



War and Occupation in China: The Letters of an American Missionary from Hangzhou, 1937–1938 ed. Charles Bright and Joseph W. Ho.

Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh Univ. Press, 2017. Pp. xi, 312. ISBN 978–1–61146–231–9.

Review by Jiu-Hwa Lo Upshur, Eastern Michigan University (jupshur@emich.edu).

War and Occupation in China compiles the letters that Robert J. McMullen, an American Presbyterian missionary-educator in Hangzhou, a coastal city in southern China, wrote to his wife in the United States from September 1937 to August 1938, the first year of the Sino-Japanese war. The letters are edited by Charles Bright (Univ. of Michigan), McMullen’s grandson, and sinologist Joseph Ho (Albion College), who also provided detailed footnotes¹ giving context to the events described.

In the first third of the twentieth century, imperial Japan gained control of Korea and territories of northeastern China known in the West as Manchuria (a region larger than France, Germany, and the Low Countries combined), which successive weak Chinese governments were unable to defend. On 7 July 1937, the Japanese army provoked yet another “incident” by attacking a railway junction in northern China (the Marco Polo Bridge Incident). The Japanese expected China to cave in, cede more territories, and make other concessions. The Chinese, however, decided to fight, thus beginning an eight-year conflict that expanded to become part of World War II in Asia.

Hangzhou at the time was a famous resort city without military or strategic significance, or any modern industries. An old Chinese saying goes, “There is paradise above, on earth there are Suzhou [another famous resort] and Hangzhou.” McMullen’s letters detail the spread of the war to Hangzhou and the disruptions caused by Japanese occupation of the city, which kept his students from attending the school he ran and made his missionary work difficult without the financial contributions he had received before the war. He was reduced to selling milk produced by the mission’s few cows and the summer crop of tea leaves from its farm. To protect the local women and girls hired as pickers from rape by the Japanese soldiers patrolling the city, McMullen flew a large American flag over the mission’s tea plantation and personally stood guard to discourage the marauding Japanese, who at that point still respected US neutrality in the conflict.

McMullen’s mission and other Western groups opened shelters where several thousands of Chinese, mostly women and children, sought refuge until the Japanese authorities gradually imposed some discipline on their soldiers. His letters contain graphic descriptions of Japanese depredations and atrocities:

On a hill some five miles west of us is a temple with roads from three directions. Into this temple had run people from S. Shang, Yien Lin Bu and Fuyang whose homes had been destroyed. They lived there without any visits from the Japanese until all of a sudden soldiers closed in on them from three sides. The men—some three hundred and fifty—were separated from the women and children and then before the eyes of their wives and children were mowed down with machine guns.... There were no soldiers, plain clothes or otherwise, among these people. Only farmers. (204)

1. The book is equipped as well with glossaries of “Chinese Terms” and “Western Names,” and a full bibliography.

He also describes the hardships endured by refugees, including local people whose homes and means of livelihood had been destroyed.

The letters stopped when Mrs. McMullen arrived in Shanghai to be with her husband. At first they hoped to return to their old mission and school in Hangzhou, but they were restricted to Shanghai's International Settlement, an area set aside since the nineteenth century for Westerners and not under Chinese government jurisdiction. There they operated a small church school. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the school closed, and, together with other Westerners, the McMullens were sent to an internment camp where they lived under harsh conditions until their repatriation in September 1943.

Robert McMullen's letters provide a valuable firsthand account of the plight of Christian missionary-educators and the people of one Chinese city early in the Sino-Japanese War. One can imagine the much greater horrors endured by millions more of Japan's victims. We must be grateful to the editors of *War and Occupation in China* for making this salutary addition to works on a small part of a large theater of the Second World War.