

# On occupied China\*

The Japanese occupation of China during World War II had a lasting legacy on the subsequent development of modern China and the Sino-Japanese relationship. Historians in the English-speaking world have recently begun to re-examine the history and meanings of Japanese-occupied China. Works such as John Boyle's *China and Japan at War, 1937-1945* (1972), Frederic Wakeman's *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime* (1996), Parks Coble's *Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangzi* (2003) and Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh's *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Shanghai Under Japanese Occupation* (2004) challenge the nationalist paradigm of moral dichotomy (resistance vs. collaboration, patriotism vs. betrayal) that has dominated the historiography. These works present to us, in different ways, a complex world of political intrigue, urban terrorism, and ambiguous business strategies.

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The new scholarship both changes and complicates the ways we understand the occupied territories of wartime China, which included all the major cities and cultural and commercial centres along the eastern seaboard - Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou. We now know that occupied China was a colonial world ruled by brute force and propaganda, a dehumanizing world racked by hunger, violence, and corruption. But even as the Japanese army tried to impose a Manichean world upon the people under its domination, responses to Japanese rule were far from Manichean. There were few resisters or traitors; most people fell in-between these polar opposites. They tried to make the best of the situation, struggling to survive the difficult times with as much dignity as possible.

Surviving involved everyday negotiations with the occupying force which brought with it wrenching moral conflicts and life-and-death consequences. In the occupied cities along the eastern seaboard, for example, Chinese were required to bow to Japanese sentries posted at every street corner. If they did not bow 'properly' they would be slapped in the face, hit with a rifle butt, or forced to kneel for the day. To bow 'properly' to the enemy was a symbol of absolute submission. Should Chinese have allowed themselves to be humiliated every time they walked to work or to the grocery store, or should they have refused to leave their houses to avoid humiliation? What should they have done if Japanese called them dogs and kicked them in the groin when they bowed 'improperly'? These kinds of banal, daily negotiations with the enemy involved various degrees of complicity and accommodation that put enormous psychological strain on people in occupied China.

We also know that we should not confuse the space in which individuals and organizations were situated in occupied areas with the location of their political loyalties. Indeed there were various spaces in occupied China that existed both within and outside the Japanese war machine. For example, Shanghai cinema was an organizational part of the Nanjing regime, yet it produced popular entertainment that was irrelevant to the legitimization efforts of the occupying force. At the same time, we know that the boundaries between occupied and unoccupied (Chinese-ruled) areas and those between occupied China and Chinese communities beyond the border (especially Hong Kong and Macau) were more porous and fluid than we thought. People, ideas, goods and capital traversed these borders throughout the war. This boundary-crossing traffic had an enormous impact on occupied

Japanese sentry on guard on Nanjing Road in occupied Shanghai



The XXth Century, Shanghai

China's cultural, social and economic life. For example, the economic prosperity of wartime Shanghai was inseparable from its access to technology and capital from Hong Kong and Singapore, while Cantonese opera troupes traveled constantly around the Pearl River delta for performances that helped sustain the consumer economy of the region.

How much more do we need to learn in order to have a deeper, more nuanced and multi-faceted view of Japanese-occupied China? I want to suggest three areas for further research.

First, most of the research on occupied China has been focused on the mainland. Understandable as this is, the focus carries with it limitations and deficiencies. How can we make sense of the blossoming of wartime Shanghai popular culture and its entertainment economy without exploring their connections with, for example, Southeast Asian

Chinese capital, the exchange of people and technology with Hong Kong, and the structural changes of the global pan-Chinese market? These connections in turn helped shape the forms and content of occupied popular culture. Or how do we map Chinese literary culture during the war if we do not know its intricate interconnections with exiled Chinese communities and publishing industries in, for example, Hong Kong and Singapore-Malaya? This was also the case in manufacturing and financial industries, as many factories and banks (both state-run and private) moved parts of their operations to areas outside the mainland during the war, in part to spread investment risk. So we need to expand our research focus by situating the history of occupied China in the larger, more complex context of greater China.

Second, excepting recent work by Timothy Brook and Keith Schoppa, our research on occupied China has been

decidedly urban (and focusing especially on Shanghai). This tendency is important as well as understandable as occupied China was made up of all the major cities that had played significant roles in China's harrowing negotiation with colonialism and modernity in the last century, and many of these cities had been subjected to massacre, terrorism, and all kinds of atrocity by the Japanese army. Also, archival materials on the histories of these occupied cities are more easily available. However, we know that only part of occupied China was urban. An urban focus occludes the vast territories made up of small cities, townships and villages under Japanese control. How did landownership patterns and local leadership structures change? In what specific ways did the occupying forces squeeze local resources and control the circulation of goods? Was there resistance by local communities and how was it organized and mobilized? How did the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party operate there?

How did the Japanese organization of intelligence information and oppression in villages differ from the cities? In what ways did the experiences of occupation in rural China differ from urban experiences? These questions point to the need for more studies on the histories of the Japanese-ruled countryside and its multi-levelled connections with the cities.

Third, research on occupied China has tended to focus largely on men, public life, and elite culture. These are important subjects, but equally important are the subjects of women, domestic life, gender relationships, and popular cultures. New studies by, for example, Norman Smith, Susan Glosser and Allison Rottmann open new perspectives on the ways in which literary discourses in occupied China were shaped and redefined by women (e.g., Zhang Ailing and Su Qing), and on the changing functions and cultural meanings of cinema in the everyday life of Chinese living under occupation. But we still know little, for example, about any changes in the roles of women (e.g., the idea of 'new woman') and the ways in which domestic life was organized in occupied cities, or in what ways the struggle of ordinary people, men and women, to create normality in the midst of Japanese terror changed the discourses and practices of urban popular cultures. We need to expand into these important subjects in order to push our understanding of occupied China to another level of complexity and multiplicity. ◀

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