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China and Japan at War: Suffering and Survival, 1937-1945

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The Resistance War (Banian kangRi zhanzheng) of 1937-45 was one of the greatest upheavals in Chinese history. It was a time of courage and sacrifice and a time of suffering and loss. Virtually the entire country was engulfed by war. All of China's major cities were occupied, as were the eastern and northeastern regions and much of the southeast. The national government was forced to move inland. Almost every family and community was affected by war. Tens of millions of people took flight. Between 20 million and 30 million soldiers and civilians died during the war.

Wars are the fracture lines of social history. We use the phrases 'pre-war', 'ante bellum', and 'post-war' in looking at European or American history as a recognition of the fundamental changes that wars produce in societies. Wars are often the death knell of an old social order, the grim handmaidens for the birth of new ones. This process does not happen in a planned or systematic way on a political or ideological blue print. The hallmark of war is chaos. War attacks the social fabric and brings loss of cohesion and fragmentation to systems and institutions that seemed solid and resistant to change in times of peace.

Here I propose to consider the effects of the war on Chinese society – not at why the war happened or at how it was fought or who was to blame for it. This means viewing the war through the eyes of the people who were on the receiving end of aggression, the Chinese in all their variety and their different circumstances, the people whose society was turned upside down.

The pretext for war, the *casus belli*, may not be reflected in what follows. Japan attacked China in 1937 in the name of containing communism, preventing its export from the USSR in to China. China never gave much credence to this justification for the invasion, not least because Japanese forces made only one aggressive move against the USSR, at Nomonhan in Mongolia, in 1938. The result was disastrous for Japan. Rather than attack the communist Soviet Union, Japan attacked the anti-Communist Guomindang (GMD) which ruled China. By the end of the war the pretext of attacking communism was not only threadbare but contradictory; by 1945 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), far stronger than it had ever been, was poised for success in the subsequent Civil War. The political beneficiary of the war was the CCP; it came to power in the aftermath of the war, hardened by the war, and ready to take on the GMD.

Japanese forces on the march at Nomonhan

The Resistance War left a devastated society. The regional variations were great, but this did not mean that any regions escaped the impact of the war. This damage was the pre-condition the CCP needed to launch the new society, one that Mao would later describer as `poor and blank (*yiqiong erbai*)', a clean slate on which to launch their visions of a new world. And the war also gave the CCP the tool it needed to get the people behind it – mass mobilisation. The first acts of political mobilisation with the form of resistance to Japan can be traced to the May 4th Movement (1919), followed by stronger forms after the 1931 seizure of Manchuria. At the start of the war the GMD and the CCP both took up mobilisation in the name of national resistance; by the end of the war the CCP, operating mainly in occupied areas, where the need for mobilisation for resistance was greatest, had made its version of nationalism and socialism into a huge movement.

The Japanese threat to China had been growing for so long that when it actually materialized, the invasion itself was not a shock. What was a shock was the scale of the attack, the fierceness of the fighting, and the devastation of the bombing. The onslaught produced a great wave of patriotism. The war was at the start a patriotic war, a war of resistance in which much of the population was involved.

The patriotic slogans came from the top, but they reflected mass feelings. The early months of fighting had a tremendously stimulating effect. For the first time, patriotism transcended regionalism, localism, and familism. The war was seen as a race war in which Chinese were being attacked as a people by aggressors who seemed to regard the Chinese as a lower order. A new national spirit (*guoqing*) blossomed. All the efforts of intellectuals and students to raise the spirit of nationalism, efforts that had been going on since the May 4th Movement in 1919, now came to fruition – and at a far higher pitch than anyone had imagined possible.

The Japanese invasion made most Chinese into nationalists; the old responsibilities to the family came second. Deng Yu, who died in August in the failed defence of Beiping, left a message to his mother before he went off to fight: 'I cannot fulfill filial piety and loyalty to the country at the same time. Please pardon me if death befalls me.'

The national spirit and the unity forged at the level of the state bloomed at the same time that the bedrock of society, the family, was being broken down by the chaos of war. The upheaval and flight, the abandonment of home and possessions, and the sudden impoverishment and destitution created by the war were seen as sacrifices for the nation.

The fighting and bombing in the second half of 1937 set off massive civilian evacuations and flights in to exile. The waves of refugees paralleled the spring of the fighting. More than 100,000 people fled into the foreign concessions in Shanghai in October and November as the Japanese attack on the Chinese parts of the city intensified. All through the lower Yangzi, civilian populations fled in panic as the fighting came closer.

Bombing was the trigger for much of the panic flight. The day after bombs fell on Fenyang (Shanxi), the patrician Ji family took to

Chinese nationalist troops in action against Japan

the roads, leaving a life of comfort and high status, heading for Wuhan. Eight-yer –old Ji Chaozhu made the long journey mostly on foot:

We had to share sleeping *kangs* with smelly strangers, and eat our meals on the dirt floors of their tiny cottages, shooing away the dogs and chickens that pestered everyone for scraps. No one in our family had ever known anything less than privilege and prosperity. I could see in my parents' exhausted faces the toll this was taking, but they remained stoic through the inconveniences and discomfort.

Woodblock image of the 1941 bombing of Chongqing

Many people fled out of fear of what would happen to members of their families. Young girls were especially vulnerable to the incoming forces. Their parents would try to get them out of places about to fall to the Japanese, hearing rumours of what happened in many of the major cities that were occupied in late 1937. In Suzhou, more than 2,000 young girls were taken away as 'comfort women' – or sex slaves – after Japanese troops took the city in November. The rumours about the danger posed to women were blood-curdling, enough to get families to flee in panic.

Some of the people who fled from the areas occupied by Japanese troops left not because they were panic-stricken but because they refused to live under the enemy. Some of these people were students and other young people leaving to fight for China. Older intellectuals fled because they knew they would be in trouble under the Japanese. The remnant Chinese armies withdrawn from the North also intended to resist, as did the evacuees from Shanghai – merchants, factory owners, workers, journalists and actors – and moved inland to defy the invaders.

The total number of refugees produced by the war is difficult to calculate. Figures given after the war vary from 20 million to nearly 100 million, or almost a quarter of the population. It was one of the greatest upheavals in Chinese history. It tore the fabric of society to ribbons.

Refugees establish new homes. Yan Han woodblock print

The war brought to Chinese society a universality of suffering. At its end so many people had been killed or deeply injured – soldiers, their families, the victims of bombing and of scorched earth actions, the survivors of the economic chaos, the forced labourers, the comfort women, the orphans – that much of the whole society was suffused with loss. There were bitter recriminations against the few who had not suffered, or were in better material circumstances – because their `happy' situation was a by-product of their accommodation with the occupiers or of profiteering.

At the end of the war Chinese society was riddled by mistrust. The natural trust between individuals and groups that had been the glue of traditional society was gone, broken by the war, eroded, undermined, and betrayed in a myriad of ways. The old social elites had either disappeared from the occupied areas or had lived with the Japanese in various degrees of accommodation. In the unoccupied areas, social trust had been undermined by separation, deprivation and loss of morale. The loss of trust was epitomised by the growth of official spying, whether the Japanese secret police, or the GMD's and CCP's spy systems. The optimistic, positive atmosphere of the early 1930s seemed to be lost forever. The atmosphere of mistrust was intensified under the early CCP, in a welter of political movements that demanded victims and forced people to distrust each other – while making it easier for people to attack those with whom they no longer felt personal connections. The excesses of the Mao Era had their beginnings in the Resistance War.

The war destroyed much of the cohesion of Chinese society. This cohesion was already under threat in the early years of the Republic, as the old order weakened under the assault of militarism, political change and modernity. The war accelerated the process dramatically. The family declined in size. Functions that families performed for their members fell in to disuse – communal housing, the provision

of financial support, and aid in times of need. Periodic tasks of ritual significance could not be performed during the war: the choice of spouses for children by their parents, the naming of children, the proper burial of the dead. Family celebrations of the New Year, or the sweeping of the graves were often impossible in wartime; the expense, the absence of key members and the impropriety of enjoyment in war made it difficult to hold celebrations that solidified families and communities.

Counterpoised against the catalogue of social losses is a loftier, transcendent conception of the impact of war, which sees society uplifted by the courage and sacrifice of individuals. Warfare makes heroes. `Baptism by fire', `steeled in battle', are some of the many sayings, in English and Chinese, that suggest that war and the loss and suffering it brings is positive, that people come into their own when they are faced with challenges and danger and then go on to transcend them. This is the basis of ideas of heroism, on which in turn are based rewards for bravery and heroism, medals, commemorations, war memorials.

Communist 8th Route Army grows grain. Gu Yuan woodblock

Few Chinese soldiers were recognized as heroes at the end of the war. There was a general reluctance to name or celebrate heroes, or to commemorate the dead. Perhaps the scale was too vast. A more likely reason is that both the GMD and the CCP, by now the only two players in Chinese politics, were preoccupied with their own internecine struggle. The war ended with the imminent threat of civil war, not with recognition of the dead or with the return of heroes to their grateful homes.

For ordinary people there was not much to celebrate. China was not gripped by the wild joy that flooded over many of the nations that were on the winning side in the Second World War. At the end of the war in China one of the most common feelings was simply relief for the people that had survived when so many had not. The reasons for survival were often mundane. Location was a critical one. People were more likely to survive if they lived in a northern city, or in Manchuria or Taiwan, places where the Japanese occupation was less harsh than elsewhere, wartime survival was not difficult – the problems came afterwards, when the people who had stayed had to explain themselves to those who had fled. Age was another key reason. Young civilians were more resilient, more likely to be able to flee, to escape from the enemy. Youth was a double-edged sword. Young men were also more likely to be drafted in to the army, or taken for slave labour. And wealth, at least at the start of the war, was a key factor in survival. The wealthy could afford to flee; they were more likely to have connections away from home, even in the foreign concessions. Perhaps the key reason for survival was resilience, the ability to overcome hardships. The resilience that many people showed came in part from dredging deep in to the Chinese tradition of endurance. This was the strength of the Chinese people. But what was clear, even amongst those who demonstrated great resilience, was that very few people had escaped the impact of war.

The transcendence of trauma has been an almost commonplace feature of modern Chinese history. The endurance and toughness with which millions of people have endured terrible hardships and still kept going, with dogged determination, is something that fills foreign observers with admiration. Many millions of Chinese survived the war, as proud, tough people. These were the ones who went on to be on the winning side in the civil war, and the less-certain ones who stayed on in China in 1949, not quite knowing what the future would bring, but assuming that it must be better than what they had just been through. The people who left the Mainland in 1949 were just as determined to survive, but they were terribly battered by their experiences in the civil war. And they were at first devastated by how much they had lost. But the worlds they created in Taiwan and Hong Kong turned out, over the duration, to be two quite different but equally successful combinations of the Chinese tradition and modernity.

The most momentous outcome of the war was the communist victory, the victory of the socialist revolution. Mao Zedong was clear about this. In 1972, on the first visit of a Japanese leader to China since the war, Mao responded to Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's stilted efforts at a veiled apology by virtually thanking him for Japan's invasion of China. 'If Japan hadn't invaded China, the Chinese Communist Party would not have been victorious; moreover, we would never be meeting today. This is the dialectic of history.

Mao and Tanaka, 1972

The desperation of the war set the stage for a confident, tough, remorseless revolutionary movement to take over the nation that had rejected it so decisively a little over a decade before, whose then government had harried it almost to distinction. The communists had steeled themselves after their defeat in Jiangxi and the calvary of the Long March never to be beaten again, never to be humiliated again. The war gave them the opportunity to prepare themselves to take over the whole nation.

The social damage and dislocation of the war was fodder for the CCP. The old elites had lost so much of their wealth and prestige during the war that they were virtually 'on the scrap heap of history'. Does this suggest that the war was a class war as well as a war of resistance, a war in which the proletariat triumphed over the old elites? Joshua Howard, in his ground-breaking *Workers at War: labor in China's Arsenals, 1937-1953*, suggests that it was. A more conventional view, current now among Chinese historians, is that during the war, patriotism subsumed class warfare. Another class-based interpretation is that the leaders of the old society were associated with abject failure during the war because they were overstretched to the point of collapse by the war, and they failed the people they were supposed to lead, at least to the extent that they could not protect them from the invading Japanese.

The war did give the CCP structural assistance in the class struggle. Beyond the losses of the war were all the things that did not happen because of the war – the loss of careers, the loss of once secure futures, the investments that were not made. These 'phantom' losses left a great number of disappointed people, whose dreams and ambitions had been destroyed by the war.

Michael Ondaatje compared the war in Europe to a chasm, a deep rift that demarcated two worlds. In China, the chasm of the war was just as deep. The old world was gone for good, the new one in uncertain gestation. The sufferings of the war ingrained a tough, hard survivor mentality which put individual or small family survival ahead of the larger family and community.

The legacy of war is still working itself out in the memory and experiences of the Chinese people.

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