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). 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). 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
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. 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, which 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**


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