Even in a century filled with violence and destruction, the eight years of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945, were a brutal era. The war brought not only death and suffering, but also led to massive movements of populations. Japan's invasion of China in the summer of 1937 led millions of Chinese, from wealthy merchants to the poorest peasants, to flee from the fighting. Perhaps as many as 95 million became refugees at least for a time, with perhaps 50 million becoming long-term refugees. Yet the standard story of flight to Sichuan and the interior is only part of the picture of wartime mobility. Particularly after the fall of Wuhan and Guangzhou in October 1938, movement of peoples in wartime became more complex with some people leaving “Free China” for the occupied areas and others moving between different war zones for business or personal reasons. This paper is an attempt to give a more nuanced understanding of the experience of wartime mobility and its significance.

Parks Coble's research field is 20th century China with special emphasis on the political history of Republican China (1911-1949), the history of Chinese business in the 20th century, and Sino-Japanese interactions. Recent publications have included a study of Chinese businessmen living in occupied China during World War II, and of the anti-Japanese movement in China in the 1930s. His current project is a study of the legacy of World War II in East Asia, a conflict which led to at least twenty million Chinese casualties. Over six decades after the end of this conflict, disagreements over its meaning are not simply academic, but often a source of conflict among the people and governments of East Asia. The rise of nationalism in post-Mao China has led to the rediscovery of this conflict as "the great patriotic war." Public focus on Japanese atrocities committed during the conflict, such as the rape of Nanjing, has even resulted in anti-Japanese outbursts in Chinese cities. This new study seeks to understand why the historical legacy of this conflict has been so problematic.