A legacy of Commerce, Addiction, and Gunboat diplomacy

By Tao He

Introduction

The primary motive of British imperialism in China in the nineteenth century was economic. There was a high demand for Chinese tea, silk and porcelain in the British market. However, Britain did not possess sufficient silver to trade with the Qing Empire. Thus, a system of barter based on Indian opium was created to bridge this problem of payment. The subsequent
exponential increase of opium in China between 1790 and 1832 brought about a generation of addicts and social instability. Clashes between the Qing government and British merchants ultimately escalated into the infamous Opium Wars. As a result, the British were given the island of Hong Kong and trading rights in the ports of Canton and Shanghai. Although British imperialism never politically took hold in mainland China, as it did in India or Africa, its cultural and political legacy is still evident today. Hong Kong remains a significant center of global finance and its government still functioned in much of the same ways as it did under British colonialism. Furthermore, the language of English and British culture highly impacted the society of Hong Kong and Southern China for over a century.

This Research Guide is divided into four main components. The first section is devoted to the definitions and qualifications of imperialism. This part mainly consists of print sources that focus on the political, economic and social mechanisms of imperialism. It provides scholarly perspectives and criticisms regarding its causes and effects. The second section consists of both print and interactive sources. This section focuses on the topic of British Imperialism in China from a British perspective. The sources include various political justifications and financial factors that influence Britain’s diplomatic decisions and imperialist tactics. The third section presents the Chinese perspective. The sources in this section explain the development of Chinese nationalism and the intricacies of international relations in the Qing court. The final section deals with the legacy of British imperialism in Hong Kong and southern China. The sources here examine the cultural and political footprint of the British in this region.

A Political Cartoon depicting the Open Door Policy

**Chronology of Events**

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>Founding of The East India Company. The Royal Charter of the Company was approved by Elizabeth I</td>
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<td>1644</td>
<td>Manchurian Qing Dynasty established in China</td>
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<td>1680</td>
<td>Recreational Opium/Tobacco mix first introduced to China by the Dutch</td>
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<td>1720</td>
<td>British Parliament bans Asian textile Imports to increase domestic production</td>
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<td>1729-1839</td>
<td>Chinese Tea as one of the primary Comodities in the British market</td>
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<td>1729</td>
<td>First government prohibition on the distribution of Opium in China (Not heavily enforced)</td>
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<td>1760</td>
<td>British began to use Opium as a Cash Crop for both Chinese commodities and silver</td>
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<td>1773</td>
<td>1000 Chests of Opium imported into China.</td>
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<td>1813</td>
<td>Increased Opium addicts in the Chinese bureaucracy causes concern in the Qing Courts</td>
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<td>1815</td>
<td>End of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain consolidates imperial power in Asia and Africa</td>
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<td>1832</td>
<td>20,000 Chests of Opium Imported into China</td>
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<td>1836</td>
<td>Qing Court formally prohibits all imports of Opium and attempts to close the ports of Canton and Shanghai</td>
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<td>1839</td>
<td>Commissioner Lin Zexu openly burned 1.2 million kilograms of confiscated opium</td>
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<td>1839-1842</td>
<td>First Opium War: Qing Empire Vs. Britain and its allies in France, United States, and Russia</td>
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<td>1842</td>
<td>Treaty of Nanjing opened the ports of Canton and Shanghai. Hong Kong became a British colony</td>
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<td>1856</td>
<td>Chinese seizure of British Vessel “The Arrow” in suspect of piracy</td>
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<td>1858</td>
<td>Tientsin Treaties, negotiations between Chinese, British, French and American diplomats</td>
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<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>British and French diplomats were refused entry into Beijing</td>
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1860-1862  Second Opium War, Looting of the Qing Imperial palace in Beijing
1898-1901  Chinese anti-Foreign uprising, Boxer Rebellion
1900       John Hay’s “Open Door Policy” calls for equal trade rights amongst Europeans in China
1912       Official collapse of the Qing Empire and establishment of the Republic of China
1912       London Missionary Society establishes Hong Kong College of Medicine, which later became the University of Hong Kong. First western institute of higher education in Hong Kong
1997       Hong Kong returns as territory of the People’s Republic of China

Spense, Jonathan D. The Search For Modern China. New York W.W. Norton & Company Inc. 1999

Imperialism: Definition and Historical Context

- Imperialism: The Idea and Reality of British and French Colonial Expansion

Winfried Baumgart devotes this study to defining the idea of European Imperialism. He split this broad concept into three separate and more manageable subcategories. First, he explains the political atmosphere of mid-nineteenth century Europe. He qualifies various preconditions that made eastern expansion possible. He highlights the significance of early trading port, naval developments, missionary activities, exploration, and technological advancements. Second he approaches the topic of imperialism from a nationalistic perspective. He explains social conception of nationalism and the “white man’s burden” to not only expand into foreign lands but also to culturally educate the natives. Furthermore, Baumgart also explains the competitive nature of nationalism amongst fellow European imperialist nations. The importance of political and economic dominance becomes a major issue between imperialist nations. His final subcategory is the economic theory behind this expansionist enterprise. In this part of the book, Baumgart discusses the application of capitalist and mercantilist economic theories in foreign markets. He analyses the economic policy of Protectionism which is significant for understanding the imperialist initiatives for the Opium War. This book serves as a strong introduction to the broad idea of Imperialism.
The Economics of European Imperialism

Alan Hodgart gives a comprehensive evaluation of the economic forces of European Imperialism. This book approaches this topic from both a Marxist and anti-Marxist perspective. On the one hand, Marxists such as Lenin and Hobson, describes imperialism as a opportunistic extension of capitalism. The exportation of capital into foreign and less competitive markets was the driving force of all imperialistic ventures. The politics and ideologies were simply justifications of this economic phenomenon. On the other hand, the anti-Marxists, represented by Joseph Schumpeter, argues that imperialism was a result of a objectless national affinity to expand. The author also signifies Weber’s idea of the Capitalist Spirit; that it is in the best interest of the powerful capitalist to continuously expand. Hodgart’s economic-based depiction of imperialism not only provides a deeper understanding of this period but also shows the complexity of the phenomenon; that European imperialism could be justified and criticized from many different perspectives.


The British Perspective

Established in 1600, the East India Company was one of Britain’s most prominent imperialistic entities in Asia.
• **British Imperialism: 1688-2000**

A 700 page comprehensive history that covers the all the major colonial and imperialistic ventures since 1688. This source serves as a catalog of events; it documents all the figures, wars, treaties and embargoes from early colonialism to the decolonization after the second World War. This book is very similar to a typical history textbook. It is topical and event driven; it mainly focuses on painting a picture of the past rather than analyzing the conceptual forces such as nationalism or economic theories. Although the description of each event is brief, it is an excellent starting point for understanding the historical significance of the period.


• **The Honorable Company: A history of the English East India Company**

The East India Company was one of the important vessels of British Imperialism. It was controlled by wealthy merchants and was known for the trades in tea, porcelain, spices, salt and opium. During the British Colonial period in India the East India company even raised its own private military unit to protect its purely economic interest. This source covers the history of the company from the establishment of its royal charter in 1600 to its collapse in the late nineteenth century. This book explains the commercial aspects of imperialism which exemplifies the theoretical economic factors associated with imperialism. More importantly, it narrows the scope of imperialism from the political and economic actions of a nation to the actions of a company in which the British government had no direct control. It also contains a comprehensive overview of the company’s tea and opium dealings with the Qing empire in China. It analyzes the events of the opium wars from a commercial perspective.


• **Punch Magazine**
Political cartoons provide a satirical view of British imperialism.

“Punch was a Victorian weekly magazine that built up for itself a reputation for satire and savagely cutting commentary. Although in many ways a conservative magazine, they kept no sacred cows; anything and everything was available to be satirized and ridiculed. Reputations and careers were made and broken by the cartoons and articles depicted in this magazine. The fact that Punch was commenting on events as they happened has meant that it has provided historians with an invaluable source of contemporary values and ideas.”

Click here to visit site

<http://www.britishempire.co.uk/media/punch/punch.htm>

Primary Sources

• **Life in the British Colony of Hong Kong**

The following source is a description of the culture and lifestyle in the British Colony of Hong Kong in the 1930s. The author was half British and half French. The first portion of the book depicts the author’s childhood in Hong Kong and her interactions with Chinese locals as well as the European inhabitants. It serves as an anthropologic view on the class dynamics of this colony. The second half deals with the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during World War II.


• **Spense Documentary Collection**

1. 6.1 *Lord Maccartney’s Commission from Henry Dundas, 1792* - This document was the a letter from Henry Dundas, a representative from the East India Company, written the
Lord Macartney, a British Diplomat in China. This letter represents the early attitude of Europeans towards the Qing empire. The tone of this letter shows British dignity but also respects the authority of the Chinese. This attitude would change significantly after industrialization and the Opium Wars.

2. **7.5 Lord Palmerston’s Declaration of War (February 20, 1840)**—The formal response to the seizure and destruction of British opium by the Qing government. Lord Palmerston, the Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, informs the Qing Government of British intentions to protect its interests in China. This was the document that began not only the first Opium War, but also the first of many conflicts between Qing China and industrialized Western powers.


- **Destruction of the Old Summer Palace in 1860**

During the Second Opium War in 1860, the allegiance of European imperialist occupied the Chinese capital of Peking (Beijing). The Old Summer Palace, the Qing Chinese equivalent of a national museum, was looted and subsequently burnt down. Various looted artifacts appear today in museums around the world.

The following is a link to some of these priceless items.

A French exhibition of the looted item from the Old Summer Palace in 1861

<http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/garden_perfect_brightness_03/ymy3_essay03.html>

**The Chinese Prospective**

- **The Opium War of 1839**
The Opium War of 1839 was the first large scale military conflicts between the Qing Empire and western imperial powers. With the official prohibition of opium in 1836 in China, the Qing government launched a campaign to confiscate all foreign imported opium in Canton. In 1839, commissioner Lin Zexu seized over a million kilograms of opium and burned them. The British Empire responded by sending in the military and initiating the first Opium War. The result of this war not only lead to China’s lost of Hong Kong Island, but also revealed the military weakness of the Qing government. Up to this point western imperialist powers have been wary of the Qing Empire, but after this conflict, China begins to experience a series of disadvantageous economic pressures from Britain and other European empires. In Peter Fey’s *The Opium War*, the author explains the economic intentions of the British Empire in China before 1839 and after 1842. He highlights the significance of the first Opium War, its legacy of further western aggression, and the subsequent Chinese movements of military industrialization and self strengthening.


- **Letter to Queen Victoria from Lin Zexu**

The following is a translated letter from Commissioner Lin Zexu to Queen Victoria on the eve of the first Opium War in 1839. Although this letter never reached Queen Victoria, it nevertheless represented the views of Lin regarding both the Opium Trade in Canton and the broader idea of the free market. Lin approaches the topic of restricting opium in a respectful but assertive tone. He also addresses the problem of imperialism. “We [The Chinese] find your country [Britain] is sixty or seventy thousand li [about 4800 miles] from China Yet there are barbaran ships that strive to come here for trade for the purpose of making a great profit The wealth of China is used to profit the barbarians.” Though Lin does not fully understand the western concept of Imperialism, he is one of the earliest Chinese officials to recognize the “Barbarians” as a future threat to both Qing authority and Chinese society.

[Click Here](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/com-lin.html) to view the letter. 

- **Legacies of the Opium Wars**
Lin Zexu is revered as a Chinese national hero for standing up against imperialist powers and burning over a million kilograms of illegal British opium. This statue sits in Humen, a battle site in the first Opium War, where the Opium War Museum is now located.


**Lasting Legacies of British Imperialism**

![British Passport](image)

British/Hong Kong Passport prior to 1997

- Historical Memory of 19th century Imperialism
The following website is a part of the Hoover Archives that covers 19th century European Imperialism in Asia. Since it is a “.gov” page, it somewhat represents the political memory of that period. This source represents a politically American point of view on events such as the Opium Wars and the Boxer Rebellion. This website is worth investigating because it deals with the political memory of imperialism from the angle of a nation that participated but mostly remained on the sidelines. It depicts this period of imperialism in retrospect and could be contrasted with the various primary sources to gain a more stronger understanding of the era.

Imperial Japan

History of WW2
12/1926 to 09/1945

It is Japan's mission to be supreme in Asia, the South Seas and eventually the four corners of the world.
General Sadao Araki

When Emperor Hirohito ascended to the throne in 1926, Japan was enveloped in a struggle between liberals and leftists on one side, and ultraconservatives on the other. In 1925, universal male suffrage was introduced, increasing the electorate from 3.3 to 12.5 million. Yet as the left pushed for further democratic reforms, right-wing politicians pushed for legislation to ban organisations that threatened the state by advocating wealth distribution or political change. This resulted in 1925’s ‘Peace Preservation Law’, which massively curtailed political freedom.

As the left disintegrated, ultra-nationalism began to loom large. Japanese nationalism was born at the end of the nineteenth century. During the Meiji period, industrialisation, centralisation, mass education and military conscription produced a shift in popular allegiances. Feudal loyalties were replaced by loyalty to the state, personified by the Emperor.

Although early ultra-nationalists called for a tempering of Japan’s ‘westernisation’, through limits on industrialisation, their focus changed after the First World War. Western politicians criticised Japan’s imperial ambitions and limited Japanese military expansion (in 1922’s Five Power Naval Limitation Agreement). The 1924 Japanese Exclusion Act prohibited Japanese immigration into the US. Ultra-nationalists saw these actions as provocative; they moved towards xenophobic, emperor-centred and Asia-centric positions, portraying the ‘ABCD Powers’ (America-British-Chinese-Dutch) as threatening the Japanese Empire.
Between 1928 and 1932, Japan faced domestic crisis. Economic collapse associated with the Great Depression provoked spiralling prices, unemployment, falling exports and social unrest. In November 1930, the Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi was shot by an ultra-nationalist. In summer 1931, as control slipped away from the civilian government, the army acted independently to *invade Manchuria*. Troops quickly conquered the entire border region, establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo. Though the *League of Nations* condemned the action, it was powerless to intervene, and Japan promptly withdrew its membership. International isolation fed ultra-nationalism. Mayors, teachers and Shinto priests were recruited by ultra-nationalist movements to indoctrinate citizens.

In May 1932, an attempt by army officers to assassinate Hamaguchi’s successor stopped short of becoming a full-blown coup, but ended rule by political parties. Between 1932 and 1936, admirals ruled Japan. Within government, the idea of the ‘Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’ emerged. This plan called for Asian unification against western imperialism under Japanese leadership, leading to Asian self-sufficiency and prosperity. In reality, it meant an agenda of Japanese imperial domination in the Far East.

In July 1937, Japanese soldiers at the Marco Polo Bridge on the Manchuria border used explosions heard on the Chinese side as a pretext to invade China. The offensive developed into a full scale war, blessed by Hirohito. Japan enjoyed military superiority over China. The army advanced quickly and occupied Peking. By December, the Japanese had defeated Chinese forces at Shanghai and seized Nanking. There Japanese troops committed the greatest atrocity of an incredibly brutal war: the ‘Rape of Nanking’, in which an estimated 300,000 civilians were slaughtered.

By 1939, the war was in stalemate; Chinese Communist and Nationalist forces continued to resist. Yet Japanese imperial ambitions were undimmed. In 1940, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact, creating the Rome-Tokyo-Berlin Axis, building on the alliance created in 1936 by the Anti-Comintern Pact. Japan now looked hungrily towards the oil-rich Dutch East Indies to fuel its Co-Prosperity Sphere. In 1941, when Imperial General Headquarters rejected Roosevelt’s ultimatum regarding the removal of troops from China and French Indochina, the US President announced an oil embargo on Japan. For Japan, the move was the perfect pretext for war, unleashed in December 1941 with the *Pearl Harbor* attack.

**Sino-Japanese War**

History of WW2  
07/1937 to 09/1945  
http://www.history.co.uk/study-topics/history-of-ww2/sino-japanese-war
There were about 800 Japanese present, some of whom were in sedan chairs. . . . the binding of prisoners and shooting kept up until 2 o'clock in the morning.

Captain Liang Ling-fang testimony to Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal on the Nanking Massacres

In the 1930s, China was a divided country. In 1927 Chiang Kai-Shek had formed a Nationalist Government – the Kuomintang (the KMT), but his dictatorial regime was opposed by Mao Tse Tung’s Communists (CCP). Civil war between the Communists and Nationalists erupted in 1930 – the period of Mao’s legendary ‘Long March’.

In 1931, Japan, eager for the vast natural resources to be found in China and seeing her obvious weakness, invaded and occupied Manchuria. It was turned into a nominally independent state called Manchukuo, but the Chinese Emperor who ruled it was a puppet of the Japanese. When China appealed to the League of Nations to intervene, the League published the Lytton Report which condemned Japanese aggression. The only real consequence of this was that an outraged Japanese delegation stormed out of the League of Nations, never to return.

In the 1930’s the Chinese suffered continued territorial encroachment from the Japanese, using their Manchurian base. The whole north of the country was gradually taken over. The official strategy of the KMT was to secure control of China by defeating her internal enemies first (Communists and various warlords), and only then turning attention to the defence of the frontier. This meant the Japanese encountered virtually no resistance, apart from some popular uprisings by Chinese peasants which were brutally suppressed.

In 1937 skirmishing between Japanese and Chinese troops on the frontier led to what became known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. This fighting sparked a full-blown conflict, the Second Sino-Japanese War. Under the terms of the Sian Agreement, the Chinese Nationalists (KMT) and the CCP now agreed to fight side by side against Japan. The Communists had been encouraged to negotiate with the KMT by Stalin, who saw Japan as an increasing threat on his Far Eastern border, and began supplying arms to China. China also received aid from western democracies, where public opinion was strongly anti-Japanese. Britain, France and the US all sent aid (the latter including the famous ‘Flying Tigers’ fighter-pilot volunteers). Because of historic ties, China also received aid from Nazi Germany for a short period, until Hitler decided to make an alliance with Japan in 1938.

Although the Japanese quickly captured all key Chinese ports and industrial centres, including cities such as the Chinese capital Nanking and Shanghai, CCP and KMT forces continued resisting. In the brutal conflict, both sides used ‘scorched earth’ tactics. Massacres and atrocities were common. The most infamous came after the fall of Nanking in December 1937, when Japanese troops slaughtered an estimated 300,000 civilians and raped 80,000 women. Many thousands of Chinese were killed in the indiscriminate bombing of cities by the Japanese air force. There were also savage reprisals carried out against Chinese peasants, in retaliation for attacks by partisans who waged a guerrilla war against the invader, ambushing supply columns and attacking isolated units. Warfare of this nature led, by the war’s end, to an estimated 10 to 20 million Chinese civilians deaths.
By 1940, the war descended into stalemate. The Japanese seemed unable to force victory, nor the Chinese to evict the Japanese from the territory they had conquered. But western intervention in the form of economic sanctions (most importantly oil) against Japan would transform the nature of the war. It was in response to these sanctions that Japan decided to attack America at Pearl Harbor, and so initiate World War II in the Far East.


Where does the modern Chinese superpower come from? Only 75 years ago, China was divided, impoverished, economically exploited and at war with ambitiously imperialist Japan. The notional rulers of China, Chiang Kai-shek and his nationalist Kuomintang party, controlled a shrinking area of central and south-west China, fighting the Japanese with a poorly armed and trained army, and sometimes fighting the Chinese communists ensconced in China's north-west. In 1940, the Chinese nationalists seemed close to defeat and Japan's vision of a "Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (a Japanese-dominated Asian new order) looked closer than ever to achievement. Somehow, the rump independent China survived and, against considerable odds, became one of the victorious allies in 1945. But how?
The answer to this question has never much bothered western historians, who, for better or worse, have focused on what they see as the real war in Europe and the Pacific, where easily identifiable victories can be found and the explanation is clear. It is that neglect which has prompted Rana Mitter, professor of Chinese history at Oxford, to write the first full account of China's wartime resistance against Japan, restoring a vital part of the wartime narrative to its rightful place. Now, for the first time, it is possible to assess the impact of the war on Chinese society and the many factors that explain the Japanese failure in China and the eventual triumph of Mao Zedong's communists in 1949, from which the superpower has grown. It is a remarkable story, told with humanity and intelligence; all historians of the second world war will be in Mitter's debt.

The sheer scale and complexity of the Sino-Japanese war is daunting enough and Mitter, perhaps wisely, does not get bogged down in the technical and tactical details of how the war was fought. There were armies numbering millions on both sides, a fact that explains why the Japanese expansion in the Pacific theatre ran out of steam in 1942. The Chinese war effort could not hope to match that of the more developed states, but it dominated the administrative and economic spheres in China, while condemning tens of millions of Chinese to high levels of deprivation and hunger throughout the conflict. Mitter does not add to the debate about deaths, occasioned by the obvious absence of reliable statistics, but suggests the current estimates of between 15 and 20 million dead may not be wide of the mark; at the least, more than 90 million Chinese became refugees in their own country.

Moreover, the war encouraged the political fragmentation of Chinese territory as Japanese encroachments grew. In the north and east, the Japanese conquered large areas, where they installed and collaborated with puppet regimes, including Puyi (the last emperor) in Manchuria. Mongolia was more or less under Soviet domination. In the south and east, rival warlords maintained an uneasy relationship with Chiang's nationalists. In Nanjing, Chiang's former colleague Wang Jingwei set up a rival nationalist government under Japanese supervision in 1940. In the north-west, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai created a communist-dominated territory in Yan'an. Making sense of the different polities is a challenge in its own right, but the many divisions also explain not only the difficulty Chiang had in ever establishing an integrated, sovereign Chinese state, but the problems faced by the Japanese as they confronted the vast land area and the mosaic of local rulers.

Mitter explores this complex politics with remarkable clarity and economy. At the heart of the story is Chiang Kai-shek, the one leader the West or Stalin ever took seriously. The war he fought was long and bloody, starting in 1931 with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, and escalating into full-scale conflict in July 1937, when both sides on the pretext of an incident at an ornate bridge at Lugouqiao (the so-called Marco Polo Bridge) near Beijing embarked on open war. The Japanese disregard for the Chinese as racial inferiors is well-known. Less familiar is Chiang's dismissal of the Japanese as "dwarf bandits" and his misplaced confidence that his large but ill-equipped armies could match Japanese military skills. Chiang never seems seriously to have considered an armistice, but instead called for a "war of resistance to the end" (Kangzhan
which condemned many Chinese to years of harsh Japanese control, near famine conditions, and an increasingly brutal and terroristic Kuomintang regime.

The early years of war are in many ways the most arresting historically, partly because Chiang and Mao were largely on their own. Neither the Soviet Union nor the western powers wanted to be involved in war in China, and none of them was much interested in supplying money or goods. It is worth reflecting that for all the contemporary and subsequent criticism levelled at Chiang's war effort, the Chinese did not collapse entirely, unlike the European forces in Burma, Malaya and the East Indies, or the Americans in the Philippines. Mitter describes horrors on both sides. The Japanese "rape of Nanjing" – the one event of the war that is familiar worldwide – did happen, and Mitter will have no truck with Japanese attempts to explain it away. But he also explores the background that led Chiang ruthlessly to order the destruction of the dykes on the Yellow River to stop the Japanese advance, which left more than half a million Chinese dead and 4.8 million as refugees.

This story in itself says much about what was different in the Chinese war from war elsewhere. Reading Mitter, it is clear that for western readers understanding how Chinese society coped with total war requires a profound adjustment. Chinese fought Chinese, as well as Japanese. While the war with Japan was fought with terrible levels of atrocity, Chiang's security chief Dai Li (the "Chinese Himmler", apparently) ran a terror organisation that killed and tortured thousands of Chinese suspected of treason or of being communist. Wang Jingwei also had his security thugs, including Li Shiqun, a Shanghai gangster, whose Gestapo-like headquarters at "Number 76" in Shanghai proved too much even for the Japanese supervisors. Li was invited to dine at a hotel with Japanese secret policemen and died a day later from poison in his fish course. Chiang's resistance to the Japanese during the Pacific war (1941-45) forced the west to turn a blind eye to the campaign of terror that went with it.

One of the threads running through Mitter's account is Chiang's difficult relationship with the west, which treated him with a patronising disdain born of years of pseudo-imperialism. Mitter quotes a complaint from a British diplomat at Chiang's wartime capital at Chongqing about the "pitch of arrogance" in Chinese attitudes following humiliating defeat for British Empire troops in 1942 – a clear case of the pot calling the kettle black. Chiang in the end had something to record. China did not surrender, nor were Chinese forces completely defeated. In 1945, the allies hardly bothered to acknowledge what China had done, but for eight years Japan had been bogged down in Asia, unable to focus on the expensive war against the west and exposed for all to see as an atrocious and self-interested imperial power.

The fact of Chinese victory, Mitter argues, opened the way for the Chinese people to begin the search for a new identity that went beyond the fractured allegiances of the wartime experience. Mao defeated Chiang four years later and the long story of the rise of modern China could begin. No one could ask for a better guide than Mitter to how that story began in the cauldron of the Chinese war.