



CHINA AT WAR

HANS VAN DE VEN

**TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY IN THE
EMERGENCE OF THE NEW CHINA
1937–1952**

P

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by

Profile Books Ltd

3 Holford Yard

Bevin Way

London WC1X 9HD

www.profilebooks.com

Copyright © Hans van de Ven, 2017

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Minion by MacGuru Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 194 2

eISBN 978 1 78283 016 0



CONTENTS

<i>Maps</i>	vii
Introduction	1
Part I: Staking a Nation	
1. Chiang Kaishek: Saving China	21
2. Nation Building	32
3. Nanjing, Nanjing	44
4. To War	57
Part II: Momentous Times	
5. The Battle of Shanghai	75
6. Trading Space for Time	92
7. Regime Change	114
8. War Communism	133
Part III: The Acid Test	
9. The Allies at War	157
10. The Turning Point	179
11. Japan's Surrender in China	203
Part IV: The New China	
12. Crash and Burn	221
13. National Liberation War	237
14. Exhaustion	256
Epilogue: Transitions	271
<i>Notes</i>	279
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	323
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	336
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	338
<i>Index</i>	340

MAPS

1. China
2. Battle for Shanghai
3. Battle of Shanghai
4. Battle of Wuhan
5. Military Situation 1939
6. Japanese conquest of Burma
7. Ichigo Operation
8. Manchuria 1948
9. Korean War





INTRODUCTION

... I the Lord thy God am a jealous God,
visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children
unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.

Deuteronomy 5:9

The world war which is approaching with irresistible force will review the Chinese problem together with all other problems of colonial domination. For it is in this that the real task of the second world war will consist: to divide the planet anew in accord with the new relationship of imperialist forces. The principal arena of struggle will, of course, not be that Lilliputian bath-tub, the Mediterranean, nor even the Atlantic Ocean, but the basin of the Pacific.

Leon Trotsky, foreword, in Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (1938)¹

Coming to grips with China's wartime history poses extraordinary challenges, not least because so much fighting took place in such a vast country over such a long period of time, from 1937 to 1945. In resisting Japanese aggression, China fought a war whose moral contours were simple and during which the country made enormous sacrifices to ensure its survival. This was the warfare of Herodotus's *The Histories*, of a civilisation defending itself against the depredations of a barbaric aggressor. However, there was also more or less simultaneously a civil war, of the kind that Thucydides portrayed in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, with instances of gross brutality, lawlessness, social mayhem, cynical betrayals and Machiavellian struggles for power. Civil wars raise different issues from wars between countries. In national wars, such as between Prussia and France in 1870, Spain and the Netherlands between 1568 and 1648, or even the First and Second World Wars, the goals are straightforward and nations come together. In civil wars, charismatic leadership, an ability to inspire, political shrewdness, managerial skill and a strong dose of ruthlessness are usually needed, first to force an outcome and make it stick, and then to bring calm to a society that has just torn itself apart.

Today, China recounts its wartime history in the Herodotean mode. This is a recent departure. In the early decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC),

China's recent past was constructed as a revolution in which the Chinese Communists had triumphed against great odds, freeing the country from the brutal tyranny of the Nationalists led by Chiang Kaishek, Japanese aggression and Western imperialism. Public attention was focused on events such as: the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921; the 1927 purge that left thousands of Communists dead; the emergence during the Second World War of Yan'an, the Communist capital, as a beacon of hope in a sea of Nationalist corruption and oppression; and the final defeat of the Nationalists in three great battles: the Liaoshen Campaign for control of Manchuria from May to November 1948, the battles for Beijing and Tianjin that lasted from 29 November 1948 until 31 January 1949, and the Huaihai Campaign in north China from 6 November 1948 to 10 January 1949. The history of the Communist revolution stood centre stage.

Now it is China's victory over Japan that takes the limelight. The Second World War (or the War of Resistance, as it is still usually called in China) is portrayed as the time when the New China was born, when the country managed to come together to prevail over enormous odds and safeguard a civilisation threatened with extinction. That today's leaders of the People's Republic choose to portray the country's war history as its finest hour is entirely understandable. Globally the Second World War has come to be regarded as something of an axial moment out of which the modern world emerged, providing not only its geopolitical contours but also its moral bearings. Many countries, including the United State of America, Russia and the United Kingdom, have put victory to use to enhance the national feel-good factor; why should China not do so, too?

The change, as so often in post-Mao China, was the result of initiatives at the local level, in this instance beginning in the universities. In the early 1980s, after Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, academic historians in the People's Republic, especially at Nanjing University, initiated a reassessment of the Nationalists' role during the War of Resistance. Using archival sources preserved in that city, they argued that, especially during the first phase of the war, it was the Nationalists rather than the Communists who bore the brunt of the fighting. In so doing, they overturned decades of silence about the enormous sacrifices the Nationalists and their armies had made in the service of the country.

Soon after, museums opened in places of significance in the war: at Nanjing, where the Nanjing Massacre Museum welcomed its first visitors in 1985 and where in the foothills of Purple Mountain the names of slain Chinese, as well as Russian and American airmen, are inscribed on memorial walls; in Shenyang, where the September 18 Memorial Museum, named after the date in 1931 on which the Japanese occupation of Manchuria began, was inaugurated in 1991; at Marco Polo Bridge, where, on 7 July 1937, the first shots of the War of

Resistance were fired; and in Chongqing, the city in western China to which the Nationalists retreated in 1938, and where Nationalist government buildings as well as the residences of Nationalist leaders have been restored and opened to the public.

Many cities now house memorial parks for the war dead, including Guangzhou, Shanghai, Hengyang, Guilin, Changde, Harbin, Shanggao and others. The war now features in movies, TV documentaries, memoirs and video games. In schools, students learn about the Second World War in China in Patriotic Education programmes. This trend culminated in the decision, taken by China's highest law-making body, the National People's Congress, to enshrine the new narrative in law. In February 2014 it decided that from then on China would mark its 'victory in the Chinese people's War of Resistance against Japan' every 3 September. Showcasing the inclusivity of the new narrative, both Communist and Nationalist veterans flanked President Xi Jinping as he presided over the commemorations held in September 2015. A year later, the seventieth anniversary of China's victory was celebrated with a huge military parade in Beijing.

There are real positives to this development. As Oxford historian Rana Mitter has noted, it has facilitated the healing of wounds resulting from decades of class struggle during which millions of Chinese people died.² It has given a new dignity to all those who were connected in one way or another with the Nationalists, distrusted during the Cultural Revolution and before as 'bourgeois running dogs', 'counter-revolutionaries', 'big tigers' or 'bad elements'. They, and their descendants, can now hold their heads up high in public.

This new understanding of the Second World War does more than further national reconciliation. The appeals of Maoism have long faded and even economic success, no matter how stellar, no longer suffices as a source of national pride for the country or of political legitimacy for its leaders. Commemorating the war fits the PRC government's efforts to move beyond ideology and economic success to promote a common national identity and proclaim its new international stature. To achieve these aims, the leadership has taken a series of steps, ranging from staging spectacles such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and reforming the national football league with the aim of making Chinese football internationally competitive, to instituting a uniform nationwide examination for university admissions and enforcing a standard pronunciation of Chinese through its schools. To construct an inspiring account of how the New China emerged from the Second World War furthers this project in modern statecraft.

China's leaders today are of course well aware that presiding over commemorative events associated with this version of China's history burnishes their image by association.³ One of their aims in emphasising China's role in the

war against Japan is also to suggest equivalence with the Western Allies, the message being that if China could be trusted by the international community then, the same should be true now. Hence their pressure to talk about a 'world-wide anti-fascist war' in which China led the fight against Japan, rather than just the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan.⁴

If this heroic version of China's Second World War history has a number of positive aspects, this book will nonetheless take issue with it, in several interconnected ways. The War of Resistance was never about the defeat of Japan alone. For China was at war not just with Japan but also with itself. For the historian the challenge has been to combine China's resistance to Japanese aggression and the simultaneous revolutionary war between the Nationalists and the Communists into a single account, an account that must be alert to the ways the two impacted on each other as well as to China's fragmented state at the time. Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek was China's wartime leader, recognised as such even by the Communists. However, even as the leader of the Nationalists he was more the convenor of a fractious alliance than the chief of a disciplined and structured organisation working towards a single purpose.

If China's war with Japan resulted from Japan's attempt to establish a Japanese empire across east and south-east Asia, the Chinese Civil War was the product of starkly different views within China about deeper questions made acute by the 1911 Revolution.⁵ These questions included: who was to have a say, and on what grounds, in political discourse and decision-making; what should China be seen to stand for; how should central and local authority relate to each other; what to preserve of China's traditions; and what was the country's place in the modern world. No mechanism existed to resolve these key constitutional issues, or indeed to foster compromises for them, with the result that the republic that emerged in the wake of the 1911 Revolution disintegrated as soon as it confronted its first major crisis, the death in June 1916 of President Yuan Shikai, the strong man of the Revolution.

By the late 1920s, Chiang Kaishek's Nationalists had prevailed in the civil wars that followed, but powerful regional forces, although nominally incorporated into the new order, remained largely independent, and frequently took to the battlefield to challenge Nationalist rule. In addition, a Communist insurgency took hold in the central China countryside in the early 1930s. In 1934 the Nationalists succeeded in driving the Communists out of their enclaves, but the Communists then undertook the Long March, as their escape to Shaanxi province, an inhospitable part of a poor province in north-west China, became known when the Communist revolution remained the preferred source for tales of heroic daring-do.

If in 1945 it was clear that Japan's gambit to establish its domination over east Asia had failed, the issues that the 1911 Revolution had shaken loose remained

unresolved. If the Nationalists had hoped that leading their country to victory and securing international recognition for China as an equal nation state had bestowed on them the mantle of legitimacy, they were to be disappointed. The Communists, and many others, refused to recognise their accession. And if by 1937 the Communists were but one among many opponents to the Nationalists – and not even the strongest one – by 1945 that situation had changed. In 1937, the Communists commanded perhaps some 30,000 inferior troops, with only a small base in a poor province. By 1945, Communist armed forces numbered some 1 million men, stationed in large bases across northern China. One effect of the War of Resistance in China was the radical narrowing of political options. At the time of the Japanese surrender on 9 September 1945, it was clear that it would be either the Nationalists or the Communists who would take charge of China. So it was that civil war continued for another four years, until October 1949, when, standing atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace overlooking Tian'anmen Square, Mao Zedong announced the founding of the People's Republic of China.

It is simply not possible to separate China's civil war from China's war with Japan. To give just one example, the Communist victory required a tightly disciplined party to ensure that its armed forces, Party cells, administrative organs and mass organisations operating across China's vast spaces implemented a coordinated strategy. In the early 1940s, when China faced the gravest situation in its war with Japan, Mao Zedong spent two years building such a party, combining a ruthless purge of his political opponents with a thorough indoctrination campaign, terrifying Communist Party colleagues into accepting his personal dominance. The negative example of Nationalist disorganisation – for which they became increasingly well known during the War of Resistance – no doubt was one reason Mao concluded that this had to be done if the revolution he wanted was to triumph. However, other factors created by the War of Resistance – such as heightened emotions, social dislocation, economic collapse and the fragmentation of military authority – were critical to his success. Similarly, the growth of Communist power impacted on Nationalist strategy. The Nationalists deployed large armies, including some of their best forces, in blockading Communist base areas, inevitably leading to a reduction in their anti-Japanese efforts.

Artificially separating China's War of Resistance from the Nationalist–Communist civil war inevitably leads to histories that are partial at best. A heroic account of China in the Second World War veils the fact that both the Nationalists and the Communists resorted to horrendous strategies, including scorched earth policies, flooding vast tracts of land, urban terror campaigns, murderous purges and the use of starvation as a military tactic. Unpalatable decisions and horrific measures are at times inevitable in war. Nonetheless,

if the Chinese have every reason to be proud that their country survived one of the greatest crises of its entire history and to celebrate this as a collective achievement, historians must try to tell it as it was.

The narrative arc for *China at War* is provided by the failure of conventional warfare in China and the emergence of what might be called national liberation war. When Japanese and Nationalist forces began fighting each other in 1937, they were committed to conventional war, with both sides seeing it as a marker of modernity and nationhood. They believed that war was a matter of deploying forces into the battlefield, arming them with industrially produced weapons and coordinating them through a general staff, while government ministries mobilised the materiel and human resources necessary for what was thought of as total war, in which mass was everything. This was the kind of war conceptualised by the great nineteenth-century military thinker Carl von Clausewitz. To Clausewitz, war was fought between opposing but internally cohesive societies, allowing all events to be placed into a dialectical narrative. That model of warfare did not survive the Second World War. What replaced it is difficult to define. At one end of the new range of possibilities was nuclear warfare, which, fortunately, has proved more a possibility than a reality. Somewhere in the middle is the kind of warfare the US waged in Vietnam, which can be thought of as managerial warfare, characterised by the use of tables, graphs, statistics, calculations and the application of modern business practices to war. Asymmetric warfare (typically between standing armies and insurgents) and terrorism are at the other end of the range.⁶

Both China and Japan realised early on in the conflict that the assumptions they had made about conventional warfare were unsound. By the autumn of 1938, the Nationalists accepted that they would not be able to throw the Japanese into the Pacific, as some had initially hoped might be possible, and nor could they sustain the war at the intensity with which they had pursued it until then. Japan drew the conclusion that it was unlikely that it could force a Nationalist surrender. It also was not willing to pay the price of pursuing the Nationalists all the way to Chongqing in western China, where they had by now fled, and judged that, in any case, the Soviet threat in Manchuria was too grave to risk such a diversion of energies.

Though both the Nationalists and the Japanese were searching for a new approach, neither went much beyond the conventional war paradigm. The Japanese placed greater stress on politics, attempting to bring about a federal China made up of a string of regional governments willing to align with Japan. In 1940–41 they also conducted a ferocious strategic bombing campaign – the first of the Second World War – in an attempt to destroy the Nationalist will to fight. In the Nationalist strategy greater emphasis was put on guerrilla

warfare and, especially, diplomacy in order to secure outside assistance. The Nationalists withdrew deep into China's vast hinterland, compelling the Japanese to spread out their forces, and kept the war going by launching limited offensives moving from one war zone to another. The Nationalists also turned to traditional methods of mobilising Chinese society, including by farming out recruitment to village leaders, and adopted an urban terror campaign to prevent the Japanese from consolidating their positions in China's cities. The result was not a stalemate – far from it – but a meat grinder of a war that ravaged the country without bringing any solution.

The internationalisation of the fighting following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 profoundly altered the context in which China's war with the Japanese took place, allowing the Chinese to offload a part of the fighting on to the USA, the UK, and eventually the USSR, and also ensure that they would be on the side of the victors. The emergence of the Communists as a powerful force was another, and for China ultimately more important, development during this period. Communist power expanded in two distinct timeframes. The first was the first two years of the War of Resistance, from 1937 to 1939, the second in 1944–5. In the first, Communist troops and cadres fanned out from their base at Yan'an in north Shaanxi province, in order to establish base areas behind Japanese lines. They waged small-scale guerrilla operations, avoiding direct contact with the Japanese, because they were too powerful, and with the Nationalists because they could not afford to alienate them at this point. The Communists carefully calibrated their political, military and cultural strategies to achieve these aims in a divided society in which they had a number of enemies and material resources were scarce. The circumstances under which the Communists were fighting rendered impossible a dialectical Clausewitzian approach to war.

The new way in which they went about conducting national liberation war combined the mobilisation of the countryside, at first on a limited scale for guerrilla warfare and for building up base areas and then for large-scale battles, with the creation of a tightly disciplined Party to provide cohesion, the assertion of a powerful ideology to jell together and motivate followers, the evasion of the battlefield until victory was virtually guaranteed, and the politicisation of all areas of life, including education, the village, court rooms, the media and even the family. Contrary to the romanticism with which national liberation war has at times been approached, it was a tough, merciless form of war – unsurprising, given the conditions under which it emerged.

National liberation war had a long-lasting impact, inspiring similar movements in south-east Asia, Africa and South America in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and with a continuing relevance for today. It should come as no surprise that Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi, one of Al-Qaeda's founding strategists, was well

versed in Mao.⁷ If atomic bombs were one invention to come out of the Second World War that would fundamentally shape the post-war world, national liberation war was another. The war in China may not seem to matter much to perspectives dominated by the rise of the two superpowers or by the emergence of nuclear warfare. But if we take the emergence of national liberation war seriously, then even though in China there were no great technological breakthroughs, what happened there nonetheless begins to matter enormously.

The years that followed the first period of expansion of the Communists were as difficult for them as for the Nationalists. In 1944, the Japanese launched their largest ever operation on land – the Ichigo offensive – in an attempt to create an overland link between south-east Asia and the Japanese homeland via China, and to drive the Nationalists out of the war completely. For the Communists, Ichigo was an opportunity. In their second period of growth, they flooded into the areas in north and central China vacated by the Nationalists and Japanese, who had to concentrate the larger part of their forces in China for this operation. They doubled the size of their armed forces to around 1 million men and, by the summer of 1945, they were in control of much of northern China, governing about a quarter of China's population. This provided them with the springboard, not to seize power straight away (although they did try that) but to move into Manchuria, train their armies in waging large-scale warfare and, finally, to surround the cities from the countryside and so defeat the Nationalists. National liberation war was never just guerrilla war.

China at War uses this framework of modern Clausewitzian warfare between two sides giving way to national liberation war in a setting with a multitude of enemies in order to bring out other key aspects of the narrative. China was a poor agricultural country fighting an industrialised state with superbly trained and equipped armed forces. Consequently, the Chinese had to 'trade place for time', that is, withdraw into the countryside and try to exhaust the Japanese through attrition, but also wait for beneficial changes in the global context. An important consequence was the virtual disappearance from pre-eminence of the large cities of coastal China, with their banks, industries, movie theatres, department stores and universities. That version of China did not survive the war, or rather, it did not re-emerge until well into the 1990s – although when it did, it did so with a vengeance. During the war, the bulk of the population moved into the countryside; it was here that China's future was decided. The transition was accompanied by enormous movements of refugees as people fled the advancing Japanese forces and as the Nationalists adopted devastating scorched earth measures, denuding areas about to fall under occupation of anything that might be useful to the enemy. The withdrawal into the countryside went hand in hand with new understandings of village China, not just among the Chinese Communists, but more broadly. 'The peasant' and 'the peasantry'

now became terms of common usage, effacing the complexity of China's village cultures but also providing village China with a political potency it had lacked in the past. Its inhabitants, who had previously been largely ignored, became subjects who needed to be organised, disciplined, cleansed, indoctrinated and mobilised (and discarded after it was all over). *China at War* returns China's Second World War to the countryside.

One challenge I have set for myself is to explore how the war was digested culturally. Two personal histories, one of a young woman who came of age during the war and the other of a middle-ranking, increasingly disillusioned Nationalist official, are interwoven into the analysis. The first, Chi Pang-yuan, has left us a beautifully written memoir of her experiences, while the other, Chen Kewen, maintained a diary in which he carefully recorded his reactions to people and events around him. They were from very different backgrounds. Chi Pang-yuan came from a politically influential family from Manchuria, while Chen was from a poor but educated family from the far south. Their experiences were not representative or typical, of course, but looking at events through their eyes nonetheless draws us intimately into the war. They give us a less ideological perspective than those provided by the Communist and Nationalist apparatchiks whose accounts have dominated the historiography and the memoir literature so far, because they and their families, while close to power, were nonetheless only on the fringes.

China at War will also discuss the shifts in history, culture and ideology at various points during the war. The struggle between the Communists and the Nationalists was decided not only on the battlefield but in the hearts and minds of the people. The Communists were consistently better at this, able to secure the allegiance of the best and brightest, at least of China's youth. Revolution is a young person's game and China's population was still largely made up of young people at this time. To understand the Communist victory, we need to understand why their views gained traction. I analyse these aspects, too, in order to focus on the fact that while China may have been poor and backward, it was also a country with rich traditions in literature, art, philosophical and ethical argument, historical analysis and political debate, all of which mattered hugely at the time, precisely because the Japanese invasion threatened their extinction.

In the USA, the UK, France and Germany, as well as increasingly the Soviet Union, wartime generals and political leaders are still well known, often because of the diaries and memoirs they have written. This is not the case in China. However, in recent years, the memoirs and diaries of such figures have appeared, which allow us to peer beneath the basic facts of battles, campaigns and strategic decisions. In this book I rely on such writings to give a more human face to some of those who led China at this critical juncture in its history. For personal networks and personal relations were often important

in the decisions that were made – inevitably in a country that was so deeply divided and in which the careful management of human relations is accorded special significance.

China at War treats the warfare in which China was involved between 1937 and 1953 as an interlocking series of events. As I have previously mentioned, its main military trend – there were many others – was the dissolution of dialectical Clausewitzian war and the emergence of national liberation war, a process that was driven by leaders thinking and acting; by people hoping, fighting, caring and dying; and by Clausewitzian chance, that is, by events that cannot be predicted or controlled in the clashes of competing armies. It returns village China and its inhabitants to a prominent place in the story, important because during the Second World War the whole world was still overwhelmingly rural, not just China.⁸ It stresses the importance of scholarship, art, culture and ideology in understanding China at war. However, this study seeks to take war seriously as war; that is, recover how it was thought about, analyse how it was planned, and examine how it was enacted, rather than just regret its horrors, see it merely as the context in which ideological or political struggles played out, or, important as these things are, use it to construct narratives about the origins of today's world.

In stressing Chinese and east Asian dynamics, I am consciously resisting the homogenisation that the concept of the Second World War often brings with it, an approach which compresses the complex events that took place in various theatres around the world into a single, usually moralised, dichotomous narrative. As the Cambridge historian David Reynolds has demonstrated, the idea that the fighting around the world amounted to a world war is a post-war construction. As he put it, 'only in 1948 did the British government decide that it had just been fighting the "second world war"'.⁹ The USA had acted with more speed, but there, too, the term was only officially adopted after Japan's surrender, when Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal proposed to President Harry S. Truman to adopt the term 'as a matter of simplicity and to insure uniform terminology'.¹⁰

With the exception of Germany, during the war none of the contending countries used the term. As we have seen, the Chinese called their war the 'War of Resistance against Japan', while the Japanese termed it, first, the 'China Incident' – a label widely used in the Anglophone press at the time as well – and, after the expansion of the war to include the US in December 1941, the Greater East Asian War, a name ruled out of order in post-war Japan and replaced with the Pacific War and the China War, in a move that gave rise to a bifurcation in scholarship that has lasted to this day.¹¹ After Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939, the British talked of 'the European War', or just 'the War', while in France it was 'la Guerre' or 'la Grand Guerre'. The Soviets fought the

‘Great Patriotic War’, a term first used by *Pravda*.¹² The Germans did talk about a *Weltkrieg* but, as Reynolds remarks, along with their unconditional surrender came the loss of naming rights.

On the Allied side, it was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who first used the term systematically, doing so well before Pearl Harbor, in order to ‘prod America out of isolationism into belligerency’.¹³ Roosevelt had pragmatic as well as idealistic concerns. America would have been difficult to mobilise unless its citizens were convinced that their country was under threat and they were fighting for a moral purpose. Roosevelt was concerned, too, with ensuring that the war would lead, not to the survival of an international system dominated by empires armed to the teeth and looking at each other with suspicion, and, in the case of Japan, hatred, but to a new global order of independent nation states who freely traded with each other and agreed to work cooperatively to maintain peace and foster prosperity. When in August 1941 the British prime minister Winston Churchill travelled to Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, in the hope of convincing the US president to join the war, he failed in that mission and instead found himself being asked to sign the Atlantic Charter, which set out Roosevelt’s ideas about the purpose of the war. If there was to be another great conflict in which millions died, then everything possible should be done to make sure that it would be the last one. The term ‘world war’ was never merely a factual description of a war fought on several continents.

After 1945 the term Second World War proved political useful. In the USA, the desire to ‘bring the boys home’ was huge. The surrenders of Japan and Germany made it possible to regard their job as finished and therefore to do so. But if the transition to peace was straightforward for the USA, for China it was not. In Asia and elsewhere, the arming of anti-imperialist and revolutionary movements during the war prevented the return of peace. It was only when these struggles had exhausted themselves, as they eventually did in China in 1949, and when the USA and the USSR consolidated their Cold War front lines in east Asia during the Korean War of 1950–53, that a measure of stability returned to the region. The term Second World War suggests a sense of finality to processes that in many places around the world remained ongoing; or, perhaps, a belief (in many cases unfounded) that peace would now return. In east Asia, wars between countries only really ended when the Cold War order descended over the area during the Korean War.

The time has come to disaggregate the Second World War and become attuned to the differences in each of its theatres. That is not to say that no connections existed between them: the Second World War was an alliance war, which the Allies won because they worked together much better than the Axis powers. Alliance members provided troops, ammunition and other aid to each other. America, a land of increasing plenty, supplied not just arms and

ammunition but also food to Britain and the USSR.¹⁴ Events in one theatre impacted on others. The war in China made it difficult for Japan to join Germany's war against the Soviet Union, leaving the latter free to concentrate on fighting the Wehrmacht. Had Japan succeeded in forcing a Chinese surrender, then China's resources would have become available to Japan. We can only speculate about the consequences, but they would have been significant. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, meant to put the US Pacific Navy out of action so that Japan could occupy south-east Asia, ensured the defeat of Germany in Europe by bringing the USA into the war. No study of any region during the Second World War should be written without considering its global dimensions.

China at War does not set out to ditch the term Second World War completely. Given both its ubiquity and its continuing appeal, any attempt to do so would be foolhardy; but some refiguring of its meaning is, I believe, in order. The idea that it all began with Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 and came to a definite stop in 1945 is too limiting to capture the complexity of events. The Second World War is, I believe, best seen as the result of Japan's and Germany's desire, at a time when resources around the world were thought to be restricted, to acquire new land in order to secure the agricultural, mineral and industrial resources they felt they needed to survive in a global order made up of competing empires. They also believed that their countries were overpopulated and therefore needed to acquire new territories (such as the Ukraine, the Caucasus, Manchuria) in which to move what they considered to be surplus populations. Both countries made initial forays – Japan in Manchuria, Germany in Austria and Czechoslovakia – which remained limited and hesitant. But full-out war broke out in Asia in 1937 and in Europe in 1939. Both Japan and Germany pursued quick war strategies in the belief that the greater resources their enemies could potentially marshal left them with no other choice.

In placing themselves on a war footing to resist German and Japanese aggression, other countries built up their armed forces, mobilised their societies, turned their industrial capacity to war purposes, and drew food, energy and people from their colonies to sustain their war effort. They also developed an alliance in which such former enemies as the UK and the USSR found ways to work together. The pre-war world of empire blocs disintegrated during these processes as Japan occupied large parts of east and south-east Asia; as the USA opposed their restoration after the war; and, critically, as national liberation movements organised and armed themselves. What emerged instead was a patchwork of arrangements involving global institutions of governance, new states that emerged out of national liberation movements, and the division of the world in two opposing camps, each led by one of the two superpowers that had grown out of the war, the USA and the USSR. *China at War* uses China not least as a case study to illustrate this process.