

BOOK REVIEW

The Tormented Alliance: American Servicemen and the Occupation of China, 1941–1949

Zach Fredman. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2022.
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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) liberated or seized control of most Chinese cities in 1949. Within about one year, the Party was mobilizing both urban and rural inhabitants to resist American incursions toward the PRC's northeastern borders. Amid the reconfiguring of China's alliances and public sentiments in these transitional years, the CCP sought to sharpen public antagonism toward the US via a campaign focusing on American atrocities in China – largely dating back to the mid-1940s – and meant very much to tarnish the outgoing Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) in a form of guilt by association. As explained by Robert Bickers in *Out of China* (Allen Lane, 2017), American troops (and indeed foreigners in various fields) could no longer swagger around Chinese territory, rape Chinese women, enable corruption in the Chinese army, proselytize, spy, reap contractual profits or walk blithely away from fatal traffic accidents. This CCP campaign was ultimately absorbed into, and overtaken by, a newer and more familiar raft of persuasive communications involving “converted” prisoners of war, bacteriological warfare accusations and simple fury over American aerial slaughter of civilians in North Korea. Since the millennium, a revived interest into the Republican period and the mainland's scholarly recuperation of China's international alliances during the War of Anti-Japanese Resistance makes the anti-American sentiment of the late 1940s – its existence, its depth and its uses – a truly interesting historical problem.

Zach Fredman's book brings us back to the everyday interactions between American soldiers and their Chinese civilian and military counterparts throughout the 1940s. The author brings forward a great deal of material to interest specialists – the thoughtful periodization, the intensity of focus on mid-level or lower-level actors, and above all the painstaking social exploration of military archives. While Fredman arrives with a sophisticated array of sources, his overall conclusion will be a reasonably familiar one for readers conversant with the CCP's information campaigns around 1949–1950, or Hong Zhang's book *America Perceived* (Praeger, 2002). Fredman writes:

By anchoring larger Sino-American struggles over race, gender, and nationality, the U.S. military in China transformed itself into a widely loathed occupation force: an aggressive, resentful, emasculating source of physical danger and compromised sovereignty, and – after Japan's surrender and the spring 1946 withdrawal of Soviet forces from Manchuria – the chief obstacle to consigning foreign imperialism in China irrevocably to the past. (p. 1)

In the framing of the text and the assumptions that run through it, at times it feels as if Fredman's ideal readers exist outside Chinese studies. American military deployments – not just after the Second World War but *during* that ostensibly “just war” – are associated with human rights abuses and eradicated sovereignty. In his epilogue, Fredman explicitly evokes the shadow of American occupations and failed state-building in more recent times, writing that “the U.S.

war in Afghanistan revealed the enduring patterns that emerged in China over fifty years before the 9/11 attacks” (p. 205).

While the broader set of concerns is clear, Fredman’s main work is to lay out a series of detailed and in fact narrow individual chapters that succeed in the author’s more specific task of “connecting operational and low-level Sino-American interactions to the alliance’s high politics” (p. 4). Chapter one covers the hostel programme housing American military advisors in China, providing ample data on the perceptions of disgust or hygienic issues which led American soldiers to “racialize and infantilize the Chinese with stunning speed and consistency” (p. 23). Diaries and letters from the Veterans History Project at the US Library of Congress are put to good use and mixed with Huang Renlin papers in this chapter. Chapter four looks at Chinese civilians’ participation derived from the US Army courts-martial papers, focusing on issues like responses to smuggling and criminality. Sidney Rittenberg, later to become a committed Maoist, makes a cameo as a JAG interpreter in February 1945 witnessing the trial of John Brenna and James Cooper for drunken driving and manslaughter (p. 132).

Chapter two provides thick detail on the 3,300 Chinese interpreters who were recruited, trained and deployed over the course of the Second World War (p. 49). Fredman adeptly shows the importance of these individuals and their idealization by the top levels of the Kuomintang. Chiang Kai-shek, He Yingqin and Hollington Tong all sang the praises of the interpreters in service of strategic goals, even if intelligence head Dai Li was against the programme on the grounds that the recruiting pool could be penetrated by spies (p. 58). Ultimately it was difficult to gather a sufficient pool of recruits, such that a draft from the 65,000 university students in China was implemented to staff the ranks. While Fredman takes pains to show the problems in the programme, a recent article on Qingdao in 1949 published in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* by authors Weizhen Zhang and Tao Peng argued that mutual US-Chinese linguistic ignorance at the local level acted as a kind of shield against frictions; call it “indifference as deconffliction.” Fredman brings out a number of interesting personae in the text, among whom Major General He Haoruo is near the top of the list. General He had earned a PhD in economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (his 1927 dissertation was entitled “The Time Concept in Economics”). While he was keenly aware of G.I. misconduct, General He was even more keen to see enrolment in the interpreter programme increase, lobbying Chengdu university administrators and using press conferences to lacerate critics and generate support (pp. 63–64).

The author’s impressive tenacity of research occasionally leads to overly extensive detail (how many tonnes of water buffalo meat were served to American troops in China during the war?). At other times the sheer velocity and pace of the multiple incidents conveyed causes the author to race past details that would be intriguing if they weren’t so buried in data. The self-immolation of one interpreter outside the Foreign Affairs Bureau in Kunming, mentioned in a single sentence (p. 67), for example, seems ripe for more discussion. At the same time, the richness of detail yields fascinating regional inequalities within Sichuan: while the best potential pool of interpreters were English-speaking students in Chengdu, trained by missionaries, it was these connections that precisely made these students untouchable by the government. Interpreters were therefore often sourced from less-qualified students in Chongqing as the number of American troops in China was skyrocketing. At other times, it was the US-adjacent who bore the brunt of resentment, such as in the episode when Chinese engineers, not American troops, were attacked by local farmers outside Chengdu as the technicians were surveying requisitioned land for B-29 airstrips for the purpose of bombing Japan (p. 115). In the end there is a fundamental pessimism to the text; China is here not a victor of the Second World War but saddled with an unequal alliance, unable to exercise agency at any level other than perhaps taking advantage of misplaced and racism-tinged American largesse.

Minor caveats aside, Fredman has approached the topic armed with tenacity and sources galore. He has gone beyond the typical questions of Japanese war crimes or Stillwell’s nutty diary, creating a

lively text whose larger argument and specific contentions are worthy of debate. *The Tormented Alliance* seems likely to generate a good amount of both heat and light among historians of the Second World War, the history of US–China relations, US military occupations, and the growing critical history of American military–civilian relations in East Asia in the 20th century.