

UNWELCOME MUSE

*Chinese Literature in
Shanghai and Peking
1937-1945*

EDWARD M. GUNN, JR.

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Preface

Amputation is an ugly word that suitably describes the political and military situation of China from 1937 to 1945, when the Chinese nation, struggling to piece itself together, was dismembered again by war. Yet during all this upheaval, the portion taken by Japan, including the cultural centers of Shanghai and Peking, sustained a cultural life that made a significant contribution to modern Chinese letters. The basic task of this book is to offer an outline of the literary history of wartime Shanghai and Peking, and its ultimate purpose is to focus critical attention on the works of greatest literary merit. The form this study has taken is heavily influenced by the contemporary state of scholarship on modern Chinese literature and history. There is little attempt to remind the reader of the major trends and events in literature amply discussed elsewhere, to repeat in biographical detail introductions to writers available in several well-known book-length surveys and papers, or to speculate on related topics for which we currently lack sufficient and reliable information. This study, then, is designed to fill the gaps that existed at the time of publication, and to emphasize, in terms of the war period and the larger context of modern Chinese literature, the achievements deserving continued appreciation.

This study began with my work as a student at Georgetown University and developed with the advice and encouragement of Professor C. T. Hsia of Columbia University. Indeed, Professor Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* provoked my initial interest in the period. In addition, I am grateful to a number of

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

This is a study of aspects of Chinese literature written in the areas under Japanese military occupation during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945. It is concerned primarily not with the sociology of literature or the moral dilemmas of intellectuals, but rather with a critical appreciation aimed at fitting this literature into the mainstream of modern Chinese literary history and criticism.

The war period considered here began in the summer of 1937, when Chinese troops struck out against growing Japanese strength in the Shanghai and Peking regions. In the full-scale war that developed, the Japanese slowly and at great cost drove the main Chinese armies back from the coastal areas into the underdeveloped “great interior.” They gained a solid reputation for brutality toward the Chinese population, first in the pillage of Nanking and then in a savage punitive campaign against Communist guerrilla incursions in North China. By 1940 the war had largely stagnated; with the exception of a final Japanese drive through South China in 1944, there were no decisive military operations. The Japanese held major coastal cities and the fertile Yangtze River region to feed their troops, while Chinese armies harassed them in the outlying countryside until they reoccupied Japanese-held territory following the Allied victory over Japan in the summer of 1945.

Even though it appears as a historically well-defined period, the Sino-Japanese War was an extension and intensification of decades of foreign domination and exploitation and the threat of more of the

same. While Nationalists denounced Communists as pawns of Soviet Russian expansionism and Communists denounced Nationalists as compradores for Western powers, the Japanese military in the early thirties seized Northeast China and gradually extended their control over North China. All these issues and more had been prominent in the literature of China. When in 1937 the elite of China made their unprecedented stand against Japanese incursions by committing the nation to full-scale war, the patriotic literature that attended this decision was largely an extension of what had come before. All writers had come to be seen as directly or indirectly contributing to the aggravation or solution of these national issues, and with the start of war all writers were expected to provide a literature of patriotic resistance to Japanese aggression. This meant the exodus of the major literary establishments that had grown up in Peking and the Shanghai foreign concessions, as the former was occupied by the Japanese and the latter engulfed by the Japanese military in the summer and fall of 1937.

Of the large numbers of writers who scattered to areas beyond Japanese control, relatively few were attached to the armies or witnessed front-line fighting. They were primarily members of educational institutions or editors of publications that decided to move away from the zones of fighting and enemy occupation. The colony of Hong Kong, long a target of anti-imperialist writers and itself culturally moribund, burst into literary activity with the arrival of numerous well-known playwrights, poets, and authors, who addressed fellow refugees from occupied Peking and battle-torn Shanghai. Other groups of writers practiced their arts in Kweilin, Kunming, Chungking, Yenan, and until they fell to the Japanese, Canton and Hankow. Just as writers attached to universities and publications relocated with them, writers who were members of propaganda organizations were assigned locations. It is in part for this reason that a number of committed Communist writers remained in the Shanghai foreign concessions after the surrounding region had fallen to the Japanese.

It was a time of particular economic hardship for writers,¹ and even those who were prominent did not find it easy to get by in the underdeveloped interior or overcrowded Hong Kong. The deteriora-

tion of social conditions in the interior as the war took its course only deepened the severity of the problem. This was a strong factor in discouraging some writers from leaving Japanese-occupied territory, particularly those who feared they would be unable to support their families without the firm offers of employment in the interior that were so hard to come by. Thus, a number of writers never left Peking or Shanghai, and a few even returned to these cities after going to the interior, to wait out the war under foreign authority as their colleagues for the most part did in the interior.

Another reason that writers remained in Japanese-occupied territory was the less tangible one of deeply felt ties to a given region or city and its life, regardless of whether it was temporarily under foreign control. The work of a number of writers, both leftist and otherwise, is deeply rooted in their sense of being part of a particular community or regional affiliation and their writing as a commitment to it. Thus, there were many reasons why certain writers stayed and others fled, but none were political. It would be difficult to demonstrate that any writers of creative literature remained in Japanese-occupied territory out of sympathy for Japanese militarism or hope for political favor under Japanese rule.

The literary enterprises that had flourished in Peking and Tientsin up to the eve of the war vanished in 1937. It was over a year before the few remaining writers and academics agreed to contribute anything to a new publication, and another year before some semblance of sustained literary activity began. This was largely the result of an influx of young writers, students, and intellectuals from Japanese-held Manchuria and Taiwan, who joined with the remaining local students. The situation in Shanghai was different, for the International Settlement and French Concession there, which had always attracted writers, remained for a long time under European control and only gradually succumbed to Japanese domination. In 1940 the French Concession accepted allegiance to Vichy France, thereby retaining a semblance of autonomy from the Japanese by cooperating with the policy of a German-Italian-Japanese Axis alliance. The International Settlement remained predominantly under British administration until it was seized by the Japanese military at the outbreak of the Pacific War on 8 December 1941. The Japanese

administered the settlement through its municipal council until it was given to the Wang Ching-wei Nanking regime late in 1943. The exodus of Chinese writers from the foreign concessions came in three stages. It began in late 1937 with the fall of Greater Shanghai to the Japanese, was followed by a trickle of departures in succeeding years as Japanese influence limited the expression of patriotic sentiment, and ended in December 1941, when a half-dozen writers and editors quit the concessions upon their seizure by the Japanese military.

In the opening years of the war, the Japanese spent considerable time and effort in locating and inducing or coercing local Chinese talent to create literature and theatrical productions propagandizing their cause. The first notable defection of Chinese writers from the policy of resistance, when it finally came, arose not in occupied China but in areas free of Japanese control, such as Hong Kong, where the propaganda machine for the Wang Ching-wei peace movement was organized in late 1939 and early 1940. These writers included a few from the old Creation Society (Ch'uang-tsao she) and from the more recent group centered around the magazine *Les Contemporains* (*Hsien-tai*). After the fall of Hong Kong and the Shanghai International Settlement, a few writers until then associated with the Lin Yü-t'ang publications also helped foster a benevolent image of the Wang Ching-wei regime. Wang Ching-wei was an established political leader of China in eclipse under his rival Chiang Kai-shek, and thus had a measure of legitimacy the Japanese utterly lacked. However, if in organizing a peace movement and a government in Nanking under the Japanese Wang's aim was to ameliorate conditions for the Chinese under enemy occupation and win back some national autonomy, the failure of his actions was apparent long before the end of the war and from the start generated no popular support. Thus, although he had a corps of writers at his disposal, they were employed not to politicize creative literature, but to write editorials, attend Sino-Japanese cultural functions, and provide occasional testimonials as the needs of a political façade and circumstance demanded. It was for these activities, rather than any creative work, that collaborationist writers later suffered assassination, imprisonment, and social ostracism.

The chapter on literature and political initiatives is designed to take up these and other related issues in the historical sequence of the war period. The general failure of the Japanese and the Chinese regimes they sponsored in North and Central China to develop a politicized literature is its theme. Indeed, the only significant Chinese works of pro-Japanese propaganda were some films produced under direct Japanese supervision, and these were relatively few given the total number of films produced under the occupation. The discussion of films in this book is limited primarily to this chapter, for the films themselves have not been available in recent years, and their interest seems mainly confined to their role in mass entertainment under Japanese supervision. A lengthy survey of the lackluster role of literature in propaganda programs might not seem to be warranted. Yet, given the natural curiosity and suspicion regarding the nature of literature under the occupation, it is important to attempt to demonstrate the limits of Japanese political influence and make clear that Chinese writers for the most part responded to the proscriptions of censors rather than the prescriptions of propagandists. Such a survey also serves as a chronological introduction to the history of literary activity under the occupation, allowing a more analytical discussion of various works in later chapters.

The alternatives to a literature sympathetic to Japanese policies was a literature of resistance, dissent, or disengagement. The existence of works advocating resistance or expressing dissent is discussed in the chapter on literature and political initiatives, but those of literary interest are discussed individually in later chapters, together with the works more aptly considered as "disengaged."

The fact that so many works might be placed in the "disengaged" category is natural considering government censorship and the departure of many writers with reputations as social activists. But works offering themes of dissent or resistance appeared throughout the occupation period; and if more did not, it was not simply a matter of the Japanese presence. The writers who went into the interior of China to serve the army and the people with resistance literature found that by 1941, that population too was wearying of patriotic war stories. The literature of disengagement—escapist works and themes unre-

lated to fighting the Japanese—were common not only to Shanghai and Peking, but to the interior as well. Indeed, the earliest and loudest calls for a literature that transcended the topical issue of the war of resistance were sounded in the interior, notably by the critic Liang Shih-ch'iu, who was dismayed with the superficial, stereotyped quality of much resistance writing. Although Liang had his supporters, he was denounced by a chorus of writers from Chungking to the Shanghai concessions who still maintained their autonomy from the Japanese. But by the outbreak of the Pacific War in late 1941, the public had largely decided in favor of works less directly concerned with the immediacies of a stagnating war. It was then that the Shanghai International Settlement fell to the Japanese. If the writers there were immediately affected by the Japanese presence, they were also in touch with literary developments in the interior and did not create a literature unique to their situation under enemy occupation.

There were, after all, important social continuities, as well as literary ones, between the Nationalist-held interior and the occupied zone. Aside from continuing, quiet economic intercourse and political arrangements between the two regions, in terms of daily life hard times fell on most people, including writers, and the black market was a feature of life across China in the quest for day to day survival. Equally a common feature of the mental landscape was the notion that these circumstances were temporary. If many expressions of loyalty in the interior were deemed a temporary necessity to drive out the Japanese, acceptance of the reality of Japanese authority under the occupation was seen as a temporary necessity to survive to VJ day. Just as there was no consensus among writers in the interior on the proper degree of commitment to any faction (beyond the ultimate commitment to a liberated China), there was little consensus in the occupied zones over how to accept the fact of Japanese-sponsored regimes. Therefore, the relative activity or passivity of a writer's "acceptance" must be determined in a case by case review.

In this connection, having drawn some lines of continuity between writers in the interior and under the occupation, it might be noted that, in contrast to many European countries under unpopular regimes, little in the way of "underground" literature in occupied

China has come to light. We might consider as underground literature any work whose content is subversive to established authority, but basically, it is literature produced, published, and/or distributed outside legally established channels. The famous *Edition Minuit* of Paris under the Nazi occupation, for example, contained many works unrelated to the topic of resistance, as well as fulfilling its role as an anti-Nazi organ. Many of its contributors simply refused to be associated with legally approved publications, regardless of whether or not their writing was concerned with the war and enemy authority. In occupied China, however, it would appear that if a writer published his or her work, it was done in legally approved ways. The result was that, while productions of some plays were curtailed or modified and some magazines suspended, a number of works passed by the censors clearly put the results of Japanese rule in an unflattering light.

There is a contrast, then, between the social background and literary milieu of an occupied France and an occupied China. Yet for both societies the experience of occupation resulted in particularly important literary achievements. The focus of this study is on examining works for their place in the wider context of the history of modern Chinese literature. The terms employed to organize the later chapters on romanticism, traditionalism, and antiromanticism were chosen in the light of research on other periods, as well as the occupation itself. They are not introduced as original terms with new definitions. Placing a work in one of these categories does not imply that the label provides the ultimate appraisal of the work, but that its dominant qualities respond more to one term than another. It might be argued that the terms chosen for this study also have a limit to their usefulness on account of their broadness and lack of precision. But to have approached the period as a whole by way of other applicable critical terms, such as Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School, regional literature, literature for the masses, and so on, would have resulted in hair-splitting definitions that could only divert attention from the individual work itself. Nor would a study organized by genres or chronology have allowed integrated discussions of the many writers whose contributions spanned more than one year and a single genre.