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Organizational Management Disasters During the Anti Japanese War: A study on the Negative Impact of the "Wang-Kang Directive" on the Northeast United Resistance Army

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

Wang-Kang Directive;

*Northeast United
Resistance Army
(NURA);*

*Anti-Japanese War in
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This paper examines the multifaceted negative impact of the “Wang-Kang Directive” (the June 3, 1936, “Secret Letter to the Comrades in Charge of Eastern Manchuria”) on the operations and cohesion of the Northeast United Resistance Army (NURA). While acknowledging the directive’s intended role in broadening the anti-Japanese united front by combating “Leftist” closed-doorism, the analysis focuses on its profound internal contradictions and their detrimental consequences. It argues that the directive’s core problematic tenets—including the passive strategic concept of “awaiting the major turn of events,” the politically compromising injunction to “not couple anti-Manchukuo with anti-Japanese,” and a grave misjudgment of the Japanese-puppet “collective hamletization” policy — collectively acted as a debilitating force on the NURA. These errors, emanating from a center remote from the Manchurian battlefield, induced strategic confusion, undermined effective political mobilization, and critically fractured organizational unity during a period of intense Japanese military pressure. The case of Commander Zhao Shangzhi’s vehement criticism and subsequent political suppression is presented as a pivotal illustration of the directive’s role in catalyzing destructive internal strife, which silenced pragmatic frontline expertise and weakened the NURA’s leadership.

INTRODUCTION

this study contends that the directive’s positive aspects were far outweighed by its role in exacerbating the NURA’s operational dilemmas. The historical episode serves as a stark case study highlighting the imperative of grounding policy in local reality, fostering constructive dissent, and balancing central guidance with tactical autonomy — lessons with enduring relevance for organizational theory and public administration.

1. The Core Content and Internal Contradictions of the "Wang-Kang Directive"

The "Secret Letter to the Comrades in Charge of Eastern Manchuria" (commonly known as the "Wang-Kang Directive" or the "June 3 Directive"), issued on June 3, 1936,

and jointly signed by Wang Ming and Kang Sheng, key members of the Chinese Communist Party Delegation to the Communist International, was a guiding document that profoundly influenced the later struggles of the Northeast United Resistance Army (NURA). This directive, formulated in Moscow in an attempt to dictate strategy and tactics for the NURA fighting in isolation thousands of miles away, was not monolithic in content. It was marked by a sharp tension between profound progressiveness and serious limitations, between correct tactical adjustments and erroneous strategic judgments. This inherent dissonance constituted the root cause of the immense controversy and complex impact it later generated.

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1.1. The Paradox of "Deconstruction" and "Construction": The Coexistence of Broadened United Front and Strategic Passivity

The most praised and genuinely positive aspect of the directive was its clear demand to break with "Leftist" closed-doorism and vigorously expand the anti-Japanese national united front. It stated the need to "universally establish upper and lower-level united fronts with various anti-Japanese forces, uniting all anti-Japanese armed forces to resist Japan together," and emphasized "absorbing all elements willing to participate in armed anti-Japanese struggle to expand the organization of guerrilla units." This guideline addressed the tendency within some Party organizations and NURA units to be wary of and insufficiently integrate with old army units, forest forces, and other anti-Japanese armed groups. On a practical level, it encouraged NURA armies to more actively absorb and unite with other anti-Japanese forces, contributing to the short-term bolstering of the NURA's momentum and the cohesion of anti-Japanese strength. For instance, influenced by this spirit, the NURA's forces were once organized into eleven armies, creating an impressive panorama of resistance.

However, forming a fatal paradox with this tactical instruction for active "expansion" was the latent tendency toward strategic passivity and waiting embedded in its overarching strategic thinking. The directive famously proposed the thesis of "awaiting the major turn of events." It argued that the anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare in the Northeast was, "at present, not for 'preparing' for the decisive struggle, but for 'awaiting' the timing of the decisive struggle." It pinned the fundamental hope for victory in the Northeast on the occurrence of a "major turn of events"—namely, the full outbreak of a nationwide War of Resistance or a major international incident (such as the Soviet Union declaring war on Japan). While this assessment stemmed from the Delegation's specific reading of domestic and international situations and had its observational basis, its delivery as strategic guidance to the NURA, then enduring brutal Japanese-puppet "mop-up" campaigns, had profoundly negative consequences.

This logic of "waiting" essentially downgraded or diminished the NURA's heroic, independent, and autonomous guerrilla warfare to a "preparatory" and "supporting" action aimed at accumulating strength, creating

conditions, and providing coordination for the "major turn of events." It subtly weakened the consciousness of subjective strategy—the resolve to proactively attack the enemy, establish consolidated base areas, and ultimately strive for local victory or even influence the overall situation through persistent, active, and flexible guerrilla warfare in the Northeast theater. The subtle shift in strategic positioning—toward "awaiting" rather than "striving," "supporting" rather than "leading"—in the extremely harsh environment behind enemy lines easily bred military conservatism, indecision in action, and an insufficient sense of urgency regarding the need to establish consolidated rear base areas. When "preserving strength and awaiting the major turn of events" became a latent psychological suggestion, it inevitably clashed violently with the practical demands of surviving and developing by actively fighting back against the enemy's frenzied "mop-up" campaigns.

1.2. The Ambiguity and Compromise in Political Principle: The Substantive Harm of "Not Coupling Anti-Manchukuo with Anti-Japanese"

Another core instruction in the directive that sparked great controversy and subsequent confusion was its explicit proposition regarding political slogans: "not to couple anti-Manchukuo with anti-Japanese." The letter demanded, "Do not combine the fight against Japan and the overthrow of Manchukuo," emphasizing that "our slogan is to resist Japan and save the nation... Regarding the Manchukuo government, we do not proclaim opposition to it; instead, we propagate to the masses that it is merely a puppet of the Japanese government." Its starting point was likely an attempt to distinguish between the primary enemy (Japan) and a secondary contradiction (the puppet Manchukuo regime), to avoid creating too many enemies, or perhaps the illusion that this tactic would soften the hostility of some officials, police, and military personnel under the puppet regime, facilitating united front work.

However, in the practical political context of the Northeast, this formulation constituted a serious retreat in political principle and a strategic error. The puppet state of Manchukuo was by no means a "secondary contradiction" entity that could be set aside. It was the core political instrument and legal "mask" of Japanese imperialist colonial rule over Northeast China, the direct executive apparatus for

Japan's economic plunder, cultural enslavement, and conscription of labor and soldiers. "Japan and Manchukuo as One" and "Harmony of the Five Races" were its fundamental national policies. The anti-Japanese struggle in the Northeast, in its concrete form, necessarily manifested as a life-and-death battle against this puppet regime and its entire ruling machinery. The dual oppression suffered by the people of the Northeast—invasion by a foreign nation and collaboration by a puppet regime of their own ethnicity—was inseparable in reality.

"Not coupling anti-Manchukuo with anti-Japanese" blurred the nature of the struggle politically and fettered the sharp edge of the NURA's political mobilization. It forced the NURA to adopt a circuitous, even self-limiting posture when exposing the puppet nature of the Manchukuo regime, calling on puppet officials, police, and soldiers to defect, and mobilizing the enslaved masses to resist the colonial order. This was tantamount to tying one's own hands on the ideological and propaganda battlefield. In practical work, this directive also caused confusion: grassroots commanders, political workers, and soldiers struggled to understand why they should "not couple" opposition to the puppet regime that directly organized "mop-ups," implemented the "concentrated hamlets" policy, and oppressed the people. This politically unrealistic fantasy not only failed to divide the enemy as intended but potentially caused some masses to become confused about the NURA's political stance, weakening its appeal as a clear banner of firm resistance against Japan and its puppet regime.

1.3. The Grave Misjudgment of a Key Enemy Policy: The Absurd Perception of "Concentrated Hamlets"

Perhaps the most glaring demonstration of the directive's drafters' detachment from and misjudgment of the realities of struggle in the Northeast was their attitude toward the Japanese-puppet policy of "collective hamletization" or "concentrated hamlets." The directive not only failed to clearly call for resolutely crushing this sinister scheme but instead proposed a view that appears nearly absurd today: that "concentrated hamlets" could have "some benefits for the anti-Japanese struggle as well, because with the masses concentrated, it is easier to conduct mass work and establish secret organizations." This assessment, based entirely on an impractical, ivory-tower imagination, formed a lamentable

contrast with the bloody reality on the ground in the Northeast.

The "collective hamlet" policy implemented by the Japanese and their puppets was an extremely cruel colonial control measure designed to completely strangle the NURA's foundation for survival. Its specific method was to utterly destroy scattered villages located near mountains and forests through a "burn all, kill all, loot all" policy, forcibly driving villagers into tightly controlled "hamlets" surrounded by walls, watchtowers, barbed wire, and heavily guarded by military and police. A baojia mutual surveillance system was simultaneously enforced, strictly restricting the movement of people and goods. The aim was explicit: to completely sever the vital links between the NURA and the masses in physical space, turning the NURA into a "fish out of water," deprived of sources for recruits, provisions, and intelligence. During the implementation of "collective hamletization," countless Northeast civilians were displaced, with untold numbers dying from exposure, starvation, or direct killing, creating vast "uninhabited zones" and "death belts."

In this context, the directive's suggestion that "concentrated masses" facilitated work completely ignored that this "concentration" was enforced at bayonet point behind barbed wire, under tight surveillance and the terror of collective punishment. It became extremely difficult for NURA personnel to enter the "hamlets," and masses faced death for attempting to make contact. The notion of "easier mass work" was pure wishful thinking. This erroneous judgment directly interfered with the NURA's clear understanding of the policy's lethality and delayed the adoption of a combined strategy of determined military raids and flexible political persuasion to counter it. Some units, possibly influenced by this directive, may not have treated the destruction of "collective hamlets" as a strategic task of vital importance in a timely manner. Consequently, during the peak period of its implementation from 1936 to 1938, the most effective resistance was not mounted, accelerating the loss of existing guerrilla zones and base areas and drastically worsening the troops' living conditions.

In summary, the "Wang-Kang Directive" was a text riven with internal contradictions. In one hand, it raised the reasonable banner of expanding the united front; in the other, it proffered the bitter fruits of a passive-waiting strategy, compromised political principles, and a grave misjudgment of the enemy. This paradox of "retreat within progress" and "error within construction" was not a simple case of

coexisting merits and flaws. Because it originated from an authoritative body distant from the practical struggles in the Northeast, it carried the force of an order to be implemented. When these contradictory instructions were collectively delivered to the Northeast anti-Japanese battlefield — an arena of extreme cruelty, poor communication, and desperate need for clear, firm guidance — the resulting confusion, divergence, and operational paralysis became inevitable. While attempting to inject new ideas into the Northeast resistance, the directive also sowed the seeds for military passivity, political disorder, and organizational friction. These latent issues would gradually manifest in subsequent practical struggles, first provoking the most intense reaction and conflict from one of the NURA's most perceptive and practically grounded leaders — Zhao Shangzhi.

2.The Military and Political Dimensions of Negative Impact: The Dilemmas in NURA's Practical Struggle

The inherent contradictions within the "Wang-Kang Directive" were not merely theoretical flaws confined to paper. When these directives, emanating from a distant center of authority, intersected with the brutal, day-to-day realities of the anti-Japanese war in the Northeast, they produced a series of concrete and detrimental consequences. The directive's problematic tenets directly translated into military confusion, political enfeeblement, and organizational discord within the Northeast United Resistance Army (NURA), exacerbating the already immense challenges it faced during a critical phase of its existence.

2.1.Confusion and Passivity in Military Strategy

The "await the major turn of events" thesis introduced a paralyzing element of strategic uncertainty into NURA's military decision-making. This notion implicitly discouraged large-scale, proactive strategic initiatives aimed at fundamentally altering the military balance in the Northeast. Instead, it fostered a mindset where the primary role of guerrilla warfare was reconceptualized as preserving strength and maintaining a presence until external salvation arrived. This shift had several tangible effects on military operations.

First, it potentially dampened the initiative and aggressiveness crucial for guerrilla survival. Facing increasingly systematic and ruthless Japanese "encirclement and suppression" campaigns from late 1936 onward, the optimal response for dispersed guerrilla forces often lay in extreme mobility, daring raids to secure supplies, and the constant creation of new zones of activity to disperse enemy attention. A strategy overly influenced by "waiting" could lead to excessive caution, a reluctance to engage in necessary but risky actions to break blockades or punish collaborators, and an over-reliance on evasion that sometimes bordered on mere survivalism. While preservation of forces was vital, the directive's strategic framing risked tilting the balance away from the dynamic, offensive-minded operations that were often the lifeblood of guerrilla morale and effectiveness.

Second, it undermined the urgency of establishing and defending consolidated base areas. The construction of relatively stable rear areas — secret camps, logistical networks, and local governments — was essential for treating wounded soldiers, training troops, manufacturing rudimentary arms, and providing a political anchor among the populace. The "waiting" mentality, by de-emphasizing the NURA's role in actively shaping the Northeast's future, could inadvertently lead to a neglect of the painstaking, long-term work required to build such bases. When the Japanese intensified their "mop-up" campaigns and the "concentrated hamlets" policy began to bite, some units found themselves without secure hinterlands, transforming tactical retreats into desperate, sustained flights that eroded strength and cohesion. The loss of key base areas like those in the Sanjiang Plain or around the Changbai Mountains in the late 1930s, while primarily caused by overwhelming enemy force, was arguably facilitated by a strategic context that did not sufficiently prioritize their active defense and development as non-negotiable cornerstones of protracted war.

Third, the directive contributed to inconsistent and uncoordinated military responses across different NURA theaters. As the directive was interpreted and implemented variably by different army leaders and regional Party committees, it led to a lack of unified strategic action. Some commanders, particularly those in closer contact with the East Jilin transmission line, might have been more inclined to adopt a conservative posture in line with the "waiting" idea. Others, like Zhao Shangzhi in the North Manchuria

region, vehemently rejected it. This divergence meant that the NURA armies failed to act as a fully coordinated strategic force. Opportunities for large-scale mutual support, diversionary attacks, or unified responses to enemy offensives were harder to realize, allowing the Japanese to exploit these divisions and deal with the NURA armies in a more piecemeal fashion.

2.2. The Weakening of Political Mobilization and Mass Work

The directive's political compromises had a corrosive effect on the NURA's relationship with the very people it relied upon for survival: the masses of Northeast China.

The injunction to "not couple anti-Manchukuo with anti-Japanese" created significant confusion in political propaganda and agitation. NURA political workers and local activists found themselves in a difficult bind. They were forbidden from openly calling for the overthrow of the puppet regime, even as that regime's police, local officials, and "self-defense" militias were directly hunting them, extracting grain taxes to feed the Japanese war machine, and implementing the "concentrated hamlets" policy. This created a dissonant message. How could they effectively mobilize hatred against the Japanese aggressor while treating the latter's immediate, visible, and brutal local enforcers with rhetorical kid gloves? In practice, this policy hampered efforts to win over the "middle elements"—those who might have been alienated by the puppet regime's excesses but were not automatically committed to armed resistance. It also complicated work among puppet troops and lower-level officials, as the call to defect was not coupled with a clear, powerful denunciation of the illegitimate regime they served.

Most critically, the directive's misguided analysis of "concentrated hamlets" amounted to a profound disconnect from the lived reality of the peasantry, which severely damaged the NURA's mass base. The directive's bizarre suggestion that concentration might aid mass work revealed a complete failure to grasp the terroristic nature of the policy. Far from being "easier to work with," the masses trapped inside these fortified hamlets lived under a regime of constant surveillance, collective punishment, and restricted movement. Establishing contact became exponentially more dangerous. Trusted local contacts were isolated or eliminated. The traditional flow of food, intelligence, and

recruits from scattered mountain villages dried up virtually overnight.

By not issuing a clarion call for the absolute, uncompromising resistance to this policy—through military attacks on hamlet construction teams, raids to liberate captured villagers, and relentless propaganda exposing its horrors—the directive left some NURA units without a clear, urgent mandate to counter this existential threat. Consequently, the implementation of "collective hamletization" between 1936 and 1939 proved devastatingly effective. It successfully created vast "no-man's-land" belts between the hamlets and the mountains, strangling the NURA's logistical lifelines. Soldiers faced starvation and frostbite not just because of enemy action, but because the connective tissue linking them to the people had been surgically severed by a policy the directive had catastrophically misdiagnosed.

2.3. Internal Ideological Confusion and Strategic Divergence

Perhaps the most immediate and damaging impact was the deep division and internal strife the directive sowed within the NURA and its supporting Party apparatus. The document was not a clear, actionable plan but a bundle of contradictions. This inherent ambiguity guaranteed varied interpretations.

A major fault line emerged between the East Jilin leadership (which had received and generally supported the directive) and the North Manchuria Provincial Committee under the leadership of Zhao Shangzhi and Feng Zhongyun. Based on their bitter frontline experience, Zhao and his comrades viewed the directive's core messages as dangerously "Rightist" capitulationism. They saw "waiting for the major turn of events" as an excuse for inaction, "not coupling anti-Manchukuo" as political suicide, and the stance on "concentrated hamlets" as sheer fantasy. Their vehement opposition was rooted in a practical understanding that survival in Manchuria required unwavering militancy, clear political banners, and relentless struggle against all forms of enemy control.

This was not a minor tactical disagreement. It escalated into a fundamental dispute over political and military line. The East Jilin side, backed by the authority of the International Delegation, accused the North Manchuria leaders of "Leftist" closed-doorism and insubordination. The North

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Manchuria side accused the East Jilin line of implementing a harmful right-opportunist retreat. This conflict consumed enormous energy in bitter debates, written polemics, and mutual accusations at a time when all efforts should have been focused on the Japanese enemy.

The directive thus became a catalyst for organizational fragmentation. It broke the already tenuous unity of the NURA forces operating in different regions. Instead of a cohesive army under a unified strategic command, the NURA increasingly resembled a collection of separate detachments following different guiding principles. Coordination broke down. Meetings between armies became forums for ideological recrimination rather than military planning. This internal disunity presented a critical vulnerability that the Japanese were quick to exploit through their own "divide and pacify" tactics. The bitter internal struggle over the "Wang-Kang Directive" weakened the NURA from within, making it less capable of resisting the onslaught from without. The stage was thus set for the personal and political tragedy of the directive's most prominent critic, Zhao Shangzhi, whose fate would become the most poignant illustration of the directive's corrosive impact on the NURA's leadership and unity.

3.The Consequences of Organizational Friction

The "Wang-Kang Directive" stands as a historical document riven with internal paradox. Its positive aspect — the advocacy for broadening the anti-Japanese united front — proved insufficient to counterbalance the severe harm wrought by its passive strategy, political compromises, and fatal misjudgments of the enemy's tactics. In the extreme context of the Northeast United Resistance Army's (NURA) arduous, isolated struggle with tenuous links to the central Party leadership, the directive's erroneous propositions — "awaiting the major turn of events," "not coupling anti-Manchukuo with anti-Japanese," and the fantastical view of "concentrated hamlets"—acted as invisible shackles. These ideas interfered with and weakened the NURA's combat effectiveness across multiple levels: from overarching strategic doctrine and concrete tactical choices to the very unity of its ranks. The result was not cohesive action, but profound ideological confusion and organizational schism. The tragic resistance of Zhao Shangzhi encapsulates this dual legacy: it embodies the invaluable quality of frontline cadres adhering to practical

reality, while simultaneously exposing the bitter fruits of dogmatic command divorced from actual conditions and of inner-Party practices that suppressed dissenting voices.

3.1.The Directive as a Catalyst for Destructive Internal Struggle

The internal contradictions of the directive did not merely cause debate; they institutionalized conflict. By presenting a mix of sound advice and perilous error under the imprimatur of the International Delegation, it forced NURA commanders and political commissars into an impossible position. To implement it fully was to court military disaster and political irrelevance; to reject its core flawed tenets was to risk being accused of defying Party authority. This created a fault line that fractured the NURA's fragile operational unity.

The bitter, protracted dispute between the East Jilin line (which generally advocated following the directive) and the North Manchuria leadership under Zhao Shangzhi (which denounced it as rightist capitulationism) consumed scarce resources of time, energy, and political capital. Meetings that should have focused on coordinating military campaigns against the Japanese devolved into ideological polemics. Precious opportunities for joint operations were lost amidst mutual suspicion and accusations. This internal friction provided a critical vulnerability that the Japanese military intelligence exploited, adeptly using their own propaganda to widen the rifts within the anti-Japanese forces. The NURA, instead of presenting a united front to the enemy, was often distracted by an internal front, significantly diluting its collective strength during a period of escalating enemy pressure.

3.2.The Zhao Shangzhi Case: A Microcosm of the Cost

The personal and political ordeal of Zhao Shangzhi serves as the most poignant case study of the directive's corrosive organizational impact. His critique was not that of a dissident but of a pragmatic military commander whose survival and successes were rooted in a clear-eyed understanding of Manchuria's harsh realities. His opposition to the directive's passivity and compromise was a defense of the NURA's core operational principles. However, the mechanism for handling this dissent proved catastrophic.

The response from the Party center, via the International

Delegation, was not engagement with his substantive arguments based on frontline experience, but organizational discipline and political ostracization. The dismissal of his envoy, Zhu Xinyang, and the subsequent labeling of Zhao's stance as "anti-Party" for opposing Wang Ming's line, established a dangerous precedent. It elevated doctrinal adherence to a specific, remotely formulated line over practical military and political effectiveness. The suppression of Zhao Shangzhi — a brilliant, charismatic, and fiercely determined commander — deprived the NURA of one of its most capable leaders at a most critical juncture. His removal from command, his subsequent struggles to regain a position, and his ultimate tragic death in 1942, were all linked, directly or indirectly, to the fallout from this political dispute.

This episode demonstrated that the cost of the "Wang-Kang Directive" was measured not only in missed opportunities and lost bases but also in the silencing of practical wisdom and the loss of vital leadership. It exposed how an incorrect line, when enforced through rigid organizational discipline, could physically and politically eliminate the very individuals best equipped to save the movement from the pitfalls of that line. The NURA's subsequent difficulties in maintaining cohesion and strategic direction in the late 1930s are inextricably linked to this purge of its most independent-minded commander.

3.3.Re-evaluating the Legacy: The Imperative of Reality-Check and Autonomy

A reassessment of the "Wang-Kang Directive" and its negative impact is essential for a fuller, more profound understanding of the NURA's struggle. It moves the historical analysis beyond a simple narrative of heroic resistance against overwhelming Japanese force to a more complex appreciation of the multifaceted internal and external pressures that shaped the NURA's fate. The extreme hardship faced by the NURA was not solely imposed by the enemy; it was compounded by strategic misguidance and internal fragmentation stemming from a flawed central directive.

This history underscores, with stark clarity, the paramount importance of the principles of seeking truth from facts and maintaining independent initiative in revolutionary warfare. The NURA's greatest successes in its early and middle phases were built upon strategies developed locally in

response to immediate conditions. Its periods of greatest crisis coincided with the imposition of strategies conceived in abstraction, far from the Manchurian battlefield. The "Wang-Kang Directive" affair is a powerful testament to the dangers of divorcing command from reality and to the devastating consequences of stifling grassroots initiative and pragmatic critique within a revolutionary organization.

Ultimately, the story of the directive and its aftermath is a sobering chapter in the history of the Chinese revolution. It highlights that the path to victory in a struggle as complex and brutal as the War of Resistance required not only courage and sacrifice but also the intellectual flexibility to adapt theory to practice, the political wisdom to tolerate debate informed by experience, and the operational autonomy to make swift, realistic decisions in the field. The tragedy of the internal strife it sparked within the NURA remains a lasting lesson on the critical need to harmonize central guidance with local reality, and ideological discipline with practical effectiveness.

Conclusion

The crisis within the Northeast United Resistance Army (NURA), precipitated by the profound disconnect between the "Wang-Kang Directive" and the operational realities of the Manchurian battlefield, transcends its specific historical moment. It serves as a stark, enduring case study in the systemic vulnerabilities of any hierarchical organization — particularly governing or administrative bodies — when critical decision-making becomes isolated from contextual truth and dissenting expertise. The core lessons emanating from this episode speak directly to perennial challenges in modern public administration: the imperative of grounding policy in empirical reality, the necessity of safeguarding channels for constructive dissent, and the strategic balance between unified purpose and localized autonomy.

The directive's most consequential failure lay in its epistemic rupture — the gap between its theoretical prescriptions and the ground truth of Japanese colonial policy and local sociopolitical dynamics. Conceived in the abstract, geopolitical calculus of Moscow, it misdiagnosed lethal enemy strategies like "collective hamletization" as potential opportunities and advocated political compromises, such as the "non-coupling" of anti-Manchukuo sentiment, that undermined the NURA's mobilizing logic. This reflects a timeless administrative pathology: the formulation of

policy within a contextual vacuum, reliant on second-hand data, ideological assumptions, or wishful thinking, rather than on direct, unvarnished feedback from the level of implementation. For contemporary public administration, this underscores the non-negotiable need to institutionalize robust “reality-check” mechanisms. Effective governance requires embedded feedback loops that continuously funnel intelligence from street-level bureaucrats and affected communities back into the policy cycle. It demands a commitment to “deliberate disconfirmation,” actively seeking out evidence that challenges initial assumptions, and an adaptive management approach that treats policies as hypotheses to be tested and refined through pilot programs, rather than as immutable decrees.

Furthermore, the organizational response to criticism, exemplified by the suppression of Zhao Shangzhi, highlights the catastrophic costs of confusing loyalty with conformity. Zhao’s dissent was not sedition; it was a pragmatic, experience-based critique essential for the NURA’s survival. Its dismissal and the punitive measures that followed crippled the organization’s adaptive capacity by silencing its most vital source of corrective feedback. Modern bureaucracies are equally susceptible to such insularity, where hierarchical pressures and institutional culture can stifle necessary debate, leading to groupthink, policy blind spots, and avoidable failures. The modern imperative, therefore, is to consciously cultivate a culture of psychological safety and constructive contention. This can be operationalized through formalized procedures like “red-teaming” or designated devil’s advocate roles in policy formulation, protected channels for anonymous reporting, and, most importantly, leadership that explicitly models receptivity to challenging viewpoints. The goal is to transform dissent from a perceived threat to authority into a recognized asset for institutional resilience and innovation.

Finally, the directive’s attempt to impose a rigid, uniform strategic template across all NURA units, despite vastly differing local conditions, points to the folly of prioritizing procedural uniformity over effective outcomes. It disregarded the principle of subsidiarity — that decisions are best made at the lowest competent level closest to the problem. In modern terms, this manifests as the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of top-down, one-size-fits-all mandates imposed on local schools, police departments, or social service agencies operating in unique contexts. The lesson for contemporary public administration is to shift focus from

micromanaging processes to clearly defining and measuring outcomes. Central authorities should establish strategic goals, performance standards, and accountability frameworks, while empowering local actors with the autonomy and necessary capacity to devise context-appropriate methods for achieving them. This fosters innovation, improves responsiveness, and builds a more agile and resilient administrative ecosystem.

In conclusion, the tragedy of the “Wang-Kang Directive” is a powerful historical metaphor for the foundational principles of sound administration. It demonstrates that legitimate authority derives not merely from hierarchical position but from the epistemic quality of its decisions and the procedural integrity of its deliberative processes. For the modern public administrator, this history reinforces the critical need to design systems that are humble in their reliance on ground-level intelligence, agile in their capacity for iterative learning, and wise in their balance of cohesive direction with empowered local execution. By internalizing these lessons, public administration can better fulfill its core mission: crafting and executing policies that are not merely formally correct but authentically responsive and effective in the complex, unpredictable realities they are meant to govern.

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