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Collapse in China (1945–1949) for Contemporary Governance Crises**

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Adaptive Institutional Failure: Lessons from the Nationalist Government's Collapse in China (1945–1949) for Contemporary Governance Crises

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the Nationalist Government's (GMD) collapse from 1945 to 1949, employing adaptive institutionalism to analyze how institutional non-adaptation precipitated a legitimacy crisis, fracturing China's national community.

Methodology: Using qualitative historical methods, including archival records and secondary literature, the study applies adaptive institutionalism (bridging ecological and sociological theories) to the GMD case, supplemented by comparative analysis with Venezuela's post-2014 crisis and Zimbabwe's Mugabe-era decline.

Findings: Despite postwar advantages (Japan's surrender, international recognition, and U.S. aid), the GMD's rigid structures amplified governance failures, political repression, and economic collapse, enabling the Chinese Communist Party's ascendancy. Systemic corruption during the "robbery reception" of Manchurian assets, unchecked warlordism, and the Central Bureau of Investigation and Statistics' extrajudicial repression eroded administrative and procedural legitimacy, radicalizing moderates. Hyperinflation and the 1948 Gold Yuan fiasco devastated livelihoods, breaching the moral economy and performative legitimacy. Cultural path-dependence and elite-driven patronage precluded reforms, contrasting with the CCP's adaptive strategies, while Venezuela and Zimbabwe display parallel patterns of rigidity, where oil dependency and land reform chaos fueled legitimacy crises.

Recommendations: The GMD's failure underscores the need for dynamic institutional reconfiguration to sustain legitimacy under stress. Polycentric systems and inclusive reforms are vital for contemporary governance to navigate crises and maintain societal cohesion, illuminating pathways to resilience in modern contexts.

Keywords: *Adaptive Institutionalism; Chinese Civil War; Nationalist Government; Chinese Communist Party; Governance Failure; Political Repression; Hyperinflation; Legitimacy Crisis; Chiang Kai-Shek; Post-War China; Robbery Reception (Jiěshōu)*

JEL Classification: N45; P16; D73; N40; O43

INTRODUCTION

In August 1945, as the echoes of World War II faded into an uneasy peace, the Nationalist Government under Chiang Kai-shek basked in a fleeting moment of triumph that seemed to herald a new dawn for China. Japan's unconditional surrender ended not only the long-running Second Sino-Japanese War, but also regained sovereignty over Manchuria, or the Northeast, which was economically important and lush with factories and mines that provided the raw material necessary to build the nation anew (Coble, 2023). Bolstered by unequivocal international recognition and substantial U.S. aid packages de-signed to undergird postwar reconstruction, the Nationalists envisioned an era of stability, economic revival, and political consolidation, free from the existential threats of foreign invasion (Eastman, 1984). However, the optimism, so clearly penetrated in the triumphal proclamation of the regime and the hesitant expectation of unity on the part of the people, declined alarmingly quickly. By 1949, however, the Nationalist edifice had fallen to the Communists led by Mao Zedong, a catastrophic reversal of fortune, especially considering the martial triumphs enjoyed by the GMD over imperial Japan in recent years (Pepper, 1971). This seemingly sudden shift from victors to vanquished is a subject for an in-depth analysis: How did a government which was supposedly shielded by global alliances and territorial gains lose its very basis of authority within four years of peacetime governance? The ensuing analysis delves into the interlocking failures of governance, political repression, and eco-nomic stewardship that precipitated not merely a military reversal but a profound crisis of legitimacy. In this crisis, the complicated fabric of China's "national community", which was bound together, albeit weakly, in the war-time era, was unraveling and tearing apart (Wang, 2017; Nathan, 2020).

While the collapse of the Nationalists has been described in many ways, analyses have usually been conducted through the lens of either military necessity or economic hardship, with less attention paid to an institutional examination of the dynamics between the Nationalists and their institutions. Historical analysis allows us to identify some of the different components of this puzzle. Parks M. Coble outlines the failures of the regime's policies and mobilisation for war (Coble, 2023) and Suzanne Pepper's pioneering study illuminates the radicalisation of student movements at the time of civil conflict, revealing the crisis of socioeconomic divisions in society (Pepper, 1971). Likewise, the mechanisms of hyperinflation as a balance-destroying force have been broken down by economic historians such as Colin D. Campbell and Gordon Tullock (Campbell & Tullock, 1954), and the problems with wartime legacies have emphasized the issue of factionalism and corruption weakening the effectiveness of any administration (Eastman, 1984; Wang, 2017). However rigorous these contributions are, they tend to reduce the collapse to separate spheres: military overreach here, inflationary spirals there. This comes at the expense of highlighting the general institutional inertia that made the regime unresponsive to the transition between wartime and peacetime needs. Such compartmentalized strategies, as Frederic Wakeman Jr. identifies in his study of the secret police apparatus, fail to appreciate a deeper background condition. Habitual patterns of patronage and authoritarian instinct continually recreated a vacuum of governance, one in which adaptability-based reform had not only been lost but was conceptually impossible (Wakeman, 1992). The gap remains even in more integrative historiography, such as literature on the institutional friction between civilian and military cultures that worsened resource plunder (van de Ven, 1997; Sasagawa, 2015). Though sometimes critical of institutional weakness, this literature rarely looks further back into the driver of the non-adaptation itself: the rigidity of hierarchies that corroded the moral agreement underpinning the regime and its people (Yeh, 1989; Chan, 2020). Individually, these studies illuminate distinct facets of the collapse: military miscalculation, inflationary shock, factional corruption, and secret-police excess. What they lack is not attention to institutional weakness itself, but a unifying framework able to connect these

fragmented empirical findings into a single causal architecture. Read together through that architecture, governance failure, repression, and economic collapse appear not as parallel case chapters but as symptoms of one underlying pathology: the regime's structural incapacity to reconfigure itself as wartime imperatives gave way to peacetime demands.

Building on this need for a unifying lens, the current paper proposes adaptive institutionalism as a new analytical prism. It is a framework stimulated by recent developments in the political science literature that defines institutional resilience not as a sign of equilibrium but as a matter of adaptable reconfiguration to perturbation (Nathan, 2020; Whiting, 2017). Based on ecological and sociological analogies, adaptive institutionalism assumes that just like socio-ecological systems, regimes obtain legitimacy and stability through their capacity to absorb shocks, either exogenous invasions or endogenous disequilibria, with the help of iterative adjustments of rules, norms, and power relations aimed at ensuring societal unity (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Smit & Wandel, 2006). In this conception, institutions are not simply "social glue" (O'Riordan and Jordan 1999), the norms that are regularly enforced on communities. Rather, they manifest themselves as agents of transformation, as 'mechanisms' that reduce vulnerabilities and seize opportunities, as the Brundtland Report calls for - that policies and institutions need to change to face interwoven economic and ecological crises (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). However, as Hall & Taylor (1996) explain in their calculus of institutional influence, actors' adaptability depends on the balance between cultural constraints (path-dependent norms that restrict actors' preferences) and strategic agency, which involves the actors' ability to deal with incomplete information and transaction costs to "satisfice" the results that permit the maintenance of collective purpose (Nee, 1998). Institutions are, therefore, not predetermined, but rather encompass historical change, institutional channels, and possibilities for the reconfiguration of the institution as it exists in the moment: political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1994). Adaptive institutionalism, when applied to the Nationalist context, examines the difficulty of the GMD's postwar institutions in shifting from mobilisation to governance, as well as the unending cycle of mistrust and alienation among the GMD's institutions, personal leadership, and party-state apparatus (Strauss, 2002; Iwatani, 2022). This was consistent with Elinor Ostrom's focus on polycentric governance for resilience (Ostrom, 2005), which highlights that institutional rigidity can both exacerbate corruption and repression and can preclude opportunities for procedural legitimacy in which the rule-of-law may have left authoritarianism's thorns less apparent (Whiting, 2017). These dynamics are emphasized, bringing the analysis above descriptive chronicles, and highlighting endogenous regimes' processes that self-undermine, as DiMaggio and Powell (1983) theorized elite-driven institutional reproduction reinforces power imbalances.

The central research question of this inquiry is how the non-adaptation of the national-ist regime's institutions contributed to the crisis of legitimacy between 1945 and 1949, and what long-term implications does this have for governance in times of duress? Legitimacy, as Andrew J. Nathan (2020) defines it, is the population's willing acceptance of government, based on their assessments of its ability, fairness, and effectiveness. They were all pillars that the GMD systematically destroyed at the cost of public trust in the so-called "robbery reception" of Manchurian assets, in which officials sold wartime assets to themselves by the use of auctioning, the example of which is the "jiéshōu" (cynical reception) of Manchurian assets (Wang, 2017; Coble, 2023). Non-adaptation was starkly displayed in the regime's failure to exert meritocratic oversight over patronage networks, which gave rise to the resurgence of warlordism and the breakdown of central authority, and ensured a predatory state-society nexus that atomized communities and radicalized erstwhile supporters (Elkus, 2012;

Pepper, 1971). Adding to this, the merger of Kuomintang party apparatus with the Central Bureau of Investigation and Statistics (CBIS) created a panoptical society of surveillance and extrajudicial terror replaced dialogue. This transformed moderate dissent, such as the 1947 Anti-Hunger campaigns, into revolutionary fervor, eroding the ideological nationalism that had once unified the polity against Japan (Yeh, 1989; Lutz, 1971; Wakeman, 1992). Economically, unchecked monetary expansion, culminating in the 1948 Gold Yuan debacle, not only obliterated middle-class savings but symbolized a profound breach of the social contract, wherein inflation served as an insidious tax on the vulnerable, mirroring the moral economy's collapse chronicled by James C. Scott in peasant rebellions and other authors (Chang, 1958; Hu, 1970; Scott, 1977; Quddus et al., 1989). These threads can be held together to create a narrative of brittleness through adaptive institutionalism: without succession mechanisms or coalition-building, the personalist rule of Chiang made the state unable to adapt to the cascading crises, since factional infighting paralysed activities (Chan, 2020; Nathan, 2020). This question then enquires not only historical causality, but teleological demands of institutional design, about how unresolved rigidities are leading to secession in the society where citizens are withholding the hearts and minds needed to sustain the regime (Pepper, 1971).

Case Studies

Venezuela

The Venezuelan crisis in the post-Chavaez regime is a prime example of institutional inflexibility that triggered the multifaceted collapse, reflecting the unraveling of the Nationalist Government in profound dimensions after the war. After the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013, his successor, Nicolas Maduro, inherited a petrostate that was aggravated due to oil dependence and populism redistribution. This model proved unsustainable as the prices of oil plummeted to under 30 U.S dollars a barrel by 2016 after being more than 100 U.S dollars a barrel in 2014, resulting in massive hyperinflation and institutional collapse (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). Venezuela's economy, once Latin America's wealthiest per capita, contracted by 62% in GDP between 2013 and 2019, with public services collapsing amid shortages of food, medicine, and electricity, while mortality rates for diseases like malaria and diphtheria surged due to healthcare disintegration (Page et al., 2019; Zubillaga et al., 2019).

The crisis had a multi-dimensional nature, defined as a "complex humanitarian emergency" by civil society and UN agencies, combining economic mismanagement and political authoritarianism (PROVEA 2018; UN-HCHR 2019), with a focus on elite patronage rather than adaptive reforms. Institutional failures were stark: centralized control under hy-per-presidentialism stifled economic diversification, with Petr leos de Venezuela (PDVSA) repurposed as a slush fund for social programs and military loyalty, echoing the GMD's fusion of party and state apparatuses (Monaldi, 2018; Ellner, 2019). Dissent was further suppressed, similar to the way the CBIS had been conducting surveillance, with student protests against hyperinflation and food shortages, facing arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killing, and para-military violence, where moderate reformists became opponents and procedural legitimacy was undermined (Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2011).

Descriptive accounts present a picture of societal despair: families trading off heirlooms for meager rations in Caracas slums, with over 4 million leaving by 2019, representing 13% of the population, for a sense of scarcity, not protection, and a sense of predation, not of protection (Bull & Rosales, 2020). Like the GMD's authoritarian shift made the intellectuals and the peasants enemies, narratives from displaced Venezuelans have led to the abandonment of checks and balances by electoral irregularities and judicial subversion under the 2017

National Constituent Assembly, creating a siege mentality that disenfranchises both city and countryside. (Alfaro Pareja, 2020). This disintegration was representative of a more general loss of adaptive capacity, with the disappearance of oil rents through subsidies and expropriations and the emergence of an empty moral economy where distrust between the state and society was paralleled by the Nationalist legitimacy vacuum (Corrales, 2020; Gill, 2019). Ultimately, Venezuela's trajectory underscores how non-adaptive institutions amplify exogenous shocks into endogenous collapse, with qualitative testimonies of emaciated queues at soup kitchens and vigilante paramilitaries symbolizing the fraying national community (Zubillaga et al., 2019; Cameron, 2018).

Zimbabwe

Similar to the Petrostate implosion of Venezuela, Zimbabwe, under the long-running dictatorship of Robert Mugabe, exemplifies the dangers of institutional non-adjustment through land reform mismanagement and unrestrained money printing, to result in hyperinflation that has wiped out societal cohesion. Having come out of the colonial rule in 1980 with a powerful infrastructure and expectations of equitable reform, the first decade of independence in Zimbabwe delivered 2.9% yearly growth, surpassing the rest of the region, but by the late 1990s Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party went into economic downfall due to deficit spending on war veterans and social programs to buy loyalty as legitimate rule waned (UNCTAD, 2007; World Bank, 2007). The extreme hyperinflation, reaching a high of 89.7 sextillion percent per month in 2008, was a result of land reform being implemented in a riotous manner as the 2000 Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme (FTLRP) expropriated more than 4,500 of the nearly 2000 white-owned farms without compensation in the name of settling past colonial inequities, which actually became partisan handouts which destroyed commercial agriculture, previously a source of 20% of GDP and 40% of exports (Ruswa, 2004; Richardson, 2005).

This institutional dysfunction was rife, with the Reserve Bank quasi-fiscal operations, for instance the Farm Mechanization Programme, providing tractors and inputs to ZANU-PF loyalists, resulting in rent-seeking hierarchies akin to GMD's warlord-ism (Muñoz, 2007; Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). Authoritarian repression compounded this, with opposition crackdowns, exemplified by the Movement for Democratic Change's (MDC) electoral suppression in 2008, deploying security forces to quash dissent, akin to CBIS tactics, while the absence of succession mechanisms entrenched Mugabe's personal-ist rule, breeding factionalism and paralysis (LeBas, 2006; Masaka, 2011). Descriptive accounts of the societies evoke visceral despair: the bread riots in Harare in 1998, when increases in price of staples doubled overnight, led to looting and police brutality, displacing 2 million farm workers into urban poverty; in 2008, families were scavenging mealie-meal from abandoned silos while the Zimbabwean dollar was trading at Z\$70million to the USD, and their savings were washed away by 80% unemployment. (McDonald, 2000; Moyo & Besada, 2008). The stories emerging from Marange diamond fields are tales of institutionalized predation – military syndicates smuggling gems worth millions, sustaining the regime while perpetuating black-market anarchy that was atomizing communities, just as GMD corruption was pulling rural peasants away. (PAC, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2009).

This "anarchic redistribution" led not only to a reduction of agricultural production by half, but also to the erosion of the moral economy, whereby war veterans (who were supposed to benefit from this redistribution) were forced into subsistence plots with no inputs, and resentment among the youth radicalized them against the state as an extractive elite (Zikhali, 2008; Bird & Prowse, 2009). The qualitative effects of hyper-inflation were echoed in Bulawayo, where grandmothers were trading heirlooms for salt in markets and the GMD's Gold Yuan debacle served as a reminder of how fragility was reinforced through non-adaptive land policies,

displacing 15% of the population and provoking donor withdrawal, which in turn widened the legitimacy gap (Collier, 2009; Kramarenko et al., 2010). Zimbabwe's progressive slip towards fragility and towards predation demonstrates a dialectic of jus-tice that was to be a restorative, but instead became a coercive instrument, whereby the national community was divided into enclaves of despair (Meyns & Msamba, 2010; Sarkar, 2008).

Comparative Selection Framework

Venezuela and Zimbabwe are selected as comparator cases using a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD). The two countries differ from the Nationalist Government, and from each other, in historical period, level of economic development, geopolitical context, and the nature of the precipitating shock (postwar territorial reconstruction versus an oil-price collapse versus a land-reform crisis). Despite this variance, all three regimes exhibit a common outcome: institutional sclerosis in the face of an exogenous or endogenous shock, culminating in a legitimacy crisis and societal secession. An MDSD logic is appropriate here because convergence on the same pattern of collapse across otherwise dissimilar cases strengthens confidence that institutional non-adaptation, rather than any single country-specific factor, is the operative causal mechanism. Each case below is therefore examined along three standardized comparative dimensions: (i) the exogenous or endogenous shock that tested the regime; (ii) the institutional rigidity mechanism through which the regime absorbed, or failed to absorb, that shock; and (iii) the resulting legitimacy failure and pattern of societal secession.

Table 1: Standardized Comparative Dimensions across the Three Cases

Case	Shock	Institutional Rigidity Mechanism	Legitimacy Failure / Societal Secession
Nationalist China (1945–1949)	Postwar reconstruction and demobilization after Japan's surrender	Patronage-based reception (jiéshōu), warlord resurgence, CBIS surveillance apparatus	Robbery reception and Gold Yuan collapse; radicalization of moderates; CCP ascendancy
Venezuela (post-2014)	Collapse of oil prices ending petrostate redistribution	Hyper-presidentialism, PDVSA as patronage vehicle, judicial subversion	Hyperinflation and hollowed moral economy; over 4 million emigrate
Zimbabwe (Mugabe era)	Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme and fiscal indiscipline	Partisan land allocation, Reserve Bank quasi-fiscal operations, ZANU-PF patronage	Hyperinflation (89.7 sextillion % monthly, 2008); donor withdrawal; mass displacement

Theoretical Framework: Adaptive Institutionalism

Adaptive institutionalism emerges as a synthetic lens for dissecting regime resilience amid crises, bridging ecological systems theory with political sociology to foreground the dynamic interplay of norms, actors, and structures in sustaining legitimacy. Its background traces to late-modern ecology's "panarchy" paradigm, which envisions socio-ecological systems as nested hierarchies capable of reorganization to absorb perturbations, as articulated by Gunderson and Holling (2002), who emphasize integrating economic, ecological, and institutional dynamics to navigate vulnerabilities. This perspective, extending Smit & Wandel's (2006) definition of adaptation as processes enabling systems, households to nations to cope with stresses through adjustment, counters reductionist analyses by privileging synthetic, cross-scale inquiry (Yohe & Tol, 2002; Adger, 2006). In political science, it resonates with Hall & Taylor's (1996) new institutionalism, which delineates institutions as cognitive scripts constraining yet enabling strategic "satisficing" by actors under incomplete information, thus linking cultural path-dependence to calculative agency (Nee, 1998; Brinton & Nee, 2001). Yet, as Ostrom et al. (2002) and Brunner et al. (2005) contend, institutions transcend normative glue, O'Riordan & Jordan's (1999) metaphor for societal cohesion, becoming mechanisms for adaptive capacity, as

the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) urged: interlocked systems demand evolving policies to mitigate ecological threats. North's (1990) transaction-cost economics further illuminates how rigid constraints impede entrepreneurial reconfiguration, while Fiori (2002) and Pelling & High (2005) highlight "slow-moving" cultural norms clashing with "fast-moving" economic imperatives, breeding fragility in non-Western contexts (Portes, 2006; Inkeles & Smith, 1974).

At its core, adaptive institutionalism posits that regimes endure crises by evolving institutions, such as anti-corruption protocols or inclusive coalitions, to preserve legitimacy, defined as perceived rightful authority warranting obedience (Nathan, 2020; Whiting, 2017). Strong institutional quality is essential for enabling human capital development and system resilience amid external shocks such as energy injustice and resource dependence (Samuel, 2026). Unlike static equilibrium models, it views legitimacy as a co-constitutive process, where shocks like hyperinflation test administrative competence, procedural fairness, and performative efficacy; failure to adapt erodes these, fostering societal secession (Whiting, 2017; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Legitimacy here encompasses Weberian dimensions, rational-legal predictability, traditional hierarchies, charismatic appeals, interwoven with power asymmetries, as Hotimsky et al. (2006) argue institutions serve elite interests unless recalibrated for broader resilience. Adaptation, as Brooks (2003) observes, requires process based scrutiny in crises transcending categorical determinants such as social capital (Pelling & High, 2005), with emphasis being placed on bottom-up empirics that indicate the interaction between exogenous hazards and endogenous frailties (Smit & Wandel, 2006). It is a framework that indicts tautological "black box" management of capacity (IPCC, 2007), and operationalises it instead through new institutional analysis (NIA), which examines the behaviour of actors within theatres of organisation to determine whether cultural scripts contribute or inhibit renewal (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Nee, 1998).

It is worth clarifying where this framework sits relative to established political-sociology traditions. The primary analytical anchor here is not ecological theory but historical institutionalism, in the sense developed by Thelen and Steinmo and by Mahoney, which explains institutional persistence and change through path dependence, critical junctures, and the gradual layering or conversion of rules under pressure. It is complemented by state capacity theory, as articulated by Migdal and by Mann, which distinguishes a regime's despotic power to issue commands from its infrastructural power to implement them consistently through society, a distinction that clarifies why the GMD could compel compliance in the short term yet could not sustain functioning administration once wartime coercion no longer sufficed. Ecological panarchy, introduced earlier in this section, is retained only as a conceptual metaphor for cross-scale adaptation under stress rather than as an operational model to be applied literally to a political regime; the explanatory work in the analysis that follows is carried out by historical-institutionalist and state-capacity concepts, not by the ecological analogy.

Methodology

The research design was a qualitative historical approach based on the thematic analysis, which was used to explore the collapse of the Nationalist regime on the premise of adaptive institutionalism and legitimacy. The study relied on a collection of sources, such as archival documents, contemporary sources, and the rich secondary literature on postwar and war administration in China, along with the comparison with Venezuela (recession of 2010s) and Zimbabwe (using hyperinflation of 2000s). The analysis was structured around an adaptive institutionalism framework focusing on the ability regimes to develop such structures of resilience during crisis situations (Nathan, 2020; Whiting, 2017) with a specific emphasis on the notion of regime legitimacy (the perceived right of the government to rule, defined as such by Whiting, 2017). In this framework,

three important dimensions along the performance of the Nationalist government were analyzed, which are the capacity of the government to govern the state (enhancing the transparency of bureaucratic structures and civilian-military relations), political repression (standing behind the use of intelligence and security services to initiate conformity), and economic management (including fiscal and monetary policy between 1945 and 1949). The paper compared and contrasted other sources to find links between particular institutional failures and transformations in popular opinion as documented by witness observers of the events and subsequent historians. The study extended the comparison of a policy choice and outcomes leading to a loss of popular support. The interdisciplinary method between political history and socioeconomic analysis provided a way of integrating the way the national community in China fell apart under the Nationalists. More importantly, the approach to the research focused on the interaction of the state and the responses of the society: How Nationalist choices of resource allocation, coercion, and reform (or absence thereof) created an atmosphere of mutual mistrust between the government and people.

Results and Discussions

Governance Failures

Failures of the governance in the Nationalist Government (GMD), between 1945 and 1949, were a chain of institutional malfunctions that not only eroded the administrative competence, but also undermined the Nationalist government control of the Nationalist Government to the extent that it enabled the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to take advantage of grievances in society. The central element of these failures was bureaucratic corruption at the postwar "reception" (jiēshou) of the Japanese-occupied lands, especially Manchuria, where the officials who had been sent to restore order instead acted as ravenous profiteers. This process later degenerated into what locals cynically labeled robbery reception (jiéshou) and seized popular indignation against the predatory nature of the GMD, with officials plundering factories, mines and warehouses or auctioning them off to secure bribes (Wang, 2017; Coble, 2023). This was not an isolated incident, but rather a governance issue that stemmed from patronage networks instead of meritocratic oversight and that wartime corruption continued during peacetime (Wang, 2017). U.S. archival reports from the period, including Ambassador Stuart's telegram that reads, "rampant profiteering squandering aid" (Stuart, 1949), draw attention to the loss of grassroots legitimacy, which was seen by "newly liberated citizens" as "their supposed liberators turn into plunderers" (Coble, 2023). This critical turning point was a time of betrayal that laid the groundwork for disillusionment among the urban and rural people, as Elkus (2012) suggests, revealing the weakness of the central government in maintaining discipline. Compounding this, warlordism resurfaced in Manchuria's power vacuum, where "Nationalist-aligned generals..... seized control of territories as personal fiefdoms" (Elkus, 2012; van de Ven, 1997). In this landscape of splintered authority, historian Parks Coble observes that U.S. assistance and captured Japanese assets were mismanaged, and that one reason for this was the GMD's failure to have mechanisms for enforcing discipline (Coble, 2023; Iwatani, 2022; Chan, 2020). For ordinary citizens in devastated provinces, the combination of greedy officials and rival militarists proved disastrous, with industrial output collapsing below wartime levels by 1946 (Sasagawa, 2015; Wang, 2017). Social deprivation suffered by rural communities continued to be exploited by the Japanese, later by the Soviet, and now by the Nationalist government (Pepper, 1971); promises of the postwar era were hollow, and disenchantment grew (Lutz, 1971; Yeh, 1989). This institutional weakness created a political vacuum for the CCP to appear as a "disciplined, populist alternative" (Elkus, 2012; Nathan, 2020). Critically, the GMD's failure to police its ranks, as U.S. Minister-Counselor Clark reported in 1949, "corruption and inefficiency" exacerbated by "warlords"

resurgence" (Clark, 1949), signaled a regime more focused on self-enrichment than reconstruction (Strauss, 2002; Whiting, 2017). This criticism is in line with that of Bianco (1971) that corruption was not an isolated incident but systemic, eroding its very foundation for stability (Sheridan, 1975; Shuja, 1976). As Global Security.org (2025) details, the "loss of Manchuria... was a blow to the Nationalist economy", with Japanese assets dismantled by the So-viets before GMD arrival, further compounding corruption's impact (Kucha et al., 2023; National Archives, 2025). Archival sources remind us that these failures were accompanied by a "deteriorating military situation" that kept "factionalism" from providing "cohesive responses" (Butterworth, 1949; Cabot, 1949). In essence, the reception process's corruption not only squandered territorial gains but symbolized the GMD's existential misalignment with public aspirations for peace and equity (Gregor, 1981; West, 2017).

Table 2: Timeline of Corruption Incidents (1945-1946)

Year/Month	Event	Key Actors
Aug 1945	Japan surrenders; GMD reception of territories (e.g., Manchuria)	Nationalist officials, military officers
Dec 1945	Kunming student protest suppressed	Nationalist authorities
1946	Civil War resumes; inflation accelerates	GMD prints currency

The civil and military divide within the Nationalist regime further exacerbated governance failures, creating a predatory dynamic that prioritized force over effective administration and alienated broad swaths of society. Chiang Kai-shek's dual roles as President and Generalissimo fostered deep mutual suspicions and divergent priorities (Yeh, 1989; van de Ven, 1997), with military intelligence like the Juntong (later CBIS) operating independently, pursuing security agendas with little regard for economic reconstruction or rule of law (Sasagawa, 2015; Wang, 2017). American advisers noted with concern that U.S.-supplied matériel intended for civilian relief was sometimes diverted to military stockpiles (van de Ven, 1997; Wang, 2017), resulting in a governance vacuum where neither side effectively addressed local needs (Sasagawa, 2015). For instance, military units requisitioned grain and coal sold on the black market (Wang, 2017), hitting rural communities hard and driving some to destitution and even starvation (Sasagawa, 2015; Pepper, 1971). In cities, profiteering hoarded supplies, exacerbating shortages as hyperinflation accelerated (Zhao & Li, 2015; Hu, 1970). This erosion of social cohesion atomized communities, where "fear and scarcity" replaced rebuilding efforts (Pepper, 1971), as protests in Nanjing and Shanghai were met with police and soldiers rather than relief (Lutz, 1971). Critically, this "predatory dynamic" illustrated the regime's crisis philosophy, where force supplanted governance, undercutting the moral basis of rule (Nathan, 2020; Whiting, 2017). U.S. reports from Butterworth (1949) highlighted "deteriorating military situation" due to such divides, as "morale falters", echoing Cabot's (1949) observation of "complete bankruptcy of KMT leadership". This critique aligns with Bianco's (1971) view that "civil-military schisms amplified corruption" (p. 194), fostering CCP opportunities (Sheridan, 1975; Global Security.org, 2025). The GMD's inability to coordinate, as Kucha et al. (2023) timeline shows, led to "gradual diminution" of control (Kucha et al., 2023), disintegrating the national community (National Archives, 2025). As Lynch (2016) argues, the divide "exacerbated exploitation" (p. 86), with archival evidence from Clark (1949) noting "warlords and officials siphoning resources", perpetuating a cycle of scarcity that radicalized rural and urban groups alike (Van de Ven, 2018; Fitzgerald, 1971). This failure not only weakened military efficacy but symbolized the regime's detachment from societal needs, as communities might have

banded together but were atomized (Pepper, 1971; Westad, 2003). In comparison to CCP's cohesive mobilization, the GMD's schism, as Kuo-chün (1951) details, precluded pragmatic remedies, deepening the legitimacy chasm (Fairbank, 1986; Hsü, 1970).

Table 3: Comparison of Civilian-Military Resource Allocation (1945-1948)

Year	Resource Diverted	Key Actors
1945	U.S. matériel	Military commanders
1947	Grain and coal	Officers on black market
1948	Relief shipments	Local officials

The absence of an effective succession mechanism within the Nationalist Party epitomized its institutional failings, rendering the regime brittle and unable to adapt to mounting crises, a flaw that critically amplified factionalism and policy paralysis. Chiang Kai-shek's highly personalist leadership, where he concentrated authority in himself and a small circle of loyalists (Iwatani, 2022; Chan, 2020), treated the party as an extension of his will, breeding rivalries that undermined both international and domestic confidence (Nathan, 2020). As Elkus (2012) observes, no contingency plan or empowered deputy existed when Chiang's leadership faltered, leading to calamitous rigidity during 1948 campaigns like Huaihai, where micromanagement and distrust contributed to major defeats (Elkus, 2012; Global Security.org, 2025). Student protesters mocked the regime as a "dead wood administration" (Pepper, 1971, p. 699), signaling a vacuum of institutional adaptability (Nathan, 2020) that alienated potential loyalists (Pepper, 1971; Lutz, 1971). This brittleness became evident in January 1949 with Chiang's resignation, an act that came far too late (Elkus, 2012), as the regime unraveled without his personal authority (Chan, 2020; National Archives, 2025). Critically, the emphasis on loyalty over institutionalization, as Whiting (2017) argues, left the state unable to survive the fall of its leader, amid economic freefall (Strauss, 2002; Sheridan, 1975). U.S. archival documents, such as Cabot's (1949) report on "bankruptcy of KMT leadership", underscore this existential mistake (Butterworth, 1949; Bianco, 1971). The GMD's failures thus not only fostered internal infighting but signaled fragility to society, as "many lost faith" in renewal (Nathan, 2020; Kucha et al., 2023). As Van De Ven (2018) critiques, the lack of power-sharing perpetuated paralysis, with archival interviews like Mao's 1944 statement emphasizing "democracy can give us strength" (National Archives, 2025, Source 3a), contrasting the GMD's rigidity (Fitzgerald, 1971; Kuo-chün, 1951). This personalism, as Fairbank (1986) notes, bred policy paralysis, amplifying defeats and eroding morale (Hsü, 1970; Li, 2012). In sum, succession absence was an existential mistake (Chan, 2020), leaving the regime vulnerable to the CCP's disciplined structure.

Table 4: Factional Infighting Incidents (1947-1949)

Event	Key Figures	Outcome
Post-1947	Chiang, T.V. Soong, H.H. Kung	Increase in infighting
Late 1948: Huaihai	Chiang's micromanagement	Major defeats; no reorganization
Jan 1949: Chiang resigns	Li Zongren replaces	Leadership crisis; morale falters

Political Repression and the Secret Police State

The political repression under the Nationalist regime, manifesting through the secret police state, further compounded governance failures by substituting terror for legitimate authority, ultimately disintegrating societal bonds and bolstering the CCP's appeal as a viable alternative. In the wake of World War II, the regime intensified authoritarian controls instead of fostering reconciliation, expanding the Central Bureau of Investigation and Statistics (CBIS) to stamp out both real and perceived opposition (Iwatani, 2022; Wakeman, 1992). Originally formed to counter Japanese spies, the CBIS under Dai Li became a powerful secret police organ entwined with military command, centralizing security in Chiang's office (Iwatani, 2022; Chan, 2020). Its mandate extended to surveillance of universities and censorship of the press (Wakeman, 1992; Pepper, 1971), equating dissent with disloyalty (Strauss, 2002; Yeh, 1989). Methods were extrajudicial and often brutal, with networks of informers creating fear and mistrust (Chan, 2020; Strauss, 2002). For example, the 1947 arrest of Peking University student leaders protesting hyperinflation led to torture and death, sparking outrage and transforming students from reformers into revolutionaries (Pepper, 1971; Lutz, 1971). This backfired, as "naked repression" without a legal facade forfeited goodwill (Whiting, 2017; National Archives, 2025, Source 2a), alienating nationalists' traditional supporters (Yeh, 1989; Kucha et al., 2023). Critically, the expansion imposed sullen stability at gunpoint (Pepper, 1971), destroying claims to lawful government (Global Security.org, 2025; Sheridan, 1975). As archival reports like Cabot's (1949) note, "Communist propaganda derives inspiration... from what Chinese Communists sincerely feel", the repression fueled resentment, with Mao's 1944 interview emphasizing "the Chinese people are in great need of democracy" (National Archives, 2025, Source 3a). This critique aligns with Bianco's (1971) view that repression turned neutrals into adversaries, as student petitions for better food rations and peace talks were crushed (Pepper, 1971; Van de Ven, 2018). The CBIS's unchecked operations, as Wakeman (1992) details, signaled all dissent intolerable, radicalizing youth and elites (Lutz, 1971; Fitzgerald, 1971). In sum, repression not only stifled openness but amplified CCP's narrative of GMD as "evil" (Lynch, 2016; Westad, 2003), eroding the regime's ideological hold (Gregor, 1981; West, 2017).

Table 5: CBIS Operations (1946-1948)

Year	Incident	Method
1946	Campus surveillance	Informers networks
1947	Peking University arrests	Arbitrary detention, torture
1948	Press censorship	Shutdowns, intimidations

The party-state fusion deepened repression, creating pervasive distrust that permeated all societal levels and accelerated the regime's isolation. Chiang deliberately fused the CBIS with the KMT to ensure total loyalty and ideological conformity (Chan, 2020; Yeh, 1989), monitoring even party members (Strauss, 2002). Dai Li invoked "Confucian values... benevolence and righteousness" (Yeh, 1989), masking an insidious dynamic: nobody could be fully trusted (Chan, 2020). The Liu Geping affair illustrated factional infighting, ending in purges and defections (Yeh, 1989; Chan, 2020). For the public, this created a universal climate of fear (Strauss, 2002), where neighbors might be informants (Lutz, 1971; Wakeman, 1992). Businesses hesitated to form associations, as collective action might be disloyalty (Strauss, 2002), chilling civil society (Pepper, 1971). Mutual mistrust ran deep, with unrest branded as instigated by evil elements (Lutz, 1971; Wakeman, 1992), precluding remedies and spiraling coercion (National Archives, 2025, Source 2b). An American observer noted that Nationalist policies made the Communists popular without presence (Wakeman, 1992), as urban

Chinese felt "little to lose" by 1949 (Global Security.org, 2025; Sheridan, 1975). This mentality ensured the people's reciprocity, viewing the regime as an enemy of their welfare (Strauss, 2002; Kucha et al., 2023). Critically, the fusion turned the government into an entity indistinguishable from opposition from people, sowing intentional distrust that disintegrated the national community (Bianco, 1971; Nathan, 2020). As Van De Ven (2018) critiques, mistrust precluded pragmatic remedies, with archival evidence like the Yen-an editorial "Without Democracy There Will Not Be Peaceful Reconstruction" (National Archives, 2025, Source 2a) highlighting the CCP's unity policy, contrasting the GMD's paranoia (Fitzgerald, 1971; Kuo-chün, 1951). This repression not only frayed social ties but amplified the CCP's narrative, as propaganda was effective (Lynch, 2016; Westad, 2003), leading to passive aid for communists (Gregor, 1981; West, 2017; Fairbank, 1986; Hsü, 1970; Li, 2012).

Table 6: Repression Incidents and Societal Responses (1946-1949)

Event	Method	Consequence
1946-47: Liu Geqing affair	Accusations, purges	Inner-party solidarity eroded
1948: Labor strikes	Police crush	Coercion spiral; alienation
1949: Urban distrust	Surveillance	Reciprocal enmity

Economic Collapse and Loss of Material Livelihood

The economic collapse under Nationalist rule, marked by hyperinflation and welfare disintegration, represented a performative legitimacy failure that devastated livelihoods and accelerated societal alienation, paving the way for CCP ascendancy. Facing civil war costs without a robust tax base, the GMD resorted to printing enormous quantities of currency (Campbell & Tullock, 1954; Sargent & Wallace, 1973), with money supply exploding from ¥3.6 billion in 1937 to trillions by 1949 (Zhao & Li, 2015; Hu, 1970). This deliberate choice driven by political expediency (Hu, 1970) used inflation as an "implicit tax" (Quddus et al., 1989), doubling prices every few weeks by 1948 (Zhao & Li, 2015). Middle-class families, GMD pillars, became "destitute", as a lifetime's earnings could not buy a sack of rice (Chang, 1958), radicalizing apolitical groups (Campbell & Tullock, 1954; Ebeling, 2004). The 1948 Gold Yuan fiasco, exchanging 3,000,000 fabi for 1 Gold Yuan pegged at 4:1 USD, was "fatally flawed" with inadequate reserves (Coble, 2023), outlawing private holdings and resuming printing, breaking promises of monetary discipline (Hu, 1970). Compliance was low, as less than one third turned in hoarded metals (Ebeling, 2004), robbing compliers in a bait and switch (Coble, 2023). By April 1949, the yuan lost value, black market rates skyrocketing to 20,000,000:1 (Coble, 2023), stripping middle-class assets and collapsing trust (Hu, 1970; Quddus et al., 1989). This "final betrayal" drove urban support to despair (Campbell & Tullock, 1954; National Archives, 2025). Critically, as Bianco (1971) note, inflation had adverse political effects, eroding GMD base (Sheridan, 1975; Global Security.org, 2025). Archival telegrams like Butterworth's (1949) predict "Communists will cross the Yangtze" amid economic chaos (Butterworth, 1949), as Cabot (1949) observes "vehemence of Communist anti-American propaganda" fueled by GMD failures (Cabot, 1949). This hyperinflation not only radicalized the middle class but symbolized the regime's incompetence, as public attitudes turned to weary cynicism (Sheridan, 1975; Shuja, 1976), contrasting CCP's regional stability (Bianco, 1971; Lynch, 2016). The GMD's "bungled financial reform" (Clark, 1949), relying on illusory U.S. aid, amplified disillusionment, with Mao's propaganda exploiting it as capitulating to imperialist powers (Bianco, 1971; Van de Ven, 2018).

Table 7: Inflation Metrics (1945-1949)

Year	Money Supply Growth	Price Doubling Rate
1947	Doubling every few months	Months
1948	Explodes to trillions	Weeks
1949	Peak hyperinflation	Days

The economic meltdown extended to a broader livelihood crisis, with severe shortages by 1948 converging with war disruptions, hyperinflation, and military priorities, fostering perceptions of a predatory state. Winter 1947–1948 famines in north and central China stemmed from heavy GMD grain requisitioning and speculative hoarding (Wei, 2001; Coble, 2023), with rural provinces like Hunan experiencing renewed hunger (Sasagawa, 2015). Nationalist responses were "grossly inadequate", as corruption infested relief: local officials siphoned off grain shipments, selling relief rice on the black market (Wei, 2001). Foreign aid like UNRRA shipments was "mismanaged", with only a fraction reaching beneficiaries (Wei, 2001; Chang, 1958). In cities, Shanghai's coal shortages left factories shut, unemployment soaring, as barely one third of the required coal arrived (Coble, 2023). Contemporary reports describe scenes of urban despair: families selling heirlooms and queues of emaciated residents (Chang, 1958), with thousands dying in Nanjing from cold and hunger (Coble, 2023). Propaganda exhorting support rang hollow, as prioritization of military over needs appeared indifferent to suffering (Chang, 1958; Wei, 2001). Chiang vetoed funds diversion or land reform, judging threats to elite interests (Sasagawa, 2015; Global Security.org, 2025). The moral economy collapsed, populace seeing state as "exploiter" (Chang, 1958), fueling CCP hopes (Wei, 2001; National Archives, 2025). Critically, this "deep alienation" meant little resistance to CCP advances (Bianco, 1971; Sheridan, 1975). Archival sources like the Yenan editorial "Revolution Futile without democratic government" (National Archives, 2025, Source 2a) contrast the GMD's failure with the CCP's unity (Fitzgerald, 1971; Kuo-chün, 1951). As Lynch (2016) notes, dire conditions left peasants vulnerable, with GMD's repeal of CCP reforms undoing advances (Van de Ven, 2018; Westad, 2003). This welfare collapse not only delegitimized the GMD but resonated with CCP propaganda depicting Nationalists as "corrupt tyrants" (Chang, 1958; Gregor, 1981).

Table 8: Inflation Metrics (1945-1949)

City	Resource	Impact
Shanghai	Coal	Factories shut; unemployment soars
Nanjing	Food, fuel	Thousands die from cold/hunger
Wuhan	Essentials	Livelihood crisis; moral economy collapse

Legitimacy Crisis and the Disintegration of the National Community

The cumulative effect of the Nationalist government's governance failures, authoritarian excesses, and economic mismanagement precipitated a dual crisis of legitimacy and social cohesion by early 1949, leaving the regime isolated as the populace mentally seceded. Legitimacy, the belief that the government's rule is rightful (Nathan, 2020; Whiting, 2017), was shattered across pillars. Administrative legitimacy was destroyed by "rampant corruption" (Wang, 2017), officials as self-interested actors (Pepper, 1971), leading to perceptions of the state as an extractor (Nathan, 2020). Procedural legitimacy was "nonexistent", ruled by decree and secret

police (Whiting, 2017; Strauss, 2002), subverting institutions (Wakeman, 1992; Chan, 2020). Performance legitimacy evaporated with hyperinflation and livelihood collapse, nullifying wartime prestige (Coble, 2023; Hu, 1970). Urban middle class turned away, rural populations felt "betrayed" (Pepper, 1971; Lutz, 1971). Ideological legitimacy compromised, as CCP appropriated nationalism, portraying GMD as "selling out" (Pepper, 1971; Sheridan, 1975). By late 1948, a crisis of the national community emerged, and shared identity disintegrated into despairing groups (Strauss, 2002; Nathan, 2020). Peasants withdrew support, intellectuals disillusioned (Pepper, 1971; Global Security.org, 2025). The "moral mandate" shifted to the CCP, appearing disciplined and egalitarian (Pepper, 1971; Bianco, 1971). Final collapse in "permissive environment", with little resistance (National Archives, 2025; Kucha et al., 2023). In summary, the GMD forfeited every foundation of authority, fracturing the national community and creating a vacuum for the CCP (Nathan, 2020; Whiting, 2017). As archival interviews like Mao's emphasize "democracy to knock down Japanese warlords" (National Archives, 2025, Source 3a), the GMD's failures contrasted sharply (Van de Ven, 2018; Fitzgerald, 1971). This disintegration, as Lynch (2016) notes, was "self-inflicted", with the CCP's gains in support and military mirroring the GMD's losses (Westad, 2003; Gregor, 1981). The interplay, as Bianco (1971) argue, was GMD weaknesses and CCP strengths, leading to erosion of government strength (Sheridan, 1975; Shuja, 1976). Critically, the crisis extended beyond the military, as consent of the governed evaporated (West, 2017; Fairbank, 1986).

Table 9: Legitimacy Pillars Erosion (1945-1949)

Pillar	Evidence
Administrative	Rampant corruption
Procedural	Decree and police
Performance	Hyperinflation

Discussion

The precipitous collapse of China's Nationalist Government (GMD) from 1945 to 1949, transitioning from wartime victors to vanquished exiles in a mere four years, presents a historical paradox that demands rigorous scrutiny. Bolstered by Japan's surrender, international recognition, and substantial U.S. aid, the GMD initially appeared poised to consolidate power and rebuild a war-torn nation (Coble, 2023; Eastman, 1984). Yet, by 1949, Mao Zedong's Communist forces had dismantled the regime, exposing a profound legitimacy crisis that eroded the national community's cohesion (Pepper, 1971; Nathan, 2020). This discussion employs adaptive institutionalism, a framework inspired by ecological and sociological theories, to dissect how the GMD's institutional non-adaptation amplified governance failures, political repression, and economic collapse, ultimately forfeiting legitimacy (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Hall & Taylor, 1996). By comparing the GMD's trajectory with Venezuela's post-Chávez crisis and Zimbabwe's Mugabe-era decline, this analysis addresses the research question: How did institutional non-adaptation exacerbate the GMD's legitimacy crisis, and what lessons emerge for governance under duress? Adaptive institutionalism, in contrast to the preceding studies with a limited view of military or economic determinants, can be viewed as a holistic approach: it suggests that regime resilience requires reconfiguration, which is dynamic in nature (Wakeman, 1992; Whiting, 2017). The comparative approach highlights commonality in the rigidity of situations across contexts, showing that the inability to re- adapted institutions to shocks - recovery after a war, oil price collapses or land reform -

breaks society trust (Ostrom, 2005; Corrales, 2020). This interrogative not only offers a historicalization of the defeat of GMD but also condenses major lessons of the governance concerning the challenging issues of the contemporary world.

Institutional Non-Adaptation and Governance Failures

The failure of the GMD to shift between wartime patronage and peacetime governance became the key symptom of institutional non-adaptation and supported systemic corruption and warlordism eroding the administrative legitimacy and disuniting China as a national community. The postwar “reception” (jiěshōu) of Japanese-occupied territories, particularly Manchuria, was a pivotal moment where officials, tasked with restoring order, instead plundered industrial assets, earning the derisive label “robbery reception” (jiéshōu) (Coble, 2023; Wang, 2017). This was not an isolated scandal but a symptom of entrenched patronage networks, where loyalty trumped merit, precluding anti-corruption reforms (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Nee, 1998). Adaptive institutionalism reveals how cultural path-dependence, wartime reliance on clientelism, stifled the GMD’s capacity to institute oversight mechanisms, allowing officials to auction factories and mines for personal gain (van de Ven, 1997). Warlordism’s resurgence in Manchuria, where Nationalist-aligned generals seized territories as fiefdoms, further exposed the regime’s failure to enforce central authority, squandering U.S. aid and Japanese assets (Elkus, 2012; Sasagawa, 2015). This mirrors Venezuela’s capture of PDVSA, where oil rents fueled elite patronage rather than diversification, and Zimbabwe’s Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme (FTLRP), where land redistribution devolved into partisan spoils, both reflecting rigid hierarchies that prioritized loyalty over equitable governance (Monaldi, 2018; Ruswa, 2004). The GMD’s failure to adopt polycentric governance, as Ostrom (2005) advocates, left accountability absent, enabling warlords and officials to exploit resources, alienating urban and rural populations who saw the state as predatory rather than protective (Pepper, 1971; Nathan, 2020). This administrative legitimacy deficit, where citizens perceived governance as extractive, fostered societal secession, as communities withdrew trust, mirroring Venezuela’s mass emigration and Zimbabwe’s urban unrest (Zubillaga et al., 2019; Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). In contrast, the CCP’s adaptive land reforms in liberated zones-built grassroots support, highlighting the GMD’s rigidity as a critical misstep that opened political space for communist mobilization (Bianco, 1971; Kucha et al., 2023). Thus, the GMD’s non-adaptation not only amplified corruption but also fractured the national community, setting the stage for broader legitimacy erosion.

Political Repression and the Erosion of Procedural Legitimacy

The GMD’s reliance on the Central Bureau of Investigation and Statistics (CBIS) to suppress dissent, rather than fostering inclusive dialogue, entrenched a secret police state that eroded procedural legitimacy, radicalizing moderates and bolstering the CCP’s appeal. Instead of transitioning to peacetime openness, the GMD expanded the CBIS’s mandate, originally anti-Japanese, to surveil universities, censor the press, and detain perceived opponents, equating dissent with disloyalty (Wakeman, 1992; Yeh, 1989). Adaptive institutionalism highlights this as a failure to recalibrate cultural norms of control, rooted in wartime exigencies, to meet post-war demands for procedural fairness (Fiori, 2002; Whiting, 2017). The 1947 Peking University arrests, where students protesting hyperinflation faced torture, transformed reformers into revolutionaries, as fear and mistrust atomized communities (Pepper, 1971; Lutz, 1971). This parallels Venezuela’s repression of 2014–2017 student protests, where paramilitary violence alienated urban elites, and Zimbabwe’s 2008 crackdowns on the Movement for Democratic Change, where electoral suppression radicalized opposition (Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2011; LeBas, 2006). The GMD’s extrajudicial methods, lacking a legal facade, forfeited goodwill,

as citizens perceived governance as coercive rather than consensual, a dynamic adaptive institutionalism frames as a failure to balance power asymmetries (Strauss, 2002; Hotimsky et al., 2006). In Venezuela, the 2017 National Constituent Assembly's judicial subversion mirrors this, as does Zimbabwe's militarized election rigging, each undermining procedural legitimacy by prioritizing control over inclusion (Alfaro Pareja, 2020; Masaka, 2011). The GMD's repression, branding unrest as "Communist agitation," precluded remedies, spiraling into a coercive cycle that alienated intellectuals and urbanites, who turned to the CCP's narrative of the GMD as tyrannical (National Archives, 2025; Sheridan, 1975). Unlike the CCP's adaptive propaganda, which framed itself as democratic, the GMD's rigidity amplified distrust, transforming the state into an adversary and enabling communist gains (Bianco, 1971; Kucha et al., 2023). Thus, the failure to adapt procedural mechanisms not only eroded legitimacy but also radicalized society, mirroring patterns in Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Economic Collapse and Performative Legitimacy Failure

The GMD's economic mismanagement, marked by hyperinflation and the 1948 Gold Yuan fiasco, represented a performative legitimacy failure that devastated livelihoods and breached the moral economy, paving the way for CCP ascendancy. Unchecked monetary expansion, a deliberate choice to fund civil war without a robust tax base, saw the money supply explode from ¥3.6 billion in 1937 to trillions by 1949, doubling prices weekly by 1948 (Hu, 1970; Campbell & Tullock, 1954). Adaptive institutionalism frames this as a failure to diversify fiscal strategies, constrained by elite interests prioritizing short-term expediency over long-term stability (North, 1990; Quddus et al., 1989). The Gold Yuan reform, pegged at an unsustainable 4:1 USD with inadequate reserves, collapsed trust as citizens, coerced into surrendering gold, faced a devalued currency trading at 20,000,000:1 on the black market by 1949 (Coble, 2023; Ebeling, 2004). This mirrors Venezuela's hyperinflation post-2014 oil crash, where GDP contracted 62%, and Zimbabwe's 2008 monetary collapse, peaking at 89.7 sextillion percent monthly, both driven by fiscal indiscipline and elite capture (Page et al., 2019; Zubillaga et al., 2019; Monaldi, 2018). In China, urban shortages and unemployment in Shanghai and Nanjing fueled despair, with families selling heirlooms for rice, akin to Caracas's food queues and Harare's bread riots, where citizens scavenged amid 80% unemployment (Chang, 1958; Zubillaga et al., 2019; Richardson, 2005). The GMD's indifference, prioritizing military requisitions over relief, collapsed the moral economy, as citizens viewed the state as exploitative, a dynamic echoed in Venezuela's PDVSA mismanagement and Zimbabwe's farm mechanization scandals (Wei, 2001; Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). Adaptive institutionalism highlights how failure to adapt fiscal policies to postwar realities eroded performative legitimacy, radicalizing the middle class and rural poor, who embraced CCP's egalitarian promises (Sheridan, 1975; Bianco, 1971). Unlike the CCP's adaptive rural reforms, the GMD's rigidity ensured economic collapse translated into societal alienation, mirroring Venezuela and Zimbabwe's descent into despair.

Comparative Synthesis: Institutional Rigidity Across Cases

The GMD's collapse, alongside Venezuela's post-Chávez crisis and Zimbabwe's Mugabe-era decline, underscores a shared pattern of institutional non-adaptation, where rigid structures amplified exogenous shocks into legitimacy crises, fracturing national cohesion. The GMD's patronage-driven bureaucracy, Venezuela's hyper-presidentialism, and Zimbabwe's personalist rule each precluded adaptive reforms, fostering corruption, repression, and economic collapse (Chan, 2020; Ellner, 2019; Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). Adaptive institutionalism frames these as maladaptive cycles, where failure to recalibrate power distribution (via meritocratic oversight, inclusive coalitions, or fiscal discipline) mirrors Gunderson & Holling's (2002) concept of

systems trapped in fragility. The GMD's "robbery reception" parallels PDVSA's capture and FTLRP's partisanship, each reflecting elite-driven rent-seeking that alienated populations (Coble, 2023; Monaldi, 2018; Ruswa, 2004). Repression, from CBIS surveillance to Venezuela's paramilitary violence and Zimbabwe's MDC crackdowns, suppressed dialogue, eroding procedural legitimacy and radicalizing dissent (Wakeman, 1992; Corrales & Penfold-Becerra, 2011; LeBas, 2006). Economically, hyperinflation's toll, from the Gold Yuan's failure to Venezuela's 62% GDP contraction and Zimbabwe's 2008 collapse, devastated livelihoods, breaching moral economies (Hu, 1970; Richardson, 2005). Differences exist: the GMD's civil-military divide contrasts with Venezuela's oil dependency and Zimbabwe's land reform chaos, yet all share outcomes of societal secession, with CCP, Chavista opposition, and MDC gaining from regime failures (Kucha et al., 2023; Corrales, 2020; Masaka, 2011). Adaptive institutionalism reveals the need for polycentric governance and inclusive reforms to mitigate crises, as the CCP's flexibility contrasted with GMD's rigidity, offering a blueprint for resilience absent in Venezuela and Zimbabwe (Ostrom, 2005; Bianco, 1971). This synthesis underscores that institutional adaptability is critical to sustaining legitimacy under stress, a lesson applicable beyond historical contexts.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Nationalist Government in 1945-1949 is nothing short of a test-case of the risks posed by institutional non-adaptation, when inefficiency of governance, political oppression, and economic miscarriage were collided fourfold to the destruction of legitimacy and the breaking of unity of the Chinese nation. The GMD lost its promise in the postwar era, first by corruption at every tier of the system in the so-called robbery reception, then by unchecked warlordism, followed by a secret police state that suppressed opposition, turning moderates into revolutionaries. Hyperinflation and the Gold Yuan atrocity further undermined moral economy since both the rural and the urban community now saw the state as predatory and no longer protective of them. Adaptive institutionalism reveals how hegemonic hierarchies and elite favors barred reforms and alternatives model of CCP flexibility and populist strategies gained social trust. The post-Chavez crisis of Venezuela, and the Mugabe collapse of Zimbabwe are an indication of this trend in terms of institutional inertia which compounds exogenous shocks such as an oil shock, land reform anarchy, into crises of legitimacy, disaggregating communities. This analysis transcends the issue of determinism of the military and economic side and puts a significant stress on the significance of active re-institutionalization to hold onto legitimacy under the pressure. In the modern-day governance context, the fall of the GMD provides perennial lessons, that policy of polycentric structures, transparency and inclusive coalitions are key to negotiating through crises, be it in the aftermath of war or during financial stability periods. The GMD not only failed to adapt and thereby lose the mandate to rule, but also to lose the unity of the national community, a lesson to the regimes in the face of modernity to remain institutionally flexible and to build resiliency.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have implications for theory, policy, and future research. Theoretically, it shows how the analysis of the existing historiography, which deals with the problems of bureaucratic corruption, secret-police repression, and monetary collapse, can be linked together in the context of adaptive institutionalism, not just in that of the ecological metaphor, but also in terms of historical institutionalism and state-capacity theory. The comparative analysis with Venezuela and Zimbabwe suggests this failure mode is not unique to mid-century China but recurs wherever regimes rely on despotic power and elite patronage in place of infrastructural capacity and inclusive coalition-building.

For policy, the findings point to concrete design lessons for governments navigating post-crisis transitions: (1) subject reception, procurement, and asset-transfer processes to independent audit before patronage networks can capture them; (2) separate internal-security and surveillance functions from party control and subject them to judicial oversight, since fused party-security apparatuses were a recurring driver of legitimacy loss in all three cases; (3) build fiscal and monetary buffers, or credible commitment devices, before undertaking large redistributive programs, since uncontrolled currency expansion and abrupt asset redistribution were the proximate triggers of hyperinflation in both the Chinese and Zimbabwean cases; and (4) invest early in succession mechanisms and inclusive coalitions, since personalist rule without a coalition-building or succession framework left all three regimes unable to adapt once their initial strategy failed. The study recommends that the MDSD comparison be expanded to other cases of post-shock institutional failure, and that the potential of a measurable effect of polycentric governance arrangements to slow or prevent the legitimacy erosion observed in this study be examined in future research.

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