

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02069-6 - The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949  
S. C. M. Paine  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

PART I

---

FEAR AND AMBITION  
JAPAN, CHINA,  
AND RUSSIA

飲鳩止渴

Drink poison to quench thirst.  
(The remedy is worse than the disease.)

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02069-6 - The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949  
S. C. M. Paine  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## I

## INTRODUCTION

## The Asian Roots of World War II

## 天災人禍

Heaven-made disasters, manmade calamities.  
(Natural disasters and wars.)

Wars produce sudden and irrevocable changes. Although they are fought for reasons, they can stampede passions, and mass passions give no quarter to reason, let alone to any individuals barring the way. Millions of lives lost mean millions of roads not taken, altering the roster of the born and unborn, and producing decisions informed by the road taken. The passions elicited by the killing, the dying, and the witnessing put a period on the way the world was. The combustion of reason and passion leaves transformative and often unintended outcomes, which in the long term may prove more important than the war's original purpose. Given the costs, unpredictability, and irretrievability, wars are important to understand.

We in the West treat World War II, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Chinese Civil War as distinct events, and in doing so we misunderstand each one. The conventional tale of World War II divides into two fronts, a European theater, opening in 1939, and a Pacific theater, opening in 1941, and the tale ends in 1945 with the fall of Berlin in May and with atomic bombs on Japan in August. Yet Japan's war began a decade prior in 1931, and that war precipitated its attack on Pearl Harbor, which drew the United States into World War II, and thus precluded a Japanese victory in China. The conventional tale does little to explain Japan's curious behavior. An attack on one's most important trading partner and source of the war matériel necessary to continue the fight in China would seem remarkably counterproductive.

The conventional tale of the Second Sino-Japanese War is equally illogical. The Japanese won every battle, including the 1944 Ichigō

## FEAR AND AMBITION: JAPAN, CHINA, AND RUSSIA

Campaign, which was their last, biggest, and best, and then they suddenly collapsed. Although World War II explains this collapse, accounts of the Second Sino-Japanese War routinely gloss over the global war. More importantly, there is no explanation for the Dr. Jekyll–Mr. Hyde transformation of Japan from the model developing country of the nineteenth century to Japan at the forefront of germ warfare, prisoner abuse, civilian massacres, and the murder of its own wounded.

The conventional tale is no more illuminating for the Chinese Civil War, portrayed as an existential struggle between good and evil and between a longing for change and the weight of corruption. Yet the alleged master of military incompetence, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, fought the Imperial Japanese Army to a stalemate by 1938 and fought it alone from 1937 to 1941. Japanese accounts emphasize their fight not against the Communists but against the Nationalists. During these years, the Imperial Japanese Army sent not its rejects but its best to China. Thereafter, Americans, despite their overwhelming industrial superiority, also found fighting the Japanese bitter indeed. Again, the facts on the ground do not square with the story told.

As it turns out, Japan attempted to settle its long war in China with a peripheral strategy targeting U.S. and British interests in Asia in order to compel them to cut off their aid to China. This was a peripheral strategy because the theaters were peripheral to the main theater, which for Japan was China, not the disease-infested jungles and isolated islands where the United States soon fought. Japan's prior alliance with Germany then sent the United States into the European theater when Germany interpreted the alliance broadly to declare war. In other words, a regional war in Asia made another regional war in Europe global when the Japanese and German declarations of war relegated U.S. isolationism to the trash heap of history.

China's war began even earlier with the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the escalating civil war to determine the nature of New China. Initially the civil war was multilateral. It did not fully settle into a bilateral Nationalist-Communist fight until 1945 and did not end until the Communist victory in 1949. As the fighting moved northward in the 1920s toward the Japanese sphere of influence and focus of investments in Manchuria, Japanese leaders became increasingly concerned. In the 1930s army leaders and many other Japanese concluded that only direct military intervention could protect their national security.

## THE ASIAN ROOTS OF WORLD WAR II

In other words, the long Chinese civil war precipitated a regional war between China and Japan so that by the time the conflict became global in 1941, the Chinese were fighting a civil war within a regional war within an overarching global war.

At different times, the intervening foreign powers – Japan, Russia, and the United States – focused on different layers of this complex war. The conventional tale focuses on the global war, which was the outermost and least fundamental layer. In fact, each layer grew out of the preceding layer, with the civil war at the core. Those who attempted to fight within one layer without consideration of the others courted disaster. Japan's operational focus on the regional war produced the opposite of intended outcomes in the civil and global wars. The U.S. attempt to focus exclusively on the global war left postwar U.S. China policy in shambles. Russia's comparatively astute Asia policy rested on an appreciation of all three layers of warfare: it brokered a truce in the civil war to promote a Sino-Japanese war to save itself from a two-front global war on the correct assumption that Japan would fight either China or Russia, but not both.

The conventional tale does not emphasize Russia's peculiar position among the Allies of World War II. Russia allied with Britain and the United States against Germany but maintained remarkably cordial relations with Japan until the last two weeks of the war, when it suddenly deployed 1.5 million men to Manchuria in its most ambitious campaign of the war.<sup>1</sup> Most histories of World War II omit the Eurasian connection between the European and Pacific theaters to tell separate tales. Russians, however, saw clear connections. German units advanced within eyesight of Moscow, the country's rail hub, the one the Bolsheviks had leveraged to win the Russian Civil War. In World War I, Russia had fallen to a one-front war against Germany and would probably not have survived a two-front war against both Germany and Japan. Russian leaders played a deft game of diplomacy to forestall this eventuality.<sup>2</sup>

Japan's war had other implications that did not reveal themselves by 1945, when the conventional tale ends, but only in 1949, when the Chinese Communists attained power. Paradoxically, the Communists greatly benefited from Japan's intervention in the long Chinese civil war because the Japanese focused on annihilating Nationalist conventional forces, fatally weakening them in eight years of high-tempo warfare.

#### FEAR AND AMBITION: JAPAN, CHINA, AND RUSSIA

Yet Japan lacked sufficient troops to garrison China's vast hinterland, where the Communists used the breathing space from Nationalist persecution to organize the peasantry. These two factors – Japanese weakening of the Nationalists and the Communist breathing space to organize – tipped the post-World War internal balance of power in favor of the Communists.

The ensuing decisive battles of the long Chinese civil war concentrated in Manchuria, which was the heart of overseas Japanese investments and the only theater with a dense railway grid and road system to move vast armies and the agricultural surplus to feed them. This theater also bordered on Russia, which has not received adequate credit for its role in the outcome of the long Chinese civil war. The Communists won this war in huge conventional battles. Yet they were a rural movement and agrarian China did not produce the weaponry to fight let alone to win huge conventional battles. Where did the weapons come from? The Communists did indeed capture many from defeated Nationalist units – but how did they acquire enough weapons to defeat the well-armed Nationalist units in the first place? Again the conventional tale is silent.

Americans often portray international events in terms of what the United States did or did not do. This outlook presumes enormous influence for themselves and discounts the ability of others to make choices. Such presumptions also obviate the need to understand the motivations and decisions of others. The conventional tale of World War II focuses on the heroism of American commanders and the brilliance of American leaders and, if generous, gives some credit to the civil and military leaders of Great Britain. It is amazing how many histories ignore the contribution of Russia, where until the end of the war Germany always deployed at least two-thirds and generally four-fifths of its army.<sup>3</sup> The contribution of China to the victory over Japan receives still less attention even though from 1942 until 1945 Japan deployed more forces against China than against the United States for every year except 1944.<sup>4</sup> American soldiers found their German and Japanese counterparts to be lethal foes, and yet Americans too often fail to credit those who fought the preponderance of these forces.

There is no shame in leaving the ground fighting to others; rather this is a hallmark of a sound maritime strategy. As Britain's great philosopher, scientist, lawyer, and statesman Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

## THE ASIAN ROOTS OF WORLD WAR II

observed, “[H]e that commands the sea is at great liberty, and may take as much and as little of the war as he will. Whereas those that be strongest by land are many times in great straits.”<sup>5</sup> The United States has emulated the British maritime strategy of keeping the seas open to trade so that the home economy can produce uninterrupted by warfare, of relying on its oceanic moat to insulate itself from foreign threats, and of fighting wars far from home, at times and places of its choosing. Land powers possess no such strategic flexibility: fighting often occurs on home territory, which disrupts the economy, while a maritime enemy can cut off their overseas markets and an attacking neighbor can choose the time and place of hostilities.

Maritime powers, such as the United States, primarily influence the littoral – the places where they can most easily project military, diplomatic, and economic influence. Continental powers such as China and Russia influence events deep inland along their land borders. Curiously, although Japan was a maritime power by geography, its leaders conceived of their homeland as a continental power, with the Imperial Japanese Army the dominant military service. This misidentification entangled Japan in wars on the Asian mainland that it need never have fought.

The conventional tale also misses many of the key turning points. History is the study of choices, not of immutable fate. If Japan had halted its expansion with Manchuria, an area sufficiently large to grant it the comparative economic self-sufficiency its leaders craved, Japan could have awaited either U.S. entry into the brewing war in Europe or the Russian collapse from the Nazi onslaught. Either alternative would probably have left Japan in control of Manchuria. The Japanese decision to extend war to the rest of China was a point of no return that entailed expanded war aims, growing foreign support for the Nationalists, and escalating foreign embargoes on Japanese trade. The decision to escalate in 1937 was just one of many turning points.

The Japanese call these turning points “incidents,” and the Chinese have adopted this nomenclature. They range from strikes to coup attempts, to assassinations, to regional wars. The word usage suggests a fork in the road and a choice that forever forecloses certain alternatives. Generally, such incidents are named by date or place, as if to absolve human beings of any responsibility for them. Incidents litter modern Japanese and Chinese history. The so-called China Incident of 1937

## FEAR AND AMBITION: JAPAN, CHINA, AND RUSSIA

was no minor untoward event but a massive escalation of a regional war that resulted from decisions made by leaders on both sides: the decision of the Japanese to attack and the decision of the Chinese to resist. Often neither the Chinese nor the Japanese wanted to acknowledge their wars. So the Japanese downgraded their wars and battles in China to “incidents,” while the Chinese refer to their civil wars as mere “rebellions.”

Long ago Confucius admonished the educated to choose their words carefully lest they misidentify phenomena: “If the names are not rectified, then words are not appropriate. If words are not appropriate, then deeds are not accomplished.”<sup>6</sup> Even a modest attempt at multiculturalism would reveal a surprisingly complicated nomenclature for World War II, the generic title for the conventional tale. Imperial Japanese leaders called the war against the United States, the British Commonwealth, and the Netherlands the War of Greater East Asia (大東亜戦争)<sup>7</sup> and defined all the prior sound and fury emanating from Manchuria and China as mere “incidents” – the 1931 Manchuria Incident and the 1937 China Incident, respectively. This reflected a practical consideration: before Pearl Harbor, a declaration of war on China would have triggered the U.S. Neutrality Act and embargoes of war matériel against both sides.<sup>8</sup>

Postwar Japanese historians divide into two groups: one highlights the Fifteen Year War (十五年戦争) from 1931 to 1945, and the other distinguishes a Japanese-Chinese War (日中戦争) from 1937 to 1945 from a Pacific Ocean War (太平洋戦争) from 1941 to 1945. Those who begin the war in China in 1937, not 1931, consider the invasion of Manchuria to have been an “incident” and focus on Japan’s fight against the Nationalists, which did not begin until 1937. This version of events ignores the fact that the Nationalists never controlled much of North China, let alone Manchuria, and so discounts all the northern Chinese who fought Japan from 1931 to 1937. As it turns out, whatever the euphemism, Japan conducted uninterrupted conventional and counterinsurgent military operations on the internationally recognized territory of China from 1931 to 1945.

The Chinese and the Taiwanese focus on their War of Resistance against Japan (抗日戦争) from 1937 to 1945 with minimal reference to the United States let alone, in the case of the Communists, to the Nationalist contribution to Japan’s defeat. This tale emphasizes the



## THE ASIAN ROOTS OF WORLD WAR II

heroic fight of the Communists or the Nationalists, opinions dividing along the Taiwan Strait. Communist dating follows their division of the long Chinese civil war into the First Revolutionary Civil War from 1924 to 1927 (the years of the First Nationalist-Communist United Front), the Second Revolutionary Civil War from 1927 to 1937 (the years of Nationalist encirclement campaigns against the Communists), and the Third Revolutionary Civil War from 1945 to 1949 (the show-down phase of the long civil war).

In fact from 1931 to 1934, the Communists could not fight the Japanese because repeated Nationalist encirclement campaigns sent them on a Long March to desolate Yan'an. Even after 1937, Nationalist, and not Communist, forces did virtually all of the conventional fighting by Chinese. In the end, the U.S. naval offensive homing in on Japan, the U.S. air campaign over Japan, and the Russian pincer from mainland Asia account for the Japanese capitulation. Yet the U.S. offensive on Japan could not have occurred without China's pinning the bulk of the Imperial Japanese Army far from the U.S. invasion route.

In other words, each country has its own conventional tale. Each discounts the contributions of others. The tale told in the United States omits many of the most interesting people, who failed to leave adequate records in Western European languages, an insurmountable problem for most Russians, Chinese, and Japanese. Their diverse places of origin gave rise to interests and priorities different from those of Americans or Britons. Often their choices do not seem "normal" and "rational" to many Americans because (surprise, surprise) their actions did not reflect American norms. An examination of why they made the portentous choices that they did is a fascinating story, well worth the telling.

The tale told here is one of nested wars set off by fears and ambitions against a backdrop of lethal national dilemmas. The choices made by national leaders reflected not only the ambitions for empire of Japan, China, and Russia, but also deep fears and dilemmas with no obvious solutions. After World War I shattered the international political order and the Great Depression then shattered the global economic order, the Western democracies bloodied themselves on the shards, discrediting liberal democracy and liberal economics in the process. In retrospect the belated post-World War II turn toward expansionist economic policies seems obvious, but it was not so at the time. Economic and political recovery required the massive stimulus of the war spending to

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-02069-6 - The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949  
S. C. M. Paine  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## FEAR AND AMBITION: JAPAN, CHINA, AND RUSSIA

get Americans back to work and the postwar Marshall Plan to restore Western Europe. Back in the 1930s, fascism and communism appeared to offer more promising solutions to the depression than did the worn-out paradigm offered by the stagnant Western democracies.

Both fascism and communism appealed to important segments of Chinese and Japanese society. The Nationalists attempted to create a hybrid out of communist political institutions and fascist economic institutions, while the Communists preferred the authentic dish of unadulterated communism. Fears and ambitions animated both the Communists and Nationalists, who dreamed of a reunified Qing empire and the restoration of China as the greatest power in Asia if not the world. Meanwhile, the Japanese feared the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia and the Western protectionist response to the Great Depression. Their fears and ambitions for empire met in Manchuria. Fears and ambitions also drove the Russians, who envisioned their country in the vanguard of a new international order replacing the discredited liberal democratic status quo. Yet everywhere the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Russians faced danger, hostile neighbors, and internal foes. Meanwhile, the Americans dreamed away the 1920s, ignoring the need to contain Germany and the many interconnections of the global economy. Desperation did not reach American shores until the stock market crash in 1929. Soon desperate decisions around the globe reflected the desperate times.

In the 1930s, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States all tried to go their separate ways. But the long Chinese civil war fed into a regional war that escalated into a global war, demonstrating the inescapable connections of living on a shared planet. Eventually, the separate ways converged into a global war, which determined the outcome of the regional war, and the outcome of the global and regional wars then strongly influenced that of the long Chinese civil war – a war whose ramifications preoccupy policy makers still.

The butchery of the fighting defies description. One guesstimate puts the number of Chinese dead during the two-generation long Chinese civil war at more than 20 million.<sup>9</sup> The sheer breadth of these wars has shaped the current Asian balance of power as well as national perspectives on the requirements for national security and the appropriate treatment of neighbors. At the beginning of the third millennium, the rubble left by a half-century of unrelenting warfare in China preoccupies the