

Workers at War: Labor in China's Arsenals, 1937–1950. By *Joshua H. Howard*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. xix + 452 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$70.00. ISBN: 0-8047-4896-9.

Reviewed by Parks M. Coble

When Japan invaded China in the summer of 1937, it attacked a country that had been only lightly touched by the Industrial Revolution. China's modern, power-driven factories were largely confined to a few coastal cities, such as Shanghai; they primarily manufactured consumer goods, such as textiles; and they were mostly privately owned, either by Chinese capitalists or foreign conglomerates. The ordnance industry was but a small fragment of this picture. Arsenals were scattered and often controlled by regional militarists. Production was inadequate, forcing the Chinese Nationalist government, led by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), to import large quantities of weapons. True, Chiang had big plans to develop a government-controlled base of heavy industry in Hunan province that would include an expanded ordnance industry. But this was not to be. The Japanese military swept over coastal China and penetrated the Yangzi valley all the way to Wuhan. Chiang Kai-shek and the forces of "Free China" retreated inland to establish a wartime capital in Chongqing (Chungking), where they would remain until the Japanese surrender in 1945.

The interior to which they moved had only a minuscule industrial base, but over the eight years of the war the region would be transformed. A heroic mobilization brought much of the equipment and workers from the arsenals of the east to remote Chongqing. The great influx of outside labor and matériel brought modern industry to the interior, but few of the privately owned factories that made consumer goods were relocated. The government naturally emphasized saving those factories, such as ordnance, deemed more crucial to military needs. Chiang also used the circumstances of war to realize his long-held dream of grabbing political control over China's arsenals. The industrial base of the interior therefore was proportionally more geared to heavy military industry and became more firmly subject to state control than heretofore.

The story of this metamorphosis has gone largely untold until recently, both within China and without. In Mao's era (1949–76), historical studies were stunted by politics, and, during the Cultural Revolution, they were silenced completely. But since the 1980s conditions have loosened, allowing archives to be opened, enabling formerly taboo subjects to be explored, and giving foreign scholars the opportunity to do research in Chinese archives. Now, finally, two major works in English have appeared on the industrialization of Free China during the war. *The Making of the State Enterprise System in Modern China: The Dynamics of Institutional Change* by Morris Bian of Auburn University (2005) deals with the impact of the war on business organization. The book under review, by Joshua H. Howard, deals with labor during the war. Taken together, they greatly advance our understanding of economic, political, and social change in interior wartime China.

Howard's focus is on the ordnance industry in China. With two to three million soldiers under arms, China's needs were exhaustive. Nor could China rely on imports. Particularly after the outbreak of war in the Pacific and the fall of Burma, Chongqing found itself cut off from the outside world, save for the air link to India over "the Hump." At one level, the Chinese effort was a major success. The arsenals of the interior increased production of rifles, machine guns, mortars, grenades, and ammunition until nearly the end of the global conflict. Given the limitations on the factories and the grim wartime conditions, this was nothing short of a miracle. Still, China's production, particularly of heavy weaponry, was never adequate, with the result that the Chinese army would be consistently outgunned by Japan until the end of the war.

But this book is about labor. Howard enters into an ongoing debate about the political role of labor in China. Communist writing under Mao always presented a unitary, idealized picture of worker solidarity. The classic work in English and French by Jean Chesneaux, published four decades ago, reflected this view. Recent American scholarship by Elizabeth Perry, Emily Honig, and Gail Hershatter has served up a very different scenario, one claiming that Chinese industrial workers were divided by factors such as gender, skill level, and regional identity, divisions that precluded a common class solidarity. Howard adheres more closely to the earlier view. He points out that wartime conditions in the ordnance industry broke down some of the differences between regions

and skill levels, creating a common worker identity. Initially, most of the skilled positions in the ordnance industry were held by “downriver” people who moved to Sichuan province after the war erupted. Unskilled work was mostly performed by locals from rural Sichuan who left tenant farms both in search of employment and to escape the military draft. Yet, as the war went on, the technology levels required for production were progressively downgraded, which caused a “deskilling” of the workforce and resulted in more fluid and mobile guidelines for workers’ promotions.

This situation gave rise to worker solidarity, in Howard’s view. The Nationalist government created a bureaucratic structure that increased the number of managerial, technical personnel (*zhiyuan*). The latter were also given the status of military officers, cementing a strong divide between workers and management. The gap between *zhiyuan* and workers widened, and strict segregation in housing, cafeterias, and even washrooms fueled the class divide. Conditions were sufficiently grim, Howard argues, that workers began either to leave or to switch jobs with great regularity. To prevent labor shortages, the government, in April 1939, made the arsenal workers subject to military law, which meant that quitting the job, especially by skilled workers, was deemed akin to desertion. Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party (Guomindang) tried to penetrate the workplace, and it developed spiritual mobilization campaigns to keep workers motivated and, most critically, away from the Chinese Communists.

The workplace became a battleground between the Nationalists and the Communists. Yet, as Howard emphasizes, the workers themselves were agents of change. Grim conditions of war, particularly the complete collapse of the currency, inspired workers to a class consciousness that often was more radical than the outlook of the communist cadres. When the war ended and strictures were loosened, a wave of strikes broke out in 1946, which were met by further crackdowns. Workers intervened decisively to save the arsenals for the victorious communists in the last days of the civil war. Howard examines the transition to the socialist state, emphasizing the role of the workers in a socialist revolution that is more often depicted as having been directed from above.

Howard’s study, which is based on extensive archival work in Chongqing, interviews with former arsenal workers, and a vast quantity of secondary literature,

represents a major breakthrough in our understanding of the contributions of the Chinese labor force in wartime, both international and civil. Although the subject is labor, rather than enterprise, readers of this journal will learn much from this excellent study.

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