

Beyond Politics in Wartime: Zhou Zuoren, 1931-1945

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No event in the twentieth-century has proved to be more powerful in shaping our historical understanding of Sino-Japanese interactions than the war of 1937-1945. For understandable reasons, its influence has by and large been restrictive. The war also has its negative legacies, inasmuch as illuminating it may direct public attention and scholarly research to conflicting national interests over time. Psychologically, the memory of loss and atrocities has produced an enduring mutual suspicion between the two peoples, as Chalmers Johnson's 1972 essay so eloquently argues and the frequently resurgent textbook controversy between Japan and China attests.¹ Intellectually, the guiding beacon of international conflict narrows researchers' view to areas that are mostly "nation-centric," leaving much of the vast ocean of complex, diversified human experiences in the dark. One vitally important yet least researched area, for instance, is wartime collaboration.

In the following pages, I shall limit my discussion to the wartime experiences of Zhou Zuoren 周作人, who was one of the most important and active writers in twentieth-century China. A famed Japanologist in his day, he has been regarded by some Japanese as one of the three Chinese in modern times who "truly understands Japan."² Zhou is also an unusually interesting but difficult figure because of his wartime experiences as a collaborator with the Japanese occupation. For an analysis of twentieth-century Sino-Japanese relations, the wartime experiences of Zhou Zoren in particular have raised two general questions: first, how do we classify individuals whose thought and behavior defy the political limits of generally accepted categories, such as resister and collaborator, patriot and traitor; secondly, what might be an alternative to power relations as a perspective on Sino-Japanese relations?

Wartime collaboration with the occupation force, for sure, is a universal practice that has ancient precedents and modern parallels. In recent decades, French historians have produced a wealth of excellent scholarship on Vichy France. Especially illuminating is Stanley Hoffmann's differentiation between a collaborator, who was forced to

1. Chalmers Johnson, "How China and Japan See Each Other," in Alvin D. Coox and Hilary Conroy, eds., *China and Japan: Search For Balance Since World War I* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1978), pp. 5-16.

2. The other two are Huang Zunxiang 黄遵憲 and Dai Jitao 戴季陶. See Takeuchi Yoshimi, "Tai Kitô to Nihon ron" 戴季陶と日本論 (Dai Jitao and "On Japan"), cited in Wu Anlong 武安隆 and Xiong Dayun 熊達雲, *Chûgokujin no Nihon kenkyû shi* 中国人の日本研究史 (A History of Chinese Studies of Japan) (Tokyo: Rokkô shuppan, 1989), p. 195.

collaborate under trying circumstances, and a collaborationist, who volunteered to collaborate with ideological conviction.³ In comparison, the scholarship on twentieth-century Chinese collaboration remains underdeveloped, with only a few, though important, works produced in the 1970s; recently, with the war a half century behind us, there does seem to be an increasing interest in the subject. Notable is Fu Poshek's 傅白石 recent book, in which he studies Chinese intellectuals under the Japanese occupation and discovers three patterns of behavior: passivity, resistance, and collaboration.⁴

To place Zhou Zuoren's case in its context, it is necessary to point out that, like its modern parallel in France, China's war with Japan took place in a complex setting of political struggle at home. Especially important was the rivalry between Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, whose competition for national power went alongside the war with Japan and escalated into civil war soon after Japan's surrender. That rivalry at once complicated the practice of collaboration and simplified the historical judgment and understanding of collaboration. In 1946, when the trial of top collaborators began in Nanjing's supreme court, it immediately opened a Pandora's box for the ruling Guomindang. The trial showed that those who chose to collaborate with the Japanese were motivated by a wide array of interests, from the noble one of serving the people under Japanese occupation, to a partisan interest in preventing Communist infiltration, to the mean end of satisfying personal ambition.⁵

The case of Zhou Zuoren, on the other hand, appeared transparent from the beginning. To repudiate the charge against Zhou that he served in the puppet-regime-controlled Beijing University, the former chancellor of Beida, Jiang Menglin 蔣夢麟, and the current chancellor, Hu Shi 胡適, testified that Zhou was appointed as one of the four caretakers to protect university property when possible and, as a result of his efforts, Beida property suffered no loss but increased its book collection. The voice of these two leading intellectuals was magnified when 54 professors from Beida and 17 professors from other leading universities sent lengthy appeals to the court, defending Zhou for his various efforts and accomplishments at resisting Japan's wartime educational measures in China, viewed by many Chinese as ways to indoctrinate and thus enslave Chinese minds. Moreover, underground workers provided evidence that Zhou had used his prestige and office to protect them and rescue them from the occupation authorities.⁶

3. Stanley Hoffmann, "Collaborationism in France during World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 40 (September 1968), pp. 375-95.

4. Fu Poshek, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai 1937-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

5. For English reference, see John Hunter Boyle, *China and Japan at War, 1937-1945: The Politics of Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); Susan Marsh, "Chou Fo-hai: The Making of a Collaborator," in Akira Iriye, ed., *The Chinese and the Japanese: Essays in Political and Cultural Interactions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 304-27.

6. Documents 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 15, 17, 20, 21, in "Zhou Zuoren" 周作人, in Nanjing shi dang'anguan 南京史档案馆, ed., *Shenxun Wangwei hanjian bilu* 审讯汪伪汉奸笔录 (Records of the Trial of Wang Puppet Regime Traitors) (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1992).

While Zhou had his defenders, he had his accusers as well. These were the intellectuals from the Communist or progressive camp, such as He Qifang 何其芳, Mao Dun 茅盾, and Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰. With minor differences, the accusers all agreed that Zhou became a traitor to the Chinese nation because he was an individualist who had no faith in national salvation. His treason, they argued, was the logical result of his departure from mainstream nationalism.⁷ Their accusation against Zhou, in retrospect, was only a fraction of the nationwide campaign of the Communists to compete with the ruling Guomindang for political legitimacy. Under pressure, the supreme court in Nanjing found it necessary to overlook what Zhou actually did during the war; and he was sentenced to 10 years in prison when the verdict was delivered in 1947. Zhou's legal trial ended there, but we are left with a historical puzzle over the obvious contradiction between the testimony in favor of Zhou and the verdict against him.

The search for a more adequate answer takes us back to 1937, the year China and Japan finally entered into total war. Late that year, when the faculty and students of Beijing University at which Zhou Zuoren was teaching began the southwest-ward retreat with the government, Zhou decided to stay in the occupied city. His friends, both liberal and leftist, including Hu Shi, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, and Yu Dafu 郁達夫, tried to persuade him to move south. They were concerned that Zhou's prestige as a leading intellectual would inevitably make him a target of pressure from the occupation forces. Some even wrote a collective letter, advising him to move south immediately, or they would consider him "a great traitor to the nation."⁸

Zhou Zuoren was moved by his colleagues' anxiety and sincere friendship, but not by their arguments. Unlike many others who also chose to remain in the occupied area, Zhou made his decision not simply from private concerns but also from a firm intellectual conviction. By the time of the war, he was already deeply alienated from the ruling Guomindang government as well as from mainstream political culture. In 1927, he was shocked and decisively turned away from the Guomindang when it brutally massacred the Communists and idealist youth. In 1931 he was outraged by Nanjing's nonresistance policy when Japan invaded northeastern China, and in a public speech at Beida he openly criticized the government. But he became deeply upset as well with the rising movement

7. He Qifang 何其芳, "Liangtiao butong de daolu" 两条不同的道路 (Two different roads); Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰, "Tan shijie jianlun Zhou Zuoren" 谈士节兼论周作人 (On morality and on Zhou Zuoren); Mao Dun 茅盾, "Zhou Zuoren de 'zhi cankui'" 周作人的知惭愧 (Zhou Zuoren's acknowledgement of "regret"), all cited in Qian Liqun 钱理群, *Zhou Zuoren zhuan* 周作人传 (A Biography of Zhou Zuoren) (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1990), pp. 505-06.

8. Hu Shi to Zhou Zuoren, received on September 20, 1938; Zhou Zuoren to Hu Shi, September 21, 1938, cited in Zhang Juxiang 张菊香, ed., *Zhou Zuoren nianpu* 周作人年谱 (A Chronological Biography of Zhou Zuoren) (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1985), 406-07, hereafter cited as *ZZRNP*; Guo Moruo 郭沫若, "Guonan shengzhong huai Zhitang" 国难声中怀知堂 (Thinking about Zhitang amidst national crises), in *Yijing, yuzhoufeng, xifeng: Feichang shiqi lianhe xunkan* 逸经, 宇宙风, 西风: 非常时期联合旬刊 I (August 30, 1937); Mao Dun, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, Lao She 老舍, et al., "Zhi Zhou Zuoren de yifeng gongkai xin" 致周作人的一封公开信 (An open letter to Zhou Zuoren), *Kangzhan wenyi* 抗战文艺 4 (May 14, 1938), cited in *ZZRNP*, 401-02.

of national salvation. He watched people from all walks of life eagerly join the propaganda, yet no one bothered to take care of professional duties or to contribute in any tangible ways to preparations for national defense.⁹

One more important force that set Zhou Zuoren apart from mainstream political culture was his continued commitment to what he called “individualist humanism” in the May Fourth era. Beneath the flashy new language and new ideologies of the 1930s, he saw the persistence of the moral basis of patriarchal society that had sustained an oppressive political order in China for ages. While others began to rally around the state as the symbol of China’s national defense, Zhou Zuoren in the 1930s wrote more and more about the hypocritical morality of chastity and virtue that demanded women’s sacrifice for men, and how women had suffered during China’s past calamities of foreign invasion.¹⁰ When asked why he did not leave with the government to the rear area, his answer was simple. To flee to the rear area would be the best choice for himself, but his departure would leave his family, all women and children, in a desperate situation.¹¹

Zhou thus stayed in occupied Beijing, and he renamed his residence the “Studio of Living in Bitterness.” During the first two years of the occupation, he taught at the American-sponsored Yenching University, translated Greek mythology, and was able to resist the pressure to serve the occupation forces. In 1939, however, there was an attempt on his life and he was forced to resign his job at Yenching and accept a position at Beijing University. In 1941, he accepted an appointment in the north China puppet regime. He became its education minister and served until his dismissal in 1943. If Zhou can be excused for taking the job at Beijing University under the pressure of circumstances, because he had to feed a large family, how could he justify this move into the service of a puppet regime?

Surprisingly, this crucial issue was never raised in the postwar trial. When questioned privately by friends in the 1960s, Zhou gave an ambiguous answer, that his service was “neither volunteered nor forced.” He did not volunteer because the move was, of course, initiated by the Japanese; he took the position, he said, because he believed that he could do something to “prevent more reactionary activities.”¹² In the late 1970s, his claim was further sustained by some key underground workers who published their memoirs in mainland China. Zhou was persuaded by them, they said, to take the position in the puppet regime, and they assured him that underground friends would come to his

9. See, Zhou Zuoren, *Kan yun ji* 看雲集 (Looking at Clouds Collection) (Shanghai: Kaimin shudian, 1932).

10. See, especially, Zhou Zuoren. *Kucha suibi* 苦茶隨筆 (Jottings from Drinking Bitter Tea) (Shanghai: Beixin shuju, 1935); *Yedu chao* 夜讀抄 (Notes from Night Readings) (Shanghai: Beixin shuju, 1935).

11. Zhou Zuoren to Xu Xu (or Xu Yu) 徐訐, February 10, 1966, printed in *Biduan* 筆端 (Hong Kong, January 1968).

12. Zhou Zuoren to Bao Yaoming 鮑耀明, July 18, 1964, cited in *ZZRNP*, p. 668.

aid whenever he needed assistance.¹³ At the war's end, Zhou Zuoren was so confident of his patriotic contribution that he assumed that the Chinese government would send him to Japan to negotiate the retrieval of cultural artifacts looted by the Japanese army.¹⁴

Zhou may have been a naïve participant in wartime politics. He relied too much on rational public judgment and cast too much of his own reputation into an unpredictable game. His own justification and other's judgments aside, what becomes truly extraordinary was his courage to raise a voice of protest against Japan's New Order in East Asia. Further, he was able to articulate a perspective on the meanings of the current conflict and its suffering in the larger context of East Asia's history of century-long interaction with the outside world and within itself.

Unlike their contemporaries in southeast Asia who at the early stage of the war looked up to the Japanese imperial army as their liberator from Western colonialism, the Chinese never had any illusion regarding Japan's claim that it was aiding China to regain a common Confucian cultural heritage. Yet under occupation, no one had ever dared publicly to confront Japan's duplicity until Zhou Zuoren wrote and published a series of essays between 1940 and 1943. Under the guise of discussing Confucianism, he argued that the Chinese never had any "thought problem," as the Japanese so claimed. The Confucianism that developed in China, he said, was "like a tree with its roots growing from deep ground. Although it may have temporarily withered, the tree can grow up again if there was no outside interference through either restraint or artificial cultivation." What could truly endanger the survival of the Confucian tradition, he pointed out, was the violation of its core value, the idea of *ren* 仁 or benevolence. What a Chinese demands for life "is very simple and hence becomes very urgent. He wants to live, and his ethic of survival does not allow him to harm others in order to benefit himself; but on the other hand he cannot harm himself to benefit others like a saint.... If he feels that there is no hope for survival, he will make a reckless move in desperation, as the proverb puts it."¹⁵

If there were gleams of optimism shining through Zhou's view of China's inner strength in resisting foreign domination, doubts and disbelief colored his tone when he spoke about Japan. Zhou had been known for his deep admiration for the politeness, simplicity, and unpretentiousness of Japanese culture, but the rise of Japanese militarism forced him to seek more comprehensive explanations. In the mid-1930s, he arrived at a hypothesis that the Japanese had entered a period of "cultural reaction," because their borrowing from China as well as from the West had burdened them with such psychological restraints that they wanted to rebel against both. Moreover, he admitted that he

13. Xu Baokui 许宝騄, "Zhou Zuoren churen huabei jiaoyu duban weizhi de jingguo" 周作人出任华北教育督办伪职的经过 (The circumstances of Zhou Zuoren's taking up the position of the Minister of Education in the North China puppet regime), *Xin wenxue shiliao* 新文学史料 35 (1987).

14. Chen Sihe 陈思和, "Guanyu Zhou Zuoren de zhuanji" 关于周作人的传记 (About biographies of Zhou Zuoren), *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中国现代文学研究丛刊, no.3.

15. Zhou Zuoren, "Han wenxue de chuantong" 汉文学的传统 (The tradition of Chinese literature), in *Yaotang zawen* 藥堂雜文 (Essays from the Medicine Hall) (Beijing: Xinmin yinshuguan, 1944), p. 2; "Zhongguo de sixiang wenti" 中国的思想問題 (Ideological issues in China), in *ibid*, p. 13.

had neglected an important trait in Japanese culture, Shinto belief. It was the fanatic worship of the way of the gods, he said, that separated the Japanese from the more rational-minded Chinese, and it was from there that the two cultures drifted apart and came to clash.¹⁶

However, that revelation of the irrational side of Japanese culture only added one more layer to Zhou's understanding of the oppressive nature of the Oriental despotism. All the more, he felt a deeper affinity with the true Japan, which was not just beautiful but suffering as well. It was that suffering from the male-centered, state-oriented despotism that marked a shared fate of the Chinese and the Japanese, and he found no words to convey this more powerfully than the images depicted by Nagai Kafû 永井荷風, the lyric writer who retreated from active public life to a private pursuit of Edo arts after the 1910 Great Treason Incident:

I often ask myself, "what am I?" I am not a Belgian like Verhaeren but a Japanese, an Oriental born with different circumstances and fate from theirs.... How I love the Ukiyoe! The print of the courtesan, who has sold herself to the cruel life for ten years so that she may help her parents, makes me want to weep. The figure of the geisha at the bamboo-latticed window, looking absently at a flowing stream, fills me with delight. The night view of the river with only one noodle vendor left behind intoxicates me. The cuckoo calling out to the moon of a rainy night, leaves falling in a sudden autumn shower, the sound of a temple bell carrying away on a wind of falling petals, snow on a mountain path at nightfall--everything in this dreamlike world, transitory, lonely, productive of sighs, is near me, and takes me back to the past.¹⁷

And Zhou Zuoren commented:

I may not agree completely with Nagai, but this passage moves me deeply; isn't it a meaningful approach, I think, to understand the sorrow of the Orientals through art and literature, though that may not be the highway of cultural studies? Once I said in an essay "Remembering Tokyo" that, no matter how hostile they have become today, the Chinese and the Japanese are simply Orientals who are born in a totally different fate and circumstances from that of the Occidentals, if we overlook their temporary relations but focus on their permanent attributes.¹⁸

16. Zhou Zuoren, "Ribei guankui zhi si" 日本管窺之四 (Fourth Peek into Japan), in *Zhitang yiyou wenbian* 知堂乙酉文編 (Essays Compiled in the Year of Yiyou) (Hong Kong: Sanyu tushu wenju gongsi, 1962), pp. 131-42.

17. Nagai Kafû 永井荷風, "Edo Bijutsu ron" 江戸美術論 (On Edo arts), in *Kafû zenshû* 荷風全集 (The Complete Works of [Nagai] Kafû) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoden, 1963), vol. 14, pp. 11-12, translated by Edward Seidensticker, in *Kafû the Scribbler* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 72, with modifications.

18. Zhou Zuoren, "Ribei zhi zai renshi" 日本之再認識 (Re-understanding Japan), dated December 17, 1940, in *Zhitang yiyou wenbian*, pp. 149-50.

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Zhou's comment, now, brings us back to the two questions raised earlier: the possibility of an alternative perspective on Sino-Japanese relations beyond the limits of politics and the problem of classifying him.

In Zhou Zuoren's case, Fu's three patterns of behavior--passivity, resistance, and collaboration--seem to coexist in one person, and thus do not fit well. These categories make little sense, because they are only relevant in the intellectual context dominated by nationalism. Hoffmann's two categories have a degree of relevance, because Zhou did collaborate, though the collaboration was not solely forced by outside pressure. And he did not subscribe to the occupier's ideology but, instead, firmly resisted it. Therefore, he certainly was not a collaborationist.

Moreover, we find that the notion of political loyalty had the least influence on Zhou Zuoren's motivation and behavior. The war did not lead to a sharp break in his thought but, instead, reinforced and refined his earlier beliefs and thus further moved him to action. As one of the most engaged participants in constructing Sino-Japanese relations along positive lines, he became all the more committed to his humanist approach to Sino-Japanese relations when the two countries came to clash violently, and continues to remind us that the persistent cultural interaction between the two societies had its own shaping power beyond the immediate war experiences.