New Perspectives on Chinese Collaboration

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The question of moral judgment looms large over every discussion of World War II collaboration, at times clouding and distorting our understanding of this complex issue, as Timothy Brook poignantly remarks in his contribution to this journal's recent symposium. This moral question is certainly relevant and should not be dismissed, since collaboration came to be more or less directly associated with the civic and human rights infringements perpetrated by the occupying forces.[1] Always complex, this question becomes murkier when linked to the rhetoric of patriotism and to postwar political agendas, as is the case with the "resistentialist" postwar narrative that has dominated the debate on collaboration until recently.[2] This narrative has mythologized resistance and enshrined it as the only patriotic, moral, and honorable response to foreign occupation, gliding over difficult moral dilemmas raised by some strategies and practices of resistance. In the process, it has polarized the debate on collaboration by offering only two opposite and monolithically-conceived categories: moral and patriotic resistance versus unethical and treasonous collaboration. It has therefore left no conceptual tool for gaining a more nuanced understanding of behaviors that do not fit this pre-established and rigid dichotomy, such as "nationalist" or "state-building" collaborationism—referring, respectively, to attempts at protecting nation and population from the occupying forces and at state building in the face of the complete and bewildering disappearance of the preexisting order, as in the cases discussed by Brook.[3] Finally, this resistentialist narrative has constructed a universal image of collaboration, which tends to reduce various forms of this phenomenon in different countries to a common denominator, obliterating all political, social, and cultural differences.

In order to overcome this ideological impasse and gain a more accurate understanding of the circumstances of collaboration, Brook shifts our attention to the local level and to the early stages of Japanese occupation, when no centralized collaborationist government was yet in place. His intention is to set aside, what he calls "the considerations of national honor and personal integrity that haunted the metropolitan politicians." He wants, instead, to throw light on practical problems, such as food distribution, that people faced daily under occupation and on the "state-building collaborationism" that these problems generated. Bringing to light these difficult-to-classify instances of collaboration—that fall outside of the meganarrative of postwar resistentialist patriotism—is a crucial step in gaining a more nuanced understanding of Chinese collaboration.

Overcoming the imposed ideological agendas of postwar resistentialism, however, also requires that we restore collaboration to its original temporal dimension by approaching it as a process developing by stages, each belonging to different political and historical moments. This approach can help us keep wartime collaboration and its postwar narrative distinct—rather than continuing to use the latter to explain the former. The first was a wartime response to crisis that took prewar political, social, and cultural frameworks and used them to build creative and improvised solutions to the collapse of the known order. The latter developed at the intersection between the politics of memory and the construction of new sources of political legitimacy in the postwar period that were in turn shaped by new political dynamics that emerged in the wake of the sweeping changes brought about by the war.

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Collaboration as an Evolving Process

If we approach World War II collaboration as an evolving process we can distinguish roughly three main phases. The first phase can be defined as the road to collaboration, during which collaborators framed goals for working with the occupying forces. Both in Europe and in China, these expectations and goals varied widely, going beyond outright self-interest or self-preservation (although these were certainly important) and including difficult to classify aims, such as "nationalist" or "state-building" collaboration. This was a moment of negotiation between collaborators and occupying forces, in which the occupiers, as both Brook and Prasenjit Duara illustrate, created the space—rhetorically, politically, and administratively—for collaborators to operate.[4] The choices made at this stage were based on what appeared to be a set of viable options at a time when the Allies' victory was at best a remote possibility and everything about the future appeared murky. Collaborators like Pétain and Wang Jingwei—the main leader of the collaborationist Reorganized Nationalist Government, or RNG (1940-1945)—for example, worked on the assumption that the war was lost and some kind of peace was soon to follow.[5]

Wang Jingwei in 1941 photograph with Nazis. Wang always flew the Nationalist flag and claimed to represent the true embodiment of the party

They therefore planned to preside over national reconstruction in an occupied country, rather than over a continuing war. They could not know with certainty the nature of the future Nazi or Japanese occupation. The continuation of the war, for example, strained both Germany's and Japan's resources, thus increasing—rather than decreasing, as the two leaders had expected—their demands on the occupied nations. Local collaborators, as Brook remarks, worked to rebuild the polity in an occupied state. They acted under the assumption that it was possible to bring some normalcy to daily life and rebuild the infrastructure for the local community to function

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properly. Their local perspective contributed to their acting from the point of view of the "here and now"—rather than trying to give primacy to long-term political possibilities. The goal of rebuilding the state under circumstances of occupation, rather than of collaborating with an enemy during a protracted war against fellow citizens, was, therefore, one of the many factors that affected decisions to collaborate at different political levels.

The actual experience of collaboration can be regarded as a second phase, when expectations were put to a test and their validity and effectiveness were revealed. Some of the Vichy collaborators—Vichy was a complex political formation and included diverse groups with different collaborationist goals, including sympathy with the Third Reich's political program—must have felt their nationalist expectations and goals slip away as it became clear that they were powerless to resist German's demands. Vichy attempted strenuously to remain autonomous from Germany, but this attempt ultimately failed.[6] Consequently Vichy increasingly slid toward, borrowing Roderick Kedward's expression, "highly derivative [Nazi-style] solutions."[7] In the end, it became clear that the original "nationalist" and "state-building" goals were a mirage.

We still know very little about the Chinese collaborationist regimes and the various groups that participated in it. It is clear that the main leaders of the Reformed Government shared anti-GMD feelings.[8] On the other hand, many of the RNG leaders belonged to the Wang political faction within the GMD, originally known as the Reorganization Clique, and presumably followed Wang for reasons that included factional loyalty and shared political visions. Other RNG leaders, such as Zhou Fohai, were not so closely associated with Wang and their motivations remain unclear. In spite of some important works, the spectrum of collaborationist goals and the internal political dynamics of both the Reformed Government and the RNG still remain largely unexplored.[9] It is clear, however, that some of the RNG leaders who held "nationalist collaboration" goals, saw them slip away. At his trial in Suzhou (April 6, 1946), Chen Gongbo—the acting chairman of the RNG after Wang's death in November 1944—admitted that he had soon come to realize that he had no power of negotiation with the Japanese and therefore he could not achieve his original collaborationist goals.[10] At this stage, confronted with the brutalities the Japanese perpetrated on their fellow citizens, even the local elites motivated by more pragmatic goals must have come face to face with ethical questions—if not with wider issues of national politics, patriotism, and national identity. They must have asked themselves whether it was possible to find a reasonable balance between costs (participating, even if marginally, in an authoritarian regime) and returns (such as the extent to which one could actually protect nation and people or restore normalcy to the local community). Above all, many must have come to recognize that peace was not going to come soon and that the Allies could actually win the war. We are therefore faced with the questions of what kind of readjustment and political evolutions these new perspectives triggered individually and within the various collaborationist organizations (national and local) and what kind of new ethical issues they generated.

The third phase covers the years immediately following the end of the war when collaboration trials enshrined a narrative of resistance and collaboration that became hegemonic. This was a triumphalist victor's narrative that recast the narrative of the war from the perspective of the Allies' victory. It also built on years of Allied war propaganda that had simplified the narrative of war and the political issues it involved. This is not to say that the resistentialist narrative of collaboration did not contain any truth. It accurately denounced the authoritarian and brutal nature of the Nazi, Japanese, and collaborationist regimes while being reticent about the less than

sterling war records of the Allies and the resisters. It avoided, for example, references to German and Japanese violent retaliations triggered by resistance or mention of such controversial Allied war strategies as firebombing. In Europe it built on a longtime political struggle against Fascism and authoritarianism (although it tended to identify this struggle and wartime resistance with the left only, ignoring other political groups that had also played important roles in both).[11] Above all it resonated in the frustration and resentment of the brutality the occupation generated in the majority of the population in the occupied areas and gained strength on the collaborationist regimes' failure to maintain autonomy and shield the local population, a failure, that shifted their role, in the eyes of most, from protectors to perpetrators.[12]

This resistentialist narrative, above all, looked toward the construction of new sources of political legitimacy for the postwar nation. The trials of the main surviving leaders of the RNG (in Suzhou from April 1946)—like the trial of Pétain in Paris (late July 1945)—were part of a wider process for establishing, retroactively, the legitimacy of Jiang Jieshi's leadership (De Gaulle's in the case of France) before and during the war and thus consolidating his position at the head of the postwar government. The trials became rituals for discrediting alternative narratives of war and resistance and reaffirming a unified and linear one, while erasing the memory of the uncertainties on how to respond to foreign occupation that had characterized the early stages of the war in both France and China. At his trial, Chen defended his collaborationist choice on the ground that his motivation was not to destroy the nation, but to save it—a defense strategy similar to the "Shield and Sword" defense presented, equally unsuccessfully, by Pétain at his Paris trial. Chen thus implied that the unsatisfactory result of his efforts should not obscure his patriotic intention.[13] Since treason—having acted against the interest of the nation—was the main charge brought against him, defending the nationalist spirit of his choice appeared to him (and to the other RNG leaders who went to trial in Suzhou) the most important point in his defense. At Suzhou, however, having acted against the nation became synonymous with having acted against Jiang. The trials moved from the assumption that Jiang's government had all along been the "central" (zhongyang) and legitimate government—forgetting how contested Jiang's leadership over party and country had been before the war—and, a priori, sanctioned any action toward the Japanese decided outside of Jiang's jurisdiction as illegitimate and treasonous, regardless of its intention. As a consequence the prosecution did not even engage Chen's narrative or try to evaluate whether he had really attempted to save the nation from the Japanese.

A Changed Political Environment

The consolidation of Jiang's leadership over Nationalist China well exemplifies the dramatic changes the war brought to the Chinese political landscape. Sources of political legitimacy had shifted dramatically and salient prewar political features such as the factional struggle over the GMD leadership and warlord politics had lost their resonance. Political strategies based on prewar political repertoires were therefore discredited. For example, the claim of some RNG leaders that they were using the Japanese invasion to challenge Jiang Jieshi's leadership appeared now particularly irrelevant. In 1938, Wang Jingwei had evoked Sun Zhongshan's 1920s collaboration with Guangdong warlord Cheng Jiongming to present collaboration as part of a legitimate political strategy to establish GMD rule over China. One of his goals, Wang claimed, was to bring down Jiang Jieshi and restore Party and country to the correct political legacy left by Sun, which he (Wang) embodied and Jiang had betrayed. It is difficult to accurately gauge how convincing this argument appeared in 1938-1940—the years of negotiations between Wang and Japan. At that time it would have already been apparent to many

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that Japan was no warlord and allying with it could bring far more ominous consequences than Wang's previous attempts to use warlords for the same political goal.[14] Rana Mitter's work on Manchuria, however, illustrates that warlord politics continued to intersect with choices of resistance and collaboration.[15] The Xi'an incident, whose role in Jiang's decision to resist Japan is still largely unclear, also played out at the intersection of warlord dynamics with internal GMD disagreements (between Jiang Jieshi and Zhang Xueliang) and national politics.[16]

Jiang Jieshi (left) and Zhang Xueliang at Xi'an

The interplay between warlord-politics, faction-struggle, and collaboration/resistance was, therefore, a familiar feature of the prewar political discourse. The war, however, swept away the warlords—with the exception of some border regions—and firmly established Jiang's leadership. The Cold War furthered this process by introducing a new polarizing political narrative that portrayed a tightly unified GMD struggling against an equally centralized CCP. Factions, warlords, and challenges to Jiang's political legitimacy disappeared from Chinese political discourse, and could no longer be convincingly deployed to explain collaborationist choices.

The postwar political landscape was also transformed by the process of political globalization that brought China into closer alignment with the Allies' political propaganda and their politics of retribution.[17] Chinese collaborators would have certainly met with punishment even without the example of the Western European collaboration trials. These trials, however, and especially that of Pétain, came to supply the terms of reference for Nationalist hanjian (the Chinese term commonly used for collaborators) policies, acted as external sources of political legitimacy, and helped shape the way that hanjian were punished. Glossing over important differences, media and political leaders in Nationalist China appropriated basic themes of the French resistentialist discourse, reconstructed them into universal tropes that went beyond the undeniable realities of the shared historical experience of occupation, and redeployed them to explain Chinese collaboration and justify its punishment.[18] In this way, Nationalist China could exploit the global visibility of the European collaboration trials to carry out its own political agenda. On the other hand, it contributed to the process of globalization of the discourse on collaboration—by equating China's and France's war experiences and making Pétain relevant for China—and to the construction of an oversimplified and monolithically conceived image of collaborators that obliterated diversity and local variation.

A Comparative Approach

Taking a comparative approach and exploring the extent and limit of collaboration as a global experience is essential for going beyond this oversimplified globalizing narrative and for proving the impossibility of discussing collaboration as a universally valid category. As both Brook and Duara clearly demonstrate, collaboration was a creative relationship between occupier and

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occupied and therefore it necessarily developed differently within different relationship frameworks. The relationship between Germany and Vichy, for example, was significantly different from that between Japan and the Chinese collaborators, since they grew out of different political backgrounds. As Brook remarks, in China, collaboration developed from below while in France it developed from above. This meant that in France, the central government did not retreat in the face of foreign occupation and the Germans were not met with the total political and administrative vacuum the Japanese met in China. The French central authorities could thus delegate Vichy to work out those pacification policies that in China became a responsibility of Japanese pacification agents. If we want to push the comparison between France and China beyond the scope of Brook's study, however, we need to reframe its parameters. Vichy, in fact, only controlled a small portion of French territory, the largest portion being directly occupied by the Germans. Would this occupied area, rather than Vichy, constitute a better comparison for China, or at least for this early collaboration from below? This question is not easily answered and its purpose is mostly to reveal the difficulty of comparing collaboration in the two countries. Several considerations in fact arise. While similar forms of collaboration from below probably characterized the occupied area in France and the early stages of the war in China, the situation under Vichy and the RNG surely differed significantly. The RNG was considerably weaker than Vichy—and the same is probably also true for the Reformed Government. It appears that the RNG never developed the ability to extend its direct control down to the local level in the same way that Vichy did. Even with respect to food procurement, in spite of the RNG's attempts to gain control over the system of "material control", Japan remain deeply involved and still directly collected grains in large areas of RNG territory.[19] Collaboration from below thus probably survived in China even after the establishment of centralized collaborationist governments. We are then left with the question of the extent to which the initial differences between Vichy and the RNG influenced long-term collaboration in the two countries. Was the RNG's weakness a result of the fact that it had to build a new administrative structure from the top in the 1940s, while Vichy, a relatively seamless continuation of the prewar government, continued to preside over the existing administrative structure? Was the German presence less felt in Vichy France than the Japanese presence in RNG China, where Japanese troops remained omnipresent and heavily involved in daily operations that touched the lives of the common people, such as grain procurements? And how did these differences affect popular views of collaboration?

Another difference between France and China lies in their prewar political situations. The Paris trial benefited from the fact that it could look back at the prewar debate on democracy and fascism, even if that debate came to be misrepresented by the resistentialist narrative.[20] Although the GMD deployed the Western European resistentialist discourse in support of its punishment of hanjian, it was itself an authoritarian state that embodied fascist elements. After the war it had immediately resumed the anti-communist purges that it had initiated in the prewar years, with open disregard of basic civic and human rights. As a consequence, the GMD used a very simplified version of the resistentialist discourse, focusing almost exclusively on issues of nationalism and political loyalty and steering safely away from anti-fascism.[21] This strategy of only evoking selected themes from Allied ideology was made possible by the fact that, during the war, the Allies' propaganda had itself relied on a vague depiction of Jiang's GMD as one of the paladins of democracy fighting against fascism (an oversimplification that was also extended to the Soviet Union). Jiang had all along relied on the ambiguity of his international reputation and even in the postwar period continued to draw legitimacy from his alignment with the Allies,

while being extremely vague about his "democratic" tendencies and never directly addressing the issue of fascism.[22]

The moral judgment on collaboration officially promoted in postwar Nationalist China was thus constructed at the crossroad between local nationalist sentiments and a globalizing political discourse. While ethical considerations certainly played a more visible role in the postwar politics of memory, as also illustrated by Heonik Kwon, they were never, in fact, separate from the political terrain. Moral issues were always present in the ideologies and rhetoric of both the invaders and the collaborators, as Duara notes. Even at the very local level studied by Brook, Japanese pacification agents and local elites who worked with them might have used this ideology simply as a convention, but it still posed questions concerning the conceptual and legitimizing framework without which any cooperation was impossible. Even at the personal level, the authoritarian and often genocidal policies of the regimes' collaborators faced must have required them to rationalize the reasons that made their response acceptable.

The terms retroactively imposed on the moral question by the postwar resistentialist narrative are obviously no longer adequate, as Brook rightly remarks. Restoring an historical dimension to the different stages of collaboration and using a comparative approach can contribute to a better understanding not just of the original political landscape of collaboration, but also of the terms in which ethical issues came to be formulated and experienced during the war and the role they played in the original political circumstances of collaboration.

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Notes

[1] The close connection between human rights issues and the postwar moral judgment on collaboration is illustrated by the sudden change in French public opinion on collaborators. As news of the Holocaust began to emerge in the immediate postwar, the number of French who supported severe punishment for collaborators increased dramatically.

[2] "Resistentialism" is a term generally used to characterize the postwar discourse on collaboration in France, but is extended here to include different forms of mythologizing of resistance in other countries including China. Henry Rousso, The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991); Eric Conan and Henry Rousso, Vichy: An Ever-Present Past, Contemporary French Culture and Society (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998).

[3] For a discussion of collaborationist nationalism outside of the debate that developed in the 1990s in European history, see Collaborationist Nationalism in Occupied wartime China" in Timothy Brook and Andre Schmid, Nation Work: Asian Elites and National Identities (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Margherita Zanasi, Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) (chapter 7) and Zanasi, "Globalizing Hanjian: The Suzhou Trials and the Post-World War II Discourse on Collaboration," The American Historical Review 113.3 (June 2008).

[4] Prasenjit Duara, Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003) and his contribution to this journal symposium.

[5] Burrin, "Vichy," in Pierre Nora ed. Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. Vol. 1 Conflicts and Divisions (New York, 1998); Zanasi, "Globalizing Hanjian.

[6] Simon Kitson, The Hunt for Nazi Spies: Fighting Espionage in Vichy France (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Robert O. Paxton, "Vichy vs. the Nazis," The New York Review of Books 55.3(March 6, 2008), p. 39-40.

[7] I refer here to Kedward's analysis of Vichy, which, however, can easily be extended to the last years of the RNG. See H. Roderick Kedward, "Introduction" In Kedward and Austin eds., Vichy France and the Resistance: Culture and Ideology, 2-3.

[8] Brook. "Collaborationist Nationalism."

[9] Brooks, "Collaborationist Nationalism"; Duara, Sovereignty and Authenticity; Parks Coble, Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order; Hwang Dongyoun, "Wang Jingwei, the Nanjing government and the problem of collaboration," Thesis (Ph.D.), Duke University, 1999.

[10] Zanasi, "Globalizing Hanjian"; Chen Gongbo, "Zibaishu."

[11] Rousso, The Vichy Syndrome.

[12] We know that, for example, the French initially supported Vichy but soon changed their views as Vichy's inability to resist German pressures became apparent. Kedward, Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance 1940-1944, 2-3, and 17; Burrin, France under the Germans; Pierre Laboire, L'Opinion Française sous Vichy, 228 on.

[13] Zanasi, "Globalizing Hanjian"; Chen Gongbo, "Zibaishu."

[14] Wang first allied against Jiang Jieshi with Feng Yuxiang and Yan Xishan in 1930, only to suffer military defeat at the hands of Jiang. Later, in 1931, he began a difficult collaboration with Chen Jitang in Canton.

[15] Rana Mitter, The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press 2000).

[16] In the city of Xi'an in December 1936 warlord Zhang Xueliang, at the time a general of the GMD army, kidnapped Jiang in cooperation with the Communists and elicited from him the assurance that he would declare war on Japan. What qualifies this incident as an event of "warlord politics" is not simply the fact that Zhang Xueliang was a warlord, but that it employed elements of "warlord" political dynamics, such as kidnapping and geographical power bases.

[17] I borrow this term from Deák István, Jan Tomasz. Gross, and Tony Judt, The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[18] For a discussion of aspects of this shared experience see Zanasi, "Globalizing Hanjian."

[19] For a more detailed explanation of "material control" in the RNG see Henriot, Christian, "Rice, Power, and People: The Politics of Food Supply in Wartime Shanghai (1937-1945)."

Twentieth-Century China 26, no. 1 (Nov. 2000): 41-84.; Wang Ke-Wen, "Collaborators and Capitalists: The Politics of `Material Control' in Wartime Shanghai." Chinese Studies in History 26, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 42-62; Zanasi, Saving the Nation (chapter 7). For a discussion of the Japanese role in the direct procurement of grains in the RNG see Yuan Yuquan. "Riben qinlue zhi paozhe de shangtonghui." In Shanghai wenshi ziliao xuanji. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1987.

[20] We cannot forget the political importance of this aspect of the resistentialist discourse, at least in Western Europe (Eastern Europe's discourse on collaboration assumed different dimensions). For a comparison of the politics of retribution in Western and Eastern Europe see Deák et al., The politics of Retribution in Europe. The importance of the resistentialist narrative of resistance, collaboration, and anti-authoritarianism is illustrated by the political weight it still exercises, as exemplified by a 1990s Italian political debate, with resonance throughout Western Europe and North America. For that debate see, among others, Norberto Bobbio, Renzo De Felice, and Gian Enrico Rusconi, Italiani, Amici Nemici, I libri di Reset (Milano; Roma: Reset ; Donzelli, 1996); Nicola Tranfaglia, Un passato scomodo: fascismo e postfascismo (Roma: Laterza, 1996); and Silvana Patriarca, "Italian Neopatriotism: Debating National Identity in the 1990s," Modern Italy 6, no. 1 (2001): 21-34.

[21] In this sense, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—which vied with the GMD in claiming the politically important legacy of the resistance and was therefore constructing its own narrative of war—was better positioned to deploy Western European resistentialism, since it better resonated with its antifascist propaganda. However, the CCP's politically authoritarian nature and its increasing distancing from the Allies in the postwar years, affected the CCP discourse on collaboration, leading to the construction of its characteristic blend of patriotism and socialism. For a discussion of Communist propaganda and the construction of its distinctive resistentialist myth, see Parks Coble, "China at War, 1937-1945: Remembering and Re-remembering China's War of Resistance" Paper presented at the Historical Society for Twentieth-Century China Biannual Conference "Chinese Nation, Chinese State," Singapore, June 26-28, 2006)' see also his "China's 'New Remembering' of the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, 1937-1945," The China Quarterly 190 (June 2007), pp. 390-410.

[22] This strategy also characterized Jiang's handling of the Cold War in support of his military confrontation with the CCP (1945-1949). References to anti-Communism at this time were sufficient to align him on the United States side without need to expatiate on anti-authoritarianism.