

revitalizing the nation: vitalist philosophy in the chinese nationalist party

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In 1934, Chen Lifu 陳立夫 (1900-2001), a high-ranking member of the Chinese right-wing Nationalist Party (*Guomindang* 國民黨), published a book with the title *Vitalism* (*Weisheng lun* 唯生論), in which he laid out his vision of China's future. Based on the idea that the country could only be as strong as its people, Chen argued for a collectivist society where citizens had to discipline themselves constantly. The same year, the party initiated the New Life Movement, which sought to create modern citizens and put the same principles into practice for which Chen Lifu had laid out a metaphysical framework in *Vitalism*. This article will trace the development that led a right-wing party to employ the rhetoric of vitalist philosophy in its struggle for national unity and modernization.

With the term “vitalism,” the Nationalist Party connected its project to the

conservative discourse of the previous fifteen years. The widespread and controversial debate on the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941) during the late 1910s and early 1920s prepared the ground for Chen Lifu to build on. However, while Bergson is sometimes seen in Europe as a vitalist philosopher, he was received as a “philosopher of life” in China. The major proponent of vitalism in Europe during the early 20th century was Hans Driesch (1867-1941), who, unlike Bergson, frequently used that term in the titles of his publications. On the invitation of Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1887-1969), the most enthusiastic defender of Bergson in China, Driesch visited the country for a year-long lecture tour in 1922 and 1923. The philosophies that clustered around the term “life” were thus very present in China at that time.

With the recent rise in interest in philosophy of life and Bergson, the intellectual sources of Nationalist Party ideology have drawn the attention of historians.¹ Dian-Kuei Chang 張典魁 has shown in great detail that Chen Lifu’s *Vitalism* was an extension of the ideas of the party founder Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866-1925), and identified several Bergsonian elements in the text.² In an earlier important study, Jiang Yihua 姜义华 emphasized the degree to which Sun himself had been influenced by, among others, Bergson and Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926).³

Building on these studies, the present article argues that *Vitalism* was conventional as an expression of the party line, yet employed a novel term, different from earlier Chinese translations, for vitalism. Chen combined vitalist, authoritarian and traditional Chinese themes into a distinctive theory meant to justify said party line. The emphasis is thus on the political function of the text, instead of its philosophical value. The first section gives an overview of the conservative discourse during the 1910s and 1920s. Then, an analysis of Chen’s book will show which sources he drew on, how it fit into the overall agenda of the party, and finally how the party put this agenda into practice with the New Life Movement.

THE INFLUENCE OF BERGSON AROUND 1920

After the republican revolution of 1911, which led to the demise of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), military leaders soon took control of the country. By 1916, China was split into effectively independent provinces. There was no strong central government any longer, and the republic existed in name only. In this bleak political situation, anti-traditional sentiments ran high, especially among students. Faced with the failure of the republic, a culturalist discourse gained currency in the late 1910s that blamed Confucian doctrines for instilling a subservient mindset

into the Chinese people. Chinese culture represented irrationality and passivity; individuals were bound up in repressive family structures and uninterested in the fate of the nation. Western culture, admired for its rationality, utilitarianism and achievements in science, was hailed as the corrective. I call this perspective “culturalist” because culture was seen as the panacea. Questions of politics were bracketed; in one extreme case, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), one of the major liberal thinkers, vowed not to discuss politics for 20 years.⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), US-pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952) and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) were among the more popular thinkers whose ideas circulated widely, often with the express purpose of turning the Chinese into enlightened, modern and liberated individuals. Becoming modern was understood by many to mean becoming more like the West. This has become known as the New Culture Movement.

This denigration of the Chinese heritage and idealization of the West, prevalent during the late 1910s and early 1920s, did not go unchallenged. The most effective line of attack was to draw on European thinkers who were themselves critical of the very things the Chinese looked up to: rationality and science. The most influential representative of this position at the time was Henri Bergson, who defended the value of intuition over intellect. In 1920, Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988), then a philosophy lecturer at the prestigious Beijing University, caused a stir when he re-interpreted the teachings of Confucius through the lens of Bergsonian anti-intellectualism. According to Liang, Confucius spontaneously harmonized with the world around him by relying on his intuition, instead of using his intellect to fulfil his desires and destroy the unity of life. Made public first in a series of lectures and then in a book with the title *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies*, Liang’s ideas were controversially discussed, and became foundational for the cultural conservatism of the 1920s.⁵ Liang and other like-minded commentators argued that the latest philosophical trends emanating from Europe and the United States were fully compatible with the Chinese intellectual heritage. There would thus be no need to reject Chinese culture; rather, the Chinese had much to contribute to the development of a new worldview that was necessary after the horrors of the First World War.

The tensions between those who preferred modernization after the model of the West and those who defended the value of Chinese culture came to a head in 1923. In February, political activist and educator Zhang Junmai gave a lecture in which he argued that science and “view of life” (*renshengguan* 人生觀, from German *Lebensanschauung*) were categorically distinct. The former was objective and employed logical methods to study objects that fell under the laws of causation,

whereas the latter relied on intuition, was subjective and concerned with beings that possessed free will. Thus, Zhang claimed, the two should be kept separate and, crucially, that “science, no matter how evolved, cannot solve the problems of the view of life.”⁶ Critics immediately charged that Zhang defended superstition and dreamed of a return to futile metaphysical speculation. Zhang’s fiercest opponent in the ensuing year-long debate on science and metaphysics, Ding Wenjiang 丁文江 (1887-1936), was convinced that “the omnipotence of science, the omnipresence of science, the thoroughness of science lies not in its material, but in its method.” Ding explicitly identified Bergson as the source of Zhang’s theories.⁷

The positions of Zhang and Ding were the poles around which two camps formed that included some of the most prominent public intellectuals of the period. That specialized questions about epistemology and the possible limitations of science attracted such interest was due to the fact that science was coded as Western and progressive. Anyone who questioned science was perceived as questioning progress. Conversely, any defense of Chinese culture was seen as regressive and anti-Western. Despite these polemical claims, Zhang Junmai had in fact been inspired by German social democratic ideas in the political realm, and was highly knowledgeable about the latest trends in European philosophy. Besides his use of Bergsonian terminology such as “intuition,” Zhang had studied in Germany under Eucken and written a book with him on *The Problem of Life in China and Europe* (*Das Lebensproblem in China und Europa*, in German). The two authors introduced the history of Chinese philosophy in broad strokes and considered what Chinese thought might have to contribute to the future development of global philosophy. Eucken’s philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) strongly colored the tone of the work, which consequently focused on the importance of the spiritual life (*geistiges Leben*) of mankind.⁸ Zhang’s defense of Chinese culture was thus grounded in an intimate understanding of contemporary idealist thinking.⁹ Over the 1920s, this part of European philosophy, though not unchallenged, gained ground in China.

HANS DRIESCH IN CHINA

After celebrated visits of Russell and Dewey, the German biologist-turned-philosopher Hans Driesch came to the country for an extended lecture tour in 1922 and 1923. Zhang Junmai, who was responsible for the invitation, had originally planned to invite his own teacher Eucken, but Eucken declined on the grounds of his advanced age. In his introduction of Driesch to the Chinese public, Zhang remarked that the scientific background of the German philosopher should be in

accordance with the current mood among Chinese intellectuals.¹⁰ Importantly, however, Driesch rejected mechanistic explanations of biological processes. Instead, Driesch posited that an immaterial life force he called *entelechy* guided the development of living beings. This must have made him particularly attractive to Zhang, who vehemently attacked the tendency to apply mechanistic laws of causation to questions of culture and society in the debate about science and metaphysics.

Driesch arrived in China in October 1922, at the height of Bergson's popularity. He lectured on the philosophy of Kant, his own vitalism, psychology, and recent trends in philosophy in Nanjing and Beijing, before leaving China for Japan and the United States in July 1923.¹¹ If Zhang had hoped to shape the Chinese debates through the invitation of Driesch, this did not materialize.¹² Werner Meißner, one of the few scholars to have written about Driesch's stay in China, states that after 1924, "interest in Driesch's philosophy apparently died."¹³

There are several possible reasons for this. The topics of Driesch's lectures, especially Kant and vitalism, did not draw much attention outside of specialized circles. Furthermore, even though Driesch had a background in science, he came to China as a critic of mechanistic explanations. The ability to predict outcomes based on a mechanistic understanding of the world was highly attractive to Zhang's opponents in the debate about science and metaphysics, which took place while Driesch was in the country. Similarly, Driesch came upon the invitation of Zhang, which have endowed his lecture tour with a partisan flair. Zhang had clearly aligned himself with the cultural conservatives, and the Chinese public may have assumed the same of Driesch. Though the visit was not a failure, its impact on the intellectual developments of the period was unremarkable.

Despite the lack of widespread interest in the vitalism of Driesch, the cultural conservatism that drew its initial inspiration from Bergson continued to flourish during the 1920s. The virulent anti-traditionalism that had animated debates in the 1910s gradually subsided. The value of tradition proved resilient, and the movement that later became known as New Confucianism began to take shape.¹⁴ At the same time, Marxism became a force to be reckoned with among intellectuals, who debated how Chinese history fit into historical-materialist models of development in the 1930s.¹⁵ Politically, however, it was the violently anti-Communist Nationalist Party that was in power. Led by men who saw Chinese tradition as a unifying force in a country threatened by imperialist aggression from the outside and left-wing agitation on the inside, the Nationalist Party employed

the rhetoric of cultural conservatives to achieve their own, authoritarian ends. Under these circumstances, vitalism suddenly came to play a prominent role in the political discourse, even though not in the sense Driesch had used it.

THE NATIONALIST PARTY AND VITALISM

The Nationalist Party was formed out of the major forces behind the revolution of 1911. Following the death of party founder and leader Sun Yat-sen in 1925, right-wing groups within the party extended their influence. In 1927, after a successful military campaign to bring all of China under their control, the united front with the Communist Party collapsed. The period of White Terror began, during which thousands of labor activists and communists were imprisoned or killed. As head of the Bureau of Investigation, whose task it was to keep an eye on communist activities, Chen Lifu was one of the organizers behind the White Terror. In the writings emanating from the circle around Chen and other counterrevolutionary groups, Maggie Clinton has identified a strong concern with national unity based on a timeless Confucian spirit. In the eyes of Nationalist Party theorists, it was the unified nation and not the proletariat that had to bring about the revolution that would propel China into the modern age. Their hostility towards communism stemmed from its divisive focus on class struggle, and their professed reverence of Confucian values served the goal of uniting the populace under a truly Chinese spiritual framework.¹⁶ Every threat to the state, understood as a hierarchical collective united by Confucian moral teachings, was seen as “communist.” The Nationalist Party thus established a link between belonging to the nation and following the precepts of Confucian morality. It diagnosed the markers of modern city life, such as dance halls, cabaret and unmarried couples living together, as symptoms of communist licentiousness.

Chen Lifu’s *Vitalism* reflected all these strands in the author’s attempt to provide a comprehensive theoretical justification for the party line. Chen was not a philosopher. By training, he was a mining engineer, with a diploma from Pittsburgh University. He rose from personal secretary of party leader Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887-1975) to various positions that allowed him to influence high-level appointments as well as the training of new cadres. Together with his brother, he was a major force in the CC Clique, one of the factions vying for dominance within the Nationalist Party in the 1930s. *Vitalism*, one of his major forays into the philosophical realm, began as a lecture series for students of the Central Political Institute before it was published as a monograph in 1934.¹⁷

Even scholars who take the doctrines of the Nationalist Party in that era seriously as an attempt to respond to contemporary problems are keenly aware of their shortcomings. Terry Bodenhorn, who offers the most sympathetic reading of *Vitalism*, admits that his analysis “does support previous scholarly readings of GMD [Nationalist Party] ideology as derivative and confused,” and notes Chen’s failure as a propagandist.¹⁸ *Vitalism* is not characterized by a consistently rigorous argumentation or lively examples that bring the abstract theory down to everyday challenges. At the same time, Bodenhorn stresses that party functionaries constituted Chen’s main audience, and that for them, laying out the guiding principles behind the party line they were tasked to put into practice might have been entirely satisfactory.¹⁹

Vitalism was an attempt at ideological self-assurance on the side of the Nationalist Party. Unlike the Communist Party, whose intellectual appeal survived the violent purges, the Nationalists could not point to a fully developed theory that justified their decisions. After the death of Sun Yat-sen, different groups strove to canonize their interpretations of the ideas of the party founder to fill that gap. Chen’s text was part of that development; what is noteworthy about this book is that Chen directly engaged with the sources on which Sun himself had drawn, and that he established links between Nationalist Party doctrines and the conservative discourse.

The title, *weishenglun* 唯生論, literally “life-only theory,” is of particular interest. Though commonly translated as “vitalism,” the preferred term for the philosophy of Hans Driesch that went by that name was *shengji zhuyi* 生機主義 (literally: vitality-ism).²⁰ *Shengji zhuyi* was already a niche concept, but *weisheng* languished in complete obscurity prior to being discovered by Nationalist Party in 1929. I am aware of only a single occurrence before that year: Li Shicen 李石岑 (1892-1934), a university lecturer, mentioned it in passing while discussing philosophy of life.²¹ On January 25, 1929, however, the renowned educator Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940) introduced a “vitalist view of history” (*weisheng shiguan* 唯生史觀) in a speech at a Nationalist Party political training class.²²

Cai’s speech allows us to trace the two-fold terminological trajectory that led the Nationalist Party to adopt the *weisheng*-variant of vitalism. First, one of Sun Yat-sen’s core principles had been “livelihood of the people” (*minsheng* 民生), under which he subsumed his economic policies. Based on the similarity of the terms and the argument that the struggle for existence, and by implication the human concern with life, is the motor of all development, Cai equated vitalism and

livelihood of the people.²³ Besides this link to party ideology, he contrasted vitalism with materialism and idealism. All three terms are structurally similar in Chinese (*weisheng*, *weiwu* 唯物 and *weixin* 唯心), and Cai stated that the new approach for which he coined this neologism was meant to overcome the limitations of the two established philosophies.²⁴ Clearly, however, it was the historical materialism of Marxist philosophy that was the main target. In effect, *weisheng*-vitalism grants Sun's "livelihood of the people" the same status as materialism and idealism.

Afterwards, variations of that term appeared with increasing frequency in articles that used language affiliated with Nationalist Party ideology. About half a dozen such texts predate Chen Lifu's 1933 lectures on vitalism; they were published in highbrow or even academic journals. Chen seems to have been the first party member of note after Cai Yuanpei to have picked up on *weisheng*-vitalism, which indicates a slow process of gestation from the periphery of the party. That he chose *Vitalism* as the title of his book suggests his desire to present a comprehensive and foundational work on the subject. Unlike the preceding texts on the topic, Chen's presented an abstract theory of vitalism that was grounded in the conservative discourse of the 1920s: The title emphasized the primacy of life as a category of analysis, which had been a distinctive feature of that discourse. And the content drew, if not always in a systematic and explicit manner, on central concepts and thinkers that had informed it.

At the heart of Chen's conception of vitalism were "elements" (*yuanzi* 元子).²⁵ He introduced them as the "tiniest, most fundamental things in the universe as it is now known to man, and also in general the constituent parts of everything."²⁶ His definition thus included both the technical as well as the vernacular meaning. In a nod to the continuous discovery of new sub-atomic particles, Chen stressed that whatever was the smallest known thing at any point was the "element:" "In relation to atoms, electrons are the elements; in relation to molecules, atoms are the elements."²⁷ With this display of scientific knowledge, the mining engineer Chen Lifu made pretensions to proposing a scientific theory of the universe.

On top of this science-inspired foundation, Chen built the manifestly vitalist framework that gave the book its title. Most importantly, he explained that each element possessed life (*shengming* 生命) and wisdom (*zhihui* 智慧). This understanding is similar to Driesch's theory of entelechy, the life-force that guided the development of living organisms. The important difference is that Driesch conceived of entelechy as an immaterial force, inexplicable in chemical or physical terms, though he also spoke of entelechy as a "true element of nature."²⁸

It is thus possible that Chen took Driesch literally and saw this life force as akin to particles in that, given sufficient progress in the sciences, it could be observed one day.

Bergson was another major source of Chen's vitalism. Chen's "debt to Bergson was common knowledge at the time," though completely unacknowledged in the text.²⁹ The most obviously Bergsonian terminology can be found in the section "The Stream of Life" (*Shengming zhi liu* 生命之流). The idea of incessant change, often expressed in Chinese writings as "stream," forms one of the central pillars of Bergson's philosophy.³⁰ True to his collectivist bent, Chen emphasizes that each individual living being is but a tiny drop in the mighty stream of life.³¹

Chen's discussion of mankind's struggle for existence is another instance where the influence of Bergson becomes apparent. For Chen, the natural state of affairs is that things can only grow if they exploit other things; in his terminology, "generally, things are only capable of destroying the existing states of equilibrium of elements in the universe."³² As the finest accumulation of elements, humans could avoid disturbing universal harmony, as they were able to create without destroying or taking away from others. While inconspicuous at first sight, the issue of creativity was closely linked to Bergson on several levels. Firstly, *Creative Evolution* proved to be central for his reception in China and already carried the issue of creativity in its title. Secondly, on a more abstract level, the idea of human creativity stood at the center of the controversy over science and metaphysics that pitted defenders of Bergson against mechanists: If humans could create in the full sense of the word, then they were unpredictable and not bound by laws of causation.

Chen Lifu also intertwines his interpretation of vitalism deeply with traditional Chinese concepts. He claims that ancient Chinese thinkers already possessed an understanding of vitalist cosmology, and that it found expression in the classic *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經).³³ He repeatedly draws on the "Middle and the Mean" (*Zhongyong* 中庸), a chapter of a classical text that became a cornerstone of Confucian teachings in the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279).³⁴ With his constant references back to foundational texts, Chen was in line with the party's approach of building a modern society on the basis of Confucian teachings.

Besides the Confucian tradition, the other important authority in Chen's *Vitalism* was the thought of party founder Sun Yat-sen. After the latter's death in 1925, various factions within the Nationalist Party scrambled to enshrine their

interpretation of his ideas as authoritative. Along with other members of the right wing, Chen highlighted the anti-communist and anti-democratic aspects of Sun's legacy.³⁵ In order to show that his own *Vitalism* fit coherently into this program, Chen includes quotations from Sun in his text on numerous occasions, and always presents them as authoritative statements that guide his own thinking. Not only does he refer to a section as “We should collectively strive to expound and propagate the philosophical thought of the Premier (*zongli* 總理) [Sun]” in the table of contents for the first chapter; Chen also opens the whole text with the following quote: “The Premier once said: ‘Life is the center of the universe, and the livelihood of the people is the center of human history.’”³⁶

As this quote shows, Chen's life-focused approach was far from alien to Sun's own thinking. Rather, to a certain degree Chen was retracing the steps of the former party leader. When Sun was in exile in Japan between 1913 and 1916, he had used the time to work out his vision for the republic. To that end, he bought a number of books from a Tokyo bookstore, and an order list that covers the months from November 1914 to March 1915 has survived. Table 1 shows the books Sun bought in that period as reported by Jiang Yihua.³⁷

Bertrand Russell	<i>The Philosophy of Bergson</i>
Friedrich Nietzsche	<i>The Gospel of Superman</i>
Émile Boutroux	<i>Science and Religion in Contemporary Philosophy</i>
Émile Boutroux	<i>The Rise and Fall of Religion</i>
Edward Westermarck	<i>The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas</i>
Rudolf Eucken	<i>Present-Day Ethics</i>
David Balsillie	<i>Professor Bergson's Philosophy</i>
William T. Jones	<i>An Interpretation of Rudolf Eucken's Philosophy</i>
Rudolf Eucken	<i>The Life of the Spirit</i>
Émile Boutroux	<i>Education and Ethics</i>
Edward Le Roy	<i>A New Philosophy: Henri Bergson</i>

Rudolf Eucken	<i>Knowledge and Life</i>
Rudolf Eucken	<i>The Truth of Religion</i>
Jacques Maritain	<i>La Philosophie Bergsonienne</i>

Table 1: List of books Sun Yat-sen bought in Tokyo, 1914-5.

Among the 14 books, five are by or about Rudolf Eucken (highlighted in dark grey), and four about Henri Bergson (light grey). Émile Boutroux (1845-1921), whose name appears three times, had heard lectures by Eucken in Germany and was a teacher of Bergson. In his writings, he defended free will against materialism and determinism. Judging from these orders, Sun was immersed in *fin de siècle* philosophy that focused on spiritual life and intuition.³⁸ Thus, when Chen Lifu chose vitalism to furnish Nationalist Party policy with a metaphysical foundation, he brought to the fore some of the very ideas that had informed the revered late Premier.

To understand what type of ideology Chen constructed in *Vitalism*, and how much support he could draw from Sun's own writings, the following quote from Sun is central: "A state is the accumulation of persons. A person is the vessel of the heart, and the affairs of the state are the phenomenon of the psychology of a collective of people."³⁹ This voluntarist, individualized approach is precisely the thrust of Chen's element-based cosmology. Just like atoms were the elements of molecules, "in relation to a nation, every citizen is an element of the nation."⁴⁰ By equating the natural and the social in this manner, Chen made clear that the nation was only as strong as each individual. Seen in relation to the communist threat that figured so prominently in party propaganda at that time, he was formulating an answer to the national challenges that was based on individual responsibility, and not on the kind of systemic change that the Communists favored.

The roots of such an organicist understanding of society go back to the end of the 19th century in China.⁴¹ The prolific translator Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921), who popularized the theory of evolution, emphasized its ramifications for China: In the global struggle for survival, the country showed signs of being "unfit." Only if the Chinese acted as one could they hope to ward off further foreign aggression. With comments like these, Yan was much closer to Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903) Social Darwinism than to Charles Darwin (1809-1882) himself. He established Social Darwinism as the framework according to which the majority of Chinese

intellectuals and politicians understood international conflicts.⁴² Spencer's metaphor of society as an organism was picked up by Sun Yat-sen and the Nationalist Party; in the 1930s, it even became a central pillar of party-mandated civic education textbooks.⁴³

As a formulation of Nationalist Party ideology, Chen Lifu's conception of society was thus entirely conventional. To furnish it with traditional backing, he drew on a famous passage from the "Great Learning" (*Daxue* 大學), a chapter that rose to prominence during the 12th century alongside the above-mentioned "Middle and the Mean." In the "Great Learning," the fate of the country is tied to individual self-cultivation.⁴⁴ Starting with the "investigation of things," an eight-step process is outlined in the "Great Learning" that includes rectifying one's heart, making one's intentions sincere and bringing one's family in order. Only then will the country be governed well and the world at peace. As a classical formulation of the concepts that guided Chen, it figured prominently in *Vitalism* and strengthened his claim that Chinese culture contained the solution to the current problems of the country.⁴⁵

There were clear limits to the kind of responsibilities of the individual, however. Instead of the individual pursuit of happiness, for example, where everyone has the freedom to create a meaningful life for themselves, the right wing of the Nationalist Party was staunchly illiberal and collectivist. As the larger discourse shows, they conceived of society as a machine. Depending on their backgrounds, the two major camps responsible for publicizing this conception either had a streamlined factory à la Henry Ford in mind, or the military. In both organizations, the responsibility was to be ready, both physically and mentally, to obey the orders that come from above.⁴⁶

Conversely, the individual only had value in relation to the collective, and disobedience was threatened with violence. In *Vitalism*, there is one passage in which Chen is very explicit about the fact that he does not support the right to live unconditionally. While explaining his ideal of selfless service to others and promising that, given the continuous increase in productivity, the question of the future would be how to use the forces of nature to maximize human happiness, he also raised a much darker issue: What about those who "did not have the ability to create" (*meiyou chuangzao de nengli* 沒有創造的能力)? As discussed above, creativity was one of Chen's key terms, and linked his text with the conservative discourse inspired by philosophy of life in the 1920s. Here, he uses it to justify his stance that with respect to those who only consumed resources but did not

contribute anything, it “may be somewhat more beneficial if they die” (*sile huoxu bijiao youyi xie* 死了或許比較有益些).⁴⁷

THE NEW LIFE MOVEMENT

Chen Lifu was not talking in the abstract when he wrote that passage. As a member of the Nationalist Party, he was speaking on behalf of the party that governed the country in an autocratic fashion. While the attempt to remold the populace along the lines laid out in party writings was indeed bolstered by violence, the party also initiated a nation-wide movement to foster mass support for its vision. The New Life Movement began in 1934 and constituted the practical implementation of the ideology for which Chen had provided a metaphysical justification in *Vitalism*. It needs to be emphasized that Chen followed the established party line in many respects, and that *Vitalism* and the New Life Movement were thus two individual yet similar expressions of the same ideology.

While historians generally agree that the New Life Movement was not a success by any measure, it has been recognized as a defining moment in the history of the republic ever since Arif Dirlik argued that the movement needs to be taken seriously as attempt at modernization based on the worldview of the Nationalist Party.⁴⁸ The movement tellingly began in Jiangxi Province in February 1934, after the Nationalists had forcibly dismantled the local Soviet Republic and driven out the Communists. It was meant to build support from the ground up and to immunize the population against the lure of Communism, while simultaneously putting surveillance measures in place (see below). Beginning in March, large-scale events like mass rallies and lantern parades that are said to have attracted up to 100'000 participants increased public awareness of the movement. Local associations were formed in more and more parts of China over the course of the next year. While these were substantial achievements, they proved unsustainable. The movement never found support from below, which is unsurprising given its strictly hierarchical nature that allowed only for top-down organization. Dirlik has argued that it was “more the will of its leadership than the nurture of its achievements” that kept the movement alive even before war broke out with Japan in 1937 and diverted attention away from it.⁴⁹

In the short period when the New Life Movement had the full support of the party, a wide array of speeches and publications explained its goals and meaning to the citizens. The speeches by President Chiang Kai-shek were central and widely reprinted in newspapers and journals. They were complemented by a flurry of

essays and articles penned by both major figures, such as Chen Lifu, as well as low-level party functionaries.⁵⁰ However, the movement relied on multi-media messaging: visuals of various formats accompanied the written word.

The issue of the journal *Future* (*Qiantu* 前途) that printed one of the important speeches by President Chiang on the New Life Movement also included a page with two cartoons that perfectly encapsulate the different tendencies inherent in the movement.⁵¹ The upper one shows three figures being thrown from a moving train. The train carries the inscription “The Road to a Strong Country,” with the figures identified as selfishness, corruption and degeneracy. The cartoon below shows a worker washing off a graffiti on the wall. The graffiti is made up of two hearts with the caption “heart of the populace.” The worker’s hose draws liquid from a tank with the label “ritual, righteousness, integrity, sense of shame,” the four cardinal virtues Chiang Kai-shek sought to instill into the Chinese through the New Life Movement.⁵²

Together, the cartoons convey the message that China is now becoming a strong country. To reach this goal, bad habits such as selfishness and degeneracy have to be discarded, if necessary by force, as the image of being thrown from a moving train suggests. In order to contribute to this enterprise and avoid reproach, everyone has to purify their hearts according to the guidelines laid out by the leaders of the movement. Each citizen’s strong spirit was the basis for a strong country; but only those with a strong body could have a strong spirit.⁵³ Therefore, the Nationalist Party emphasized hygienic behavior, complementing the exhortations to be moral and frugal. The party, and by extension the state, attempted to micromanage almost all aspects of daily life through the New Life Movement.

To get a sense of the concrete behavioral norms that the movement wished to instill into citizens, it is instructive to look at the propaganda posters from the era.⁵⁴ They mirror the concerns mentioned above. In the category of hygiene, individuals are asked to keep their residences tidy and to eat washed food from clean bowls. In terms of morality, there was a poster with injunctions against soliciting prostitutes, gambling, drinking, and smoking. Citizens were urged to wait in line in an orderly fashion and walk on the left side of the road. These are appropriate ways to behave in modern cities, which shows that behind the traditional rhetoric, the movement was a response to modern problems. Finally, a number of posters urge frugality with slogans that praise the re-use of waste material and suggest walking instead of using costly means of transport; one simply says “Cut down on expenses” and shows a modern, nuclear family gathered

around a book of household accounts.

With directives such as these, the New Life Movement achieved two goals. First, it imbued seemingly trivial questions of orderliness and personal hygiene with a grandiose meaning. If the nation was a machine and every citizen a cog, then the whole could only function well if all parts were in order. Citizens who behaved well, even in the most inconsequential of activities, were supposed to feel that they were contributing to national revitalization. This gave an active role to otherwise passive citizens, whose input in politics was neither needed nor welcome. Secondly, by laying out clear rules for how to live one's life, the state arrogated to itself the right to sanction any transgression and legitimized a tight net of surveillance. Right at the start of the movement, in March 1934, the party drafted more than 700 inspectors who formed groups and "examined almost every household in Nanchang."⁵⁵ Entertainment venues such as cinemas, bars and restaurants were also inspected in the course of the movement.⁵⁶ While left-wing activists bore the brunt of state-directed violence, the state also intruded deeply into private and public spaces in the name of safeguarding the spirit of China and creating a powerful nation.

CONCLUSION

Chen Lifu was only one voice in the right-wing propaganda ensemble, but as the author of *Vitalism*, he personifies the connection between the Nationalist Party and the conservative discourse that drew inspiration from idealist philosophers such as Bergson, Driesch and Eucken. The same connection became all the more apparent when Zhang Junmai gave a speech in Ruijin, the capital of the recently liberated Soviet Republic in Jiangxi, in 1936. Zhang had, as mentioned, studied under Eucken, invited Driesch to China and vigorously defended Bergson against Chinese critics. The title of his speech was "Ruijin Stands at the Frontline of Spiritual Anti-Communism." Zhang decried that the materialist worldview of the Communists ignored spiritual life, a point that resembled his position in the debate about science and metaphysics. His "willingness to appear at a Nationalist assembly lent an air of highbrow respectability to the party's counterrevolutionary violence" and showed that their claim to be defenders of native Chinese culture resonated with more moderate cultural conservatives.⁵⁷

The Nationalist Party theorists and the cultural conservatives were drawn to European idealist philosophy by different aspects. Party founder Sun Yat-sen explicitly affirmed the value of science and technical progress, but, along the lines

of Eucken, maintained that the goal should be a “spiritual culture.”⁵⁸ In the 1920s, Zhang Junmai and like-minded intellectuals challenged the primacy of a scientific and rationalized approach to the problems of life, following the lead of Bergson. They all agreed that the intrinsic value of Chinese culture needed to be defended against unjustified criticism from Chinese modernizers.

In *Vitalism*, Chen Lifu followed the readings offered by Sun Yat-sen more closely than those of the cultural conservatives, which is unsurprising given his role in the party. Yet because Chen presented an abstract metaphysical system, he invariably integrated more substantial aspects from the anti-materialist sources on which both Sun and the conservatives had relied, and thus rooted the party line in the debates and intellectual developments that were widely received in the educated reading public during the 1920s. The title of the book itself made a strong claim that the party had an encompassing philosophy based on, but superior to the latest European trends, according to which it shaped the future of the country. Yet crucially, even though some passages are strongly colored by Bergsonian and vitalist terminology, an organicist conception of society stood at the heart of the text. Furthermore, the overall focus on “life,” distinctive for many schools of thought in the early 20th century, constituted the deepest connection between conservatives and the party.

As part of the propaganda effort of the Nationalist Party, the very existence of *Vitalism* as a philosophical treatise was thus at least as important as its actual content. Chen’s readings of vitalist philosophy tended to be idiosyncratic, his writing style was heavy-handed and his explanations did not touch upon everyday problems. Still, *Vitalism* is said to have sold 250,000 copies, a figure that historian Terry Bodenhorn considers realistic because the book “was aimed at a large and captive institutional audience,” i.e. party cadres who took part in training sessions.⁵⁹ Though apparently mostly ignored outside of party circles, *Vitalism* is crucial as a condensation of Nationalist Party ideology. It answers the question why Chiang Kai-shek and his advisors believed that the New Life Movement and the concomitant state attention to minute aspects of individual behavior could be successful in revitalizing China. It is a key document for understanding the thought process behind the major mass movement launched by the party during the republican era.

Finally, both Chen himself as well as the political atmosphere from which the book emerged marked *Vitalism* as an alternative to the materialist worldview of the Chinese Communist Party and their sympathizers. It was based on the same

European *fin de siècle* and interwar thought that conservatives had used during the 1920s to argue in defense of China's spiritual tradition. In the battle between the Nationalist Party and Communists that had China in its grip throughout the 1930s to the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, philosophical systems that had anything to offer to counter materialist and mechanistic worldviews were drawn further and further to the right, regardless of the political beliefs of their creators. In the end, ideas of Bergson, Eucken and Driesch wound up in the hands of outright authoritarians, who used them to discredit both Communism and liberalism.

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NOTES

1. The major Western-language studies on Bergson in China are: Raoul David Findeisen, “Vier westliche Philosophen in China: Dewey und Russell, Bergson und Nietzsche.” *minima sinica* 1 (1992), 1-36. Joseph Ciaudo, “Bergson’s ‘Intuition’ in China and its Confucian Fate (1915-1923): Some Remarks on *zhijue* in Modern Chinese Philosophy.” *Problemos* (2016), 35-50. Ku-Ming Kevin Chang, “‘Ceaseless Generation’: Republican China’s Rediscovery and Expansion of Domestic Vitalism.” *Asia Major* 30:2 (2017), 101-131.
2. Dian-Kuei Chang 張典魁, “Chen Lifu ‘*Weishenglun*’ yu Baigesen zhexue guanxi zhi tantao” 陳立夫《唯生論》與柏格森哲學關係之探討 (A discussion of the relation between Chen Lifu’s *Vitalism* and Bergson’s philosophy). *Zhongzheng lishi xuekan* 中正歷史學刊 12 (2009), 157-194.
3. Jiang Yihua 姜义华, “Lun ‘Sun Wen xueshuo’ renwen jingshen de xin goujian” 论《孙文学说》人文精神的新构建 (On the new construction of humanist spirit in *Sunism*). *Xueshu yuekan* 学术月刊 1 (1994), 113-120.
4. Vincent Y. C. Shih, “A Talk with Hu Shih.” *The China Quarterly* No. 10 (Apr. - Jun., 1962), 154.
5. On Liang in general, see Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-Ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. On Liang’s interpretation of intuition, see Yanming An, “Liang Shuming and Henri Bergson on Intuition: Cultural Context and the Evolution of Terms.” *Philosophy East and West* 47:3 (July 1997), 337-362.
6. *Kexue yu renshengguan* 科學與人生觀 (Science and view of life). Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1997, 36. For an overview of the debate, see D. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought 1900-1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, 135-60.
7. *Kexue yu renshengguan*, 51.
8. For example: Rudolf Eucken and Carsun Chang [Zhang Junmai 張君勱], *Das Lebensproblem in China und Europa*. Leipzig: Quelle Meyer, 1922, 169. On Eucken’s contemporary fame and intellectual development, see Ulrich Sieg, *Geist und Gewalt. Deutsche Philosophen zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus*. München: Carl Hanser, 2013, 73-102.
9. Caterina Zanfi has argued Eucken’s students were instrumental in the popularization of Bergson’s philosophy in Germany. It is noteworthy that Zhang, who can also be counted as a student of Eucken, played a similar role in China. See Caterina Zanfi, *Bergson et la philosophie allemande, 1907-1932*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2014, 32.
10. Zhang Junmai, “Deguo zhexuejia Dulishu donglai zhi baogao jiqi zhexue dalüe” 德國哲學家杜里舒氏東來之報告及其學說大略 (Report on German philosopher Driesch coming to the East and outline of his philosophy), *Gaizao* 改造 4:6 (1922), 2.
11. Werner Meißner, “The German Philosopher Hans Driesch in China.” *Transkulturelle Rezeption und Konstruktion. Festschrift für Adrian Hsia*. Ed. Monika Schmitz-Emans. Heidelberg: Synchron, 2004, 52.
12. That Zhang had such hopes for Driesch’s visit can be gathered from his farewell speech, assuming he was not merely exchanging pleasantries. Zhang said that during his stay, Driesch

- had “planted many seeds” that would later bear fruit. See Hans and Margarete Driesch, *Fern-Ost. Als Gäste Jungchinas*. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1925, 224.
13. Meißner, “Driesch in China,” 57.
 14. For a critical account of the origins of New Confucianism, see John Makeham, “The Retrospective Creation of New Confucianism.” *New Confucianism. A Critical Examination*. Ed. John Makeham. New York: Palgrave, 2003, 25-54.
 15. Benjamin Schwartz, “A Marxist Controversy on China.” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 13:2 (1954), 143-153.
 16. Maggie Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism. Fascism and Culture in China 1925-1937*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, 80-8.
 17. O. Brière, *Fifty Years of Chinese Philosophy 1898-1950*. Trans. Laurence G. Thompson. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956, 36.
 18. Terry Bodenhorn “Chen Lifu’s *Vitalism*: A Guomindang Vision of Modernity circa 1934.” *Defining Modernity: Guomindang Rhetoric of a New China, 1920-1970*. Ed. Terry Bodenhorn. Ann Arbor: Center For Chinese Studies, 2002, 93, 113.
 19. Bodenhorn, “Chen Lifu’s *Vitalism*,” 116.
 20. See for example Hans Driesch, “Shengji zhuyi yu jiaoyu” 生機主義與教育 (Vitalism and education). Trans. Zhang Junmai. *Xin Jiaoyu* 新教育 5:5 (1922), 1037-40.
 21. Li says that he likes the term *weishenglun* because he is “not satisfied with the distinction between living and non-living things,” as that distinction is scientific instead of philosophical. See his “Rensheng zhexue dayao” 人生哲學大要 (Central issues of philosophy of life). Li Shicen, *Li Shicen zhexue lunzhu* 李石岑哲學論著 (Li Shicen’s philosophical works). Shanghai: Shudian chubanshe, 2010, B-56. The lecture first appeared in print in 1921.
 22. Xiao Yifei 肖伊緋, “Cai Yuanpei: Shou chang ‘weisheng shiguan’ – Yi xinjin faxian Cai Yuanpei zai Zhongyang lujun junguan xuexiao jiang yangao wei zhongxin” 蔡元培: 首倡“唯生史觀”—以新近發現蔡元培在中央陸軍軍官學校講演稿為中心 (Cai Yuanpei: The First to Propose a “Vitalist View of History.” Based on the Recently Discovered Manuscript for a Lecture Cai Yuanpei Gave at the Central Army Officer School). *Guandong xuekan* 關東學刊 5 (2018), 116-123.
 23. Xiao Yifei, “Cai Yuanpei,” 117.
 24. Xiao Yifei, “Cai Yuanpei,” 117-8. Parallel to “historical materialism,” one could speak of “historical vitalism.”
 25. The usual term for chemical elements, *yuansu* 元素, prevailed at that time already. A database search of contemporary periodicals indicates that *yuanzi* was also in use, if much less frequently.
 26. Chen Lifu, *Weishenglun* 唯生論 (Vitalism). Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1991, 17.
 27. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 17.
 28. Hans Driesch, *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism. The Clifford Lectures Delivered*

- Before the University of Aberdeen in the Year 1907*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1908, 142.
29. Bodenhorn, "Chen Lifu's Vitalism," 97n7. See especially Brière, *Chinese Philosophy*, 36.
30. For example in Li Shicen, "Baigesen zhexue zhi jieshi yu pipan" 柏格森哲學之解釋與批判 (An explanation and evaluation of Bergson's philosophy). *Li Shicen zhexue lunzhu*, A-43.
31. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 47.
32. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 50.
33. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 54. When exactly classical Chinese texts were composed is unclear. Most can reasonably be assumed to have taken shape over the course of the second half of the first millennium BCE.
34. See for example Chen, *Weishenglun*, 110.
35. See Clinton, "Revolutionary Nativism," 27-28.
36. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 1, 5.
37. Jiang Yihua, "Lun 'Sun Wen xueshuo,'" 113-4. I have added authors' first names and silently corrected misspellings.
38. See also Jiang Yihua, "Lun 'Sun Wen xueshuo,'" 116.
39. Sun Yat-sen, *Sun Wen xueshuo* 孫文學說 (The Theory of Sun Yat-sen). Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927, 2.
40. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 17.
41. For the roots of the organismic metaphor in German idealism, see Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 26-31.
42. Xiaoxing Jin, "Translation and Transmutation: The *Origin of Species* in China." *The British Journal for the History of Science* 52:1 (March 2019), 125. See also James Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*. Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1983, esp. 62-66.
43. Robert Culp, "Setting the Sheet of Loose Sand: Conceptions of Society and Citizenship in Nanjing Decade Party Doctrine and Civics Textbooks." *Defining Modernity: Guomindang Rhetoric of a New China, 1920-1970*. Ed. Terry Bodenhorn. Ann Arbor: Center For Chinese Studies, 2002, 54-6.
44. For an in-depth discussion of the developments that lead to the chapter's unprecedented centrality, see Daniel Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh. Neo-Confucian Reflections on the Confucian Canon*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
45. For example Chen, *Weishenglun*, 135. Sun Yat-sen had also highlighted that passage as an important piece of native political philosophy, see his *Minzu zhuyi* 民族主義 (Nationalism). Shanghai: Minzhi shuju, 1926, 128.
46. Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism*, 139-40.
47. Chen, *Weishenglun*, 78.
48. Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34:4 (August 1975), 945-6.

49. Dirlik, "New Life Movement," 952.
50. Chen Lifu refrained from emphasizing the framework he had developed in *Vitalism* in his contributions. He possibly considered his metaphysical ideas unsuited for propaganda aimed at a general audience.
51. Clinton discusses this example as well as other cartoons and cover images, see *Revolutionary Nativism*, 128-160.
52. *Qiantu* vol. 2, no. 4, 1934.
53. Dirlik, "New Life Movement," 957-8.
54. These posters can be found at: <https://ccposters.com/poster/series/new-life-movement/> Last accessed December 09, 2021.
55. Liu Wennan, "Redefining the Moral and Legal Roles of the State in Everyday Life: The New Life Movement in China in the Mid-1930s." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 2:2 (November 2013), 339.
56. Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism*, 134.
57. Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism*, 99. Zhang's appearance at this event is especially noteworthy considering that he had an extremely fraught relationship with the Nationalist Party and frequently criticized the one-party dictatorship established under Chiang Kai-shek. In June 1929, he was kidnapped for several weeks, which he and many of those around him believed to have been orchestrated by the Nationalist Party. See Roger B. Jeans Jr, *Democracy and Socialism in Republican China. The Politics of Zhang Junmai (Carsun Chang)*, 1906-1941. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997, 98-107.
58. Jiang Yihua, "Lun 'Sun Wen xueshuo,'" 119.
59. Bodenhorn, "Chen Lifu's *Vitalism*," 94.