Introduction:
Relief and Reconstruction in Wartime China

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In the early twenty-first century, one of the most pressing problems that faces the Chinese Communist Party is the social contract. In a society under pressure, what can the people expect from the state and vice versa? For decades, there has been a scholarly discourse that finds the origins of the answer to this particular question in the Communist revolution that took place during the war against Japan from 1937–1945. In this narrative, the Communists developed their own social contract in contrast not only with the imperialism of Japan, but also the indolence and corruption of the Guomindang (Nationalist) regime that ruled China at the time.

This set of essays seeks significantly to revise that view. The body of work here argues that the government of Chiang Kai-shek and affiliated organizations did in fact undertake significant efforts in the field of social rehabilitation and welfare in wartime China. The Nationalists did so partly in competition with the Communists, but also because they wished to develop their own model of modernity. At the same time, the Guomindang made ever-greater demands of its citizenry in wartime, understanding that citizens would in turn demand more from it.

Overall, the essays stress the importance of the wartime period in remoulding the relationship between the Guomindang and the wider population. The pieces also emphasize a tragic irony: the wartime period saw simultaneous attempts on the part of the Nationalist state to strengthen responsibility to its citizens while

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1) The conference at Oxford at which the papers in this special issue were first presented was supported by a Leverhulme Research Leadership Award, which the editors gratefully acknowledge, along with the input of all those who attended and critiqued the papers.

2) Emblematic of the work that seeks to revise the Nationalist contribution to the war effort is Hans J. van de Ven, War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945 (London, 2003).

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the state was itself disintegrating under the pressure of Japanese invasion as well as its own flaws and contradictions.

The articles in this special issue were developed from a workshop entitled “Relief and Reconstruction in Wartime and Postwar China” which was held at the University of Oxford in June 2011. The conference was organized around clusters of ideas about the nature of relief and ideas of reconstruction in the midst of the chaos and destruction of wartime. The eight years of war against Japan accelerated trends and shifted the dynamics of social transformation already present in the late Qing and early Republican period. At a time of total war, citizens were told to sacrifice, as the state became increasingly interested in managing and improving the quality of its citizens. The essays here do not seek to downplay the great shortcomings of the Nationalist government during this period, but they seek to understand the Guomindang’s wartime social programmes on their own terms.

From 1937 to 1945, the Guomindang government was forced into exile from its capital at Nanjing, and had to reconstitute the state in the less familiar territory of southwestern China. The new capital, Chongqing (Chungking), was repeatedly bombed, and suffered from the depredations caused by refugee flight, ecological degradation, and economic isolation from the outside world. Until recently, scholarly accounts of this experience have concentrated on well-documented accounts of corruption and incompetence that marked much of the Guomindang state’s activities, whether civilian or military. However, there was another story to be told as well: one in which issues ranging from health care to women’s rights were also considered as part of the fashioning of a modern nation-state. These efforts at reform were carried out even in the midst of a violent conflict. Because of the move of the capital, these papers deal primarily with Chongqing and Sichuan, but the case studies discussed here nonetheless tell us about the wider nature of the Guomindang’s state building efforts.

In these essays we learn about organizations and individuals who drew on specific sets of expertise, whether bureaucratic or technical, to address the crippling problems of wartime China. State-building and modernizing figures of the period include civil servants of the New Life Movement organization like Wang Minyi who was rural division leader for women’s work of the Women’s

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