China's Trial by Fire

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The Shanghai War of 1932

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To my partner in everything, Mary Kaye

Dashing thunderclaps and flying
flames destroyed the sons of man.
Amid crumbled walls and wells was left
a starved dove . . .

—Lu Hsun, "Inscription for San-i Pagoda,"
Shanghai, June 21, 1933

Preface

Shanghai in 1932 was the scene of a fierce thirty-three-day fight between Chinese and Japanese. Was this a war or a mere "incident"? This bloody struggle that captured world headlines for five weeks in early 1932, followed by a longer period of contentious negotiations, shrank to but a footnote in history once the Sino-Japanese war erupted in 1937 and merged with the global conflagration in 1941. A second huge battle at Shanghai in 1937 further confused the 1932 memories of even the residents. Historians of modern China and the 1930s also became content to trivialize Shanghai's 1932 conflict with a sentence or paragraph based on widely accepted generalizations but little fact.

Shanghai's geographic location at the center of China's economy and political heartland, however, caused what happened there to be more than the local incident claimed by Japan. Because of Shanghai's centrality on China's modern stage, influences from the war in 1932 rippled outward, touching nearly everything in that developmental decade of nation building, the 1930s. A few postwar historians of modern China eventually realized that the Shanghai War of 1932 was of greater consequence than indicated by the cursory references found in histories of East Asia.

Lloyd Eastman, a major historiographical influence for China's republican era, in his seminal *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937* found the Shanghai "incident" to be causation, as discussed in his chapters entitled "The Blue Shirts and Fascism" and "The Fukien Rebellion."[1] However, as with those of most of his colleagues, his conclusions were based on very little evidence, superficial generalizations on the conflict. Like most scholars, he included only the role of the famed Nineteenth Route Army (R.A.) under General Ts'ai T'ing-k'ai, who "without supplies or support" had defended Shanghai for thirty-three days against Japan's bombardment. Eastman concluded from this assumption that the traumatic defense had alienated the Chinese public from Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters. Therefore, pro-

gressive leftists had coalesced around the Nineteenth R.A. leaders in the Fukien rebellion of 1933. In tracing the rise of Chiang Kai-shek's power, Eastman wrote that Chiang returned from his 1931 retirement to chair the new military commission of the Kuomintang (on the day after the Shanghai War began) and that his Blue Shirts were functioning by March or April 1932. That period coincided with the duration of the Shanghai War, but since only the Nineteenth R.A. dissidents were known to be involved, the "incident" failed to explain why patriotic Kuomintang (KMT) officers would rally around Chiang to join the new Blue Shirts.

Immanuel C. Y. Hsu pioneered in 1970 in briefly pointing out in his comprehensive textbook the fact that Nanking's Fifth Army had also participated at Shanghai.[2] Eastman with his acute sense of fairness concluded that current generalizations about the brief war were unbalanced and that "what actually occurred in the Shanghai "Incident" is considerably more controversial" and "deserving of a detailed study—there is a wealth of material on the subject."[3] This intriguing suggestion spurred me to explore the Shanghai War, which, in turn, drew me back into the complexities of China's greatest anti-Japanese boycott headquartered in that city after July 1931.[4] Eastman probably also inspired Parks Coble, his student, to expand on existing knowledge of the Shanghai "incident."

In 1980 Coble's study of Shanghai capitalists retained what had become through repetition the orthodox vision of the heroic Nineteenth R.A. standing alone against the Japanese onslaught while the KMT watched in safety from Nanking.[5] By the 1980s Coble, however, went beyond that popular interpretation, coming closer to meeting Eastman's challenge in a ten-page summary of the 1932 Shanghai War in his monumental *Facing Japan: Chinese Politics and Japanese Imperialism 1931–1937*.

Coble went beyond Hsu in revealing that Chiang Kai-shek had ordered two of his new National Guard divisions to join in the valiant defense. They fought alongside the Nineteenth R.A. on an expanding battlefield once the Japanese army began to reinforce the outnumbered Japanese naval infantry that had begun the attack on Chapei two weeks earlier. Readers at least became aware that Nanking's Eighty-seventh and Eighty-eighth Divisions combined in the Fifth Army had suffered 35 percent of the heavy Chinese casualties, indicating that the integrated Chinese force of foot soldiers had been able to stand for a time against vastly superior Japanese firepower. Coble also revealed how this costly defense, outflanked in its fifth week, had inspired Hu Shih and other intellectuals

to note within the Chinese people a surge of patriotism greater than in the May Fourth movement or any other episode in the past century. Although Coble's study added to the understanding of the first real contest in what became a long Sino-Japanese conflict, the sources were still predominantly secondary or partisan, such as the autobiography by Ts'ai T'ing-k'ai, one of the highly publicized Nineteenth R.A.'s commanders.

Coble's book highlights one of the characteristics of the powerful anti-Japanese spirit in China exemplified in this work—that it became a very useful weapon in Chinese domestic struggles.[6] Along with pressing the Chinese to unite defensively, the Japanese threat also stirred the anti-Chiang forces and the Chinese Communists to contend with Nanking for leadership of the national defense. Still, the geographical extent, timing, and magnitude of the warfare; the nature of the Chinese defense and Japanese offense; the details of the partisan controversies needed to be laid out. As recently as 1999 one major textbook still briefly summarized the war as a "clash" in which three Japanese divisions were resisted by the Nineteenth R.A. in Chapei.[7]

This study fleshes out and tests many prior generalizations. Eastman's call for a detailed study referred to the "wealth of material." The sources include a bounty of polemics and partisan propaganda. The critics of Chiang Kai-shek and the rival KMT press, then safe within the International Settlement of Shanghai, most effectively transfigured the Nineteenth R.A. leaders into superhuman celebrities. KMT politicians outside Chiang's circles collaborated with media specialists with the Nineteenth R.A. Reporter Percy Finch recalled attending a "tea party" thrown by General Ts'ai T'ing-k'ai especially for Western reporters at his rear headquarters. After supplying an elegant buffet of pâté de foie gras, brandy, and Martel cognac, Ts'ai sent the dazzled reporters back to Shanghai, "his staunch all[ies]." Parks Coble lists brandy among the gifts supplied by the Kuos[8] of Wing On department store on Nanking Road and local cotton mills—leaders of the Shanghai Cantonese community supporting the Cantonese Nineteenth R.A. This minor anecdote exemplifies the layers of details that required gleaning to move closer to a balanced picture.

The media efforts of the anti-Chiang side, touched on by Harriet Sergeant,[9] would be, in themselves, worthy of research in that their propaganda was far more effective than that produced by Chiang's Fifth Army supporters. Capitalizing on Chinese press hyperbole from within the International Settlement that accentuated Nineteenth R.A. heroics,

the Shanghai Communist Party went so far as to attempt a victory rally on March 4, 1932, for the Chinese in the International Settlement. Commendable, until one is made aware that the date coincided with the general retreat of all Chinese units. Some of the public were persuaded that although the Nineteenth R.A. had won against all odds, Nanking negotiators had conceded a treasonous settlement—a lie that became a strong political weapon. Scholars of modern Japan likewise have perpetuated errors on the Shanghai War.

Contributor to the invaluable Columbia series Japan's Road to the Pacific War, Shimada Toshihiko, in his "The Extension of Hostilities, 1931–1932," credits only the Nineteenth R.A. He does include a message from the local Japanese naval commander asking for the army to be sent to Shanghai because Chiang Kai-shek "is sending reinforcements." This work was translated into English in 1984 by diplomatic historian Iriye Akira, who from a Japanese perspective saw the Shanghai episode primarily as an extension of the Manchurian Incident, a more significant turning point for Japan. Subsequently Iriye stuck with the earlier, widely accepted focus on the Nineteenth R.A.; then, on the basis of secondary Japanese works, in 1987 he trivialized the war at Shanghai as "skirmishes" in *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific.*[10]

In his 1992 *China and Japan in the Global Setting,* Iriye sought to counter the predominance of Sino-Japanese *military* interaction in the 1930s by referring to the defensive stance of the Chinese on the Japanese threat toward their *culture*. He quotes from Ts'ai Yuan-p'ei's 1932 appeal to the League of Nations in which he condemns the Japanese army's "wholesale destruction of China's educational and culture establishments" and how these establishments "collapse under their wanton aerial and artillery bombardment."[11] This plea needed a better context linking Ts'ai's March 1932 statement to the February bombing and firestorm in Chapei that had destroyed most of Chinese Shanghai's colleges as well as the Oriental Library, a major repository of ancient manuscripts and paintings. In general, the Japanese public was never enlightened about Japan's heavy daily bombing of civilian Shanghai, in which thousands died as early as 1932. As recently as 1999, Iriye glossed over the 1932 war, generalizing that by the mid-1930s Japan had expanded its empire onto the Asian continent "without fighting China and without incurring any sanction on the part of other powers."[12] Both of these points are disputed herein.

The work of Ienaga Saburo, who sought in the 1960s to educate Japanese on the horrors of their wars, repeated the myth of the Nineteenth R.A. as sole defenders but, as did Shimada, emphasized the role of Major Tanaka Ryukichi. Ienaga includes Tanaka as a provocateur at Shanghai who, to aid his Kwantung Army colleagues, ignited the Shanghai War to divert world attention while they established Manchukuo.[13] American historian Mark Peattie, an expert on Japanese imperialism, examined the Japanese side at Shanghai but abbreviated the "fighting [that] exploded in Shanghai in January 1932 after the Landing Party moved aggressively against Chinese nationalist forces stationed outside the Settlement." A debatable point is Peattie's conclusion that the origins of the conflict emanated from "tensions within the city," leaving only local effects such as the de facto takeover in 1932 by Japan of the International Settlement north of Suchou Creek—the area known as "Little Tokyo."[14]

Walter LaFeber, in his comprehensive text on U.S.-Japanese relations, notes how Japan's 1932 mass bombings at Shanghai horrified the then U.S. secretary of state, Henry Stimson, and President Hoover. However, perhaps due to reliance on State Department reports and secondary sources, LaFeber minimized the scale of the Japanese invasion as a landing of "eighteen hundred troops to restore order."[15]

History in China has had a tradition of often serving political purposes rather than detached objectivity. In this study there has been a concerted effort to include a variety of subjective reports on the war at Shanghai, including foreign observations as well as those from the many Chinese factions involved. The aforementioned "victory" rally for the Nineteenth R.A. recorded by the Settlement police was used by Patricia Stranahan in her groundbreaking history of the Communist Party at Shanghai to exemplify effective suppression of local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) public anti-Japanese demonstrations in the early 1930s.[16] Not surprisingly, Stranahan did not connect the date of the aborted Chinese "victory rally" with what was actually a general retreat then ending the Shanghai War. This may signal a problem facing scholars of the origins of the CCP. As John Fitzgerald proclaims, "The time for peaceful reunification between [Republic of China and People's Republic of China] histories is now upon us."[17] This present treatment of the Shanghai War provides a study from which historians of Chinese Communism may benefit by reexamining the Shanghai War for possible effects on the contemporary Communist movement.

Heretofore, not only has the Nineteenth R.A. received sole credit for victory in that it survived to retreat, it has even been mislabeled a "Chinese Communist force."[18] Patricia Stranahan likewise confuses the Nineteenth Route Army in 1937 when she has them retreating again from Shanghai, although the group actually involved was the Nineteenth Army Group, which did include Chiang's battle veterans from 1932, the Eighty-seventh and Eighty-eighth Divisions (Fifth Army) under Chang Chih-chung.[19] Of greater significance is how what happened at Shanghai in 1932 impacted on the CCP experience.

The early postwar histories produced in the People's Republic of China (PRC) omit any hint of Kuomintang (KMT) success in Shanghai, crediting only the Nineteenth R.A. for resistance at Shanghai. Reliance on secondary sources continues to taint contemporary historiography on the CCP of the 1930s. In Lincoln Li's important study, *Student Nationalism in China 1924–1949,* for the Shanghai War he relies on a 1951 history published in Communist Shanghai that credits only the Nineteenth R.A.[20] With the KMT written off as alienated from the populace after the 1932 war, historians such as Stranahan have logically attributed the Shanghai CCP decline from 1931 to 1934 to KMT suppression and CCP factionalism alone. On the other hand, if the KMT did succeed in blocking the Japanese in 1932 from occupying Chinese Shanghai, then the ruling KMT may have outweighed the CCP in the public eye until later. Edward Dreyer sees the celebrity status for the Chinese military after the Shanghai conflict as distorted beyond reality.[21] Stranahan does note that CCP failures at Shanghai in the early 1930s included less focus on workers' economic issues in comparison to KMT unions. In addition she notes the slowness of the local CCP to align with the inclusive Anti-Japanese National Salvation Association (AJNSA), whose "impact had been enormous . . . immediately after the Japanese *bombing* of Shanghai" (emphasis added). Although Stranahan and other scholars of the CCP do see 1932 as a turning point, they seem unaware that the scale of the 1932 war was more than "the 28 January bombing" that had absorbed the attention of all Shanghai residents. Stranahan found the CCP-linked Leftist League beginning its expansion into the influential Shanghai film industry in 1932.[22] *China's Trial by Fire* will reveal a surge of public demand for war-related newsreels and film versions of war stories. That the CCP Central Committee evacuated Shanghai for the rural wilderness of Kiangsi in 1933 may quite likely be related to the relative success of the KMT at Shanghai during the 1932 war.

Although Kiangsi was far removed from Shanghai, the 1932 war may also be studied for its effects on the CCP in that new rural setting after the party central's flight from Shanghai. The KMT military became distracted from its anti-CCP campaign with first the Canton rebellion in the fall of 1931 and then the Japanese threat in Manchuria. But especially after the Shanghai War had begun in late January, the CCP in Kiangsi enjoyed a respite from Nationalist offensives. With the transfer toward Shanghai of many troops, beginning with the Nineteenth R.A., the Red Army was able to shift from Mao's defensive guerrilla-style warfare to Soviet-inspired larger scale offensives. The so-called internationalist faction or Twenty-eight Bolsheviks were more attuned to Comintern ideals and critical of Mao's traditional combat style. The internationalists, according to James Harrison, were able to take the Red forces on a 1932 offensive that greatly expanded the Soviet area. Franklin W. Houn records the Kiangsi Soviet expanding to its maximum territory in early 1932 but merely explains this in the context of the Manchurian invasion and the "political storm" at Nanking.[23]

That the CCP victories in Kiangsi took place in February and March 1932 needs to be placed in the broader context of the desperate Shanghai War. The CCP success led its internationalists and Chou En-lai to become overly optimistic[24]—not only about seizing the entire province but also in declaring war against Japan in April. This overoptimism seems to be proven when matched against what followed after the Shanghai War settlement in May 1932. It was then that Chiang drew on his new military and political powers that solidified during the Shanghai War, returning nationalist forces to their anti-CCP campaign in Kiangsi.

Comintern military expert Otto Braun apparently moved on in 1933 with the CCP rear guard from Shanghai to advising in Kiangsi. It may be determined that it was after seeing the central army fight at Shanghai that Braun (Li Teh) defended Mao's guerrilla tactics against the positional warfare of the internationalists. That Stalin was reacting increasingly to the Japanese threat in the east will be seen in the latter portion of this book, which describes the pressure on Japan in the early spring of 1932 to curtail the Shanghai expedition in order to respond to Russian reinforcements pouring into eastern Siberia opposite the new Manchukuo. Harrison only refers peripherally to the "stubborn defense" of Shanghai by the Nineteenth R.A. and sees Stalin's 1932 restoration of relations with Nanking as "paradoxical" rather than a natural alliance.[25]

The preceding are but a few examples of the need for historians of

Communist China, as well as specialists on the Nanking era, to heed Eastman's call. This study of the Shanghai War has been, indeed, deserved. The research has been a fascinating journey through Western diplomatic and press sources; League of Nations debates; Japanese military, diplomatic, and press reports; and Chinese coverage in all its rhetorical diversity—written and oral—from Taipei to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Nanking, and Peking. In general, curators of the numerous archives and museums visited have been guardian angels, as has been my patient wife, muse, and skilled proofreader, Mary Kaye.

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