

The Reluctant Combatant: Japan and the Second Sino-Japanese War

By: Kitamura Minoru and Lin Siyun

The mainstream view on the Second Sino-Japanese War is that Imperial Japan was bent on destroying China, and the rest of Asia, for purely selfish reasons. However, careful analysis of the global situation, particularly of the social and political development of China and the attitudes of the Chinese leadership, indicates that the Chinese were not the innocent victims of “aggression” as is currently claimed. At the same time, analysis uncovers a complex environment in which the Japanese operated, an environment that allowed little room for maneuver. With limited resources, dependence on sea routes for trade and two powerful and potentially hostile countries within reach, Japan could not afford to make poor decisions concerning regional relationships.

Authors Kitamura and Lin recount the circumstances that ultimately lead to the Second Sino-Japanese War, demonstrating that the war was neither a Japanese “war of aggression” or that China was a “helpless” victim.

The authors raise important issues that have been studiously ignored by standard historical analysis. For example, prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the concept of “aggressive war” was meaningless with respect to international law. The concept was not even widely accepted among the Allies during the Second World War. Nonetheless, charges of “war crimes” and “aggressive war” which were applied against Germany were reflexively applied to Japan as well despite vast differences in circumstances. Assignment of guilt to Japan over their “aggressive war” by the Allies following the end of the war is continuously reinforced today by a peculiar Chinese perception of social status and exaggeration.

Unlike Germany’s war, which evolved into a flagrant inter-ethnic war, Japan struggled to maintain itself and its interests in the face of western embargos and neighbors that vastly outmatched Japan in terms of population and resources. A careful reading of history will demonstrate that Japanese activity in China was not part of an overall conspiracy or plan to dominate all of China but consistent with the activity of other colonial powers at the time. In fact, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, Japanese efforts to feed urban Chinese were documented in Chinese sources. Japan’s incursions into China was not at all motivated by race or ethnicity, unlike Germany’s desire to expand at the expense of other ethnics in central and eastern Europe.

The authors give a close examination of the lead-up into the Second Sino-Japanese War, which casts a different light on standard explanations on the cause of the war. Japanese entry to war was neither desired nor inevitable. Both China and Japan raced to modernize in the face of encroachment by the technologically advanced west. Despite China’s significant lag in modernization and marked social stratification and fragmentation, the Chinese people were induced into fighting Japan and the burden invariably fell onto the Chinese peasant masses. The consequences of warfare against Japan were indeed grim and, it has been estimated that more Chinese soldiers were lost

due to induction rather than actual combat. While Japan undertook numerous measures to protect her own interests in China, as European countries did, and actively sought compromise rather than war, Japanese failure led to a prolonged war of attrition.

Given the Chinese philosophy of exaggerated self-promotion while covering up or lying to cover faults, in particular, in service of the nation, it is unlikely that China will come to grips with what really happened during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Reconciliation between Japan and China will be extremely challenging at best.