

China's War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival

Review Number: 1548

Publish date: Thursday, 20 February, 2014

Author: Rana Mitter

ISBN: 9781846140105

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £25.00

Pages: 480pp.

Publisher: Allen Lane

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Aaron Moore

This book is the culmination of an ambitious multi-year research project, of which I was a part, wherein Rana Mitter proposed to re-examine as many aspects as possible of China's experience of the highly destructive, eight-year war with Japan. Other collaborative projects have attempted comprehensive efforts in the past, such as the successful conference organised by Ezra Vogel and others at Harvard University, which produced a useful bibliography, but Mitter's Leverhulme-funded endeavour has focused on including a new generation of scholars who view the Nationalist regime in a different way (more on this below). This book, which has been informed by Mitter's conversations with scholars formally and informally affiliated with the project, is therefore one of the best contributions to our current understanding of the war, particularly at the level of elite political actors such as Chiang Kai-shek, Wang Jingwei, and Mao Zedong.

Mitter's book was preceded by three important volumes on the war from the Chinese perspective, beginning with Lloyd Eastman's *Seeds of Destruction* (1984), followed by Hans van de Ven's *War and Nationalism in China* (2003), and Diana Lary's *The Chinese People at War* (2010).⁽¹⁾ There have been other important contributions to our understanding of the war, particularly in recent years, but many have been restricted to certain areas of China or particular subjects, examples being Stephen Mackinnon's *Wuhan 1938* (obviously, restricted to Wuhan) and Parks Coble's important *Facing Japan* (1991, which focused primarily on Chiang's intraparty struggles).⁽²⁾ Mitter's book synthesises important aspects of these works, such as Mackinnon's emphasis on the refugee experience (see chapter six, especially). Coble, who called for more social historical work on the war, ably narrated in *Facing Japan* the incessant crises faced by Chiang Kai-shek, including those involving rivals from his own party, which is reflected in Mitter's nuanced treatment of Japanese collaborators such as Wang Jingwei and Zhou Fohai.

Historical treatment of the Nationalist regime prior to Eastman rarely used primary materials in Chinese, for a variety of reasons (such as limited archival access, even in Taiwan), and tended to fall into either the Barbara Tuchman / 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell camp of complaining about Nationalist incompetence, on the one hand, or uncritical reproductions of wartime propaganda, on the other. First Eastman entered this field by harshly criticising the GMD (Kuomintang) (beginning with *Abortive Revolution* in 1974), insisting on the inherently reactionary character of Chiang's regime. Eastman cited disparaging comments by Tang Enbo and the generalissimo himself, echoing many Chinese Communist Party (CCP) arguments that it was the Nationalists' corruption and suppression of revolutionary forces that lost them the war, and China. When

peasants began taking up crude arms and attacked retreating Nationalist forces (141–2), how could one possibly claim that Chiang's government was channelling Chinese patriotism against Japanese invasion? Second, scholars such as Hans van de Ven made a major contribution to re-writing this view of the GMD in *War and Nationalism*, along with other historians working roughly at the same time such as Parks Coble and Frederic Wakeman, Jr. Seeing the Nationalist Party leadership as facing considerable opposition both outside and inside its own ranks, historians like van de Ven urged us to view the GMD's war against Japan realistically, and noted the party's successes when guiding a growing, but disparate, national consciousness toward resistance against Japan. Finally, Diana Lary was certainly not the first to point out that the narrative of China's war with Japan must also be a social history, but her work has been an important culmination of disparate efforts through the years to explore the stories of refugees, women, and ordinary soldiers (as in her early work, *Warlord Soldiers*). As Lary put it, the Second World War in China 'was different from traditional patterns of foreign conquest ... [it was] a fundamental disturbance to Chinese society that produced profound and permanent change ...' (p. 195). This sentiment is repeated throughout Mitter's work as well.

In this sense, *China's War with Japan* is not a revisionist history (although it might appear so at first glance to those unfamiliar with the field) but a very skilful syncretic project, pulling the best of diplomatic, political, and military history into a highly readable format. This will make Mitter's book one of the best places to begin for casual or beginning readers of Chinese modern history, with the caveat that their study cannot end here (Mitter provides a good 'Further reading' section at the end of the book). Mitter uses some of the most important archives: Chongqing Municipal, Shanghai Municipal, and No. 2 in Nanjing, but future researchers, while needing to touch base with these collections, should not neglect Taiwan, and I believe an emphasis on regional archives in provinces such as Hubei, Yunnan, and Shaanxi will add important information to the Chinese resistance. Of course, the Communist Party archives are likely to also have a story to tell, but I am not holding my breath for access to useful or new (unpublished) materials. Mitter also revisits the Chiang Kai-shek diaries, which have been the subject of some attention in print already (see Jay Taylor's 2009 *Generalissimo* and, in the same year, Wang Qisheng in *The Journal of Modern Chinese History* (3)), but he is able to integrate them into the larger narrative and show us how they change our view of the war; he also makes reference to the well-known Zhou Fohai diary throughout, which has been crying out for better inclusion into the historiography (however, see Brian G. Martin's article in *Twentieth Century China*, 2008 (4)). Newspapers such as the *North China Herald* and foreigners' accounts at the Yale Divinity Library archives help Mitter flesh out the general narrative as well as the complex and mercurial international relations of the wartime period. In this sense, Mitter has responded to scholarly reviews of Parks Coble's *Facing Japan*, which asked that the intraparty GMD struggle be combined with the older narrative of China-qua-Allied power, as well as its international relations (see Akira Iriye's review of Coble in *The China Quarterly*, 1993 (5)). Thus, non-specialist readers will be unaware of the mass of scholarship supporting Mitter's view of the war, including his own original research, and may take exception to his portrayal of the GMD efforts and the decisions made by collaborationists. Especially in the latter case, sceptical readers should review Poshek Fu's path-breaking *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration* (1993), Mitter's first book *Manchurian Myth* (2000), and Timothy Brook's *Collaboration* (2005).[\(6\)](#)

One area in which this volume particularly excels is the situation of Chongqing (Chungking) at the heart of the Chinese war experience, and the return to focusing on the period after Pearl Harbor. While Nanjing was the pre-war capital, and we have a lot of recent studies on Shanghai, the Communist effort, Hong Kong, and Japanese-occupied areas such as Dalian, Qingdao, Tianjin, and Manchukuo, Chongqing (the wartime capital) has been a relatively minor concern for historians (there are, of course, important book chapters by Chang Jui-te and Edna Tow on the Chongqing bombing). Mitter rightly reminds us of the importance of Chongqing, which was heavily bombed by the Japanese, but which also became the nexus of an international effort to weaken and eventually destroy the Japanese empire. Here Mitter wisely divides the war effort into two key stages: 1938–41, 'Resisting alone,' and (following Pearl Harbor) 1941–5, 'The poisoned alliance.' In particular, the period from the fall of Wuhan to Pearl Harbor is poorly understood, and Mitter draws on foreigners' accounts, Chinese reporters, and post-war published Chinese resource collections, such as *Qu da houfang*

(Shanghai, 2005), to show how civilians weathered the crisis in Sichuan. Mitter and Lary are in agreement: the war was transformative for China's sense of itself; for Mitter, this is especially true when the government had to move to Chongqing, which 'helped to consolidate ideas of a united China that spanned the whole of the country's land mass' (p. 172). In chapters ten to twelve, Mitter shows why he, the author of *Manchurian Myth* and *A Bitter Revolution* (2005) (7), is able to tell this tale particularly well; combining CCP, collaborationist, and GMD resistance narratives is extraordinarily difficult, but he manages to present the story with unusual clarity. In these chapters, he is also indirectly challenging the approach of Eastman and Tuchman, as well as the more widespread Western memory of the war (shaped by reporters such as Theodore White, intelligence officers such as Graham Peck, and various Western soldiers' and civilians' memoirs), by emphasising how the regime survived by wit and willpower almost entirely on its own. These chapters are, to this reader, the most important contribution that the book has made to the way we talk about the Second World War in China.

The 'poisoned alliance' between China and the United States is a story we know well by now, but Mitter uses it as an opportunity to complicate the one-dimensional view of GMD corruption being the paramount reason for the regime's failures after 1941. On pages 260 to 262, Mitter presents America's man-in-China, Joseph Stilwell, as a rather poorly-informed gambler with other nations' assets, who simultaneously fed the press statements that bolstered his position at the expense of Chiang's. Although Stilwell could hardly have claimed to even match Nationalist achievements from 1937 to 1941, he managed to win 'the war for Washington's ear' (p. 342) which, in the age of dependency on Lend-Lease, was almost everything. He follows this with a nuanced view of one of China's infamous wartime famines in Henan, which was largely a consequence of Chiang's destruction of the Yellow River dikes. Mitter admits that Chiang's regime must be blamed for the famine, which was exacerbated by policies that served the wartime state, but he follows this with a fairly hard-hitting comparison with the British armed forces' cynical decision to withhold relief in wartime Bengal—and South Asia could hardly be said to have suffered encirclement and sustained attack by the Japanese Empire as mainland China was (pp. 273–4). China's failing economy and long-suffering people created the conditions that necessitated a strong government response (in the name of survival) and this, ironically, was the Nationalists' undoing. When analysing the ruthless secret service war carried on between the collaborationist government in Nanjing and the GMD in Chongqing, Mitter puts it succinctly: 'The public saw the agents not as ideological stalwarts, but as weak men given power to exercise for their own benefit' (p. 297). By 1945, this was arguably true for the regime altogether. With Stilwell failing in his command of Chinese troops and Stalin backing the GMD over the CCP as the only reliable resistance force in East Asia, one wonders just who could have done a better job of holding down the Japanese Imperial Army with limited industry, a currency continually destabilised by the enemy, a multi-lingual force with shifting loyalties, little or no air power, and unreliable access to critical fuels and materials—all in region that had been under the control of warlords until 1936.

Mitter concludes his narrative by bluntly stating that, without the resistance, 'China would have become a Japanese colony as early as 1938' (p. 388) instead of becoming a critical part of the Allied war against Japan. Because he has written such a readable and well-informed book, it is hopeful that it will help shift our historical memory of China's role in the Second World War. There are two important lessons for the casual student of East Asian history to take from this new work: first, the resistance, which saved China from outright colonisation, was primarily a Nationalist endeavour, despite CCP claims to leadership and their ultimate victory in 1949; second, that the effort was the consequence of genuine public support for the war effort in China. On the second point, the discussion becomes quite challenging for scholars today. R. Keith Schoppa's recent monograph on refugees, *In a Sea of Bitterness* (2011), argues strongly that, when analysing the diaries of ordinary civilians, nationalism and dedication are almost nowhere to be found. However, in my own work on soldiers' diaries, *Writing War* (2013), I have found many instances of Chinese troops earnestly dedicating themselves to the war against Japan, particularly from 1937 to 1939.(8) Although Mitter does cite some personal accounts, it is first and foremost a study of high level political and military actors. Still, these monographs tell slightly different tales of the war experience, suggesting that, even with the remarkable progress we have made in the last two decades in re-evaluating the war in China, we still have a long way to

go. Furthermore, China scholars continue to note that it was a terribly fractious place in the 1930s and 1940s, with strong regional governments, dialects, ethnic diversity, and local cultures. Is it sensible to speak of a ‘Chinese’ resistance at all? Mitter shows us that this is where we must begin – with the Nanjing/Chongqing government under Chiang Kai-shek – but that subsequent attention to local experiences may change the story.

Synthesizing years of research by dozens of scholars, including many original findings of his own, Mitter has provided a powerful, readable, and accessible account of the conflict in China, focusing on its leading figures and major turning points, which will help readers navigate this complicated, confusing, and terrible war. What is needed now are more studies of the social history of the conflict, particularly those that might combine various local histories; this will help us resolve some of the contradictory images we see from different studies but, in my view, this can only be accomplished through the gruelling task of exploring China’s rich regional archives.

Notes

1. Lloyd Eastman, *Seeds of Destruction* (Stanford, CT, 1984), Hans van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China* (London, 2003), Diana Lary, *The Chinese People at War* (Cambridge, 2010). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Stephen Mackinnon, *Wuhan 1938: War, Refugees, and the Making of Modern China* (Berkeley, CA, 2008), Parks Coble, *Facing Japan: Chinese? Politics? and? Japanese? Imperialism, 1931–7* (Cambridge, MA, 1991). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Wang Qisheng, ‘Chiang Kai-shek’s reading: an inquiry based on Chiang’s diary, 1920s–1940s’, *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 3, 1 (2009), 11–25. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Brian G. Martin, ‘Collaboration within collaboration: Zhou Fohai’s relations with the Chongqing Government, 1942–1945’, *Twentieth-Century China*, 34, 2 (April 2008), 55–88. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Akira Iriye, ‘Review of Parks Coble, *Facing Japan*’, in *The China Quarterly*, 133 (March 1993), 170–1. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Poshek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937–1945* (Stanford, CT, 1993), Rana Mitter, *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge, MA, 2005). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China’s Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford, 2005). [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. R. Keith Schoppa, *In a Sea of Bitterness: Refugees during the Sino-Japanese War* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Aaron William Moore, *Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2013). [Back to \(8\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/06/china-war-japan-rana-mitter-review> [2]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10182755/Chinas-war-With-Japan-1937-1945-the-struggle-for-survival-by-Rana-Mitter-review.html> [3]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21579797-how-struggle-against-japans-brutal-occupation-shaped-modern-china-start-history> [4]

Hindu

<http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/a-peoples-war-against-japan/article5364818.ece> [5]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1548>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/66956>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/06/china-war-japan-rana-mitter-review>

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10182755/Chinas-war-With-Japan-1937-1945-the-struggle-for-survival-by-Rana-Mitter-review.html>

[4] <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21579797-how-struggle-against-japans-brutal-occupation-shaped-modern-china-start-history>

[5] <http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/a-peoples-war-against-japan/article5364818.ece>