

## On NHK's Interview with Zhang Xueliang

Koichi Okamoto  
Columbia University

According to recent assessments, the Xi'an Incident of December 1936 was a significant turning point in modern Chinese history because it led to the cooperation of the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party against the Japanese. The basic outline of Jiang Jieshi's 蒋介石 capture by Zhang Xueliang 张学良 has been known since December 1936. However, the details of those two weeks--in particular, the exact means by which the second United Front was created--have remained unclear. Zhang Xueliang's first public interview was therefore greatly anticipated because of his firsthand knowledge of the event.

It is unclear how NHK (Nihon hōsō kyōkai 日本放送協会, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation) succeeded in obtaining an interview with Zhang after 54 years of house arrest and silence, but Zhang's public appearance at his 90th birthday party, held in Taipei on June 1, 1990, and attended by such high-ranking Guomindang figures as Zhang Qun 張群, the chairman of the presidium of the central committee of the GMD, may have signified his relative political rehabilitation. Two months later, NHK interviewed him.

In August 1990, Isomura Hisanori 磯村尚徳, an NHK reporter, and Usui Katsumi 臼井勝美, professor of Sino-Japanese relations at Denki Tsūshin 電機通信 University, talked with Zhang for more than ten hours in Taipei, covering the period from his childhood to the Xi'an Incident. NHK produced two 75-minute programs based upon these interviews: "Chō Gakuryō ga ima kataru" 张学良がいま語る [Zhang Xueliang talks now], a biographical documentary which was aired on December 9, 1990; and "Chō Gakuryō: watakushi no Chūgoku, watakushi no Nihon" 张学良: 私の中国, 私の日本 [Zhang Xueliang, my China and my Japan], a chronologically edited version of the interview, aired on December 10.<sup>1</sup> Since the contents of the programs largely overlapped, the following comments will concentrate primarily on the latter program.

To the disappointment of those who have already read a summary of Zhang Xueliang's "Penitent Confession on the Xi'an Incident," his comments in this interview provided few new facts concerning the first half of his life.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the interview gave the public its first opportunity to hear Zhang's personal understanding of the events.

### Zhang's Views Concerning the Unification of China

Zhang related a story concerning his only meeting with Sun Yat-sen, although he did not specify the date. At that meeting, when Zhang saw Sun sick in bed, Sun encouraged him to bring about a unified China. Zhang shared the Guomindang's ideal of a unified China at that time. However, Zhang recognized later that, because of its corruption, the GMD was "worse than traditional military cliques." In his interview, Zhang emphasized repeatedly that he had maintained faith in China's reunification.

Zhang apparently envisioned a China that would be unified under a popularly elected president. According to Zhang, when he met Pu Yi 溥儀 once in Tianjin, he urged the deposed emperor to study at Nankai University or in the United States. If Pu Yi did so, Zhang said: "Someday you will have a chance to be elected the president of China democratically, if you become a citizen and dismiss your deceitful attendants."

### Zhang's Attitude toward Japan

"The Japanese killed my father on my birthday," Zhang explained emotionally, "and since then I changed my birthday." Because the Japanese had assassinated Zhang Zuolin 張作霖 despite his conciliatory position, Zhang Xueliang decided that he would not "walk the same path as Father," that he would never cooperate with Japan. Therefore, Zhang strongly criticized Doihara Kenji 土肥原賢二, the Japanese military adviser appointed to him because of Doihara's blatant exploitation of China. Doihara had tried to persuade Zhang that it was in Manchuria's best interest to cooperate with Japan rather than with Jiang Jieshi by drawing a chart of political relations in and around China. Based on his book, Ōdō ron 王道論 [On the Kingly Way], Doihara apparently urged Zhang to become the new Manchurian emperor.

In contrast, Zhang expressed favorable impressions of some Japanese officials such as Hayashi Gonsuke 林權助, Hayashi Hisajirō 林久治郎, Saburi Sadao 佐分利貞男, and Honjō Shigeru 本庄繁. Although Honjō was military adviser to his father and a commander-in-chief of the Guandong Army at the time of the September 18, 1931 Incident, Zhang recalled positive memories of him and insisted that "the Incident might not have happened if General Honjō had known about the plot."

### The Xi'an Incident

The subject on which Zhang could have been most helpful, however, was the Xi'an Incident itself. As the sole surviving actor, only Zhang can relate the activities of Zhang Jieshi, Zhou Enlai 周恩来 and himself during the last phase of the Incident. The interviewers summarized the Incident according to recent interpretations. They then asked Zhang about the meeting between Jiang Jieshi and Zhou Enlai. Zhang merely said: "I brought Zhou to the Generalissimo [on the night of December 24, 1936]. I was there during the meeting." He rejected any further questions on the matter.

Zhang's reticence on the subject of the Xi'an Incident may prove frustrating to historians who might wish for a more detailed account for future studies of this important period in Chinese history. However, as Zhang Xueliang's first interview since that time--55 years ago--the broadcast itself is a historic event and provides an opportunity to glimpse the personality of one of the main actors in modern Chinese history.<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

1. Zhang spoke in Chinese throughout the interview. Unfortunately, the program was not subtitled but dubbed into Japanese which prevented viewers from hearing his exact words. Therefore, quotations from the interview are taken from the Japanese dubbing. Note: Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University has video tapes of these programs. If interested, please contact Mr. Kenji Niki at the library (212-854-1506).

2. Zhang's "Confession" was originally published in Taiwan under the title "Xi'an shibian chanhuilu: zhaiyao" 西安事变懺悔錄:摘要, Xiwang 希望 1 (July 1964). Four years later it was reprinted in Hong Kong, in Mingbao 明報 3.9 (September 1968). A Japanese translation appeared in Chūgoku 中国 103 (June 1972), and an English translation was printed in Chinese Studies in History 22.3 (Spring 1989). Both translations are based upon the Hong Kong text.

3. I would like to express special thanks to Sarah E. Thal for editing the final draft of this article.

Editor's note. Shortly after Mr. Okamoto completed this essay,

Nicholas D. Kristof of the New York Times published the results of his own interview with Zhang Xueliang. See "Taipei Journal: Chiang Kai-shek's Kidnapper Talks," New York Times (February 20, 1991), p. A4.