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REVIEW ESSAY

Taking Asian Fascisms Seriously

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Maggie Clinton. *Revolutionary Nativism: Fascism and Culture in China, 1925–1937*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 280 pp. \$25.95 (paper).

Reto Hofmann. *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915–1952*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. 224 pp. \$35 (cloth).

I suspect that the authors of these two monographs did not envision—and certainly did not expect or hope—that their work would be so explicitly and obviously relevant in the present political circumstances. Both Maggie Clinton and Reto Hofmann are clearly aware that writing about “fascism” means dealing with a topic whose relevance is not simply historical—tarring something, even in the seemingly defunct past, with the “f-word” always involves taking a political stance. Still, they probably did not imagine that their books would see the light at a time when “fascists,” either self-professed or identified by others as such, take to the streets of cities around the world with rekindled arrogance, and “fascism” unabashedly claims a place in the supposedly free “marketplace of ideas.” It was therefore difficult, at least for this reader, to approach these volumes without an eerie feeling, a ringing echo of sorts. But it would be a disservice to the work that Clinton and Hofmann have done to let ourselves be too reflexively swayed by what French historian Marc Bloch called “the virus of the present” and fall into simple analogies. The temptation, I must admit, is strong.

However, one of the crucial contributions these two books make is precisely their analysis of Chinese and Japanese fascisms as global yet localized phenomena—that is, as forms of politics that were deeply intertwined with specific contingencies and the worldwide sweep of colonial capitalism. As Clinton reminds us, quoting historian of Europe Arno Mayer, “students

of crisis politics need multi-angled and adjustable lenses with which to examine such unsettled situations. These lenses must be able to focus on the narrow synchronic and the broad diachronic aspects of explosive conjunctures as well as on the intersections between them” (10). Clinton and Hofmann approach Chinese and Japanese fascisms not as local reinterpretations of a European topology, but as specifically situated, yet globally connected, politics: their popularity, power, and continuing influence, as well as the unresolvable tensions that animated them, were determined historically as much as politically. Clinton and Hofmann thus offer us different ways to analyze the political activism of the extreme right as situated politics, and that, in conclusion, might provide not just a historical but also a political lesson for tackling our current crises.

While both authors deal with how Chinese and Japanese activists framed their own specific discourses and practices of fascism—at a distance from, but with knowledge of, the larger transnational movement—they take quite different approaches. Maggie Clinton’s *Revolutionary Nativism* is an in-depth investigation of the ideological positions and political practices of two extreme right-wing groups within the Guomindang (Nationalist Party, GMD)—the Blue Shirts and the CC Clique—from the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925 to the beginning of the full-scale Japanese invasion in 1937. Clinton reminds us throughout the book that fascist politicians and intellectuals were immersed in a situation and in specific living conditions determined by global imperialism, and that they were responding to a Chinese crisis intimately connected to the expansion of capitalism and the fascination with socialism. Yet her take is a sophisticated analysis of Chinese nativism as a form of fascism. Reto Hofmann’s *The Fascist Effect*, on the other hand, centers on the bilateral connections between Japan and Italy and covers a slightly longer time frame, extending to the postwar sidelining of fascism as meaningless to Japanese history. Hofmann brings fascism back as a constitutive part of “Japanese ideology” in the interwar and World War II eras, but he does so through the reflecting mirror of Italy, showing the complex and changing interplay of fascination and distance that Japanese intellectuals, activists, and politicians (not only on the right) felt for the “original” Fascists.

The books differ in approach, strategy, and emphasis, but they share some crucial elements—first and foremost, their distinct clarity about fascism’s role in the Asian context. In both the Chinese and Japanese contexts—with all the distinctions and peculiarities of each case—fascism was constitutive of the dominant political discourse. Fascism was a flexible, vital, and contradictory ideology that was also inherently revolutionary and modern (or, rather, fascism

participated in and was defined by the circulation of symbols, commodities, and practices that were associated with the modern and with the aesthetics of modernism). Finally, and more importantly, for both Clinton and Hofmann, fascism simply *was*. Without delving into the nominalist sophistries of defining what and who could actually be called “fascist”—do you need a party? a leader? a cult figure?—both authors show that fascism existed in China and Japan, and that people we can comfortably call “fascists” had a crucial political role in both places. Hofmann smartly sidesteps the question of whether 1930s Japan was a fascist state, focusing instead on how “interwar Japanese culture and politics was steeped in fascism” (7), and that includes individuals and groups that were clearly fascist. Clinton is more direct in identifying specific nationalist groups (the CC Clique and the Blue Shirts) as fascist, but she also ably traces their influence in shaping the broader GMD political ideology along nativist lines. While neither China nor the Guomindang during the Nanjing Decade can be labeled as fascist, Clinton makes a convincing case for the crucial role fascism played in shaping the ideological posture of the Nationalists and of Chiang Kai-shek himself, in delinking revolution from an international anti-imperialist struggle and reducing it to an essentialized “Chinese” enterprise.

Revolutionary Nativism traces how GMD ideology after Sun’s death turned to the right by refocusing around a nativist core—that is, by making “a harmoniously cooperative national body, bound together by culture” (10) the proper agent of the Chinese Revolution. That was a revolution to be waged against enemies external (colonialism) and internal (those groups, such as the Communists, who separated themselves from native culture and thus made themselves “external”). Nativism here names the identification—one is tempted to say the “construction”—by right-wing activists of Confucianism as a central, exclusive, and largely unchanging core of Chinese “cultural and national belonging” (14), a national spirit that could and had to be resuscitated. From this perspective, any historical process or political project alternative to nativist essentialism could be and was construed as critically harmful to Chinese culture and the nation itself, thus making the nation’s very survival the stake of any political battle. Clinton identifies nativism as a crucial aspect of Chinese right-wing ideology, but she has no qualms in calling the people who upheld this ideology “fascists.” The term “fascism” here identifies a politics that embraced modern technology and capitalist efficiency, while at the same time promising to thwart some of the social changes capitalism produced. It was not a conservative politics, but one that put forth a distilled version of native culture. It was, further, a politics

enmeshed in the globalized life of the colonial modern, yet terrified by the tensions that animated it. Fascism was revolutionary and counterrevolutionary at the same time. And, Clinton argues, “understanding interwar fascism as a nexus of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary politics—a politics that was anticonservative, antiliberal, anti-Communist, antifeminist, and historically rooted—also allows us to see how it was generated from within China’s postdynastic landscape rather than imported from Europe or Japan” (13).

Throughout the book, Clinton deftly analyzes how this revolutionary–counterrevolutionary dynamic, and the nativism at its core, worked in defining fascism within the historical conditions of interwar China. Chapter 1 traces the emergence of the Blue Shirts and the CC Clique in the 1920s, but also sets the political efforts of these groups in a tense relation to global capitalism and the aesthetic forms of the industrial age. Declaredly anti-conservative, Chinese fascists promised to harness the revolutionary power of capitalist forms of production, fully understanding the extent of the social transformations they would bring forth; however, they remained convinced that they could achieve these revolutionary changes without reproducing the evils associated with the present forms of capitalism (including moral degeneration, imperialism, and social disunity). They knew and welcomed the radical challenge of capitalism but believed they could tame it; in that regard, they continued to define themselves as anti-capitalist. Similarly, Clinton shows—her use of the beautiful visual materials in the book is truly to be praised—how fascists passionately contributed to the same modernist aesthetics and deployed the same modernist repertoires that defined the leftist- and capitalist-tinged visual culture of the 1920s and 1930s; fascist discourse and visual messages were therefore “hidden in plain sight.” In this sense, as Clinton summarizes, there was no separate “fascist aesthetics,” even if fascists continuously tried to limit the political meaning of specific forms (60) and connect them to their own goals.

One of the most interesting aspects of Clinton’s discussion concerns the fascist revolution/counterrevolution’s complex relation to time or temporality, as it promised both an acceleration toward the glories of a wondrous future of national rejuvenation, based on a radical break with the present, and a reconnection with the timeless traditions that defined a national essence. In cultural terms, it was required to further develop the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist, nationalist agenda of the May Fourth Movement, while at the same time separating it from its bourgeois liberal (and, even worse, socialist) leanings, as well as its radical anti-Confucianism.

In chapter 2, Clinton describes how the fascists implemented their cultural revolution by dissociating Confucianism from feudal traditions and construing it as the essential element of a national spirit that was under attack by capitalism and socialism alike. Postulating this unchanging spirit helped them avoid the contradictions of fascist revolutionary discourse: if it was eternal, and not associated with a specific historical era, it could then guarantee the continuing unity of the nation *and* its openness to the revolutionary new. Through this nativist discourse, fascists could also define the unified nation as the revolutionary subject—eliding differences into an imagined or enforced national sameness (71). Consequently, as Clinton illustrates in chapter 3, nativism was functional in defining Chinese fascism's relation with the Communists, "in the figurative sense of how they construed them and in the literal sense of how they hunted them down" (100). If the subject of history and of revolution was a national community bounded together by timeless yet endangered Confucian values, then the threat of Communism was not to specific relationships of property and production but to the very logic of national belonging itself, to the subsistence of the nation itself. People who posed such a threat were therefore automatically excluded from the national fold and the shared space of citizenship, and thus had to be dealt with using the utmost degree of violence. The long-standing anti-colonial fear of national extinction (*wangguo*) here morphs seamlessly into the "need" for authoritarian persecution. Clinton is clear and precise in defining how fascist violence toward political adversaries was (is?) never just expedient or random but always directly and intimately connected with the discourse and the logic of nativism; politically, she alerts us to how any form of nativism is always potentially repressive and violent.

The New Life Movement, which probably represented the apex of fascist influence within the GMD, is the subject of Clinton's chapter 5. Keeping the focus on the revolutionary–counterrevolutionary tension at the core of right-wing nativism, Clinton provides an innovative take on this pretty well-studied case, showing how the movement was constituted as an attempt to "fix the everyday." The everyday is an eminently modern concept, one that embodies the contradictions, the incompleteness, and the hidden aspects, but also the possibilities of life under capitalism—as Clinton highlights, citing the work of historian of Japan Harry Harootunian. As such, it featured as an important subject of Marxist investigations in the interwar and postwar periods (131). Chinese fascists were equally attentive to the tensions and possibilities of the quotidian, but their goal, expressed through the New Life Movement, was to eliminate those

tensions and foreclose those possibilities. As Clinton points out, “they did not fear modern life so much as those aspects of it that they could not control” (149). Under the trappings of traditional morality, the New Life Movement embodied a managerial (almost Taylorist) view of the social world, according to which the everyday could be reorganized under the disciplined routines of the factory and the army, and people could be assigned “into precise and stable categories” (131), making the nation into a Confucian hierarchical unity, where even the possibility of pursuing politically antagonistic paths was preemptively barred. The New Life Movement was largely a failure and did not achieve much in terms of social reordering, but the social fantasy of an efficient social order—machine-like and productively in motion but fixed in its hierarchy (what Clinton calls “mobile fixity”)—was necessarily predicated on endless violent state repression, indispensable to prevent the resurgences of claims for social justice and equality. The same violence was ruthlessly deployed by fascists in fostering their project of nationalist literature and arts (*minzu wenyi*)—which was intimately connected, as Clinton shows in chapter 5, not only to state support and censorship, but also to the actual terrorizing and killing of writers, artists, and editors who had demonstrated a different understanding of the mission of art and literature. While there was no real discernable “fascist aesthetics” and, taken out of context, the literary products of right-wing nativists might strike us as “saccharine or even as progressive expressions of patriotism” (166), they did not and could not exist separate from the terror that was supposed to guarantee their dominance in the cultural field. *Revolutionary Nativism* is a complete revision and rebuttal of scholarly trends that wishfully depict GMD-era China as an “age of openness,” whose potential of democracy, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism was cut short by the war and by the Communist victory. By showing the centrality of fascism in the beliefs and practices promoted by the GMD in the Nanjing Decade, Clinton strips us of the illusion that this regime harbored the promise of something more progressive or democratic, specifically because the Confucian nativism the right wing promoted was not a conservative response aimed at slowing down an inevitable and natural development (in political, social, and economic terms), but rather was characterized by a double dynamic that sought to “promote dramatic change in one direction and preclude it in others” (196).

The tension between these two different impulses of the fascist movement also figures prominently in *The Fascist Effect*. Here, Reto Hofmann rephrases this essential contradiction, following both Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the right-wing terrorist Mikami Taku,

as one between restoration and revolution, epitomizing the role of fascism “in revolutionizing the old and restoring the new in order to reconcile the tension between capital and the nation” (1). While I would argue that, in general, “restoration” and “counter-revolution” are not just different names for the same political process, “restoration” was indeed the term of choice in the case of Japan, and it was under that term that Japanese fascists articulated their counterrevolution. Many of the themes tackled by Clinton in the China case are also central in Hofmann’s analysis. For example, both authors examine the complex relationship of the right-wing with the modern, and Harootunian’s “overcoming modernity” provides a point of reference for each of them. Hofmann’s understanding of fascism as a phenomenon always defined by the interplay between the local and the global, yet ultimately dealing with specific historical conditions, resonates with Clinton’s work as well. Fascism, as Hoffman argues, should be understood as a process, not as a model. Rather than pointlessly trying to figure out how much the Japanese “borrowed” from their European predecessors, Hofmann more productively considers how the Japanese regarded and got involved in fascism as a form of politics, responding to a local set of problems and conditions. He argues that the very concealment of fascism under supposedly “Japanese” ideological guises—the “national polity” or the “imperial way”—was part and parcel of the logic of fascism itself, what Hofmann calls “a politics of cultural authenticity.” This looks very similar, at least in terms of its form and function, to Clinton’s nativism. This might sound like a sleight of hand on Hofmann’s part, but it is a crucial, if understated, point. Fascism existed in Japan in Japanese garb, but this should not be viewed as a way by which a foreign ideology was adopted, but rather as an essential characteristic of fascism itself, whose claims of a connection to a national spirit/essence are foundational. National difference was a crucial element in fascism’s cult of communitarian authenticity (3). Precisely because of his clarity about this mechanism, I was hoping that Hofmann would devote more space to the specific forms Japanese nativism took and how they contributed to the revolutionary discourse of fascism, as well as to its repressive/controlling aspects, in particular in relation to capitalism. But that would have been quite a different book. *The Fascist Effect* is, as mentioned, framed around the evolving relationship of Japanese intellectuals with Italian Fascism, and in that, ideas such as *kokutai* or *ōdō* figure mainly as names of the national uniqueness under which fascism could be disguised and (Italian) Fascism could be rejected.

The Fascist Effect is organized chronologically, with each chapter devoted to a phase in the Japan–Italy relationship. Chapter 1 (1915–1928) starts before Fascism itself and follows the curious figure of the late Meiji educator Shimoi Harukichi, focusing on his fascination for and involvement with Italian wartime nationalist culture, as well as his relationship with the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio. The story is full of fascinating details, and there is something almost accidentally charming in Shimoi’s efforts to argue for a spiritual link between the two countries and cultures. Yet, Hofmann argues, it was largely through Shimoi’s work that fascism started to achieve popularity in Japan precisely as an Italian phenomenon with “wider, transnational significance” (10). This popularity increased in the second half of the 1920s, when Japan was overtaken by what Hofmann labels a “Mussolini boom,” with journalists and political commentators debating the virtues and character of “Il Duce,” while plays, biographies, and other literary works contributed to the creation of the global myth of Mussolini (chapter 2). Hofmann’s analysis of these at times bizarre sources—the book, like Clinton’s, includes excellent visual materials, which probably deserve closer examination—shows how Japanese intellectuals were selective and cautious in their enthusiasm for Mussolini, and how his appeal was part and parcel of a larger search for a way out of the perceived impasse of liberal capitalism and the threat of social disorder. In this sense, Mussolini fascinated the Japanese public not as an individual, but as the embodiment of a fascist solution to a global and local crisis.

By the 1930s, when it shifted from an Italian phenomenon to a global event, the term “fascism” was at the center of a protracted and heated debate in Japan (described in chapter 3), which epitomized one of the contradictory facets of this ideological posture. Because fascism could only be national, it could only configure itself as a form of nativist particularism, and thus Japanese nativists had to dissociate themselves from worldwide fascism (perceived as universal) in the name of preserving their national identity. The paradox was that, precisely at the time when Japan was getting more fascist, it had to distance itself from Fascism. As Hofmann, puts it, “ironically, when fascism flourished, it was difficult to be a fascist” (75–76). Or, rather, it was difficult to call oneself “fascist.” The chapter follows the at times tortuous negotiations in which fascist intellectuals engaged, trying to argue for a place for (properly named) fascism in Japan. It was, however, a “fake confusion” (88), one that dissimulated not only the actual link between nativist ideology and fascism but also the fascist politics hidden under native names. Therein lay the challenge of bringing “fascism without fascism” to Japan (137).

Fascism within empire and war is the topic of chapters 4 and 5. The Italo-Ethiopian War marked a turning point in Japan's international positioning: Japanese intellectuals, businessmen, and politicians had initially taken the side of the Ethiopians, threatened by yet another act of European colonial expansion. However, they quickly moved to support Italian ambitions, in which they saw a mirror of their own desires to break the grip of decadent Great Powers (institutionalized in the League of Nations) and to achieve economic autarky through imperial domination, something Japan was striving to realize with the occupation of Manchuria and the progressive expansion into North China. Notably, the war had reverberations in China as well, but, as Clinton shows in her book, Chinese fascists stood unequivocally on the side of Ethiopia, a brethren nation subject to imperialist brutality. The comparison between the two cases exemplifies how the relationship between fascism and anti-colonialism was far from settled and univocal. The Tripartite Pact of 1940 marks the formal joining of the three "fascist" countries, but Hofmann details the uneasiness with which Japanese—including fascists and self-declared "Friends of Italy"—threaded the tensions implicit in an alliance that challenged both Japan's uniqueness and the separation of the East from the West. The global connections forged by fascist politics had to be continuously discussed because they challenged the nativist core of localized fascism.

The concealment of fascism under native names continued in the postwar period, as Japan was the first to dissociate its history from that of global fascism, now conveniently reduced to a problem of select nations, and one that Japan could be said to have avoided precisely because of its unique historical path. References to "militarism" or "ultranationalism"—or the attribution of Japan's collapse to pathological, premodern elements—disguised the elision of "fascism" from Japanese modern history, a process made easier by the fact that fascism had always been disguised.

Revolutionary Nativism and *The Fascist Effect* give us two differently framed, yet complementary, descriptions of a specific moment in the history of China and Japan, as well as of the truly global event that was interwar fascism. Based on this alone, they are extremely valuable works. But, as I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, they also tell us something about fascism that is both more theoretical and more urgent. Clinton and Hofmann illustrate how Asian fascisms came into being in local circumstances framed both by the global expansion of capitalism (via imperialism and colonialism) and by the global circulation of Fascism, as well as

other modern ideas (socialism and Marxism above all, but not only these). They show that Chinese and Japanese fascists did not conform to a “Fascist” model, and yet they were indeed participating in and promoting fascist politics. With that, they cut the Gordian knot of fascist nomenclature—that is, the issue of what we can call “fascism” and what we cannot. By taking fascism as a flexible, adaptive, yet historically contingent politics, they show us how Asian fascisms existed *as fascism*. Reading these two excellent monographs, one cannot but say that this is a historically convincing move as much as it is a politically helpful one.

By tracing the legacy of that historical moment in today’s China and Japan—be it the availability of Confucianism as a “native” tradition or the effects of the continuing erasure of “fascism” from Japanese history—Clinton and Hofmann invite us to rethink a longer trajectory of political influence and political concealment. Finally, these books (especially Clinton’s) remind us that fascism, no matter in what forms it presents itself, is *always* dependent on the violent repression of other politics; violence is constitutive of fascism’s appeal and its success. G. W. F. Hegel quipped that the only thing we learned from history is that we have never learned anything from history; maybe the historical examples of Asian fascisms can highlight the violence implicit (and explicit) in today’s fascisms, be they concealed or declared, and expose the dangerous vacuity of their fraudulent claims to free speech.

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