

# *The National Spirit Embodied in the Battle of Shanghai and Its Historical Significance*

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**Abstract:** The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) was also a page in the development of the Chinese nation that was marked by vicissitudes. During this period, the national spirit, with patriotism as its core, reached an unprecedented height. The Sino-Japanese War lasted fourteen years, divided into the stage of a partial war and a full-scale war. This article focuses on the comprehensive strategic defence phase during the full-scale war from 1937 to 1939, with the Battle of Shanghai as the main focus, and discusses the analysis of the history of the war and the national spirit embodied in it. The significance of the Battle of Shanghai is not only the military strategic consideration of "uploading and transmitting" or buying time for the national industry to move inward, but also the "united mindset" and even "bottom-up" spirit, from officers to popular people. The national spirit of "bottom up" embodied in it provided valuable and rich ideological and psychological reserves for people to resist the war for a long time. The Battle of Shanghai promoted the unity and solidarity of people from all social classes in Shanghai and even the whole country under the call of "resisting Japan and defeating insults, solidarity in the national defense", and promoted the development of an unprecedented new climax of the national anti-Japanese movement.

**Keywords:** Battle of Shanghai, national spirit, war propaganda

## **1. Introduction**

Before the July 7 Incident in 1937, China and Japan had been engaged in local wars and conflicts for six years. At the same time, the world economic crisis had almost devastated the Japanese economy. Japan attempted to "destroy China in three months" in an effort to win a quick victory and ease its domestic difficulties. From the Mukden Incident (or 9.18 Incident) in 1931 to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (7.7 Incident) and the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, Japan's strategy of invasion of China changed from "encroachment" to "quick war" [1]. Japan eagerly tried to force the Nationalist Government in Nanjing to recognize the legitimacy of its pseudo-Manchukuo, so as to force China to surrender at minimal cost by engaging in local pseudo-autonomy. However, the National Government was determined not to surrender or to recognize the territorial affiliation. After the Xi'an Incident, Chiang Kai-shek gave Japan a strong response, "Now we have only to lead the people of the whole country, raise the nation and struggle to the end." [2] Japan then felt compelled to establish its rule over mainland China before the Chinese became strong and had to launch an all-out war against China. The determination of Chinese people to fight the war grew as the scale of the war grew, and the Japanese government's attempt of "persuasion" against Chiang Kai-shek's Nanjing National Government escalated.

This came to the Battle of Shanghai after the 7.7 Incident. Japan attempted to force Chiang Kai-shek to surrender through military strikes and partial victories. And Chiang Kai-shek's government decided to shift the operational focus of the Sino-Japanese war from the battlefield in northern China to the battlefield in eastern China to lure the Japanese to change the direction of operations, therefore lengthening the battlefield and gain assistance. The strategists in Nanking believed that Shanghai was more suitable for fighting Japan than the open area of northern China [3]. Thus, the largest battle of the Anti-Japanese War period was fought in Shanghai. Chiang Wei-Guo mentioned in *Anti-Japanese Resistance* that Chiang Kai-shek "in the guidance of field strategy, when the war broke out at the beginning, that is, to induce the Japanese army in the wrong direction ..... so China changed the space of time in the area, from the ease of the withdrawal of human and material resources in East China to the southwest." [4] The scholar Wu Xiangxiang in *China's Overall Strategy Towards Japan* commented on the strategic significance of changing the Japanese army's "north-south" course to "east-west": "If the Japanese army used its fast troops to drive straight to Hankow along the Ping-Han Railway and block the Tongguan Pass out of Luoyang, the Japanese army would have been able to use its fast troops to move to Hankow. If the Japanese army used its fast troops to drive straight to Hankou along the Ping-Han Railway and block the Tongguan Pass from Luoyang, China would be cut in two from east to west, the army and people and materials and equipment in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River could not be transported westward, the establishment of a large rear area in the northwest and southwest would be futile, and the strategy of lasting resistance could not be realized." [5] From this point of view, if Japan occupied North China, from the north to the south to plunder, it seems to be very much like the old way of the Yuan Dynasty to destroy the Southern Song Dynasty. Thus, the two sides fought the largest battle of the war in Shanghai.

## 2. Stages and evolution of the Battle of Shanghai

The Battle of Shanghai began with the incident at Shanghai Hongqiao Airport in August 1937, when the Chinese and Japanese sides were already on the verge of war, and on 9 August, Lieutenant Isao Oyama and his men, who were originally stationed in the Marine Corps at Toyota Yarn Factory in Shanghai, drove drunkenly and forced their way through the airport security line with guns, provoking the Chinese army in front of their defenders. They were subsequently shot dead by Chinese troops. This incident was the trigger for Battle of Shanghai [6]. On 13 August 1937, the Battle of Shanghai officially began. The primary objective of the Chinese initial battle was to attack the Japanese Marine Corps Command stationed in Shanghai. Although the Chinese air force made good gains in the opening battle, they lacked offensive power in the absence of artillery fire. Even though the Chinese forces captured Huishan Wharf, the steady stream of Japanese reinforcements and the landing at Wusongkou left no choice but to order an evacuation. The Chinese army was forced to move to the second phase of the operation. As a result of the move from stronghold uprooting to anti-landing operations, the Nationalists were ultimately unable to drive the Japanese forces in Shanghai down the Huangpu River. The defensive focus then shifted to the Luodian and Baoshan areas.

The National Army fought the Battle of Baoshan. Needing to ease the situation in Shanghai and protect the flanks of Zhang Zhizhong's Ninth Army Group, Chiang Kai-shek ordered Chen Cheng to move to Wusongkou and Luodian. The Japanese, however, focused their attack on the important town of Baoshan. Chen Cheng ordered the Ninety-eighth Division to hold it to the death, and Yao Ziqing was ordered to take over the defence. Soon after, with the arrival of reinforcements, the Japanese began a general attack on Baoshan. At this point, the industrial gap led to the complete passivity of the National Army. The Japanese attacked the four gates, towed by armoured vehicles, and the battle continued until noon. With only twenty or so men left, the Nationalists remained undeterred and engaged the Japanese in alleyway and physical battles. The battle lasted until early morning when the entire battalion was martyred. Wei Jianchen, a soldier of the 9th Company who broke out to report

on the battle, became the only surviving witness to the battle. The end of the battle of Baoshan allowed the Japanese to break through the first barrier on the flank of the National Army. Thereafter, the Chinese and Japanese armies began to build around Luodian, gradually drawing up a main body of battle [7].

By late September, the town of Luodian had been largely scorched and the Japanese gradually took the initiative on the battlefield. The Japanese decided at the highest level to shift the main direction of the invasion from northern China to Shanghai, and called for an acceleration of the Shanghai campaign, again making the decision to increase troops. The total strength of the Japanese army in Shanghai then reached 200,000 men [8]. The total strength of the Nationalist Government had also reached 75 divisions and over 700,000 men by this time.

However, the Chinese army was far inferior to the Japanese in terms of logistics and the quality of its troops, and the gap in industrial strength made it impossible for the Chinese army to match the modern, mechanised Japanese army even though it had the advantage of numbers [9]. As Shanghai was an alluvial plain formed by the siltation of rivers, it was difficult to build temporary defensive positions. Faced with Japanese mechanised troops, heavy artillery, aircraft and tanks, Chinese soldiers fought with flesh and blood against shells from the ground, air and sea, often destroying entire battalions by enemy fire. At Luodian, the Chinese soldiers were most eager to fight at bayonet point, as close combat would minimise the gap in armament, and the Luodian position saw physical combat on the scale of thousands of men; but the Japanese were also extremely superior in terms of the quality of their individual combatants and physical qualities. Even so, the Japanese advanced less than five kilometres in forty days in the dozens of square kilometres of Luodian. Feng Yuxiang recalled: "Our troops were putting in division after division every day, and some of them were half dead in less than three hours, and two-thirds dead again in five hours of support. This battlefield was like a melting pot, filled in and melted, trenches were blown flat, soldiers had to use the bodies of their comrades to construct fortifications, and the blood of the dead flowed all over the earth." [10] The road from Liu Xing to Daba was almost filled with a sea of corpses and blood, with new troops being thrown in and quickly consumed by both sides, and so on. Luodian was also known as the "Verdun of the East", the "mill of flesh and blood" [11].

After the defeat of Luodian, Yunzaobang and Dachang, the Chinese army was left with only the northern bank of the Suzhou River, which was about to be breached. But as the League of Nations was about to meet up, Chiang Kai-shek, who had already agreed to retreat, had unrealistic illusions again and explicitly ordered that the Chinese army must hold out for ten days to two weeks. The Sihang Warehouse became the only last available position and Xie Jinyuan led four hundred men into it to guard it. The soldiers who entered the warehouse knew that there was no way out of this battle. Xie Jinyuan had told the men that this was their coffin, and that as long as there was a breath of life left, they should fight with all their might and not be ashamed of the country's expectations [12]. Years later, the words written by the soldiers back then were found on the walls of the Sihang Warehouse: "We are the sons of the Chinese nation, and the wise and benevolent do not kill to harm benevolence, but kill to become benevolent." The Suzhou River was then lost, and the Chinese army faced defeat with the enemy at its back [13].

On November 9, Shanghai fell. On November 13, the Nationalist Government issued a statement in its "Letter to the Compatriots in Shanghai": "The soldiers from all over the world, having heard of the righteousness of the struggle, arrived in the morning and in the evening, and built trenches with their flesh and blood on the front line." [14] This ended the Battle of Shanghai at the cost of 60% of the National Army's elite troops [15].

### 3. The national spirit and its historical significance embodied in the Battle of Shanghai

Although the Battle of Shanghai ended in China's defeat, it had great historical significance as one of the largest and most tragic battles of the entire war against Japan. Firstly, it broke the Japanese plan to destroy China in three months. The Chinese army had bought a full three months in Shanghai alone, dealing a blow to the Japanese army, which had been furiously attacking the strategic areas of eastern China and the Yangtze River. It took Japan a long time to win the battle, and there was doubt and confusion about the morale of the people. Japan was almost certain that it would not be able to end the war with China in the short term, and then Japan would face the greatest Achilles heel of its strategy - a lack of resources for war and livelihood that could not withstand long-term depletion. The main battlefield of the war against Japan also shifted from northern to eastern China, facilitating the development of a protracted war of resistance [16]. Secondly, the Battle of Shanghai bought time for the relocation of national industries. The three months of the Battle of Shanghai bought enough time for most of the national industries to relocate, laying the groundwork for the subsequent war of resistance.

But the significance of the Battle of Shanghai went much further than that. The Battle of Shanghai was a pervasive expression of the Chinese national spirit, a patriotic feeling that erupted in the face of an unprecedented crisis of national survival, and was further reflected in action. When the Japanese invaders were approaching the city, the formerly scattered National Government and warlords from all over the country united in an unprecedented manner to put aside their past disputes and to fight to defend the country. This was an unprecedented unity of the whole nation against foreign invasion, a magnificent situation that had never been seen since the Republic of China or in modern times [17].

The attitude of the top government officials and patriotic generals in resisting the invasion was very clear. Chen Cheng, the commander-in-chief of the left-wing army at the Battle of Shanghai, stated in his diary that he would never seek peace and taught his officers that they must take their responsibility as generals to add strength to the country and that soldiers must be willing to sacrifice [18]. The soldiers in the battlefield also interpreted the will to resist the war with their actions: "Every inch of mountain and river is an inch of blood". At this time, China was no match for Japan in terms of economy, military, manpower and technology. The Japanese army was well-equipped and well-trained; the Chinese army was poorly equipped and had no chance to fight back against the aircraft, artillery and tanks. The Battle of Shanghai was a certain defeat almost from the beginning. Even so, the Nationalists still finished the battle with a casualty ratio of ten to one.

And long before the top brass took a stand, the patriotism of the people had already awakened spontaneously. As early as 1932, the people started the anti-Japanese rescue movement in Shanghai. The Battle of Shanghai then galvanised the national spirit in Shanghai and throughout the country. The Shanghai community took the initiative to unite under the banner of the anti-Japanese national united front at the time of the invaders' arrival, and took the initiative to mobilise and organise relief groups in various ways to unite and mobilise the people. They carried out anti-Japanese propaganda, made financial donations and helped refugees. Shanghai became the home base of the national salvation movement at that time.

The powerful anti-Japanese propaganda was also the most influential part of the mass movement. *The Salvation Daily* (《救亡日报》), edited by Guo Moruo and others, the *War of Resistance* (《抗战》), edited by Zhou Taofen, and the *Shen Bao* (《申报》), led by Shi Liangcai and his sons, provided extensive and sustained coverage of Japan during the Battle of Shanghai, and played an important role in dispelling the doomsday arguments and strengthening the will for a lasting war of resistance. After the Hongqiao Airport Incident, *Shen Bao* was strongly critical of this time, helping the public to correctly perceive the true nature of the Japanese army and mobilising them to actively resist Japan [19]. The newspaper also continued to report on the progress of the war, especially in-

depth coverage of the battle at Luodian and the heroic battle of the Nationalist army, showing that the Chinese people had no alternative but to resolutely fight the war [20]. The three daily issues of *War of Resistance* carried articles on popular mobilisation, calling on the people to persevere in the war to the end and to save their lives [21]. The public opinion campaign in Shanghai covered workers, industrialists, businessmen, government officials and employees of foreign companies, from the cities to the countryside, and was unprecedented in the Shanghai people's revolutionary movement. As Chen Cheng said, "The officers and soldiers at the front must shed blood, the personnel at the rear should sweat, and the press must promote public propaganda." [22]

The Battle of Shanghai greatly invigorated the national spirit and inspired the people of the country to resist Japan. The hundreds of thousands of soldiers on the front line demonstrated the national morale of sacrificing life for righteousness and the resilient soul of the nation; while the fierce popular struggle for salvation and the soldiers who fought on the front reflected each other, together forging the patriotism of the Chinese nation as the core national spirit.

#### 4. Conclusions

The significance of the Battle of Shanghai was not just a strategic military consideration, nor did it merely buy time for the relocation of national industries to China and frustrate the strength of the Japanese army, but it was also the fact that it embodied the "unity of mind" from officers and soldiers to the people. It was also the national spirit embodied in it, from the officers and soldiers to the people, which provided a valuable and rich ideological and psychological reserve for people from all walks of life to resist the war in the long term. The Battle of Shanghai promoted the unity and solidarity of people from all walks of life in Shanghai, and even the whole country, under the call to "resist Japan and fight against the invasion of the country" and promoted the development of an unprecedented new climax of the national anti-Japanese movement. This process greatly invigorated the patriotic national spirit and strengthened national self-confidence and self-esteem. During the thrilling three months of the Battle of Shanghai, a consensus emerged across China to resist Japanese aggression, China "would never end the war of resistance, even if we had to fight to the last man." This was the most tragic decision in the history of the Chinese nation, and the whole nation was determined to face the challenge of the historical crisis with total sacrifice [23]. The Battle of Shanghai made indelible and significant contributions to national independence and the liberation of the people.

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