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Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. Pp. xii, 450. ISBN 978-0-618-89425-3.

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In *Forgotten Ally*, Rana Mitter (Oxford Univ.) has written an excellent account of China's heroic and desperate war against Japan (1937-45). Had China succumbed to its enemy's overwhelmingly superior military, Japan would then have turned its forces against Southeast Asia, India, and the Soviet Union with unimaginable worldwide results. A huge number of original sources, memoirs, and Chinese-language histories published in the Republic of China (Taiwan) fully document China's struggle against Japanese aggression and its crucial contributions to Allied victory in World War II. Scholars in the People's Republic of (mainland) China (PRC) as well have recently credited Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist government for leading the War of Resistance against Japan. By contrast, many older works¹ in English reflected an anti-Nationalist bias and denigrated China's role in the war. More recent, well researched studies in English, however, have provided a major corrective to the old one-sided presentations.² *Forgotten Ally* is one of these.

In "Prologue: City on Fire," Mitter sets the theme of his book by describing a Japanese fire-bombing of China's wartime capital, Chongqing, and stresses the need

to remind people of a time past, but not long past, when China stood alongside the other progressive powers against fascism: the Second World War. If we wish to understand the role of China in today's global society, we would do well to remind ourselves of the tragic, titanic struggle which that country waged in the 1930s and 1940s not just for its own national dignity and survival, but for the victory of all the Allies, west and east, against some of the darkest forces history has ever produced. (14)

The main text comprises four parts. The first, "The Path to War," explains that the Japanese believed their rapid modernization and their victories in the Sino-Japanese (1894-95) and Russo-Japanese Wars (1904-5) entitled them to dominate Korea and China. Many young Chinese admired Japan's success. Some had even studied there: Chiang Kai-shek, China's leader during the Second World War, attended a Japanese military academy, and Wang Jingwei, who studied law and politics in Japan, later led a quisling regime in occupied China. Both joined Sun Yat-sen, whose revolutionary organization (later the KMT) overthrew the Qing dynasty in 1911 and established the Republic of China. Japan increased its belligerence toward China after 1912, dictating to its weak warlords and ousting or killing the noncompliant among them.

Even after Chiang Kai-shek had defeated the warlords and brought them under the control of his new KMT government in Nanjing, Japanese leaders treated him as just another warlord, to be browbeaten and subjugated if he dared oppose their orders. Though beset by warlord revolts and a communist insurgency, Chiang's government fostered modernization and unity. Japan, viewing such progress as inimical to its imperialist goals, intensified its aggression during the Nanjing decade (1928-37), conquering the vast Northeastern Provinces (Manchuria) in 1931 and then making further military moves in northern China, then ruled by an assortment of semi-autonomous warlords with little allegiance to the Nanjing government. Chiang temporized by hiring German military advisers to update his army, quash warlord rebellions, and campaign against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); he finally drove the much reduced communist forces under Mao Zedong to retreat in the Long March to a small enclave in the northwest.

1. E.g., Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945* (NY: Macmillan, 1970), based mainly on Stilwell's papers.

2. See, e.g., Laura Tyson Li, *Madame Chiang Kai-shek: China's Eternal First Lady* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 2006), and Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2009).

Fearful of losing their chance to subjugate China, extremist Japanese officers staged a coup in February 1936, eliminating moderates and installing the most imperialistic officers and their civilian allies in power. Meanwhile, in China, Wang Jingwei had grown resentful of Chiang's leadership of the KMT because he felt that position should have been his. In trying to topple Chiang, he relied on Soviet advisers, allied himself with various warlords, and even advocated cooperation in Japanese domination. Neither he nor his politically ambitious wife was mollified by offers of positions in the Nanjing government.

Part II, "Disaster," begins with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (7 July 1937), instigated by members of the powerful Japanese military detachment stationed in northern China; their goal was to create a second "Manchukuo" (alluding to Japan's existing puppet state in northeastern China). They were convinced they could eliminate the regional military rulers, who were only partially under Nanjing's control. But nearly all Chinese people realized that Japan would not be content with another lackey regime in Beijing and would seek to control all China, forcing it to fight for its existence. Only Wang and some members of his clique favored compromise with Japan. He even enlisted Hitler's ambassador to China to mediate a settlement. When this effort failed, Japanese troops poured into North China, crushing the ineffective local defenders and capturing its two principal cities, Beijing and Tianjin, by the end of July. In August, the KMT and CCP ended their civil war and formed a Second United Front to oppose the Japanese.

Japan expanded the war on 13 August 1937 with a massive assault on Shanghai. Chiang threw his best German-trained and equipped divisions into the fight, aided by over two hundred thousand soldiers of provincial army units that had previously shown doubtful loyalty to the central government. The three-month defense of Shanghai cost China 190,000 men from its best units, but bought time to move key factories and equipment in and around Shanghai together with many skilled workers up the Yangzi River into the undeveloped interior. (Many universities relocated as well.) Recent PRC historians call this episode "China's Dunkirk" (120). By the end of the year, after a defense that cost China eighty thousand soldiers, Japanese troops had taken Nanjing, wantonly raping and butchering some three hundred thousand of the city's inhabitants, by Chinese estimates.³ Yet even such barbarities failed to force China to surrender.

China moved its capital to Wuhan, the nation's second greatest industrial hub, up the Yangzi River. To slow the enemy's advance, Chiang deployed eight hundred thousand troops to defend vital north-south railway lines and sections of the Grand Canal. In a last-ditch move to prevent the Japanese from crossing the Yellow River, he "resorted to using water instead of soldiers" by blowing up its crucial dams and dikes on 9 June 1938. Fifty-four thousand square kilometers of land were flooded, a half million people died, and 3–5 million more became refugees. These measures stalled the Japanese advance for five months, allowing much of China's modern industrial facilities to be transported farther up the Yangzi to Sichuan and other inland provinces. The Japanese took Wuhan and other cities along the Yangzi in fall 1938, subjecting their people to the same horrors they had visited on Nanjing. In northern China, communist guerrillas harassed the Japanese but were too weak to engage them in battle. For comparison, two years later, facing much better odds against Nazi Germany than China had against Japan, France surrendered within a month and twelve days to become Hitler's subject "ally."

Part III, "Resistance Alone," covers the period from late 1938 to late 1941. Western diplomats and reporters described Free China's capital as a poor and primitive city even before it suffered repeated Japanese fire bombings and was left to cope with an enormous influx of refugees. It had an air raid alarm system but no anti-aircraft guns. In 1939, the USSR withdrew the aircraft and airmen it had sent to China two years before. Not until Madame Chiang recruited US volunteers under Gen. Clair Chennault to form an unofficial air corps—the "Flying Tigers"—did the city have any air defenses.

These dire conditions transformed the Chinese nation, as the war forged a new relationship between government and people. The millions who had followed the government to Free China expected to receive support and relief. In response, the government issued relief cards in return for labor on, for example, air raid shelters. It also provided free hospital care for the injured; shelter for refugees; centers for orphans; and

3. W.E. Dodd, US ambassador to Berlin, reported that the Japanese ambassador to Germany boasted that his country's soldiers had "killed 500,000 Chinese people" (142).

free education and board for refugee students. By 1941, 1,059 care centers had registered and helped 9.2 million refugees. The scale of mobilization was unprecedented in Chinese history. The Government reached into the countryside to conscript troops and carry out agricultural improvements. For the first time tradition-bound women were recruited to work in factories, care for wounded soldiers, sew uniforms, etc. About three hundred thousand mostly educated youths went to Yanan, the CCP headquarters, to join the 1.4 million people under the communist government, which up to 1942 had suffered only 214 killed in Japanese air raids.

Up to 1939, Japan had enticed only a few insignificant renegades to collaborate, forming two bogus “governments” in northern China and one for the lower Yangzi region, its leaders ensconced in a Shanghai hotel; locals jokingly spoke of the “hotel government.” Late in December 1939, Wang Jingwei secretly fled from Chongqing to Tokyo. Since he held the number two positions in both the KMT and the Chongqing government, his defection damaged China’s cause. Despite Chiang’s attempts to dissuade Wang, he was installed as Japan’s puppet in his “capital city” of Nanjing in May 1940. His regime had no autonomy and its troops fought under Japanese orders. Occupied China under the Wang regime suffered severe Japanese economic exploitation and bore the main burden of supporting the occupation. Chinese called Wang and other quislings “hanjian,” denoting that they had forfeited the right to be Chinese. China continued fighting, despite the unraveling of the KMT-CCP United Front by 1940, and the severing of its remaining links to the outside world when Japan ordered the Vichy regime to cut the Hanoi-to-China rail line. Since it could not end the war in China on its terms, Japan sought to conquer Southeast Asia after attacking the US naval base at Pearl Harbor and simultaneously assaulting British and Dutch colonies in the region as well as the Philippines, then an American protectorate.

Part IV, “The Poisoned Alliance,” concerns the expansion of World War II to Asia after 8 December 1941. China was now no longer fighting alone and Chiang Kai-shek became the Allied commander in chief in the China theater. China’s record of holding down over six hundred thousand Japanese troops stands in striking contrast to the swift collapse of Western forces in the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Malaya, and Singapore. Chiang and his wife immediately visited British India, which was crucial for China-bound war supplies; much to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s chagrin, Chiang became the first non-European head of state to hold talks with the leaders of India’s independence movement, Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

In 1942, China signed new, equal-status treaties with its Western allies to replace the unequal ones imposed on it during the previous century. In late 1943, the Japanese belatedly signed a new treaty with Wang, incorporating occupied China into Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. In November 1943, Chiang and his wife attended an Allied summit conference with Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt in Cairo, where China helped define such Allied war goals as the unconditional surrender of Japan, the return of all Chinese territory and installations held by the Japanese, and Korean independence. China also played a major role in establishing the United Nations, being designated (with the United States, Britain, the USSR, and France) as one of the “Big Five” powers that held permanent seats and veto power in the Security Council. Its wartime contributions richly justified these momentous gains in China’s international status.

China, however, as the weakest among the Big Five, was assigned the lowest priority among the theaters of the Second World War. Thus, its annual allotment of American Lend-Lease funds and materials was a paltry 0.5–4.0 percent. Moreover, while Britain and the Soviet Union decided for themselves how to use their allotments, control of Lend-Lease funds in China rested with Joseph Stilwell, US Secretary of War George Marshall’s protégé, who had been assigned to be Chiang’s chief of staff. Stilwell had served under Marshall in the US military attaché’s office in Beijing after World War I. He was promoted to lieutenant general to qualify for his position as Chiang’s chief of staff. Presumably his knowledge of spoken Chinese, albeit of the barracks variety, also fitted him for the job. In Mitter’s assessment, Stilwell “showed characteristics that suggested severe limitations on his skills as a military commander. He had a particular way of

viewing the world, and anything that ran counter to the assumptions that shaped that view was dismissed as irrelevant, or worse, maliciously intended to undermine him” (256).

Despite Stilwell's many faults, Chiang had to submit to his demands and terrible decisions in order to maintain good relations with the Americans. Mitter also blames the Western press in China for uncritical assessments of Stilwell's abilities. Though lacking in battlefield experience, Stilwell had insisted on personally commanding two campaigns against the Japanese in Burma, both costly debacles. The first killed twenty-five thousand of China's best troops plus ten thousand British and Indian troops. Attempting to redeem his reputation and against the bitter opposition of both Britain and China, Stilwell launched a second calamitous campaign in Burma in 1944: 80 percent of the Chinese, Indian, and British troops participating in it were killed or wounded, just when Japan was mounting its largest offensive in China, Operation Ichigo, with half a million troops. When General Chennault begged Stilwell to release aviation fuel so that the US air brigade could support beleaguered Chinese army units in the vital city of Hengyang, Stilwell replied “let them stew” (325).

China's army was more crippled, its economy more damaged, and its relationship with the United States more strained (despite efforts by Ambassador Patrick Hurley, whom Stilwell also undermined) at the end of Operation Ichigo than at any other point of the war. When Roosevelt finally dismissed him, Stilwell left China without briefing his successor, Gen. Albert Wedemeyer, and made sure Marshall also recalled Chennault. The sorry Stilwell episode permanently harmed Chinese-American relations and exposed the weakness of China's hand in dealing with its principal ally. Nevertheless, at the end of the “War of Resistance against Japan,” China was stronger than it had been in a century. No longer a mere semi-colony, it was the sole non-Western power among the Big Five.

The war against Japan left 15 million to 20 million dead, and 80 to 100 million refugees. The flawed but real economic development that the [Chinese] Nationalists had begun in 1928 was destroyed. For eight years brutal death was an everyday possibility for ordinary Chinese, whether from the swords in Nanjing or the bombs dropping on Chongqing, or even the dams, destroyed in desperation by their own government.... The Nationalists maintained some 4 million troops in China through the war.... Without Chinese resistance, China would have been a Japanese colony as early as 1938 ... and would have allowed Tokyo to turn its attention to expansion in Southeast Asia even more quickly, and with less distraction. A pacified China would have made the invasion of British India much more plausible. Without the “China Quagmire”—a quagmire caused by the refusal of the Chinese to stop fighting—Japan's imperial ambitions would have been much easier to fulfill. (378-79)

As Rana Miller has so persuasively demonstrated, the Western powers owed a large debt of gratitude to their forgotten ally in East Asia.