A General as a Drifting Leaf, 1937–46

In July 1937, full-scale war broke out between the invading Japanese forces and the Chinese Nationalist Army. Beijing was conquered within the month, Shanghai was besieged and subsequently fell, and in early December the Japanese entered the capital, Nanjing. Upon entering the city, they massacred the citizens, killing over 200,000 men, women and children, and brutally raped about 20,000 women. By the end of 1937, the Japanese occupied most of northern China. A year later, Japanese forces pushed south, taking key cities along the Chinese coastline and the large city, Guangzhou (Canton), capital of the south.

After desperate campaigns and attempts to halt the advance of the Japanese forces, the Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek was gradually forced to retreat westwards, finally establishing its seat in Chongqing, further up the reaches of the Yangzi River. About one third of the Chinese land mass was under foreign occupation. Free China was under siege and supplies reached the citizens in roundabout ways, either via Vietnam and Burma, until they, too, succumbed to the Japanese, or by land and air via India.

Politically, the Nationalist government was divided and unstable. Two competing governments were created in two different capitals, displaying two alternative models to the rule of Chiang Kai-shek. In Nanjing, the Japanese created a puppet state headed by Wang Jingwei, formerly among the leaders of the Guomindang. This government touted the ideal of ‘Asia for the Asians’, which, if realized, was supposed to create prosperity in the region under Tokyo’s leadership. The Communists, on the other hand, were formulating a radical model with ever-increasing confidence in the northern soviet that they had created around their capital of Yan’an. According to their slogans, this model was supposed to sweep across the whole of the Chinese citizenry and release them from the burden of imperialism and the slavery and impoverishment of feudalism.
Crucial changes were taking place in greater Asia, in Europe and in the international arena at large. The Sino-Japanese War merged with the war that broke out in Europe in 1939 and spread, drawing in Soviet Russia and the United States in 1941. There was no longer any doubt as to the fact that this war had now become international.

The Sino-Japanese War ended after eight years, in August 1945, with the unconditional surrender of Japan to the Allies after nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In retrospect, it turned out that it was not possible to call the initial armed conflicts between the Chinese forces and the Japanese expeditionary force mere ‘incidents’ – the ‘Manchurian Incident’ of 1931 and then the ‘China Incident’ of 1937, the latter being the major Japanese attack on China – nor was it possible to explain the Japanese push south of the Great Wall as an attempt to recapture the Manchurian glory of old.\(^1\) This war took place in China proper.

From 1946 onwards, both the vanquished and the victor began trying to recover and rebuild after the destruction and desolation caused by the war. However, local disputes, wars of liberation and civil wars continually broke out and took their toll. Forces of change tried again and again to gain another piece of land, have another accomplishment to compensate for the price paid in blood. As the war in the Pacific and in East and Southeast Asia came to an end, a civil war broke out between the Nationalist government forces and the Communists, the latter having spent the previous two decades strengthening their position among the agrarian population of China’s outlying regions.

Throughout this entire period, the Young Marshal was kept in ‘mobile custody’, detainment and under house arrest.

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On 1 January 1937, in the midst of Zhang’s trial, Yang Hucheng lashed out at the government for taking his friend into custody and imposing strict conditions on him while he was held. After the trial, when it became known that the sentence had been replaced by the strange ‘pardon’, it was clear that Zhang’s liberty had been taken away for an indeterminate period. From Yang’s point of view, this was a clear provocation. There was talk of national reconciliation, but how was this supposed to take place without restoring Zhang’s civil liberties and without him being permitted to return to Xi’an to resume command of his forces? And as though that were not enough, the promises made in Xi’an were not kept and the government army was pushing west and threatening the rebels and their supporters.

In those early days of January 1937, Chiang Kai-shek was in the process of carrying out his intention to wipe out the Dongbei Army, Zhang