



American technocracy and Chinese response: Theories and practices of Chinese expert politics in the period of the Nanjing Government, 1927–1949



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ABSTRACT

This article describes the spread of the American technocracy movement in China during the 1930s and traces the appeal of a technocratic society among Chinese intellectuals. From 1931 to 1935, Chinese newspapers and magazines translated and published the writing of American technocrats, which inspired Chinese thinkers to explore technocratic ideals. This paper argues that the Nanjing Government (which operated from 1927 to 1949) upheld the Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt administrations as examples of expert politics in action. By studying American technocracy, China remolded American style “expert politics” into expert politics with Chinese characteristics. Although this article contends that American technocracy was the external motivating factor for the movement in China, it also establishes the uniqueness of Chinese technocracy as the merging of Chinese tradition and Western thought, and illustrates key differences between the practices of expert politics in each nation. Such divergences include the emphasis of Chinese technocrats on increasing national power and the movement’s failure to change the fundamental power regime in China. The histories of both United States and China show, contra Veblen and other theorists, that technocratic governments, though powerful forces, were not able to bring about any lasting change in political structures.

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The history of technocracy in China during the 1930s and 1940s is a neglected area of scholarship. While it is assumed by many that technocratic ideas only became relevant in China in the time period after 1949, it is evident that technocratic ideas were influencing Chinese society and politics in the early 1930s. The history of technocracy in China, therefore, is older and deeper than is often assumed. Furthermore, Chinese technocracy, though powerfully influenced by the American Technocracy Movement, is different from its American counterpart.

1. Introduction

In 1919, William H. Smyth, an American engineer, coined the word “technocracy” to be “the rule of the people made effective through the agency of their servants, the scientists and engineers” ([35], p. 214). However, “Technocracy” did not become a common term until the Technocracy Movement rose in America in the 1930s

and made it well known even beyond Western countries.

It is generally acknowledged that the Technocracy Movement commenced with Thostein Veblen, Howard Scott and others when they initiated the Technical Alliance, a society of engineers and technicians in 1920 [1,2,7,39,56]. In the early 1930s, under the influence of the Great Depression (1929–1933), the Technocracy Movement flourished and subsequently influenced the political activities of the Herbert Clark Hoover and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Governments. Still, the movement’s anti-capitalist intentions inspired suspicion. Repressing radicals and splitting left- and right-wing adherents led to technocracy’s decline after the 1940s.

Narrowly defined technocracy refers to the fundamental standpoints of Veblen whose contentious work in 1921, *The Engineers and the Price System*, was even dubbed the “original gospel, from which the theories of Technocracy have been developed” ([56], p. 120). Veblen argued that the capitalist price system was doomed to collapse due to inherent and irreconcilable conflicts; that profit-motivated businessmen ignorant of industrial technology should cede power to engineers for the sake of industrial production and efficiency; and that by transforming the industrial

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system, engineers could restructure the social order of advanced industrial countries based on the industry system [77]. The concepts of Society Measurement and Energy Certificates developed by other theorists of the Technocracy Movement shaped Veblen's technocratic opinions [60,66,67]. The former idea was developed to argue that the operations of society including industrial production should be measured and controlled by technical methods in order to promote operating efficiency. The latter concept argues that energy is the proper index for the measurement of labor and wealth, so "Energy Certificates" should be issued to replace currency. By properly measuring broad-scale energy consumption, it would be possible to plan an ideal energy scheme to govern society.¹

Generally defined technocracy is regarded as a kind of thought of long standing, whose concept or opinions can be found earlier in the writings of prominent European thinkers such Francis Bacon [5], Saint-Simon [58], Gaetano Mosca [53], and Max Weber [80,81], even Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *The Politics*. And it should not be limited within the American Technocracy Movement which actually was influenced in some degree by thoughts from Europe, especially Saint-Simon. After the Technocracy Movement, technocracy did not disappear in America but was further developed through the writings of Walt Whitman Rostow [57], John Kenneth Galbraith [21], Zigniew Brezinski [9], Daniel Boorstin [8], Daniel Bell [6], Alvin Toffler [76], etc., and was gradually distributed into more and more countries, deeply affecting modern political activities all over the world. Because of its long history and broad scope, technocracy has spawned a myriad of sub-types with divergent features that it cannot be formulated with precision [24,10]. However, all technocracy sub-types advocate 1) technological governance – the ruling of society in terms of scientific principles, technical measures and quantitative methods, and 2) expert politics – scientists and other technological experts should replace politicians and be given political power to manage society. In Veblen's view, experts which he called engineers consisting of "technicians whose qualifications enable them to be called Resource Engineers, together with similarly competent spokesmen of the transportation system and of the distributive traffic in finished products and services" ([77], p. 143), and "consulting economics; men who are qualified to be called Production Economists" ([77], p. 144), constitute governmental power organization dubbed Soviet of Technicians by Veblen to supervise the society. The American technocrats mainly referred to engineers and industrial administration experts in this regard, whereas the Chinese interpreted the term to apply to a wider range covering natural science experts, social science experts and humanities experts. In fact, at that time in China, the term "expert" did not refer to any particular discipline, but was opposed to the concept of the traditional intellectual, the majority of whom were Confucian scholars. Broadly speaking, this term "expert" could refer to all the modern intellectuals who received contemporary education. Ultimately, the scientific operation of society, especially of political activities, is the gist of technocracy.

Although the American Technocracy Movement did not survive for a long period, it (and its ideas) exerted a formidable impact worldwide at that time, and China was no exception. Though the

Revolution of 1911 overthrew the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China was established in 1912, China did not enjoy even nominal unification. For more than 10 years China was embroiled in intra-mural wars. Not only were the northern warlords at war with southern revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen,² the northern warlords were at war with each other. The Nanjing Government of the Republic of China, established in 1927, led by Chiang Kai-shek³ realized nominal unification. Genuine unification of mainland China would have to wait until the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. There was serious turbulence within the field of politics and the world of ideas in China during the first 30 years of the 20th century. While some people wanted to revive different branches of Chinese traditional culture, because of China's failure to compete with Western countries in the late 19th century more and more people became interested in importing Western theories (including Darwinism, Capitalism, Marxism, Bolshevism, republicanism, liberalism, pragmatism, anarchism, scientism, and Nazism among others) in order to revive China's relevance in the world. Some were abandoned soon after a short application in China because they did not adapted to Chinese reality, while some were accepted and developed by Chinese people and influenced later development of China in different degrees, including the most famous Marxism, besides the technocracy in American Movement introduced into China soon after its arising. Chinese intellectuals at the time integrated American technocratic ideals with traditional Chinese thought and created a unique form of technocracy that gained ideological prevalence and stimulated the development of expert politics in China. Pressure from the economy, politics, and especially the Japanese invasion, forced the Nanjing Government to accept certain technocratic policies and implement expert politics to deal with various social crises. In what follows I will analyze the influence of technocracy, narrowly defined, in China during the 1930s and 40s.

Current research on the relationship between modern China and technocracy is primarily focused on the period after 1949, with particular emphasis on the period after the Chinese economic reform of 1978. Most of the intellectuals conducting this research hold that contemporary China is running into some kind of technocracy. William deB. Mills argues that Deng Xiaoping and his associates used the Twelfth Party Congress to begin the replacement of the revolutionary elite generation with a technocratic elite generation [52]. Based on many empirical proofs, Li Cheng and Lynn White argue that Mainland China and Taiwan have both witnessed nearly identical elite transformations and convergent social transitions in the 1980s. Technocrats who were more oriented towards economic achievement than the old elites emerged in the mainstream of Chinese political life, replaced cadres from the military who were promoted in the early period of the People's Republic of China and now became old enough to depart from the politic arena [41]. The elite transformation reached a peak in the Thirteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1987 [40]. Most newly promoted cadres in Mainland China were technocrats, and the main reform journal of the 1980s, the Shanghai-based *World Economic Herald*, played a very important role in

¹ For instance, Frank Arkwright, a famous technocrat, argued that "Technocracy has one fundamental principle and that is that the facts involved in fundamental operation of our society are metrical, in other words, the working of our great social machine is susceptible to measurement." ([4], p. 73) On "energy of the technocracy", see Ref. [59]. See also William H. Smyth who argued that "technocracy is a proposed new system and philosophy of government. It implies scientific reorganization of national energy and resources, coordinating industrial democracy to effect the will of people. This is the concept and philosophy of government that I originated and for which I coined and defined the word Technocracy." ([64], p. 646).

² Sun Yat-sen (孙中山) (1866–1925), the founder of Kuomintang (KMT), was regarded as "the Father of Nation" by GMT, and as "the great foregoer of modern Chinese democratic revolution" by Chinese Communist Part (CCP). He led the Revolution of 1911 which overturned the Qing Dynasty, and was selected to be first provisional president of the Republic of China in 1911.

³ Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) (1887–1975), the most important leader of KMT after Sun Yat-sen's death in 1925. He had ever been the president of the Huangpu Military Academy, the commander in chief of Northern Expedition of KMT, the president of KMT, the president of the Republic of China. After being defeat by army of Chinese Communist Party in 1949, he led KMT to retreat to Taiwan.

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