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Reviewed by Bill Sewell (Department of History, Saint Mary's University)
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From Black and White to Grey: Chinese Collaboration in the Sino-Japanese War

>From Black and White to Grey: Chinese Collaboration in the Sino-Japanese War

The history of the second Sino-Japanese War has been a long neglected subject; in fact to this date there is no decent English-language book on the topic.[1] Given the enormous array of books published on the European theater, from every angle conceivable, this is remarkable. Explaining this lacuna usually involves going into the difficulties confronted in trying to access sources, but it can also be attributed to the moralistic tones that have long colored perceptions of the experience—tones that bestowed simplistic black and white views on the conflict that obviated any need to revisit the events. Collaborators, for example, were simply labeled “traitors” (*hanjian* in Mandarin Chinese).[2] Fortunately, however, as the publication of this volume suggests, both of these obstacles appear to be diminishing. Moreover, if the issue of one of the war’s greyest areas can now be meaningfully revisited, then perhaps so may the larger experience be finally addressed.

Until recently, the study of Chinese collaboration has been virtually ignored.[3] Since the 1990s, however, a steady trickle of works concerned with collaboration has appeared.[4] The present work addresses the issue through eleven articles that focus on the Japanese sponsored regimes in the lower Yangzi (Yangtze) Valley—not only China’s most economically productive region, but also the onetime heartland of the Nationalist (Guomindang or Kuomintang) government of Chiang Kai-shek

(Jiang Jieshi).

Rather than simply call attention to a gap in the literature, the authors note a range of factors that have combined to make this work possible. Co-editor David Barrett notes some of the more salient factors in the introduction. Perhaps most obviously the volume represents an English language response to a growing surge of Chinese publications (p. 15). The dynamic growth of the Chinese publishing industry has been noticeable over the past two decades, but for Barrett the key is the changed context. Not only have researchers returned to old sources with new questions, but it strikes Barrett that recent changes in the People’s Republic of China have resulted in changed attitudes among those who study Chinese history. This appears to be as true for academics overseas as it is for Chinese academics, because for Barrett, it was only after the overriding interest in the development of Maoist thought—something he asserts eclipsed interest in Nationalist China and the puppet regimes almost entirely—dispersed could other research agendas finally emerge. This, however, might go too far for some, especially when Barrett asserts that especially American academics in the 1960s and 1970s shared the “teleological notion that Maoist communism was both the rightful and inevitable historic destiny of China” (p. 15).[5]

These processes eventually led to a December 1995 conference in Vancouver, Canada that resulted in the eleven papers here. It is refreshing to write that all of these essays are useful, since they show, in multiple

ways, that those who decided to work with the Japanese did so for a variety of reasons and not simply out of any moral weakness. With this volume, the study of wartime Chinese collaboration with Japanese thus moves from simplistic black and white assumptions to more realistic and useful shades of gray.

The first two essays examine negotiations between Chinese and Japanese to suggest that pragmatism motivated Chinese collaborators more than moral turpitude. Wang Ke-wen's study of the policies of Wang Jingwei (Wang Ching-wei) emphasizes the long-term continuity apparent in his decisions. Rather than perceive him as a member of a nascent pro-Japan faction, Wang argues that the actions of the longtime Guomindang leader betrayed a consistency that escaped many of his contemporaries' attention. Long a proponent of making China strong, Wang only opted for negotiations with Japan when he thought China was too weak to confront Japan. This was as apparent before the war, when vestigial warlordism rendered China weak, as it was after the many retreats that occurred in the aftermath of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (July 7, 1937). Convinced that the Western imperialist powers would never be of any aid, Wang took what he thought was the only viable road by establishing a new government that would restore peace and prosperity (or as much as possible) within the Japanese orbit. In 1938 the prospects for any Nationalist victory were grim indeed.[6]

Wang Ke-wen's account is useful because he does not whitewash Wang's activities, noting that Wang was also using his new position to carry on his rivalry with Chiang Kai-shek. However, Wang Ke-wen also explores Wang's fatalism, as he knew that going over to the Japanese side would be an act of sacrifice (p. 35). In Wang Ke-wen's view, Wang stuck to his policies with only a small hope of successfully supplanting Chiang.

A similar mix of issues is apparent in the case of Song Zheyuan, a Nationalist general facing an expanding Japanese presence in North China before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident.[7] In order to maintain local stability he determined there was no choice but to negotiate with the Japanese, but such negotiations naturally would inevitably call Song's relations with Nanjing into question. As such, Marjorie Dryburgh ably shows not only the political fragmentation apparent in Nationalist China, but also the paucity of options available to Chinese regional commanders. Song had to go along with some Japanese demands, however, by participating in negotiations he proved able to delay Japanese encroach-

ment as well as enhance his own position. At the same time, Song's actions resembled those of Wang Jingwei because in Song's eyes as well, Jiang's Guomindang seemed "a poor guardian of the national interest" (p. 54). Unlike Wang, however, after hostilities broke out Song elected only to fight.

The final essay in this section examines wartime negotiations between Chinese and Japanese. In reviewing these discussions, Huang Meizhen and Yang Hanqing note well the difficulty of achieving a negotiated peace. While the Nationalists sought consistently to restore the situation as it existed before the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the scale of Japanese losses prevented Japanese from accepting anything less than gaining Nationalist recognition of key Japanese actions, such as the creation of Manchukuo (Manzhouguo). The authors, however, deem that ultimately it was the Nationalists who were the more realistic, observing that Japan could never conquer all of China and that eventually China would have allies. In contrast, the Japanese consistently misjudged both Chinese anxieties as well as their own abilities. Indeed, the authors conclude that until the attack on Pearl Harbor, Chiang Kai-shek may have been willing to accept a more realistic peace offer, one that could have included recognition of Manchukuo and possibly the independence of Inner Mongolia. By that time, however, the Japanese had vested too much effort into creating the Wang Jingwei regime—including anti-Chiang Kai-shek rhetoric—to make that scenario possible.

The Huang and Yang essay is also useful because it sets the stage for the remaining essays. These consider the issue of collaboration after the outbreak of hostilities. This was a difficult era for Chinese, because for six long years—from the end of 1938 until Operation Ichigo in 1944—the battle lines remained roughly the same. This meant that not only a difficult war of attrition occurred, but also that an enormous number of people living behind Japanese lines had to learn to make do amid changed circumstances. Moreover, the scale of the occupation insured that there would be a wide variety of forms of collaboration.

Many of the articles here distinguish between collaboration and collaborationism, usually following the distinction offered by Roderick Kedward.[8] While the latter may be used to describe those who identified with the invader's cause, the former may be used to describe those who opted to work with the invader out of self-interest or simply for survival. Given the nature of the Japanese rhetoric and occupation, it should not be surprising that

the articles here are concerned with examples of collaboration rather than collaborationism.

The book's second section focuses on Japanese sponsored client regimes, two of which illustrate the practical motivations behind the decisions to participate in administering occupied China. First, Timothy Brook provides what appears to be the first survey of the history of the Reformed Government (Weixin zhengfu), which administered central China from March 1938 to March 1940. Rather than dismiss this group simply as dupes, as so many have done, Brook looked instead for the processes by which the government was formed, thereby revealing its underlying rationales. Surprisingly, he found that the establishment of the Reformed Government was hardly a straightforward affair. It required complicated negotiations between a variety of Chinese and Japanese concerns, and exposed rifts within the Imperial Japanese Army itself. The Reformed Government was thus "not a purely Japanese creation" (p. 100).

David Barrett's essay on Wang Jingwei reinforces Brook's in that Wang, like Liang Hongzhi and the other leaders of the Reformed Government, constituted a political alternative to Chiang Kai-shek, an alternative that had simply lost out in the political infighting of the prewar era. Thus, when considering what that government actually did, in Barrett's eyes the "continuities" with the prewar government seem more plentiful than the discontinuities—meaning that the Wang Jingwei regime governed central China more or less as the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek had. Indeed, Barrett concludes that in securing the continuity of China, Wang was only acting much as earlier Chinese had in dealing with invading Mongols or Manchus through the politics of accommodation.

In contrast to these two essays, Lo Jiu-lung's essay seeks to condemn the collaboration of Wang Jingwei and others on philosophical grounds. Lo does this through invoking Thomas Hobbes, the materialist philosopher perhaps most famous for seeking to bring order to the chaos of his own times. Yet Lo also adds a psychological dimension, suggesting that Wang Jingwei's temperament may have helped land him in trouble—"his quick temper sometimes led to rash decisions" (p. 121). In the final analysis, however, Lo concludes that while some people noted that the "existence of his government helped ameliorate the situation" (p. 131), given the "paucity of their attainments, it proved impossible for the collaborationists to argue their contribution to national survival after the war's end" (p. 132).

It is intriguing that Lo's rather dire assessment is included in this volume, as it seems to buck the trend. It also differs from the others in that it is more philosophically than empirically based. Lo cites only the one-month occupation of Zhengzhou (August to September, 1941) as a concrete example, and breezes over the actions of Wang Jingwei, including only one footnote. It would thus seem that Lo's determination that Wang was a "collaborationist" is not too firmly grounded, especially given his admission that individual survival was less important to many modern Chinese than it was for Hobbes.[9]

The third section of the book considers the roles of elites who collaborated. In addition to the articles by Brook and Dryburgh above, and along with Seybolt's in section four, this section breaks the newest ground. Specifically, here we have hints as to how the vast majority of Chinese caught behind enemy lines had to live. Parks Coble begins the section with an essay examining how Chinese capitalists sought to continue to do business in occupied Shanghai.[10] Intriguingly he finds that once things settled down, many businessmen proved able to survive. This was no simple task of course, as first the Japanese army had to stabilize society and then devise schemes that encouraged Chinese economic activities. This proved especially difficult as Chinese enterprises were forced to take a back seat to businesses in Japan. However, beginning in 1943, negotiations with the Wang Jingwei regime improved the business climate in Shanghai, although the deteriorating war situation once again made things more difficult. Coble ultimately concludes that "[m]ost Chinese businessmen survived, in fact, by relying on speculation and hoarding" (p. 154). Thus, while Japanese policies amounted to no more than a new form of colonial control, some enterprising Chinese did prove able to fleece the system, though presumably not without difficulty (or fear of arrest or worse).

Keith Schoppa's essay on occupied Shaoxing county, located on the southern shores of Hangzhou Bay, is a wonderful case study that reveals the chaos that undoubtedly reigned in much of occupied China. First there was the chaos involved in the retreat of the local government, one that had proved itself to be inept and corrupt. Then, the Japanese restored order by selecting local notables to administer society, a process that allowed for some measure of local prosperity. Even if these elites did benefit personally from such arrangements, as was widely believed, the community as a whole benefited also. This meant that elements of the local population who responded to the occupation carefully were able to profit from it. At the same time, some military elites re-

sponded opportunistically, seizing chances to create personal domains that could either cooperate with or challenge the Japanese, depending on whichever benefited them most. Moreover, because of their multiple identities, most of these opportunistic elites proved able to elude being labeled traitors when the war was over.

Poshek Fu's essay on the Chinese cinema in occupied Shanghai completes this section. He recapitulates the main theme of these essays by describing the space Chinese filmmaker Zhang Shankun carved out for himself when recruited by Kawakita Nagamasu. Until April 1942, under Kawakita's protection, Zhang dominated the Shanghai cinema; yet he was allowed a fair amount of autonomy, it seems, for the vast majority of his work dealt with the subject of love and avoided troublesome political themes. (However, it is not clear in Fu's essay if all of films did so; see p. 188.) As the war progressed, however, two reorganizations of the industry resulted in more Japanese control, with the result that some films were more politically motivated. That said, according to Fu, most films failed to provide the kind of political inspiration that movies produced in Manchukuo did. In conclusion, Fu argues that Chinese filmmakers provide a case of "resistance in collaboration," suggesting that a "new conceptual framework" is necessary to understand "the human condition in an extreme situation" (p. 198). (Indeed, he notes also that in some cases "we may discover collaboration in resistance.")

The final section of this collection addresses those areas in occupied China outside of the limelight. In the first essay, Peter Seybolt examines collaboration in Neihuang County in northern Henan. It is a sobering essay, as Seybolt documents the sad fact that most of the fighting that occurred in the county was between opposing Chinese forces, and not between Chinese and Japanese. This is significant, because as the Imperial Japanese Army had insufficient numbers to garrison the entirety of occupied China, they relied extensively on Chinese troops to augment their thinly stretched troops. However, rather than forcibly impress Chinese to collaborate militarily, the Japanese in Neihuang had simply to recruit from the local paramilitary organizations that had long existed on the north China plain. As the Guomindang had been unable to provide competent local administration before the war, a number of these organizations were already mobilized by the time the Japanese arrived. Several eventually volunteered to work with the Japanese in order to further their own expansion, which the Japanese accepted as they could not secure local stability on their own. The Japanese, too, eventually allowed these organizations to

carry out their own anti-Communist campaigns, resulting in extraordinarily high civilian death tolls. Naturally this undermined Japanese authority, and in the end it helped paved the way for a later Communist victory.

The final essay in this section by Odoric Wou documents nicely one of the reasons this collection was possible—the availability of new documents.[11] These include primary materials collected by the Communist Party and published in recent years at both the provincial and county level. Wou describes these sources as "a wealth of information on the socioeconomic background of local elites, the local power structure, the changes to that structure in wartime, and the strategies and tactics adopted by these elites in dealing with the Communists, Nationalists, and Japanese and their puppets during the war" (pp. 234-5).

The essays reviewed above are noteworthy in that most seek to liberate the issue of collaboration in wartime from the simplistic and moralistic framework into which it has long been straightjacketed. Of course, the moralistic perspective is understandable, for in addition to lingering Confucian rhetoric, the Japanese occupation at times proved bestial. However, a simplistic reading of the past is unhealthy—at the very least it encourages simplistic assessments of contemporary situations.

Greys are also useful because they include multiple hues. As such they depict more how life is, and less how one thinks it ought to be. Thus, despite the inherent murkiness of the subject—and because local studies of this era are what we need most—with this collection the study of China's wartime history in English takes a large step forward. (Indeed, I look forward to reading the companion volume to this book, including more papers given at the 1995 Vancouver conference.[12]) There are only two caveats to this fine collection: it would be nice to have a list of key names and terms in Chinese characters listed in an appendix; and, while Barrett's introduction is good for historiographical purposes, the best theoretical discussion can be found in the opening pages of the essay by Brook (pp. 81-4). Those sections should perhaps be read in tandem.

Notes

[1]. Dick Wilson's *When Tigers Fight: The Story of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945* (New York: Viking, 1982) is short and sketchy in the extreme, while Frank Dorn's *The Sino-Japanese War: From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* (New York: Macmillan, 1974) is better, it only carries through to 1941. Another work of limited

scope is Lincoln Li's *The Japanese Army in North China: Problems of Political and Economic Control* (Tokyo: Oxford University Press, 1975). More useful is the edited collection by James C. Hsiung and Steven Levine, eds., which surveys key aspects of this conflict, but by itself is insufficient, *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992). To be fair, there are also two volumes in English published in the Republic of China, but these are by nature one-sided. See Hsu Long-hsuen and Chang Ming-kai, eds., *History of The Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)* (Taipei: Chung Wu Publishing, 1971); and, Hu Pu-yu, *A Brief History of Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945)* (Taipei: Chung Wu Publishing, 1974).

[2]. For example, the two works published in Taiwan mentioned in the note above practically ignore the issue of collaboration, mentioning Wang Jingwei only in passing and always as a "traitor," even in the indexes. See Hsu and Chang, *History*, pp. 35-36, 57, 342, 637, and Hu, *Brief History*, pp. 9, 30, 356.

[3]. The only meaningful exceptions in English before the 1990s are John H. Boyle, *China and Japan at War: The Politics of Collaboration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); and, Gerald E. Bunker, *The Peace Conspiracy: Wang Ching-wei and the China War, 1937-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). Also of interest is Lloyd Eastman, "Facets of an Ambivalent Relationship: Smuggling, Puppets, and Atrocities During the War, 1937-1945," in *The Chinese and the Japanese: Essays in Political and Cultural Interactions*, ed. Akira Iriye (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 284-292.

[4]. For example, centering on Shanghai there are Poshek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Frederic Wakeman, *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime, 1937-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Wen-hsin Yeh (ed.), *Wartime Shanghai* (London: Routledge, 1998); and, Parks M. Coble, *Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangzi, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[5]. A number of important studies appeared in the 1970s that were more concerned with Nationalist failures than communist dynamism, including Lloyd E. Eastman, *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927-1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); and its sequel, *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China*

in War and Revolution, 1937-1949 (Stanford: Stanford University Press), published in 1984; and Suzanne Pepper, *Civil War in China: The Political Struggle, 1945-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Also relevant are Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972); James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912-1949* (New York: The Free Press, 1975); and Donald A. Jordan, *The Northern Expedition: China's National Revolution of 1926-1928* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1976).

[6]. Published after the 1995 conference, the article by Dongyoun Hwang, "Some Reflections on Wartime Collaboration in China: Wang Jingwei and His Group in Hanoi," in *Working Papers in Asian/Pacific Studies* (Durham: Duke University, February, 1998) is also of interest.

[7]. I have reviewed the work from which this essay is taken for H-Japan: see Marjorie Dryburgh, *North China and Japanese Expansion 1933-1937: Regional Power and the National Interest* (Richmond and Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000). See *H-Net Reviews* (February, 2002) <<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=2381810146580666>>\$. Other useful studies addressing the troubles of this era include Parks M. Coble, *Facing Japan: Chinese Politics and Japanese Imperialism, 1931-1937* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); James T. C. Liu, "Accommodation Politics: Southern Sung China and 1930s China," in *Studia Sino-Mongolica: Festschrift fur Herbert Franke*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979), pp. 69-82; and James T. C. Liu, "Sino-Japanese Diplomacy in the Appeasement Period, 1933-37" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1950). I do not think Liu's essay was cited in any of the essays here, which is surprising given the general thrust of these essays and the subtitle of the book.

[8]. See H. Roderick Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

[9]. To be fair, Lo does not invoke the collaboration versus collaborationism dichotomy outlined above, but participation in the Vancouver conference should have alerted Lo to the distinction others were making. Focusing on issues of survival, Lo's essay fails to make the case that Wang Jingwei was a collaborationist.

[10]. Coble's book from which this essay is extracted is Parks M. Coble, *Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangzi, 1937-1945* (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 2003).

[11]. Odoric Y. K. Wou is also the author of *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[12]. David P. Barrett and Larry N. Shyu, eds., *China in the Anti-Japanese War, 1937-1945: Politics, Culture, and Society* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001). Some of the essays from this collection could easily have been included in

the present book under review.

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