

## TAKE THREE: THE BOMBING OF THE *USS PANAY*

# The Longer History of Imperial Incidents on the Yangtze

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Just before 1:30 pm on December 12, 1937, a Japanese bomb ripped through the bridge of the *USS Panay*, a U.S. Navy gunboat anchored twenty miles upriver from Nanjing, China's Republican Era capital. Japanese naval aircraft bombed and strafed continuously until about 2:25 pm, sinking the *Panay*, two Socony-Vacuum tankers, and damaging a third American merchant ship. Three men died in the bombing, and another succumbed to his wounds a week later. The vessels, all clearly marked with American flags, had been acting as a refuge for American citizens fleeing the Japanese assault on Nanjing.<sup>1</sup> This unprovoked attack sparked a crisis in U.S.–Japan relations, which the Japanese government quickly defused by accepting full responsibility and paying a \$2.2 million indemnity.<sup>2</sup> War between Japan and the United States began four years later with a much larger surprise attack, enshrining the *Panay* bombing in American historical memory as the prelude to Pearl Harbor.<sup>3</sup>

But the December 1937 bombing was not the first deadly international incident involving the *Panay*. Two Chinese boatmen, Wang Heshun (王和順) and Miao Yuanlin (繆元林), drowned in Chongqing on July 29, 1933, after an accident allegedly caused by the American gunboat.<sup>4</sup> While the 1937 bombing became a crucial element in the Pacific War's origin story, the accident in Chongqing passed without notice. But this first *Panay* incident reveals more about how the U.S. military presence in China contributed to anti-imperialist resentment—a force that eventually succeeded where Japan failed by helping to drive the U.S. military out of China.

Early that July morning, a wooden junk belonging to Zheng Shuqing (鄭樹卿) pulled away from Chongqing's Linjiang Gate laden with forty-six tons of coal. As the thirty-eight-man crew prepared to dock and offload their cargo at the Renhe Gully Postal Wharf on the Yangtze River's north bank, the *Panay* steamed by. According to Chinese eyewitnesses, the *Panay* “was moving at high speed, along the north bank of the river [outside the normal steamer

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<sup>1</sup>Navy department's report of the bombing and sinking of the *U.S.S. Panay*, Dec. 24, 1937, file no. 11-33-02-04-023, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], 近史所檔案館 [Institute of Modern History Archives, hereafter IMHA], Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. At least twenty-seven were injured.

<sup>2</sup>Note from the American ambassador in Tokyo to the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dec. 25, 1937, File No. 11-33-02-04-023, IMHA; The ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State, Apr. 22, 1938, United States Department of State, in *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1938, The Far East Volume 4* (Washington, DC, 1938), 211–3.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Hamilton Darby Perry, *The Panay Incident: Prelude to Pearl Harbor* (Toronto, 1969); Ted Robbins, “A Japanese Attack before Pearl Harbor,” *NPR*, Dec. 13, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/17110447?storyId=17110447> (accessed Dec. 5, 2019); Douglas Peifer, *Choosing War: Presidential Decisions in the Maine, Lusitania, and Panay Incidents* (New York, 2016), 149–233; William T. Johnsen, *The Origins of the Grand Alliance: Anglo-American Military Collaboration from the Panay Incident to Pearl Harbor* (Lexington, KY, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>重慶市市長潘文華呈外交部 [Chongqing Mayor Pan Wenhua to the Foreign Ministry], Sept. 2, 1933, File No. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

track] and failed to sound its steam whistle.” The junk capsized in the *Panay*’s wash. Nearby ferry boats managed to rescue most of the crew, but Wang and Miao drowned.<sup>5</sup>

Chinese authorities found the *Panay* at fault for the accident. Chongqing Mayor Pan Wenhua (潘文華) requested compensation of \$1,000 silver Mexican dollars to the families of each of the deceased, as well as \$1,669 to Zheng for his boat and cargo, paid in the same currency.<sup>6</sup>

U.S. Navy investigators, on the other hand, dismissed the claim. According to the commander of U.S. naval forces in China, Chinese authorities failed to furnish sufficient evidence that wash from the *Panay* “was the direct cause of the sinking of the junk.” Had the junk been properly loaded with safe freeboard, the investigators concluded, the “wash of the vessel of the size of the *Panay* would not of itself cause the sinking of a junk of a size to transport forty-six tons of coal.”<sup>7</sup>

Neither the junk’s owner nor the deceased boatmen’s families received compensation from the U.S. government. Wang left behind a wife and an elderly mother, while Miao had been the sole breadwinner for an extended family comprising his mother, spouse, son, and disabled brother.<sup>8</sup>

Such incidents were not uncommon in China, which hosted the largest U.S. military presence on foreign soil in the years before World War II. The *Panay* was one of six new gunboats making up the Yangtze Patrol during the 1930s, which plied China’s largest river from coastal Shanghai all the way to Chongqing, more than 1,300 miles inland.<sup>9</sup> Another gunboat squadron—the South China Patrol—operated in the waterways surrounding Guangzhou. Larger, ocean-going destroyers often supplemented these gunboats, and during tense periods the Navy sent dozens of additional vessels to China.<sup>10</sup> The other service branches also deployed forces on Chinese territory. The Army’s 15th Infantry Regiment—approximately 1,000 men—called the city of Tianjin home between 1912 and 1938, while as many as 5,600 Marines were stationed in the country at any given time, divided between a legation guard at Peking (Beijing), the 4th Marine Regiment in Shanghai between 1927 and 1941, and other units deployed on shorter missions.<sup>11</sup>

Americans understood these deployments as categorically different from what European countries and Japan were doing in China. Diplomats and military commanders pointed to America’s Open Door policy, which upheld Chinese territorial integrity, while stressing that longstanding treaties gave U.S. forces the right to protect American lives and property throughout the country. Their vision, however, was clouded by a paternalistic understanding of Sino–U.S. relations, which led them (and their compatriots) to overlook America’s complicity in the

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.; 證明書 [Witness Statement], undated, signed by Li Ziqing (李子清), Lai Yinhe (賴銀和), Wang Qingyun (王慶雲), Zhou Changhai (周昌海), Fu Yingcheng (傅銀成), Zhang Guangjie (張光傑), and Zhang Chaolu (張朝祿), Oct. 24, 1933, file no. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

<sup>6</sup>計抄美潘南兵船浪沉炭船人損失價值單 [Statement of Damages from the Sinking of a Coal Junk by the U.S.S. Panay], Sept. 2, 1933, file no. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

<sup>7</sup>Clarence E. Gauss, Counselor of Legation at Peking to Wang Chao-Ming, Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nov. 17, 1933, file no. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

<sup>8</sup>Statement of Damages from the Sinking of a Coal Junk by the U.S.S. Panay, Sept. 2, 1933, file no. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

<sup>9</sup>U.S. naval patrols in the Yangtze began in 1854. See Tolley Kemp, *Yangtze Patrol* (Annapolis, MD, 1971).

<sup>10</sup>During Chiang Kai-shek’s Northern Expedition (1926–1928), for example, the U.S. Navy sent seventeen destroyers, eleven submarines, and three cruisers to China, along with mine sweepers and numerous support vessels. For a helpful primary source on the prewar naval presence, see Annual Reports of the Navy Department, *River Patrol and Other U.S. Navy Asiatic Fleet Activities in China, as Described in the Annual Reports of the Navy Department*, 1920, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/y/yangtze-river-patrol-and-other-us-navy-asiatic-fleet-activities-in-china.html> (accessed Dec. 5, 2019).

<sup>11</sup>Alfred Emile Cornebise, *The United States 15th Infantry Regiment in China, 1912–1938* (Jefferson, NC, 2004); George B. Clark, *Treading Softly: U.S. Marines in China, 1819–1949* (Westport, CT, 2001), 56–77.

history of foreign imperialism in China since the First Opium War (1839–1842).<sup>12</sup> Even in 1953, with the Chinese Revolution in hindsight, the authors of the Army’s official history of the China-Burma-India Theater during World War II described this prewar military presence as “tiny garrisons” the U.S. maintained in the country “as a symbol in support of Chinese nationalism.”<sup>13</sup>

Chinese nationalists of all political stripes, however, saw the U.S. military presence as an infringement upon Chinese sovereignty. Mao Zedong described the U.S. presence in the Yangtze Valley as part of larger imperialist effort “to completely enslave the Chinese nation.”<sup>14</sup> Mao’s archnemesis Chiang Kai-shek similarly denounced the “Gunboat Policy” that allowed the United States and other foreign powers to sail their warships wherever they pleased and “take off the gun covers” whenever a dispute occurred.<sup>15</sup> A naval barrage launched by a U.S. warship in Nanjing after an attack on foreign nationals on March 24, 1927, for example, killed approximately twenty Chinese.<sup>16</sup> According to Chiang, the unequal treaties that allowed foreign militaries to operate with impunity in China had rendered “China no longer a state” and “the Chinese people no longer a nation.”<sup>17</sup>

Ordinary Chinese understood the U.S. military presence in less abstract terms: as the first *Panay* incident illustrated, any American vehicle was a potential source of physical danger. An entire family was killed in a 1925 collision caused by the *USS Hart* on the Yangtze. A U.S. Navy investigation found the Hart’s crew at fault for killing Li Yinting’s (李陰亭) son, daughter-in-law, two grandchildren, and two of his employees, but it took another decade before Congress approved payment of a \$1,500 claim for his losses, by which time Li had been dead for five years.<sup>18</sup>

American servicemen also posed a threat when not at the helm. As the China historian Robert Bickers shows, extraterritoriality gave these men “an aura of untouchability.” They could get away with just about anything in China—and they knew it.<sup>19</sup> Pervasive racism and some of the military’s highest rates of alcoholism made matters worse.<sup>20</sup> Even those who had seemingly cordial relations with American personnel were not immune to violence at their hands. Li Baotian (李寶田), proprietress of one of Tianjin’s most popular spots for U.S. servicemen on leave, suffered “a singularly brutal and murderous attack” by a knife-wielding Marine Corps private who owed her \$16 in early 1929, leaving her with around twenty cuts and slashes to her face, wrists, and back, including one puncture wound that penetrated into the pleural cavity. Congress compensated her \$300 for her injuries—six years after the attack occurred.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), 271–2.

<sup>13</sup>Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell’s Mission to China* (Washington, DC, 1953), 27.

<sup>14</sup>Mao Zedong, “Report to the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Congress of Workers and Peasants Representatives,” Jan. 23, 1934, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6\\_18.htm#s3](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv6_18.htm#s3) (accessed Dec. 5, 2019).

<sup>15</sup>Chiang Kai-shek and Philip Jaffe, *China’s Destiny and Chinese Economic Theory* (1943; Leiden, 2012), 80–1.

<sup>16</sup>Bickers, *Out of China*, 107.

<sup>17</sup>Chiang, *China’s Destiny*, 79.

<sup>18</sup>被傷害華人償卹表 [List of Indemnities Paid to Injured Chinese], Mar. 18, 1937, file no. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

<sup>19</sup>Bickers, *Out of China*, 17.

<sup>20</sup>Edward M. Coffman, “The American 15th Infantry Regiment in China, 1912–1938: A Vignette in Social History,” *Journal of Military History* 58, no. 1 (Jan. 1994): 70–2.

<sup>21</sup>Office of the Brigade Provost Marshall, Third Brigade, Tientsin, China, “Report of Investigation of the Assault Made Upon the Proprietress of the Chicago Bar,” Jan. 10, 1929; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Document no. 117, 4th Cong., 1st sess., Mar. 4, 1935, file no. 11-33-02-06-013, 外交部檔案 [Foreign Ministry Files], IMHA.

Violent misconduct and deadly accidents involving U.S. military personnel inflamed anti-imperialist resentment across the social spectrum. When American servicemen attacked rickshaw pullers or other civilians in the treaty ports, they counted on help from military police or guards to avoid being subjected to street justice at the hands of large groups of angry young men. Chinese who attacked American personnel put their own lives at risk. In his anti-imperialist treatise *China's Destiny*, Chiang recounted the “innumerable incidents” in which foreign soldiers had killed Chinese citizens.<sup>22</sup> Extraterritoriality rendered Chinese authorities powerless in dealing with such cases, regardless—as the first *Panay* incident illustrated—of what their investigations concluded. Chinese could do nothing but await the result of U.S. military investigations and courts martial. Even in the best-case scenario, the claims process dragged on for many years.

Japan's full-scale invasion in China in 1937 took attention away from the U.S. military presence, and in late 1941 American soldiers returned to China as partners in the war effort. But even as Chinese and Americans fought shoulder-to-shoulder against the Japanese, these long-standing sources of resentment remained. American servicemen continued to enjoy immunity from Chinese law. Vehicle accidents and violent crimes against Chinese civilians increased over the course of the war. Widespread anti-American backlash finally broke out in spring 1945, when Chinese interpreters working with the U.S. Army staged strikes around the country, angry mobs of male civilians attacked GIs on the streets of Chongqing over alleged sex offenses, and Chinese soldiers sick of being treated like second-class citizens in their own country turned their guns on U.S. forces.<sup>23</sup>

More than 53,000 Marines had landed in northern China after the war ended, and nearly half remained in the country after their ostensible mission of repatriating Japanese soldiers and civilians had ended. The U.S. military also continued to exercise sole jurisdiction over all criminal matters involving American personnel, even though the 1943 Sino–U.S. jurisdiction agreement stipulated that this right would expire six months after the war ended.<sup>24</sup> The Americans behaved deplorably.<sup>25</sup> Shanghai Police reported sixty-seven violent crimes committed by Marines and GIs in just three months over the winter of 1945 to 1946.<sup>26</sup> Deadly vehicle accidents like the first *Panay* incident occurred almost daily. According to an investigation by the *Minzhu bao* newspaper, U.S. military Jeeps and trucks killed more than 1,000 Chinese between Japan's surrender and July 1946.<sup>27</sup> The frequency of deadly collisions led some victims' families to argue that American actions could not be explained away as unintentional.<sup>28</sup>

With Japan's surrender and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Manchuria in April 1946, the Chinese Communist Party made hay of the violence and other dangers stemming from the lingering U.S. military presence. Anti-Americanism became a central feature of Chinese

<sup>22</sup>Chiang, *China's Destiny*, 80.

<sup>23</sup>Zach Fredman, “Lofty Expectations and Bitter Reality: Chinese Interpreters for the U.S. Army during the Second World War,” *Frontiers of History in China* 12, no. 4 (2017): 585–90; Zach Fredman, “GIs and ‘Jeep Girls’: Sex and American Soldiers in Wartime China,” *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 13, no. 1 (2019): 76–101.

<sup>24</sup>The Chinese Ministry for Foreign Affairs, “Regulations Governing the Handling of Criminal Offenses Committed by Members of the Armed Forces of the United States in China,” Oct. 1, 1943, in *Foreign Relations of the United States; Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China* (Washington, DC, 1957), 699–700.

<sup>25</sup>Marc Gallicchio, *The Scramble for Asia: U.S. Military Power in the Aftermath of the Pacific War* (Lanham, MD, 2008), 132–6; Hong Zhang, *America Perceived: The Making of Chinese Images of the United States, 1945–1953* (Westport, CT, 2002), 77–111.

<sup>26</sup>上海市警察局關於美軍機關對美帝侵略軍在上海肇事的調查 [Shanghai Police Bureau Report on Incidents Involving American Servicemen in Shanghai], Dec. 14, 1945 to Mar. 18, 1946, file no. Q131-20-3, 1–187, Shanghai Municipal Archives, Shanghai, China.

<sup>27</sup>Zhang Mochao et al. 中国现代史 [Modern Chinese History] (Chongqing, 1996), 616.

<sup>28</sup>Zhiguo Yang, “U.S. Marines in Qingdao: History, Public Memory, and Chinese Nationalism,” in *Exploring Nationalisms of China: Themes and Conflicts*, eds. C. X. George Wei and Xiaoyuan Liu (Westport, CT, 2002), 61–62.

politics, as Mao's Communists leveraged resentment against the U.S. military presence as a powerful tool in their efforts to seize and consolidate power.<sup>29</sup> When two intoxicated Marines allegedly raped a Peking University student in Beijing on Christmas Eve, 1946, underground Communist Party members played a leading role in organizing the country's largest nationwide protest movement of the Republican Era.<sup>30</sup> In 1950, the new Chinese government mobilized its war-weary population to "resist America and aid Korea" with an all-encompassing propaganda campaign that warned the U.S. military would return to China unless the Chinese made a stand in Korea.<sup>31</sup>

Chinese anti-imperialism—not Japan's attempt to drive Western countries from East and Southeast Asia—ended the U.S. military presence in China. Even after the large-scale withdrawal of Marines following the failure of General of the Army George C. Marshall's attempt to mediate between the Communists and Nationalists, small advisory groups from the Army and Navy stayed on in China. So while the 1937 bombing sheds light on the imperialist rivalry leading up to Pearl Harbor, the first *Panay* incident illustrates how the U.S. military helped bring about the very outcome it had been deployed to China in order to forestall: control over the country by a power hostile to the United States.

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<sup>29</sup>Matthew D. Johnson, "Anti-Imperialism as Strategy: Masking the Edges of Foreign Entanglements in Civil War-Era China, 1945–1945," in *Overcoming Empire in Post-Imperial East Asia: Repatriation, Redress and Rebuilding*, eds. Barak Kushner and Serzod Muminov (London, 2019), 124, 127–31, 138–40.

<sup>30</sup>Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946–1950* (Stanford, CA, 2003), 140–1.

<sup>31</sup>For an overview of the propaganda campaign see 侯松涛 Hou Songtao, "抗美援朝运动与民众社会心态研究" [The Resist American and Aid Korea Campaign and Mass Social Attitudes in China], *中共党史研究* [Party History Research] (2005年第二期): 19–28.