Hans van de Ven, Diana Lary, and Stephen R. Mackinnon, eds.


In 2002 Harvard scholar Ezra Vogel, distressed at the bitter historical legacy in East Asia of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, organized the first of several international conferences to attempt to find common ground between Chinese and Japanese historians. Each conference has involved scholars from Japan, China, and the West. Vogel decided that the conferences would avoid the most contentious issues such as the Rape of Nanjing, comfort women, and war crimes trials but try to find areas such as military history and diplomacy where fruitful interaction might be possible. Looking back more than a dozen years later, the “history question” would seem to divide China and Japan more than ever. Yet if they have not quite brought the two together, the conferences have produced serious and important scholarly treatment of the war.

Two conference volumes have already been published, both no doubt familiar to readers of this journal. The first, _China at War: Regions of China, 1937-1945_, edited by Stephen R. MacKinnon, Diana Lary, and Ezra Vogel, appeared in 2007. The second, _The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945_, edited by Mark Peattie, Edward Drea, and Hans van de Ven, appeared in 2011. The volume under review was the product of a conference held in Chongqing, China, in 2009. As with the other volumes the list of participants is both distinguished and diverse. Of the fourteen authors in this volume three are from the People’s Republic, three based in Taiwan, two in Japan, two in Britain, two in the United States, and one each from France and Canada. The selection of topics might at first appear puzzling, but in the conclusion Stephen MacKinnon explains that the editors deliberately omitted topics that had been extensively covered elsewhere, so that little mention is made of Chiang’s contentious relationship with the United States or the Stilwell–Chennault dispute.

One of the great strengths of this work is that it gives the English-language reader access to the latest research by scholars in China and Japan who do not normally publish in English. Yang Kuisong, an expert in China on the history of the Chinese Communist Party, gives a detailed and fascinating account of the relationship between the CCP and the Comintern. Yang argues that when the Comintern re-established contact with the CCP after the Long March it forced it to accept the United Front policy and acquiesce to the release of Chiang Kai-shek in the Xi’an Incident. Although Mao remained unhappy with the policy, he accepted Comintern direction. Yang Tianshi, of the Institute of Modern History at CASS, has done extensive research in the Chiang Kai-shek diaries
held at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. He includes a chapter on Chiang's relationship with Nehru. Although both men shared a common anti-imperialist slant, Chiang ultimately wanted India to stay in the war against Japan and thus support Britain, which led to a clash with Nehru. At the same time the British were wary of Chiang, a non-white leader, playing too active a role in India or Burma.

Liu Yuzhen, also at CASS, an expert on the Soviet Union, includes an important chapter on Chiang's relationship with Stalin. She details a history of mutual suspicion that was overcome only by the dire circumstances of war. Wu Sufeng, based in Taiwan, examines the attitude of Nationalist China toward postwar Japan. She uncovers evidence that as early as the Cairo Conference, Chiang adopted the position that the Emperor of Japan could remain if the Japanese people so wished it. This was at a time when most of the Allies called for his removal. Taiwan scholar Wang Weizhen examines the post-war negotiations between China and France over Vietnam. Chinese forces accepted surrender of Japanese in northern Vietnam, the British those in the south. China generally opposed the French returning to Vietnam, but the issue got mired in Chinese domestic politics and Chiang's growing suspicion of the Vietnamese Communists.

One of the most interesting chapters is by Chang Jui-te, who details the role of Shen Zonglian, dispatched by Chiang to Tibet from 1943 to 1946. A Harvard-trained economist, Shen attempted to win Tibetan support through a variety of means including generous donations to many lamas and monasteries. Shen was adamantly opposed by the British representatives in Lhasa. At a time when Britain and China were allied against Japan, the hostile attitude of the two sides in Tibet revealed that imperialism still remained a dominant issue. The British effort to keep Tibet as a buffer for India eventually came to naught, as they were forced to quit India itself.

The Japanese side is represented as well. Tsuchida Akio, professor of Chinese history at Chuo University, deals with the issue of declaring war. He challenges the prevailing view in Japan (and elsewhere) that China did not declare war before Pearl Harbor because of fear of the American Neutrality Acts. Other factors were key, he argues, including fear that Japan could have legally blockaded ports and seized commodities if war had been declared. Nishimura Shigeo of Osaka University deals with the issue of the Northeast in Chongqing politics. Recovering it and avenging the Manchurian Incident of 1931 became a touchstone of Chinese politics and may have forced Chiang's hand in the aftermath of Japan's surrender.

These scholars generally do not engage Western scholarship but do present fruits of the latest archival research, making this accessible to those confined to