CONCLUSION

Beyond the Colonial Gaze

The seventieth anniversary of the “Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Antifascist War” was marked by significant pomp in Beijing on September 3, 2015. The event included a march-past by some twelve thousand Chinese troops and a speech by Xi Jinping, wearing a black Zhongshan tunic and standing above Ge Xiaoguang’s famous portrait of Mao Zedong on Tiananmen. This was, however, an event in which many aspects of China’s wartime experience were simply ignored. In contrast to the commemorations marking the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s end two decades earlier, for example, few mentions were made of Chinese traitors in official accounts. Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking in 2015 that there had been no client regime led by Wang Jingwei during the Japanese occupation.

Despite the invisibility of the RNG, one cannot help feeling that the September 2015 commemorations would have looked remarkably familiar to figures such as Lin Baisheng. Military march-pasts were, of course, part of the spectacle that many wartime Chinese regimes practiced. Political portraiture was as common to the RNG as it is in the PRC today. And Wang Jingwei had worn a black Zhongshan tunic when he declared war on the Allies in January 1943 in Nanjing. Had he been there to witness the 2015 celebrations in Beijing, Lin might even have found residual references to China’s “peaceful rise” (heping jueqi) strangely reminiscent of occupation rhetoric.

I speculate in this manner not to be flippant or to suggest that today’s PRC inherited its political culture directly from Wang Jingwei’s theater state. Rather, such parallels suggest that the RNG drew on a shared set of rhetoric, symbols, and icons that were common to many modern Chinese polities and that have survived into the present day. As we have seen, different “Chinas” also learned from one another during the war. The MoP envied the New Fourth Army for its propaganda prowess, even as it tried to eradicate it. May Fourth nationalism was articulated in Chongqing just
as it was in occupied Nanjing. One can acknowledge the significant differences between these various wartime entities while being cognizant of the continuities in their iconographies. In his classic study of “Confucian fascism,” Frederic Wakeman Jr. cited Lloyd Eastman in noting that a “larger symbolic realm of popular anti-foreignism and ethnic revivalism . . . characterized many modern movements in China.” Wakeman’s argument that “Red Guards and Blue Shirts . . . were not that far apart” remains entirely convincing today—but that same argument could be made even more convincing were we to consider RNG Youth League activists alongside their Republican and communist cousins.5

This is precisely why the RNG, despite its invisibility at the 2015 anniversary, remains highly significant. A close reading of the visual and material ephemera that this regime left to posterity can help us test many of the assumptions we make about various aspects of political culture, and cultural politics, in modern China more generally. As some of the secondary literature that has been cited throughout this book shows, political, economic, and military historians are already turning their focus toward Wang Jingwei’s China so that this regime can be brought back into the wider story of modern China’s development. However, in the study of wartime China’s cultural history—to say nothing of the broader field of Chinese visual cultures—far fewer scholars have followed the lead that Edward Gunn, Nicole Huang, and Poshek Fu have established by taking seriously the cultural developments that occurred under Japanese occupation. Most analysis of the culture of wartime China remains heavily weighted toward the unconquered “great hinterland” (da houfang), the Communist base areas, or Shanghai’s gudao. The RNG continues to be excluded from much of this scholarship.6

As a result we have few opportunities to contrast the RNG to its cognate regimes in China’s west or to other Republican entities that struggled for political legitimacy, such as Chiang Kai-shek’s ROC after 1949. Nor do we have a means of properly testing how visual tropes and rhetoric crossed political and temporal boundaries both during and after the war. By not taking the RNG into account, our understanding of everything from personality cults to political theater in modern China remains incomplete.

For all its continuities with other Chinese regimes, however, the RNG is unique for what it can tell us about the resilience and adaptability of Republican Chinese iconographies. In insisting on the sanctity of the ROC flag, the figure of Sun Yat-sen, and the face of Wang Jingwei—and in seeking to present such icons through recognizably modern Chinese modes of visuality—the RNG framed itself as a distinctly Republican Chinese entity.
To be sure, this regime struggled to cast off the far more overtly Japanese representations of China that had permeated east and north China thanks to the efforts of the Daminhui and Xinminhui, respectively (e.g., poster art depicting the sun rising over city walls, or the feminization of occupied China as envisaged in the films of Li Xianglan). Nonetheless, in managing to continue to look Chinese—indeed, to look defiantly Chinese when it came to mobilizing youth activists, for example—groups such as the MoP might be said to have gone much further than other client regimes in establishing a separate visual space for their “reorganized” China.

The RNG therefore suggests that many of the icons developed in China in the prewar years were far more malleable than even the Japanese may have expected. As we saw in chapter 4, a “new woman” associated closely with both Shanghai glamour and anti-Japanese resistance (e.g., Nancy Chan) could be reinvented in the print media over the course of just a few months as an obedient symbol of occupation-era entertainment. A 1920s Soviet stage play and its ant-colonialist characters could be revived to celebrate Nanjing’s declaration of war on the Allies, and could in turn provide the inspiration for a myriad of artistic representations of the occupied (and supposedly anticommunist) Chinese man. We might dismiss such instances as cynical attempts by desperate “traitors” to cling to some semblance of patriotism via prewar archetypes or visual tropes. Yet, as I have suggested throughout this book, such developments could just as easily be read as attempts by a client regime to mark itself apart from an occupying power as well as Chinese resisters. If a study of the iconographies of occupation tells us anything, then, it is that the Japanese invasion of China led, not to the eradication of prewar Chinese visual cultures, but to the selective and eclectic reenvisioning of China by a regime populated by veteran KMT (and, in some cases, former communist) propagandists and refugee cultural workers.

**Visual History and the Limits of Collaborationist Nationalism**

Citing the arguments put forward by surviving RNG leaders at trials held in 1946, a number of historians have noted the emphasis that Wang’s regime placed on “the protection of people and the preservation of the nation” when explaining its decision to work with a foreign occupier as a form of patriotism. In the RNG mind-set, a distinction could apparently be made between the nation and the state, with preservation of the former (even in some compromised form) being far more urgent in the circumstances of war.
To phrase it another way, “land and people were the foundation of the nation, and . . . national defense should start by remaining with them and shielding them.” By adopting such an ideology, the violence of war could be suspended, and a Chinese administration could ensure that people were fed and protected.

Even at the huandu, however, one must wonder why groups such as the MoP—if they were led by individuals who espoused a “collaborationist nationalism” that put the nation before the state—were so keen to emphasize the visual and performative trappings of the Republican state at their “return.” The huandu may well have led to increased levels of stability for people in areas administered by the RNG. Why, however, did such an event require the mobilization of Scouts, the proliferation of Wang Jingwei portraiture (which clearly drew on prewar templates), or the revival of a largely ceremonial navy? For that matter, was the restitution of the ROC flag a prerequisite for the protection of people and land? If anything, such developments suggest a very state-centered approach on the part of the MoP in 1940. They even suggest that the RNG’s leaders, rather than choosing nation over state, were proud of demonstrating just how many concessions to Republican statehood they had managed to win from the Japanese.

Another difficulty arises when we attempt to apply the logic of collaborationist nationalism to the RNG after the huandu. In particular, the notion that this administration embraced such an ideology is difficult to square with the realities of what I have referred to in this book as the Axis turn of 1941. If collaborationist nationalism rested on the idea that a negotiated peace would benefit the people, then the sheer amount of energy expended on political theater and symbolism seems incompatible with such a notion. Even if we accept that a good deal of these developments were forced upon Wang’s administration as a result of the Japanese empire’s changing fortunes during the war, we cannot deny that increasing levels of agency for the RNG only led to greater attempts to emulate the aesthetics of the Axis powers or to rebrand China as a GEACPS state. When we look at the explosion of propaganda and various other forms of cultural expression around the tuihuan, it would seem that concern for the safety and well-being of the people was, at the very least, matched by a desire to see—and photograph—the ROC flag flying over the Shanghai Bund.

RNG attempts to gloss over a lack of territorial control by experimenting with new and distinctly Chinese modes of representing the “rivers and mountains” also test the limits of the collaborationist nationalism paradigm. To be sure, a focus on the protection of land and people can be found
in the depictions of urban and rural China that we examined in chapter 5. But so too can a deep-seated sense of inadequacy when we consider MoP avoidance of direct reference to certain types of national space. Wang Jingwei appears to have genuinely shown an interest in seeking to have the rivers and mountains of China returned to him. Until events such as the return of the foreign concessions, however, his courtiers sought specific ways of visualizing their homeland that would not remind people of the RNG’s lack of territorial integrity or anger his Japanese patrons.

Such apparent contradictions that emerge from textually derived understandings of collaborationist nationalism and what I refer to as the iconographies of occupation demonstrate why a visual history of the RNG is necessary. Analyses of this regime based on the testimonies of its main proponents are certainly not invalid. They provide us with only a partial picture of the highly factionalized and changing notions of what China and “the Chinese” meant in the RNG realm, however. An emphasis on the ever-changing iconographies that were deployed by this regime complicate our understanding of the RNG, and of occupied China more generally, in a variety of ways.

First, a visual history approach helps show us how this regime lacked a single ideology—be it collaborationist nationalism, Pan-Asianism, pacifism, or anything else. To be sure, Lin Baisheng’s staff at the Zhonghua ribao and the MoP started their work in 1939 by presenting Wang Jingwei in ways that were compatible with the notion of “peace, anticommunism, and nation-building.” Yet the MoP’s view of Wang developed as its own agenda changed, and its resulting visions of Wang cohabited a visual sphere that was populated by alternative representations of the leader authored by Japanese artists and Daminhui propagandists. In 1941, we find Wang the peacemaker transformed into a field commander (thanks to a private photography studio). And in 1944, Wang is buried, thanks to Chen Bijun, as a revolutionary martyr. The development of these many and sometimes contradictory Wangs over the course of the RNG’s history parallel the regime more generally. This was a regime that suffered from a lack of iconographic or ideological coherence, because of its ever-changing relationship with Japan and its highly factionalized nature.

As the Wang personality cult also suggests, a visual history approach exposes just how contested the realm of the visual was in occupied China. Given that the contestation of the visual has been shown by theorists such as Gil Hochberg and Nicholas Mirzoeff to be so central to the very nature of foreign occupation in other contexts, it is surprising that this has not been
noted before in the case of China. Contestation for control of the visual, and competition over what could and could not be seen in Wang Jingwei’s China, meant that the RNG did not always adhere to imperial Japanese policies. We see evidence of this in Wang’s obsession with the visual markers of the navy—a force that he had established against the wishes of the Japanese navy itself. We also see it in figures such as the “roaring man,” who inspired RNG youth activists to attack Japanese institutions late in the war. Just as importantly, however, contestation occurred within the RNG state itself, as Nanjing struggled to rid its regional centers of residual Daminhui influence. As I demonstrated in chapter 4, even the MoP disagreed within itself on what the ideal RNG subject should look like. Was the occupied woman a glamorous starlet in a wedding gown, or was she a “co-prosperity realist” youth activist in a New Citizens uniform? There was also competition between the government and the commercial sphere for control of what could and could not be seen, with early Peace Movement reliance on the commercial print media (initiated originally to avoid censorship from “semicolonial” authorities in Shanghai and elsewhere) coming back to plague MoP attempts to drive the cultural agenda in later years. Indeed, it is perhaps more than coincidence that the notion of “seeing clearly” was so common a trope in the campaigns adopted by Japanese pharmaceutical firms, as residents of occupied China were told to see the bright future promised under Sino-Japanese cooperation if (like Wang Jingwei and Li Xianglan) they applied drops to their eyes. While such visions of occupied China did not contradict RNG policy, they trivialized MoP iconography and ultimately undermined the coherence of any messages that Wang Jingwei’s government might have sought to propagate. Despite assumptions about this regime being monolithic in nature and totalitarian in aspiration—assumptions that images such as those of Wang and Nazis are often deployed to illustrate—the RNG was continually competing with other arms of the wider occupation state, and with itself, as it tried to visualize wartime China.

The Occupied Gaze

One of the most intriguing frames in an otherwise mundane Japanese newsreel that documents the opening of the Greater East Asia Exposition in Nanjing in late 1942 is negligible in its brevity. Thirty-six seconds into this one-and-a-half-minute film, Chen Bijun is shown entering the exposition. What is most significant about this frame is not the naval-themed sensōga behind Chen, however, but the fact that she is shown holding a folding camera
and pointing it directly back at the unnamed Japanese camera operator who
is filming her. Chen takes a photograph, then hurries sheepishly offscreen.

Chen was not alone in her fondness for photography. This was, after all,
a favored leisure pursuit for many high-ranking members of the RNG, most
noticeably Chu Minyi. Images of Chu and other RNG luminaries photo-
graphing events and places in occupied China are a common theme in the
publications and private image collections emanating from the occupation.
I have been able to write this book only because individuals such as Chu
Minyi and Lin Baisheng took and/or collected photographs, and because
the resulting collections are now available to researchers in public institu-
tions. Yet the image of Chen Bijun photographing a Japanese cameraman
who is in the process of filming her (as she supposedly gazes at Japanese war
art depicting occupied China) speaks volumes about the complex dynamics
that typified visual cultures under the RNG. Chen is not a passive subject of
the colonial gaze here (though she is certainly being gazed at). She looks dir-
ectly back at the occupier, even as she fulfills her role as an extra in a film of
an event celebrating Japanese military conquest.9

Throughout this book, I have shown how RNG agencies sought to es-
tablish their own gaze over occupied China, deploying recognizably Repub-
lican Chinese modes of visuality while borrowing techniques from prewar
(and resistance) Chinese, Axis, and other forms of visual propaganda. They
did this even as they sought to chart a narrow course between Japanese im-
perial sensibilities and established notions of Chinese patriotism. What I
refer to as the occupied gaze set itself apart from the visuality imposed on
China by the Japanese (often via Manchukuo)—with its “sun-centered pro-
paganda” and “harmony of the five races”—even while it sought to render
non-RNG visual expressions of resistance against the Japanese invisible.
The RNG was never content with being the passive subject of a colonial
gaze. Like Chen Bijun with her camera, Wang Jingwei’s regime gazed back.

Of course, the Chen Bijun example also demonstrates the limits of the
occupied gaze. After all, though we might see Chen gazing back at a Japan-
ese camera operator, we never see that person through Chen’s lens. This is
indicative of many photographic and other forms of visual representations
that emerged under the RNG. While photographs of Wang Jingwei and
others in the presence of Japanese officials are certainly prominent in many
surviving collections, it is clear from RNG publications that depictions of
Japanese officials were highly regulated, staged, and few in number. This is
hardly surprising, given that Japanese military minders habitually accom-
panied CNA photographers and that Japanese advisers kept a close watch
over the work of the MoP. Despite Chen Bijun’s few seconds of photographic defiance in October 1942, the RNG gaze was therefore almost always directed at China and Chinese people rather than back at the Japanese.

The occupied gaze was also only operable as long as the Japanese military, and agents of the RNG state, were on hand to eradicate alternative ways of seeing. The oft-told story of the two-bytwenty-six-meter-long scroll entitled *Liumin tu* (Refugees), painted by the artist Jiang Zhaohoe in 1943, is worth considering here. This social realist depiction of the suffering of Chinese refugees under occupation was confiscated by Japanese military officers in both Beijing and Shanghai when it was exhibited in each city and was partially destroyed in the process. An occupied gaze that exposed Chinese suffering on such a grand scale, it would seem, would not be tolerated by the Japanese military. This is usually where the story of the *Liumin tu* ends. In reality, however, RNG cultural workers themselves experimented with imagery depicting the suffering of Chinese refugees and continued to circulate such images to a wide audience in occupied China, late into the war. Even the most loyal of RNG artists, such as those affiliated with the CCA and ACWA, produced cartoons and woodcuts that lamented the plight of the country’s poor in 1943, even as Jiang Zhaohoe’s work was being censored (figure Con.1). It would appear that the content of such depictions mattered far less than who was producing it. Working under the apparent protection of RNG-sponsored and occupation-compliant institutions, some cultural workers were able to craft a distinct, if partial, vision of Chinese suffering—though one that has never been acknowledged since the end of the war.

The occupied gaze was not always benign, however. Indeed, despite the endless talk of China’s “liberation” under Wang Jingwei, the agents of the RNG state could themselves act as belligerent occupants in lieu of the Japanese, imposing their own narrow and Nanjing-centric visions of China on communities that had no say in their own representation, and bringing such communities into partisan visions of China against their will. Rural Pacification, for example, was significant because it afforded Nanjing- and Suzhou-based cadres the opportunity to both physically and visually occupy the rural hinterland and to gaze at Chinese peasants and landscapes in ways that only Japanese military bodies had been able to do previously. Documentary photography associated with Rural Pacification and produced by the likes of Chen Guoqi was dominated by the figure of Wang Jingwei walking through the pacified landscape and by MoP cadres preaching their message to peasants. In other cases, it took its cues directly from the Japanese colonial gaze in occupied Southeast Asia. While we might see
in this imagery a defiant response to Japanese-imagined landscapes of the early war years, we must also acknowledge that the violence and persecution that typified Rural Pacification were never allowed to be seen in such depictions. One shortcoming of this book, therefore, is that I have not engaged with visual cultures that were produced under, but in opposition to, RNG rule. A challenge for future scholars might be to locate and analyze the visual texts that would allow for a visual history of Rural Pacification as seen by those who lived under it.
In demonstrating how a lack of control undermined the RNG state’s ability to maintain a coherent vision of China, however, the iconographies of occupation also complicate the current focus on “ways of seeing” and representation in the context of foreign occupation. To be sure, the field of critical visual studies has already moved beyond the tendency, common in earlier decades, to simply deconstruct the colonial gaze. Yet a focus on the overwhelming control of the “right to see” by occupiers—and on the spectacle of modern war and occupation—continues to shape many of the questions that scholars in this field pose. What Wang Jingwei’s China offers, therefore, is a case through which recent theoretical musings about the inherent difficulty in “redirecting the gaze or manipulating visions of control” in the context of occupation can be reconsidered.

Although the agents of the RNG state did manage to subvert the gaze of the occupier at specific moments, the conflicting and contested iconographies espoused by this state highlight the limits of such endeavors. Occupation did not render China invisible, nor did it lead to complete control of the visual realm by a foreign power. It did, however, lead to a client regime that continually re-envisioned its leader, its people, and its territory in ways that would fit with its reliance on a belligerent occupant and its desire to look legitimate as an inheritor of Sun Yat-sen’s republic. Only by grafting Axis aesthetics and prewar modes of visuality onto Republican Chinese icons late in the war did this eclectic regime manage to come close to achieving a unified vision.

The material and symbolic consequences of such efforts can be felt even today. Sun Yat-sen statuary still sits at the same location in downtown Nanjing at which it was first erected in 1942 under Wang Jingwei. And just as Wang Jingwei was buried temporarily in Nanjing while he awaited the peaceful unification of China, so too does the body of Wang Jingwei’s longtime rival—Chiang Kai-shek—lie today in rural Taiwan, awaiting re-interment in Nanjing after the Republic of China is unified. Most importantly, however, the RNG can be felt in the reluctance to even look at the residue of Wang Jingwei’s regime in a China that had, by 2015, recast the war as a life-and-death struggle between the forces of darkness and light. While so many governments have ignored the RNG or sought to erase it from the visual record since 1945, it is important that we look again at Wang Jingwei’s China. In doing so, not only will we gain a more complete and balanced understanding of China’s wartime experience, but we will also gain a more complex and nuanced understanding of visuality under foreign occupation more broadly.