



China's War Reporters: The Legacy of Resistance against Japan by Parks M. Coble.

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In *China's War Reporters*, historian Parks Coble (Univ. of Nebraska) provides an compelling account of the experiences of Chinese journalists during and after the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), especially the leftist writers associated with the National Salvation Movement. He explores the intricacies of China's resistance war and their effect on Chinese people, society, and politics. He examines the chain of events triggered by the Marco Polo Bridge incident (7 July 1937); these were ignored by wartime intellectuals and reporters and, after the war, by communist historians and the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), in the interest of highlighting the Communist Revolution and furthering "patriotic education" after the 1980s. Coble takes up important historical issues and questions that have recently gained wide scholarly attention. Chief among these is the management or erasure of certain memories of the war. In so doing, he breaks new ground concerning many neglected aspects of the war and its remembrance.

In the book's first five chapters, Coble analyzes the wartime writings and reports of journalists and intellectuals interested in the changing war situation and "excited ... with near euphoria" (23, 10) by China's war of resistance against Japan. In particular, they welcomed the change from the passive, unpopular appeasement policy of the Guomindang (Nationalist) government (GMD) of Chiang Kai-shek after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931. When Chiang finally decided on resistance, these journalists believed their mission was to tell patriotic tales of heroism to "boost the morale of the Chinese" (73). They enjoyed a "golden age of wartime writing and journalism" (127).

These writers, according to Coble, were not "simply neutral observers" (86), but proponents and mobilizers of national resistance, "contributing to China's survival" (37); consequently, they downplayed or suppressed news of Chinese victimhood, for fear of damaging morale. Their upbeat emphasis on "heroic resistance ... even in the face of ... the cold reality of defeat" (28, 31) elided any coverage of Japanese war atrocities in China, which was ensured as well, Coble points out, by state censorship. On the other hand, the government allowed reports of Japanese bombing of Chinese civilians in order to stir international sympathy and shore up national unity and a spirit of defiance.

Chiang Kai-shek and his government, unlike the war reporters, doubted the efficacy of mass mobilization and ideological training in support of the resistance effort among a people who were often indifferent to the war and lacking a sense of nationalism. Consequently, writers faced the dilemma of "undercutting [the GMD's] political program" (45) by criticizing the state's lack of enthusiasm for mobilization in the national cause.

Especially fascinating here are the journalists' tales of their own flight as refugees; these various dislocations became "a subject of reportage" (82). Many migrated to unoccupied areas under GMD control ("Free China"), others chose to remain in occupied cities like Shanghai as "an easier, safer alternative" (89) to the "dangers of the trip [to Free China] and [out of] concern over family members" (90). Many families, Coble writes, found that "a certain normalcy had crept into the wartime situation ... with the cordon line [between occupied and unoccupied China] being relatively porous" (89, 92).

During his two-month journey to Free China, for example, Chen Guangfu found that crossing borders did not entail any life-threatening risks and that it was in fact possible to “escape from enemy territory through hostile fire to a safe haven” (93).

The story of capitalists in occupied China was somewhat similar. As they were “seeking economic opportunity” (94) during the war, they found it “not too difficult” (99), since there was nothing to stop their movement between occupied and unoccupied China. Occupied Shanghai’s “strange prosperity” (95) was certainly a product of such travels by its capitalists. As Lloyd Eastman has argued, there were “ambivalences in the Chinese relationship with the Japanese” and “the spirit of nationalism had touched the Chinese people only lightly” during the war.¹

While traveling in China without much trouble, Chinese reporters like Fan Changjiang witnessed not only the suffering of those who fought the Japanese but a profound dissatisfaction with their government’s “incompetent or indifferent officials” (83). Many Chinese even felt their enemy in 1941 was not only the Japanese but the GMD. Despair, pessimism, and “a sense of panic” (119) about the war and China’s fate were widespread in 1944. In Chongqing, China’s wartime capital, morale had collapsed altogether by the end of that year. No wonder leftist writers supported the cause of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the war and joined it after 1945 on the verge its civil war with the GMD. This was true, Coble stresses, despite the CCP’s suppression of dissenting intellectuals like Ding Ling and Fan Changjiang before 1945 at Yan’an, the party’s revolutionary base. Japan’s surrender in August 1945 was a “bitter victory” (197) after all the personal hardships endured by reporters and intellectuals during the war.

The book’s last two chapters concern the politically motivated “new remembering” of the war since the mid 1990s.² After 1949, the CCP had “privileged its revolution” and the party’s role during the war, consigning “other players and memories to historical oblivion,” and subordinating the legacy of the war “to the policy concerns of the Cold War” (143). The public memory of the heroic work of wartime reporters “virtually disappeared, ... consumed by the very revolution they had helped foster” (140). Japanese atrocities were “subordinated to the political goal” (143) of the PRC, though a “slow restoration of the public memory” (147) was encouraged in the mid 1990s for the purpose of “patriotic education” (159) through war memorials, museums, and the publication of wartime reportage stressing the heroic resistance of the Chinese people and even the GMD military. The “core role” (160) of the CCP remains unchallenged, however. The wartime “heroic resistance narrative” produced by leftist writers and the post-1949 “victor narrative” (165) of the CCP have merged into the “current Nationalist narrative” (190) of the war. Coble writes that the change “reveals the limits of using the past to serve the present” (190).

As the author correctly argues, the history of the Sino-Japanese War, whether including the role of the GMD or purely communist-centered, evokes a “‘patriotic Nationalist narrative’ and China’s role in the global defeat of fascism” (8), thus precluding any “deeper understanding of the war” (5). Missing in this kind of history is “the diverse range of experiences of mobility during the war [and] the disjunction between the imagined narrative of the war and the real experiences” (103) of the Chinese people. To balance the communist narrative, many scholars have recently emphasized the role of GMD government in the resistance war and the final victory over Japan. Coble’s work contributes to this new

1. “Facets of an Ambivalent Relationship: Smuggling, Puppets, and Atrocities during the War, 1937–1945,” in Akira Iriye, ed., *The Chinese and the Japanese: Essays in Political and Cultural Interactions* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1980) 301. As Coble puts it, “The force of modern Nationalism had not yet penetrated into the interior” (193).

2. See further Arthur Waldron, “China’s New Remembering of World War II: The Case of Zhang Zizhong,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30 (1996) 945–78.

line of scholarship, but at the same time confirms existing studies of Chiang Kai-shek's GMD government. As Eastman and others have argued,³ Chiang could not both complete the task of nation building and fully prepare for a full-scale war of resistance against Japan. Coble proves that Chiang's distrust of mass movement and reluctance to mobilize for total war resulted in the GMD government's failure to fulfil its wartime responsibilities; this was the chief criticism leveled by Chinese war reporters and intellectuals.

Many Chinese knew, Coble shows, that they were fighting a losing war in the first two or three years of the conflict, when the patriotic reporters were touting national unity and resistance. Thus, more "nuanced portrayals of collaborators" who advocated peace with Japan are much needed.⁴ Ultimately, Coble faults both the CCP and the PRC, while deemphasizing the responsibility of the war reporters for veiling the facts of the war to preserve Chinese morale and support for the state's resistance. This is the book's principal weakness.⁵

China's War Reporters usefully clarifies the complexities of the human experience of the Sino-Japanese War. The stories gathered by Parks Coble break out of the "framework of modern Chinese history ... shaped by the Chinese Communist leadership" (191, 197) to testify that the war was more multifaceted than politically inspired histories have made it appear.

3. See Eastman, *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937-1949* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 1984), and Hsi-sheng Ch'i, *Nationalist China at War: Military Defeats and Political Collapse, 1937-45* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Pr, 1982).

4. Several recent works on Chinese wartime collaboration with Japan attempt to explain it as a complex phenomenon rather than a purely political and moral issue. See, e.g., Timothy Brook, *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005), and Dongyoun Hwang, "Wartime Collaboration in Question: An Examination of the Postwar Trials of the Chinese Collaborators," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6.1 (2005) 75-97.

5. A less serious, but annoying problem concerns terminology: the author's interchangeable use of "Nanjing government," "Nationalist government," "Guomindang government," and "Chongqing government" (e.g., 112, 116) is likely to cause needless confusion.