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0521822211 - In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai under Japanese Occupation

Edited by Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh

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Introduction

CHRISTIAN HENRIOT AND WEN-HSIN YEH

Metropolitan Shanghai never was a city at war, though Shanghai at large was among the first battle scenes in the Sino-Japanese War. This is a paradox and even a challenge in a statement that will sound provocative and controversial to the reader. No one will deny the reality of war in the city. Shanghai was the first large metropolis to bear the full brunt of modern warfare in World War II. Three months of bitter fighting left tens of thousands of casualties among the Chinese and Japanese troops. Hundreds of thousands of civilians from the Chinese-administered districts abandoned their homes and belongings to seek refuge in the foreign settlements. Entire neighborhoods were burned to the ground as a result of indiscriminate shelling and uncontrolled fires. The deliberate or accidental dropping of bombs by Japanese and Chinese planes – “collateral damages” in military jargon – brought the horror of war into the very heart of the city, on the world-famous Bund and near the Great World amusement center. When the fighting was over, the Chinese living outside of the settlements were often exposed to the arbitrary power and brutality of the occupant. Yet, after the withdrawal of Chinese troops and administration in November 1937, the foreign concessions of the city progressively returned to a state of “quasi normalcy.” Except for the strategic bombings of industrial districts by U.S. airplanes in 1944–1945, full-scale warfare between professional military forces was never again part of the Shanghai experience.

As fighting ended, a new era of urban violence began. Shanghai became a major stake over which various contending parties, especially the Japanese military authorities, the Chongqing-based Nationalist government, and the successive puppet regimes competed fiercely for control. The contenders resorted to terrorist strategies and employed deadly means. But despite the struggle and the bloodshed or precisely because of them, Shanghai was not a city mobilized

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1. The tragic bombing of the Great World Theater on August 14, 1937, left 3,000 victims. Source: Courtesy of the Fabre Family.

for war. Major features such as the unification of people in space and time, the organization of resistance, or the mobilization of resources for the armed conflict were largely missing. On the first issue, the organization of time and space became even more fragmented in Shanghai. Territorial and political divisions, as we know, were not new to the city, but war introduced new patterns. The Chinese districts came under Japanese military occupation, even as their administration was entrusted to puppet municipal governments. The foreign settlements came under siege, surrounded as they were by the Chinese districts, and had to face increasingly stringent measures of blockade. Nevertheless, they continued to have access to the outside world by sea up to 1941. In the Chinese municipality, power shifted in succession to men appointed or monitored by the Japanese army. In the foreign settlements, the Western-dominated municipal authorities declared a state of “neutrality” despite their resentment at being threatened by an Asian power. Neither the British nor the American home government was about to declare war against Japan over Shanghai extraterritoriality. Eventually, the predominantly Anglo-American International Settlement became the sole refuge for anti-Japanese activists when Vichy France actually

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2. Death by the thousands around the Great World Theater. Source: Courtesy of the Fabre Family.

allowed almost free access to the French Concession to the Japanese special services.¹

The peculiar spatial and political division of Shanghai created an opportunity for the organization of actions of resistance. After all, for decades gangsters had taken advantage of the divisions of jurisdiction to evade pursuit and arrest by moving from one place to the other.² Although the Japanese consul and the army exercised strong pressures on the Shanghai Municipal Council in the International Settlement to quell all anti-Japanese activities, Japanese interest did not dominate the foreign territories. Foreign authorities yielded to Japanese pressures by accepting the latter's censorship, police surveillance, and sometimes arrests, but their main worry did not come from civilian resistance by Shanghai's Chinese students, intellectuals, or artists. The authorities were

¹ Wen-hsin Yeh's "Prologue" in *Wartime Shanghai* offers the most sophisticated presentation of the chain of events in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. Wen-hsin Yeh (ed.), *Wartime Shanghai*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, pp. 1–17.

² On police and bandits in Shanghai, see Wakeman, Frederic, *Policing Shanghai, 1927–1937*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994 and Martin, Brian, *The Shanghai Green Gang: Politics and Organized Crime, 1919–1937*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.

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concerned, instead, about the resistance put up by the professional agents of the Chinese Nationalist army and secret services in the form of terrorist actions (mostly assassinations and bomb attacks). When the Chinese collaborators and the puppet authorities established their own apparatus, especially the infamous No. 76 secret police on Jessfield Road, Shanghai became the scene of a series of extremely violent acts of terrorism. Nationalist agents targeted prominent Chinese public figures, Nationalist or non-Nationalist, who had been approached by the Japanese or the puppet authorities as leaders of collaboration. The collaborators struck back, attacking all those involved *volens nolens* in the propaganda (journalists), political (lawyers, magistrates), and economic (bankers and their employees) battle between the contending parties.³ Acts of hideous brutality and violence, however, did not involve the population at large. These forms of action remained the domain of professionals and, for that matter, left most Chinese residents in Shanghai at the fringe of resistance or active mobilization for war purposes.

The third missing element in a logic of war economy in Shanghai is precisely the absence of a harnessing of resources to support the war effort by either side. At the onset of the war, the city was a huge safe with the highest concentration of capital in China, a thriving commercial hub, and an unrivaled industrial power engine. Although the armed conflict inflicted heavy damages on industrial plants and induced many capitalists to send their money to Hong Kong for safety, this handicap was overcome by the influx of capital and equipment from inland Chinese cities and, after a short lapse of time, the return of the absconded capital. Production resumed within months of the cessation of hostilities. In late 1938, Shanghai had regained its initial potential and enjoyed a strong revival of its economy. Local entrepreneurs, Chinese, Japanese, as well as Westerners, actively sold their locally produced goods to all parties. Depending on their nationality, they probably had national preferences when it came to selecting their customers. There is also no doubt that goods put out by Chinese firms were shipped or transshipped to Nationalist forces in inland China.⁴ Finally, the Chongqing government maintained a relative influence on the local economy through various agencies and its currency. Yet the economic system worked in a freewheeling mode since no single authority functioned to place the financial, commercial, and industrial resources of Shanghai under a war-supporting scheme. When the Wang Jingwei government and the Japanese

³ Wakeman, Frederic E., *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime, 1937–1941*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁴ Schoppa, Keith, “The structure, dynamics, and impacts of the Shanghai-coastal Zhejiang trading system, 1938–1944,” paper presented at the international conference on “Wartime Shanghai, 1937–1945,” Lyon, October 15–17, 1997.

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eventually carried out a form of command economy (*tongzhi jingji*) made of monopolies on commodities in early 1943, it only led to the gradual collapse of production and paralysis in the city.⁵ Throughout the war, and despite the declared hostilities, this volume argues, the foreign concessions of the city continued to operate along their prewar patterns of economic activities, albeit within a much more restrictive context.

Many economic actors chose to stay in Shanghai during the war. Others moved far beyond the limits of the city. Either alternative entailed risks of sorts. A decision to remain in Shanghai meant vulnerability in an uncertain economic environment. Supplies were difficult to obtain, prices were on the rise, and there existed the permanent threat of a Japanese takeover of the foreign settlements. This last fear eventually became a reality in December 1941. The other possibility – to move one's machinery, or capital, or simply oneself to Chongqing and the Nationalist-controlled areas – entailed an almost equally hazardous future in China's underdeveloped hinterland that was ill equipped for industrial operations. Meanwhile, Shanghai offered an opportunity for great games, great risks, and eventually great profits. Imported commodities were plentiful, overseas markets were accessible, banks stored huge amounts of idle capital, real estate offered a safe investment alternative, and plenty of urbanites whiled away their days shopping. Finally, the city remained a unique springboard for foray into the surrounding countryside. These markets were firmly under the control of either the thriving smuggling rings or a variety of state agencies. Shanghai was a marketplace for social connections (*guanxi*) where all the major and minor players converged. War or no war, Shanghai concessions remained a nerve center for business, industry, intelligence, and intrigue.

Throughout the fighting and the occupation, Shanghai maintained its connections to its hinterland. Imports continued despite the restrictions imposed by the Japanese army on the movement of goods. As late as 1941, there was no dearth of smuggled materials crisscrossing the boundaries. Chinese merchants used the dense network of the rivers of the lower Yangzi area or the transshipment facilities of the string of harbors along the South China coast to elude military controls and barriers. The communist guerrillas in Central China frequently commissioned special agents to organize the purchase of controlled commodities and equipment. Although these acquisitions remained several degrees below the large-scale smuggling activities of the secret services-backed companies,

⁵ Henriot, Christian, "War and economics: the control of material resources in the lower Yangzi and Shanghai area between 1937 and 1945," paper presented to the international conference "The Role of the Republican Period in Twentieth Century China: Reflections and Reconsiderations," Venice, June 30–July 3, 1999.

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they bear testimony to the fluidity of Shanghai's relations with its hinterland. The flow ceased only when the Wang Jingwei government enforced a strict system of controlled economy. Its purpose, however, was not to seal off Shanghai, but to place all the material resources of Central China under the command of a coordinated set of official agencies or committees. Whereas the explicit purpose of this policy was the full mobilization of resources for the war effort, its clumsy implementation, compounded by the corruption and inefficiency of the said agencies, resulted in a devastating – albeit unintended – paralysis of the whole economic system. Only then did metropolitan Shanghai become insulated from the economy of its hinterland.

There are many good reasons, therefore, to reconsider the idea that after the withdrawal of Chinese troops in November 1937, the foreign concessions in Shanghai became a lone islet (“*gudao*”). The term was coined in the aftermath of the Chinese withdrawal and has become a standard expression for the period prior to Japanese occupation. It conveys various conflicting meanings: that of *gu'er* (orphan) or *gujun* (lone army [of resisters]). It can also mean a haven, an oasis that afforded protection in a realm of violence. Above all, it means the singularity of Shanghai in the Chinese war experience. For those who coined the term, its immediate meaning may have been closer to “isolation, abandonment, orphan.” The larger world beyond its confines had been transformed by the Japanese military. The Chinese government had retreated to the deep hinterland. The enemy was all around. There was hardly any sense of heroism in this initial definition. *Gudao* conjured up powerlessness and vulnerability. But as time passed, people resumed their old habits and everyday life while the rest of the country continued to struggle and suffer. During the war, but probably more so after the Japanese surrender – that is, when the time had come to reward the winners and punish the losers – *gudao* served to buttress Shanghai's claim of its commitment to resistance and to survival against all odds. The combined values of heroism and singularity were injected into the term to characterize the Shanghai experience during the war. It was a term that shielded its inhabitants from the accusation of collaboration and absolved them of the guilt of survival. After all, the people of Shanghai were orphans abandoned by their elders during the war.⁶

Like “*Résistance*” in postwar Gaullist France, *gudao* has to be deconstructed in order to engage in a historical re-assessment of the Japanese occupation in Shanghai. It is a convenient and simplistic cover-up for a complex period dominated by postures and actions that do not fit in a “resistance vs. collaboration”

⁶ Fu Poshek, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937–1945*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993.

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mold.⁷ There was no time for a “postwar” period in China since the victors of the day (Nationalists and Communists) became at once the enemies of tomorrow and headed off to a military struggle. The question of resistance and collaboration became a secondary issue in the civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang (GMD). There was no time for reflection on the war experience under the Japanese. Nor was the civil war an appropriate framework for a consideration of issues of collaboration and resistance during the Sino-Japanese War. After 1949, the Nationalists and the Communists told their divergent war stories respectively. On the mainland, wartime memory was reconstructed according to the canons of Marxist historiography. On Taiwan, it became part of a larger effort to explain the collapse of the Nationalist regime and the victory of the Communists. Nationalist leaders had no interest in a close examination of their possible compromises and misconduct during the war. Postwar politics dictated that a black and white picture should serve as a much more convenient posture. By and large, much was said about the evils of militarism and imperialism while little was done by way of historical research to examine the actual experience of war at the local level.⁸

In real life, there was a wide array of attitudes toward the Japanese occupation. Few, indeed, engaged in outright collaboration with the enemy. Despite a long history of political and cultural relations, the Japanese had not been able to build up the kind of sympathetic following that the Germans could rely on in France among political elites.⁹ In Central China and in Shanghai, the Japanese could not even rely on the network of proxies from the pool of former warlords they had supported in the 1920s–1930s. When the Japanese Navy decided to establish the Dadao (Great Way) government in the city in late 1937, it had to “import” its main leaders from Taiwan. This government probably was an exceptional example of a collaborationist institution in Shanghai. It turned out to be a dismal failure, despite ambitious plans to extend its reach to the whole Central China region. Its successors, the Fu Xiao’an and Chen Gongbo municipal

⁷ On the issue of collaboration by the Vichy regime and the postwar “épuration” in France, see Lottman, Herbert, *L’épuration, 1943–1953*, Paris, Fayard, 1986; and Roussio, Henry, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Arthur Goldhammer, trans.), Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991 (Paris, Seuil, 1987).

⁸ Although the Japanese case is not unique, it is interesting to note that the Japanese communities that lived in China, especially in Shanghai, have been absent from most historical accounts until very recently. On the general issue of foreign communities, see Bickers, Robert and Henriot, Christian (eds.), *New Frontiers: Imperialism’s New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1952*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000. The first historical study by Japanese scholars to address the issue of the Japanese community in Shanghai is Takahashi, Kôsuke and Furumaya, Tadao (eds.), *Shanghai shi* (The History of Shanghai), Tokyo, Toho shoten, 1995.

⁹ See Ory, Pascal, *Les collaborateurs, 1940–1945*, Paris, Seuil, 1976.

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administrations, proved no more malleable to Japanese ends. Some will argue that the prewar colonial situation in Shanghai – the foreign settlements had been in existence for almost ninety years – had prepared the ground for “collaboration” between the various sectors of Chinese society and Japan. After all, Westerners were invaders and the masters of a political system that called for collaboration on the part of the Chinese. True enough, significant parts of Shanghai had developed under Western colonialism. But Westerners prevailed in a system under the appearance of a rule of law. It was also a system of governance that had stemmed from collaboration in the economic sphere. The Japanese military presence in Shanghai developed under different circumstances. From a Chinese perspective, some might argue that there was hardly a difference in nature. Yet a Western colonial legacy and a system of collaboration such as had developed in Shanghai do not mean, as this volume will show, that the Chinese in Shanghai thus became “naturally” and indiscriminately receptive to *any* form of foreign dominance or political coercion.

Japanese occupation sealed the fate of the Western presence in Shanghai. Foreign authorities of the International Settlement and the French Concession resorted to different tactics in their dealings with the Japanese, the puppet administrations, and the Chongqing Nationalists. Yet neither showed much commitment to the local population beyond what happened to coincide with its self-interest. The concessions, thanks to the colonial standing, offered some protection to those Chinese who had fled Japanese occupation. During the initial phase of the war, this served the interest of the Nationalist government in Chongqing and the Shanghai Chinese among the local elite. Japanese military authorities made repeated attempts to interfere with the functioning of the concession municipality. The Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC) adopted a middle-of-the-road strategy that ultimately entailed repeated compromises at the expense of Chinese sovereign rights, institutions, and nationalism. The French Concession adopted a tough stance in the early years of the war, but gave in to most Japanese demands when the French government fell for Japan under Marshall Pétain. In both cases, the authorities were concerned primarily with the preservation of their existing interests – a dream that fell apart on December 8, 1941 for the SMC – and future presence – an illusion that crumbled in July 1943 for the French – in Shanghai. The SMC carried on its duties under Japanese command until its staff members were interned as “enemy nationals” in 1943. The French consul and concession authorities, by contrast, escaped the humiliation of formal submission to the Japanese army. In both cases, however, there was a similar pattern of collaboration with the invaders.

Among both the Shanghai workers and business elite, Japanese and puppet Chinese manipulation of anti-Western sentiments failed to generate enough

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support for pro-Japanese collaboration. The workers were severely hit by the rising cost of basic necessities, especially food. They organized numerous strikes to express their discontent and disarray. The war period, in particular the years 1940–1941, saw a short-lived though extensive movement of workers' protests. The puppet authorities and the Japanese special services realized the potentialities of the workers' dissatisfaction in their struggle against Western companies and, through them, against Western political dominance in the city. They facilitated or often provoked the establishments of clubs and simli-unions to engineer strike movements or to monitor those that erupted spontaneously. Like its Nationalist predecessor, the Wang Jingwei regime was eager to control the "world of labor" and harness it in its anti-Western campaign, but it failed to attract the sympathy of the workers. Fundamentally, however, its major weakness laid in its inability to formulate and materialize a genuine policy toward the workers. Among its Japanese allies, there was even a clear aversion to the development of unions, as a labor movement was perceived to be potentially dangerous for social stability. Eventually, the puppet authorities made halfhearted and instrumental inroads into the working classes, but they failed to enlist them under their banner.

The local elites in general also proved to be unwilling partners. The business community, especially the major figures of the prewar period, either remained in the relative safety of the foreign settlements or, when the pressure became too high, absconded to Hong Kong or Chongqing. The Japanese and Wang Jingwei managed to attract only a handful of established Shanghai capitalists. Nevertheless, war also offered opportunities for expansion and profits for those who placed the interests of their company ahead of political considerations. Some even saw the war, its restrictions, and built-in system of state involvement as a privileged moment to place themselves as intermediaries—“fixers” in the words of Sherman Cochran's Xu Guanqun – and to use their privileges to conquer market shares. Were these characters very dissimilar to the Shanghai British businessmen who equated British national interests with their company's financial prospects, and therefore had no qualms about their deals with their country's enemy after 1941? Were they “conscious” collaborators? They probably did not think of themselves as collaborators or traitors.¹⁰ They argued that the success of their businesses was a guarantee for the success of China in the long term. They refused to believe that they were contributing to the immediate interests of the Japanese occupiers or the puppet regimes.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of these notions, see Wasserstein, Bernard, “Ambiguities of occupation: Foreign resisters and collaborators in wartime Shanghai,” in Wen-hsin Yeh (ed.), *Wartime Shanghai*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, pp. 24–41.

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For the merchant organizations and their leaders, the policy of no contact with the enemy or its Chinese representatives came to an end when the Japanese army took over the International Settlement. Frustrated by four years of failed attempts to throw their net over Shanghai's industry and trade, the Japanese pursued an aggressive policy of creating Sino-Japanese professional associations (*tongye gonghui*). The entrepreneurs, who had failed to respond to the Japanese call to cooperate and lost their properties in the occupied parts of the city, could no longer avoid playing by the rules of the city's occupiers. The mediation of the Wang Jingwei government made collaboration more palatable than a straightforward *entente* with the Japanese. Yet, the entrepreneurs were torn between their political allegiance to Chongqing and a pragmatic desire to put their plants back into production under the Japanese. The Rong family treaded a careful path in order to avoid direct involvement in collaboration, shamelessly sending nonfamily executives of the company to serve in the professional associations or monopoly committees set up by the Wang Jingwei government. Having secured protection from both sides of the political contenders, they came out of the war with a clean record and escaped postwar sanctions.

Although the confusing mix of trade and politics and the subtle system of relationships between entrepreneurs and officials can be traced back to the Nanking decade, the war and the occupation marked the forceful intrusion of the state into the control of material resources.¹¹ It promulgated and enforced various sets of increasingly stringent regulations in order to harness the productive machinery for the war effort. The coexistence of rival authorities or agencies often resulted in the adoption of competing and contradictory regulations. In the case of the local authorities, these measures were designed to ensure the procurement of basic necessities to the people, an objective that was never met. The wealthy region around Shanghai became a bounty for army-backed Japanese companies. They organized the systematic, though unsuccessful, plundering of material resources, especially agricultural products. The Japanese civilian community swelled to unknown heights – 100,000 people – taking advantage of the

¹¹ On state-bourgeoisie relations under the Nationalist regime, see Eastman, Lloyd E., *The Abortive Revolution: China Under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974; Coble, Parks M., *The Shanghai Capitalists and the Nationalist Government, 1927–1937*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980; Bush, Richard, *The Politics of Cotton Textiles in Kuomintang China*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1982; Fewsmith, Joseph, *Party, State, and Local Elites in Republican China*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1985; Bergère, Marie-Claire, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.