

War and Nationalism in China

1925–1945

Hans J. van de Ven

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War and Nationalism in China

In 1937, the Nationalists under Chiang Kaishek were leading the Chinese war effort against Japan and were lauded in the West for their efforts to transform China into an independent and modern nation; yet this image was quickly tarnished. The Nationalists were soon denounced as militarily incompetent, corrupt, and anti-democratic and Chiang Kaishek, the same.

In this book, Hans J. van de Ven investigates the myths and truths of Nationalist resistance including issues such as:

- The role of the USA in East Asia during the Second World War.
- The achievements of Chiang Kaishek as Nationalist leader.
- The respective contributions of the Nationalists and the Communists in the defeat of Japan.
- The consequences of the Europe First strategy for Asia.

War and Nationalism in China offers a major new interpretation of the Chinese Nationalists, placing their War of Resistance against Japan in the context of their prolonged efforts to establish control over their own country and providing a critical reassessment of Allied Warfare in the region. This groundbreaking volume will interest students and researchers of Chinese history and warfare.

Hans J. van de Ven, educated at Leiden and Harvard universities, is a Reader in Chinese Studies at the University of Cambridge. He is also the author of the award-winning book *From Friend to Comrade*.

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For Johan, Derek, and Willem

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Conventions

This book uses the Pinyin transliteration system, with a few arbitrary exceptions. In the case of some well-known Chinese and geographical names, I have used established English spellings. Thus, I use Chiang Kaishek rather than Jiang Jieshi and the Yellow River rather than the Huanghe. I also refer to the Nationalists' political party as the KMT (Kuo-min-tang) rather than the GMD (Guomindang), as some now do. In the Notes, I follow the conventional format except that in referencing documents from published collections of primary sources I provide only a translated title. These titles are long and were added by the compilers of these collections. To omit a long Pinyin transliteration seemed justifiable to keep the Notes accessible to a non-specialist audience and saved considerable space. Translations of titles of Chinese books and articles in the Notes can be found in the bibliography.

Introduction

When China's War of Resistance against Japan broke out in 1937, many foreign correspondents rushed to China. Peter Fleming covered the war for *The Times*. Joris Ivens, the Dutch Left-wing film-maker, led the History Today film crew. He as well as Robert Capa, the war photographer, had moved on straight from Spain, where Franco had just prevailed in the Spanish Civil War. Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden felt like 'characters in one of Jules Verne's stories about lunatic English explorers' when they travelled to the battlefields of China. Isherwood wrote with sympathy about Chinese soldiers and Auden in his poems expressed the sad absurdity of war.¹ Franco's victory in Spain, the spread of militarism and fascism in Europe, the callousness of appeasing West European democracies, the alternative of Communism, and the dread of another world war were the themes featuring in their reporting on the events unfolding in China.

When the books came out in the following year, all were opposed to the Japanese and many wrote favourably about the Nationalists, the ruling party, which led the Chinese war effort. In 1939, Robin Hyde in *Dragon Rampant* described the first great battles of the war praising the Chinese. In the same year, Charles Shepherd in *The Case Against Japan* detailed Japanese violations of international law and disregard for the League of Nations. Harold Timperley of the *Manchester Guardian* gave publicity to the Nanjing Massacre in *What War Means: the Japanese Terror in China*. Johan Gunnar Andersson's *China Fights for the World* stated that 'among the democratic powers, China alone has for twenty-five months fought singled-handed and against tremendous odds to uphold the right of a nation to live its free and independent life'.² Andersson had lived for many years in China and praised the Nationalists for what had been achieved in state-building and economic reconstruction, but also wrote that rural poverty remained a serious problem, commenting, however, that 'Chiang Kaishek knows where the shoe pinches'.³

In 1940, Hallett Abend, writing to awaken the US public to the USA's destiny in China, criticised Nationalist corruption, profiteering, and nepotism, but also praised the Nationalists for responding well to the challenges of the war and argued that China was experiencing a revival. In *China's Struggles with the Dictators*, which had a foreword by Guo Taiji, the Chinese Ambassador in London, O.M. Green, closely following Nationalists propaganda, described the Nationalists as having bedded down a new unity in China and as capably leading its transformation into a modern nation.

Even Theodore White, whose *Thunder out of China* of 1946, written together with Annalee Jacoby, became a best-selling indictment of the Nationalists, reported on

2 Introduction

China with considerable sympathy and even admiration for the Nationalists during the first two years of his stay, which began in 1939. White was the China reporter of Henry Luce's *Time* magazine. He wrote of Chiang Kaishek as an 'Olympian' whose tranquillity reassured 'all who come into contact with him' and praised Madame Chiang as brave, anxious to promote American efficiency, a philanthropist, and a social worker who believed in 'the democratic process'.⁴ As late as 1941, he praised Chiang Kaishek's refusal to make peace with the Japanese and believed that their time in East Asia was running out.⁵ But, as Robert E. Herzstein put it in his biography of Luce, 'White wanted to equate antifascism with democracy',⁶ and was first 'confused, and then angered' about signs, such as the harsh use of force by the police, financial mismanagement, and Japanese military successes, which suggested that China was neither liberal nor efficient in an American way.

Early foreign views of the Nationalists, then, were generally sympathetic although not uncritical and stand in sharp contrast with those that have since come to dominate. Before the war, there had been a group of Leftist critics of the Nationalists, including R.H. Tawney, whose *Land and Labor in China* grew out of a conference held by the Institute of Pacific Relations in Shanghai in 1931. They did not fall silent once the fighting began. Edgar Snow, Israel Epstein, and James Bertram were firmly with the Communists, with whom the Nationalists had been fighting a civil war in the 1930s until just before the beginning of the War. Snow had lived and worked in China for seven years when as the war clouds gathered he published *Red Star over China*, based on his visit to Yan'an, the Communist capital, and his interviews with Mao Zedong the year before. Snow, who revised the second edition of his book in order to fall in with policies of the Communist International in Moscow after pressure of the Communist Party of the USA,⁷ held that Communist revolution would 'defeat the external tumour of imperialism and the internal cancer of class oppression'.⁸ Writing before the fighting had begun, he looked forward with eager anticipation to a 'great imperialist war', which he believed would become a world war, because it would 'release the forces that can bring to the Asiatic masses the arms, training, the political experience, and the moral weakening of internal policing powers which are necessary accessories for any conceivable successful revolutionary ascent'.⁹ Epstein's *The People's War* cast the history of Republican China as a struggle by the people to free themselves from state oppression.¹⁰ Bertram, who dedicated his *North China Front* of 1939 to 'Griff McLaurin, killed in Spain, November 1936',¹¹ too argued that a popular front under Communist leadership would solve China's problems.

But, the negative appraisal of the Nationalists would not come to prevail until after the US entry into the Second World War. Initially, as Barbara Tuchman has written, following Pearl Harbor China was 'the favourite ally', naturally so since China was fighting the country that had just attacked the USA.¹² When on 6 January 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt discussed in Congress the new allies that the US had acquired, he praised the Chinese as 'those millions who for four and a half years have withstood bombs and starvation and have whipped the invaders time and again in spite of superior Japanese equipment and arms'.¹³ Set against the crumbling of the British, Dutch, and US military presence in East and South-east Asia (the French had already become powerless in 1940), Nationalist resistance gained a new aura of pluckiness against all odds.

However, as US service men and journalists moved to China in 1942, they did not find a gallant country bravely resisting the Japanese, but rather factionalism, poverty, filth, stench, greed, ignorance, corruption, disunity, and trading with the enemy. As the likelihood of a Chinese counter-offensive against Japan declined, the image of the Nationalists in the US public mind began a rapid decline, although Roosevelt continued to support China partly for strategic reasons and partly to further his vision of a post-war world order in which China would be one of the policemen of the world. In the last years of the Pacific War, many China correspondents, including Brooks Atkinson, Jack Belden, and Theodore White, wrote with growing disillusionment about the Nationalists in leading US newspapers and periodicals.

The story of 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell became a foil around which a story of Nationalist military incompetence and of a militarist and authoritarian regime mired in corruption was constructed. Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell was the ranking US military officer on the Asian mainland. He was commander of US forces in China and Chief-of-Staff to Chiang Kaishek of the Allied Armies in the China Theatre, besides controlling the distribution of Lend-Lease supplies to China. Stilwell led Chinese forces during the 1942 defeat of the Allies in Burma. He became the advocate of a strategy of recovering north Burma in order to build a supply line to China. Properly equipped and trained Chinese forces would then drive Japan from China and cut off its connections with oil- and rubber-rich South-east Asia, thus bringing Japan to its knees.

US journalists focused on Stilwell as the US public was hungry for stories illustrating that the US was taking on the Japanese. Stilwell was portrayed as a man heroically battling to force a reluctant Chiang Kaishek to reform his armies, co-operate with the Communists, and finally launch offensives against the Japanese as well as a sound opponent of British imperialism. In October 1944, after Japan's Ichigo Offensive had cut through Nationalist defences and in the US the conviction took hold that the Nationalists might yet be knocked out of the war, Stilwell was dramatically recalled after Chiang Kaishek refused a US demand to put Stilwell in charge of all Chinese forces not just in Burma but also in China itself. A Brooks Atkinson article in *The New York Times* described Stilwell's recall as the 'political triumph of a moribund anti-democratic regime' with Chiang Kai-shek 'bewildered and alarmed by the rapidity with which China is falling apart'.¹⁴ The continued support of the Nationalists, this article went on, 'has the effect of making us acquiesce in an unenlightened cold-hearted autocratic regime'.

The dismissal of the Nationalists as a militarily incompetent, corrupt, and authoritarian clique became entrenched after the end of the war, when the issue of whether or to what extent the USA should support the Nationalists in their Civil War with the Communists became politically divisive in the USA. White's *Thunder out of China*, advertised as giving 'the background for an understanding of China today and of America's role in the Chinese revolution',¹⁵ confirmed a wholly unsavoury image of the Nationalists. According to White, Chiang Kaishek's regime was a nasty and corrupt dictatorship. It had not been interested in fighting the Japanese and had no concern for the Chinese population, having done nothing, for instance, to ameliorate the great Henan famine of 1943. He described the communists positively: they ruled the areas under their control effectively and fairly; they had been determined to fight the Japanese; and they were popular.

Subsequent publications strengthened this perspective. In 1948, Theodore White helped edit and publish *The Stilwell Papers*, after Stilwell had died in 1946. It became a bestseller in which Stilwell associated the KMT (Kuo-min-tang) with ‘corruption, neglect, chaos, ... black market, trading with the enemy’,¹⁶ and the Communist with ‘reduce taxes, raise production and standard of living ... practice what they preach’.¹⁷ Chiang Kaishek, memorably called ‘the Peanut’, was a ‘stubborn, ignorant, prejudiced, conceited despot’¹⁸ who ‘failed to keep his agreements’,¹⁹ who never said ‘a single thing that indicated gratitude to the President or our Country’,²⁰ and who ‘wants to be a moral potentate, a religious leader, a philosopher. But he has no education. How ridiculous this is. If he had four year’s of college education, he might understand conditions in the modern world’.²¹ Senior Nationalist commanders were dismissed likewise. He Yingqin, the head of the Board of Military Administration, was the ‘Blocking Back’ who lacked ‘military education and ability’, and was ‘a joke’. The senior strategist Liu Fei made ‘inaction a virtue by proving conclusively the impossibility of action. ... Everything full of false assumptions, and mistakes of fact, and twisted viewpoints’.²²

Stilwell was positive about few people. His bad relations with Claire Chennault, the head of the US 14th Air force, were legendary. When a rumour that Albert Wedemeyer might replace him reached Stilwell, he noted ‘Good God-to be ousted in favour of Wedemeyer-that would be a disgrace’.²³ The British came in for similar treatment. Harold Alexander, who commanded British Empire forces during the first Burma campaign, was, Stilwell moped, ‘astonished to find ME – mere me, a goddam American – in command of Chinese troops. “Extrawdinary!” Looked me over as if I had just crawled from under a rock’.²⁴ Although at first he had liked Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of the South-east Asia Command, by 1944 Stilwell ‘went to the zoo first to look at the monkeys just to get in the mood’ before meeting ‘his Lordship’.²⁵

The US government adopted Stilwell’s belief that the US had done its best but the Nationalists had caused their own defeat to defend its China policy. In August 1949 – weeks before Mao Zedong announced the founding of the People’s Republic of China – the State Department published *The China White Paper*. Following the failure of George Marshall’s mediation efforts to end the Civil War, the *White Paper* justified US withdrawal of support for the Nationalists in terms of the latter’s incompetence and corruption. The publication of the *White Paper* took place just after the unexpected Democratic victory in the 1948 elections, when the Democrats gained control of both houses of Congress. In his letter of transmittal, Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State, argued that Chiang Kaishek’s government had ‘lost the confidence of its own forces and its own people’.²⁶ Intervention would require ‘the expenditure of even greater sums than have been fruitlessly spent thus far’ as well as US command of Chinese forces and the participation of huge US armies. Because the China Lobby in Congress, which supported the Nationalists, had made US policy towards China a major political issue, the *White Paper* was an attempt to close the debate on China, or at least to take the political sting out of it, by letting, as Lyman Vanslyke put it in his introduction to the Stanford University Press edition of 1968, ‘the record speak for itself’.²⁷

It did not do so. The American media again threw themselves upon the China issue, and questions about omissions, distortions, and falsifications were raised in the House of Representatives. Senator Joseph McCarthy exploited the White Paper to press his pursuit of Communists in the Department of State. As Ambassador to China, Patrick Hurley

had come to blows with China specialists in the Department of State such as John Service and John Carter Vincent who in their despatches had described the Nationalists negatively and the Communists favourably. Hurley charged in a letter to President Harry Truman in November 1946 that 'our professional diplomats continuously advised the Communists that my efforts in preventing the collapse of the National Government did not represent the policy of the United States. These same professionals openly advised the Communist armed party to decline unification of the Chinese Communist Army with the National Army'.²⁸ Following the publication of the *White Paper*, in 1950 McCarthy began to make speeches about Communist subversion of the US Government.

McCarthy's charge that the Roosevelt and Truman administrations were virtually the product of a Communist conspiracy was an act of gross demagoguery, wild speculation, and paranoia. He and his supporters exploited a scare about the enemy within to attack Roosevelt's New Deal liberalism in a very nasty way. Nonetheless, as Allen Weinstein, Alexander Vassiliev, John Earl Haynes, and Harvey Klehr have shown on the basis of research conducted in Soviet archives in the 1990s and as a result of the release, finally, of 3,000 war-time telegrams between Soviet spies in the USA and Moscow deciphered by the Venona project, the consensus of the 1970s and 1980s that there were no Soviet spies in the US government was also wrong.²⁹ Although some of their specific conclusions have been challenged,³⁰ it is clear that high-ranking US officials in the Treasury, in the Department of State, in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) (the forerunner of the CIA), in other US government agencies, and in the Manhattan Project were indeed Soviet agents. They included, among many others, Lauchlin Currie, Roosevelt's Special Advisor, and Harry Dexter White, Henri Morgenthau's aide, who had a hand in delaying gold shipments to China for the purpose of stabilising the Nationalist currency.³¹

In the feverish atmosphere that followed McCarthy's allegations and his subsequent hearings in Congress, the nature of the Nationalist government became a political issue with deeply serious consequences. Service, Vincent, and John Paton Davies suffered greatly in their careers and in their lives. The argument became that the Americans had tried their honest best, but that the Nationalists had been beyond salvation, as men like Service, Davies, and Vincent had charged all along, and as Dean Acheson had asserted in the Letter of Transmittal of *The China White Paper*.³² Stilwell was an excellent vehicle to make this case. No one could accuse him of being a Communist or even a Democrat, his views about the Nationalists seemed all too prescient, and he had worked with great energy. Service and White had developed a genuine admiration for him, and an equally honest loathing for the Nationalists. Like White, Service had been close to Stilwell. The State Department had loaned him to Stilwell as his political advisor.

In 1971, when the ground of McCarthyism and the China issue 'was still hot',³³ Barbara Tuchman distilled what had been implicit in much of the reporting about the Stilwell–Chiang clash into a grand tragedy of American values running into the blinkered authoritarianism of Chiang Kaishek. In her *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and which concluded the public debate about the Nationalists, she described Stilwell as 'quintessentially American'.³⁴ Stilwell, to her, was an American hero precisely because despite the fact that the National Government was beyond salvation, 'he made the maximum effort because his temperament permitted no less'.³⁵ He was given to 'plain talk' and could not stand the 'phoney propaganda,' as he

himself called it, about Chinese victories.³⁶ Perhaps too honest and outspoken for his own good and unsuited to the Byzantine politics of Nationalist China, Stilwell was a good guy: honest, dedicated, incapable of scheming and self-aggrandisement, and essentially on the right track. In Tuchman's version of Stilwell, he failed because 'the KMT military structure could not be reformed without reform of the system'.³⁷

Tuchman built on the work of White and others who had reported on China or produced memoirs, as well as on Stilwell's papers. She also relied on the research of the official US Army historians, Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland. In their three-volume account of the war published between 1953 and 1959, they praised Stilwell's attempts to reform the Chinese army, argued that his strategic views had been correct, and lauded his command capabilities. Tuchman agreed with their views, but put the political at centre stage. According to her, the Nationalists were doomed to waste America's 'supreme try in China' because the 'regenerative idea', for which America stood, could not 'be imposed from outside' on a politically debilitated 'husk'.³⁸

Most other academic historians agreed with the negative appraisal of the National Government. None have challenged Stilwell's depiction of their military capabilities, the appropriateness of his own strategic preferences, or his command capabilities. Our understanding of the Nationalist prosecution of China's war against Japan has been shaped heavily by Stilwell and by people who had close connections with him. Romanus and Sunderland defended the US Army's point of view and Stilwell against charges of gross incompetence and criticism made by detractors such as Captain Joseph Alsop,³⁹ who had good relations with Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's special advisor, and Claire Chennault who commanded the 14th US Air Force in China.⁴⁰ Romanus and Sunderland were heavily influenced by Stilwell's papers, commenting that 'for an understanding of events in China in the years 1942–44 their importance can hardly be overestimated'.⁴¹

Frank Dorn published *The History of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1941: From Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* in 1974 which was highly critical of Nationalist strategy and military forces. Dorn was assistant military attaché under Stilwell when Stilwell himself served as military attaché in China when the War of Resistance broke out. Dorn later was Stilwell's Aide-de-Camp in Burma and Chief-of-Staff of Y-Force, the army trained in Yunnan in south China as part of Stilwell's programme to train a Chinese force to recover north Burma. As Dorn stated in *Walk-out*, his 1971 memoirs of the retreat from Burma, 'my friendship and regard for General Stilwell were highly subjective, and still are'.⁴² Lloyd Eastman described the account of Romanus and Sunderland about the US role as 'near definitive'.⁴³ Edward Dryer in *China at War, 1901–1949* based his chapters on the War of Resistance almost entirely on their work.⁴⁴ They, as well as Dorn, Tuchman, and *The Stilwell Papers*, shaped Eastman's account of Nationalist military and its operations in *The Cambridge History of China*.⁴⁵ Bruce Elleman in *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989* relied heavily on Eastman and Dryer.⁴⁶

In writing about the Nationalist state during the War of Resistance, most commentators and historians have taken as their starting point the validity of the criticism of the Nationalist military by Stilwell, Romanus, Sunderland, and Dorn, and then sought to explain it in terms of a pathology endogenous to the Nationalist state predating the War of Resistance. Ch'i Hsi-sheng's *Nationalist China at War* saw the Nationalists' inability to produce offensive warfare during the War of Resistance as laying bare a malady that predated the war and that rendered Nationalist rule stillborn. Discussing several

Nationalist attempts at offensive warfare, Ch'i concluded that 'the root causes of the KMT's failure were in existence long before the outbreak of the war. ... The militarisation of politics, the pursuit of etatist objectives, the exceedingly narrow definition of revolution as the elimination of domestic and foreign political-military rivals had all been firmly established as features of the KMT's programs of the Nanking decade'.⁴⁷ According to Ch'i, these features made it impossible for the Nationalists to mobilise Chinese society effectively during the War of Resistance.

The purpose of Eastman's *Seeds of Destruction* was to counter the China Lobby's argument that the Communists won in 1949 because the 'US government betrayed the Nationalists by withholding support and material aid at critical junctures of the Civil War'.⁴⁸ He concluded that responsible for the victory of the Communists was 'the inherent structural infirmities of a military-authoritarian regime lacking a base in society'.⁴⁹ The failure to institute social, military, economic, and political reform along liberal lines before 1937, according to Eastman, made it impossible for the Nationalists to gain the loyalty of warlord troops, to tax rural society efficiently, reform the military, and establish a fair conscription system so that the National Army became 'incapable, at least after 1942 and probably earlier, of sustained effective military operations'.⁵⁰

Subsequent monographs worked on different aspects of this general interpretative framework. Parks Coble in *The Shanghai Capitalists and the National Government* argued that the Nationalists were not even friendly to capitalist business.⁵¹ In *Facing Japan*, he described the Nationalists during the 1930s as failing to stand up to Japan, thus holding them indirectly responsible for Japanese militarism. He agreed with Eastman that the Nationalists were an authoritarian and conservative regime without a mass base and obsessed with the Communists.⁵² William Wei described the Nationalists' campaigns against Communist bases in the early 1930s and argued that its military approach then led to the dominance of the military.⁵³

Recent studies have begun to bring the Nationalists back into the historiography of twentieth-century China. Thomas Rawski, David Faure, and Loren Brandt have argued for impressive economic progress both in industrial and agricultural productivity during the 1930s.⁵⁴ William Kirby discussed Sino-German relations in the 1930s. He argued that after 1931 the Nationalists pursued a vigorous industrialisation programme and suggested that dismissals of the regime as fascist were not fully appropriate.⁵⁵ Christian Henriot has written about the Nationalists' efforts to bring order to chaotic Shanghai with its powerful Green Gang, arguing that their policies were sensible and effective.⁵⁶ Julia Strauss undermined the depiction of Nationalist officialdom as invariably corrupt and incompetent by showing that before 1940, the Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs, as well as the Sino-Foreign Salt Inspectorate made themselves into relatively effective and honest bureaucracies in a very difficult environment.⁵⁷ Studies of Shanghai,⁵⁸ a new interest in Republican culture, mentalities, and discourses,⁵⁹ and a special issue of *The China Quarterly* on the history of the Republican China too have revitalised interest in the period.⁶⁰

Yet, in our understanding of the Nationalist military and the War of Resistance, the influence of what perhaps might be called the Stilwell-White paradigm remains overwhelming. Its basic tenets, of military incompetence, corruption, a debilitating obsession with the Communists, authoritarianism, and a blind refusal to fight Japan remain in place. Even if the Communists have lost their shine, we continue to think in terms of