinese as "soldier-citizen" followed logically from this same assumption. Historians more emphasis on the political policies that proposed by Chiang Kai-shek, Chen Li-fu and other Kuomintang officials. Political power use and manage the mass are the key. Then, integrating with the world's political environment in the 1930s, fascism carried out and practiced successfully by Mussolini and Hitler. A series of measures taken by Chiang Kai-shek, showing the style of totalitarianism and fascism. And the process of carrying out the New Life Movement was fit to the basic features of fascism. For instance, Chiang Kai-shek wanted people to obey him absolutely. And he encouraged to use violence and tried to militarize the nation. In a totalitarian vision, it interprets that the state, as the unchallengeable personification of collective unity, encompassed society wholly within it[9].

Moreover, Chiang Kai-shek deeply influenced by Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture. Totalitarianism was proposed in the name of Li Yi Lian Chi. The leaders of

Kuomintang had a new interpretation to Li Yi Lian Chi, and the meaning more related to politeness and morality. Frederic Wakeman (1937-2006) argued that Chiang Kai-shek's ideology combined fascist military discipline with the classic Neo-Confucian view of community hierarchy and lineage solidarity[10]. And he used a new term "Confucian fascism" to describe the NLM. "Confucian fascism" symbols of power quickly merged into hues of traditional social relationships that combined imperial loyalism with the more egalitarian righteousness of medieval knights-errant who formed the militant brotherhoods of late imperial China[11]. He thought that "Confucian fascism" fails to truly mobilize the mass as European fascism did. Some scholars agreed with Wakeman's ideas, such as William Kirby. They agreed that the New Life Movement is an unsuccessful imitation of German fascism.

From the 1970s to 1990s, data-driven and analytical approach are frequently used by scholars. They collected many central archives including official documents and the speech of leaders. Then, they interpreted the texts carefully and paid attention to the details. There were few valuable works that they were able to use for reference in that period. The theory of fascism inspired them. And they tried to find some precise words to explain the measures that practiced in the New Life Movement. They dug out the texts and learnt the policies at first. Then, they incorporated with the knowledge of historical background of the Republic of China and other theories to help them understand. In short, they had a comprehensive interpretation of the political ideology of the New Life Movement by using above historical methods.

The studies in this period lie a foundation on the understanding of fascism and Confucianism in the NLM. These ideologies are considered from the perspective of totalitarianism and state building. Plus considering the influence of Eurocentrism and politics history, this historiography mode lasted almost thirty years. The direction of this kind of research is an embodiment of orientalism. Those European and American scholars put Chiang Kai-Shek's policies and measures in the ideological framework they are familiar with. It's a Western style for explaining.

### 3. The 2000s: Body Politics and Social Order

Influenced by Foucault's theories, and other studies about the body history and gender history, the historiography of the New Life Movement has a "body turn", the paradigm shift. The last period focuses more on the relation between political power and orderliness. In this period, historians paid more attention to the relation between national control and people's body, it called "body politics". It shows the combination between the race, gender and imperialism. Since the 1990s, some scholars already studied the body history. Prasenjit Duara argues that nationalists pursue sovereign authority, and the nation-state exhorts its citizens to think about what they can do for the nation. He considers the role of the women in modern China. He thinks that what this commodified authenticity means for the new nationalism, for subject formation, and for women, may be well worth exploring[12]. Then, because of the influence of Chinese culture for a long time, some Japanese scholars are interested in this topic. And Shigehisa Kuriyama's masterpiece enhances people's

understanding of Chinese people's body and traditional Chinese medicine. In short, the study perspective has a change from the ideology to people.

Body politics is a mode in national control. Considering the elements of the European and Japanese aggression, the status of China and Chinese was low in the world. Historians discuss a lot in the relation between the image of the nation and citizens' behaviors. Hideo Fukamachi is a Japanese scholar. He studies the connection between body aesthetics and public consciousness in the New Life Movement. His title has a metaphor, "The Apple's Aftertaste". "Apple" relates to a story that Adam and Eve shamed on their naked body, and "apple" in the article also means western civilization. Hideo Fukamachi holds a view that the leaders of Kuomintang wanted to transform Chinese people by setting the standards of western modern citizens to require them. Chiang Kai-shek tried to use political power as a tool to push the body aesthetics and public consciousness become universal and popular[13].

Moreover, historians gradually focus on the non-elites. Except people's social life, the study of female body is another study focus in the 2000s. Gender imperialism is reflected here. The emancipation of the female body in China was part of the New Life movement and a testimony to the government's role in the improvement of the country. Yen Hsiao-pei bases on a popular female magazine *Linglong* to analysis modern girls in China. Foot binding was abandoned in the 1930s, but Chinese women's feet and legs were still not their own possessions. What's more, Yuan Liangfen, mayor of Beijing, prohibited women from baring their feet and legs[14]. And *Linglong* recorded the resist of Beijing women for the ban. The New Life Movement also promoted natural breasts and eradicating the unhealthy custom of breastbinding[15]. Meanwhile, Yen reads lots of works of western scholars about the female history and modern China to help her study. Through the response of the official regulation of their body, modern girls helped reveal the entanglement of body politics, modernity, and nationalism in 1930s China.

Then, case study and narrative words are the main writing features in this period. For instance, Hideo Fukamachi explains the important role of government plays in the New Life Movement by giving an example of the improvement of Japanese modernization. And Yen Hsiao-pei tells some women's stories to show their attitudes and ideas about the policies. From their bibliographies, these scholars learn from the nationalism and feminism theories. Their readable words expressed theories better. The analysis of the case study is not limited in the events but relates to the era. Seeing the big from the small is a method of historical research.

It's a "Cultural turn" in this period. Central archives and local magazines are the main sources for the scholars. Source use is different from the last period. However, it is a good change and progress to the study of the New Life Movement. It inspires further historians that various kinds of sources can be used. Then, historians talk about the power relation and social identity. They are not just focus on the leaders. They discuss more about the relation between the nation and ordinary people and try to construct social identity of the non-elites. Influenced by the theory of culture history, the writing and

study method of historians changed. This “turn” provides more sides and possibilities to show the different types of imperialism. Imperialism is not limited to the political control of the leadership, and its function is reflected in the infiltration of the public.

#### 4. From 2010 till Now: Modernity and Interaction

After the stage of body politics, there is a turning point in the study of the New Life Movement. Scholars start to use modern and interactive perspectives to discuss. Then, some historians are not focus on the level of country, they tend to study some specific areas. This is the interaction between the local government and the central government of the Kuomintang, and a dynamic observation of imperialism. For instance, Federica Ferlanti studies the New Life Movement in Jiangxi province and the wartime mobilization in Chongqing and Chengdu. She pays more attention to dig out the local archives. And the texts in her articles are not only from China, but also from America, such as Hoover Institution Archive. Federica holds a view that the New Life Movement raised a fundamental issue in Chinese society, which would be the primacy of the state in social mobilization[16]. The mobilization strictly followed the top-down approach and inspired by bureaucratic zeal rather than genuine enthusiasm [17]. In the study of Chengdu and Chongqing, considering the mobilization connects with economic system, the author gives five tables in her article to show the financial resources in the war time. It's a directly way to help readers understand the contents. She studies the mobilization of European countries, comparing the differences between China and Europe. Federica Ferlanti provides a new perspective to learn the New Life Movement and rethinks the function of it.

Then, in this period, based on previous study achievements of the New Life Movement, historians have a more comprehensive understanding on this topic. Maggie Clinton analyzes the fascism of the NLM in her book, however, she combines many social factors to consider that how the fascism influence people's daily life. The ideology was not her focus, she paid more attention to discuss the interaction between the state and society. She provides some cases and uses posters and cartoons to discuss the policy of advocating nationalistic masculinity. The NLM embraced masculine sartorial and physical norms that had been developing since the end of the Qing[18]. The study of fascism is not only considered as a political term and relates to the leaders, but a discussion about the reaction of the mass.

Hideo Fukamachi also discusses the relation between the mass and the politicians. For instance, he uses “Prairie Fire” to describe Chinese people and looks the New Life Movement as the emperor's new clothes. His main arguments are that the masses tended to take “overtly obedient and covertly disobedient” attitude to the policies and this movement didn't achieve the aim of modern nation-building. Hideo Fukamachi uses case study to help his interpretation. The masses were inclined to respond to “a policy from above with a countermeasure from below” (Shang you zhengce xia you duice 上有政策下有对策)[19]. Thus, he argues that the NLM is a tool of Kuomintang government's political struggle and the state-society interaction is ineffective to handling the

national crisis[20].

Moreover, re-interpretation and return to the texts are the main features in this period. The scholars find more archives. They are not content with the previous studies, and they use the new sources and theories to give a new interpretation. Taken Liu Wennan as an example, she redefines the moral and legal roles in people's daily life. From the perspective of personal hygiene to the establishment of social order, she also discusses the discipline in this movement. She finds that the discipline of the NLM between morality and law had much in common with the mechanism of discipline articulated in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, but it still differed from Foucault's analysis of discipline, which was based on the Western experience[21]. Her study not only mixes the study of political ideology and body politics, but uses new sources to form her own ideas. She uses the poster to do some explaining. Consequently, Liu insists on that the movement was not an intentional design. It's an organic part of China's own modernizing process, in which the state redefined its moral and legal role in people's everyday lives in order to build a strong nation-state[22].

The thought base of this period is that reality is not fixed, shaped by the interaction. Most of their studies don't have a clear conclusion to define the New Life Movement. The study perspectives become more and more various. Zhang Qiang studies this movement in a global context. His paper is a cross-cultural perspective through the example of the capital market in Shanghai as an epitome of China's modernization[23]. His sources based on *Journey to a War*, co-authored by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, involving poems and travel dairies. Zhang gave people a new perspective to study this movement by combining with translation and literature. Through analyzing Auden's dairies and poems, he finds that Auden's opinions indeed show the deficiencies of this government-mandated top-down mass campaign, far from the actual needs of wartime China[24]. The oriental perceptions of wartime China in *Journey to a War* coincide with Auden's contemporary imperialist vision on seeking the European shadow of cities in the East[25]. Zhang Qiang uses the sources carefully. In short, putting the New Life Movement into the modern context between the China and western countries is a new trend.

Since the 2010s, many Chinese scholars concerns the topic of the New Life Movement. Case studies are the popular choice for their writing. The perspectives show the diversity, especially the female character study and exploration from the literature, movie, magazines of the 1930s. Furthermore, there are some scholars pay attention to the ideological imagination embedded in the Movement. For instance, Yang Weihua mentions that Chiang Kai-shek and Song Mei-ling incorporated the Christian Church into the New Life Movement by marking it with Christianity, political patriotism, and cultural nationalism[26]. By examining the relationship between the Christian Church and the New Life Movement, it not only reflects the complexity of the interface between social groups and national movements, but also hints at the plight of the New Life Movement in implementing the modernity in national transformation. This is a new attempt for the study of the NLM at the level of the state machine to show that state building from ideology.



Looking at this stage of studies under the cultural imperialism, the New Life movement highlights the hegemony of European and American culture in the world in the 1930s. The cultural exportation to the colonies was an expression of the West's civilizational discrimination and its racial superiority. Based on Said's ideas, orientalism has three explanations. Firstly, orientalism is an academic discourse power with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies, and colonial styles. Secondly, orientalism a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." [27] Thirdly, in historically and materially, orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [28]. The scholars' findings all imply that the New Life Movement was implemented to transform Chinese nationals with Western standards of modernization. The government directives and requirements reveal the localized spread of Western concepts and behaviors of moral literacy, lifestyle, and hygiene awareness in China.

In short, recently, historians like discussing the NLM on the process of modernization and the interaction between the state and the mass. The New Life Movement embodies the features of cultural imperialism. There are lots of studies about the relation between the NLM and mobilization, ideology imagination and female's life. Scholars by studying one side to discuss the whole picture of the policy. Moreover, historians tend to use different kinds of sources. They are not limited in interpreting central archives and local archives, and they use newspapers, journals and diaries more frequently. The posters, cartoons reveal the social situation vividly. They return to the text but have critical thinking and new consideration mode to this topic.

## 5. Conclusion

The study perspective of the New Life Movement is from leader's political ideology to people's social life. The trend is from top to bottom. This movement is launched in China, but the study scale is not just limited in China. Scholars also compare to the European and Japanese in the 1930s to study this topic. The studies are based on the archives, newspapers and magazines, so the sources are mostly valuable and reliable. And some texts are from the UK and USA's archives. In short, the study of the NLM shows kind of interactions, including the leaders and the mass, the state and the people, as well as China and the world.

The movement itself was influenced by the cultural, racial and gender imperialism. In order to break the weak and dirty impression of European and Japanese imperialist countries on the Chinese in the colonial context, the leaders of the Kuomintang focused on learning the lifestyles and behaviors of Westerners in order to improve the international image of the Chinese. Chiang Kai-shek's wife, Soong Mei-ling, as one of the main promoters of the New Life Movement, also promoted the liberation of the bodies and minds of women in that era. So, this study can be also discussed in a female discourse context. In addition, the research on this movement showed the characteristics of cultural imperialism. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex

hegemony. The earliest stage of research was carried out according to the European style of consideration, starting with fascism to analyze Chiang Kai-shek's centralized leadership. Then the research direction gradually made the research diversified. In short, the interpretation of the New Life Movement within the framework of imperialism shows that the movement has a positive significance in shaping China's civilized citizens. It did not bring "new" life to the Chinese nation in the end, but it is trying to integrate China into the modern world.

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