

Chinese Capitalists in Japan's New Order: The Occupied Lower Yangzi, 1937–1945. *By Parks M. Coble*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xvi + 296 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, tables. Cloth, \$60.00. ISBN 0-520-23268-2.

Reviewed by Hanchao Lu

This is an original and pioneering study of the wartime experience of Chinese capitalists. Using extensive archival materials on individual enterprises, Coble recaptures the spirit of Chinese capitalism in an age of great turmoil and uncertainty, shedding new light on the rationale governing the activities of Chinese businessmen during the war.

The book is largely composed of case studies of individual entrepreneurs. The selection encompasses an impressive number of capitalists across a wide range of industries and trades: the Rong family, known as the “Rockefellers of China,” renowned for their enormous investments in cotton textile and flour-milling industries that extended from their native Wuxi to Shanghai and beyond; the Guo brothers and the Yong’an group, famous for establishing China’s first modern department stores and for their investment in textiles; Liu Guojun and other prominent entrepreneurs in the cotton textile industry in lower Yangzi delta cities, such as Nantong, Changzhou, and Wuxi; the “MSG King,” Wu Yunchu, a powerhouse in the chemical industry; the “Match King,” Liu Hongsheng, one of the greatest of China’s “patriotic industrialists”; and, finally, a group of rubber industrialists whose companies produced items, from rubber shoes to rickshaw tires, whose brand names in some cases became household bywords in Republican China.

In his detailed profiles of these enterprises, Coble tries to evaluate the wartime performance and disposition of the businessmen who directed them. He points out that it is difficult to characterize their actions during the war in a clear-cut manner as either collaboration or patriotism. Survival was the main goal; few Chinese businessmen “fit neatly into the ‘heroic nationalist narrative’ currently touted in Chinese historical writing. Yet few also would clearly be defined as collaborators for the entire course of the war. Most operated between the poles of collaboration and resistance” (p. 113). Nevertheless, in refuting the official version of their wartime performance, Coble leans toward the argument that the wartime record of these capitalists more closely resembled

collaboration than patriotic heroism. Nearly all the cases he discusses, including instances of resistance, support this argument. For instance, Coble suggests that the chemical industrialist Fan Xudong, who had an unblemished wartime record and steered clear of the invading authorities, did not necessarily act out of patriotism. Fan's choices were restricted by the strong military implications of his business (pp. 174–5). Although the “patriotic industrialist” Liu Hongsheng retreated to the Nationalist area and established numerous plants there, he deliberately left some key members of his family in the occupied areas in order “to survive the war by keeping one foot in each camp” (p. 194). Coble notes that even a popular fountain pen, proudly labeled as a “national product” during the war, in fact contained Japanese materials (p. 105).

While focusing on the eight years of the Sino-Japanese war, Coble also looks at the broader implications of the wartime experience and argues that the war left a strong imprint on the organization and operation of Chinese business. The characteristic Chinese business culture, with its family-oriented structure and personally run operations, proved to be of great value during the war. Under the leadership of a powerful patriarch, most Chinese businesses were able to disperse resources relatively quickly and divide the risk among family members. Although the strength of family enterprises, which was based on strong personal direction, could also be their weakness, as disputes inevitably followed the death of the patriarch, nevertheless the strategy they adopted of dispersal and division also worked well during the unstable political postwar years, when many Chinese capitalists left their homeland after the Communist victory. Coble asserts that some major Chinese enterprises survived their exile from the People's Republic after 1949 by maintaining this pattern of organization. The Rong family, for instance, managed to disperse its fortune and investments to Hong Kong, Brazil, the United States, Thailand, and Australia, while maintaining part of its roots in China (pp. 137–9). In one of the dramatic turns and twists of contemporary Chinese politics, Rong family enterprise on the mainland became a success, and one of the Rongs rose to political prominence, a first for any businessman in Chinese history.

An unusual merit of this work is its engagement with scholarship in the People's Republic. Even two decades after the Maoist ideological strictures on academic research have been loosened, resulting in improved scholarly communication, the intellectual

dialogue between Western and Chinese academics remains too limited. Other than the debates among socioeconomic historians of late imperial China, which has involved considerable discussion about “incipient capitalism” or “sprouts of capitalism,” few Western scholars have seriously considered the research of their counterparts in China, much less engaged them theoretically. Some have simply dismissed scholarship on the mainland as ideologically or politically motivated. But the fact is that scholars in post-Mao China have produced some solid work based on an enormous archive of previously unknown materials (notably, in the field of business history, the documents on enterprise that have been compiled and published by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences). Coble has immersed himself in these sources and has had the courage to discuss them with mainland scholars. We can only hope that his work will stimulate the thinking of business historians and students of World War II history in China, thus paving the way for a more constructive dialogue between academics on both side of the Pacific.

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