

Connecting the experiences of the Sino-Japanese and Asia-Pacific Wars

How were the Sino-Japanese and Asia-Pacific Wars related to one another? In terms of military strategy, competition for raw materials, diplomacy and the like, historians have long acknowledged connections between the conflicts, and how one prefigured the other. Yet, beyond the obvious military-strategic links, other kinds of inter-relationships between developments in the China theater and in other parts of Asia subsequently occupied by Japan have received much less attention, particularly in terms of transnational cultural history.

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Conventional accounts of the two conflicts tend to lump Japanese and Asian experiences into one basket with the shared labels 'imperialism versus nationalism' and 'oppression versus resistance.' To a certain extent this remains accurate, but there were important differences between how Japan's occupation of China and its occupations in Southeast Asia were apprehended and experienced by occupier and occupied. At the same time, the two conflicts were related in complex ways.

Coming home

The case of Japanese-Indonesian relations in occupied Java and their relationship to the Sino-Japanese War serves as a brief example. When Japanese forces landed on Java in March 1942, they brought with them a stirring, revolutionary message: Japan's occupation of Indonesia represented neither imperialist aggression nor a local version of Western colonialism, but the realization of a world-historical mission to 'liberate' Japan's Asian brethren from Western capitalism and colonialism, and to build a harmoniously 'Asian' order transcending modernity's social ills. In ancient times, Asia had been a unified and powerful cultural whole; the success of Japan's new Asia-building project depended on a cultural return to the shared Asian values and unity that Western imperialism, capitalism, and individualism had undermined. Japan, alone among Asian societies in having maintained its political autonomy and Eastern cultural essence while mastering Western science and technology, was uniquely, 'naturally' qualified to lead this Asian renaissance.

Java's indigenous population had long been suffering under Dutch colonial domination, and many, particularly among its educated elite, were in search of a new post-colonial order. Many Indonesians thus welcomed the Japanese and were captivated by their promises, particularly given that beyond occasional contact with local Japanese shopkeepers – who had an overwhelmingly positive reputation – Indonesians had little direct experience of Japan and its empire. The demonstration of Japanese power represented by the rollback of the Americans, British, and Dutch in the Pacific between December 1941 and March 1942, unprecedented in speed and scope, was further incentive to follow Japan's lead. And while many Indonesians were aware that Japan had been waging war in China for several years, longstanding class and racial tensions between the indigenous population and local ethnic Chinese – who dominated the lower reaches of the economy and were widely perceived as capitalist-colonial henchmen of the Dutch rulers – offset the potential for anti-Japanese solidarity.

For their part, many Japanese who took part in the invasion were overwhelmed by the Indonesian welcome, and were quick to see in Indonesia proof of the world-historical righteousness of Japan's mission as Asia's leader and liberator. Many went so far as to interpret their comfort in Java – reinforced by what they saw as uncanny racial, linguistic and cultural similarities between Indonesians and Japanese – as confirmation of a 'fresh start' for Asia as well as a 'homecoming' to the long-lost Asian brethren described in Japan's own propaganda.

Northeast Asian roots

While Japan's message was new and appealing to many Indonesians, for Chinese, Koreans, and others who bore the brunt of Japanese expansionism in Northeast Asia, the language of 'liberation' and 'return to Asia' had a familiar and by now hollow ring. This was no coincidence, for while it was now directed at Southeast Asians, the message of 'Greater Asia' was originally meant for Northeast Asian consumption. And wittingly or not, Chinese resistance had played a critical role in its making, elaboration, and radicalization.

Up to the 1930s, Japanese justifications for imperial expansion and colonial rule had largely mirrored those of the Western powers: the protection of Japan's military-strategic 'spheres of interest', the securing of vital raw materials, land, and markets, and in more idealistic

fueled by fear of the Soviet Union and its commitment to exporting communist revolution, along with increasingly assertive Chinese nationalism. From 1931, the empire-building project in Manchuria became the focus of Japanese ambitions, and was billed as a model solution to Japan's domestic problems.

Imperial crisis

At the same time, the interwar period was a time of crisis in the legitimacy of imperialism itself. Chinese nationalist resistance to Japanese encroachment was a regional play on the global theme

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of anti-colonialism, which was gaining the moral high ground as the 'trend of the times', articulated by such spokesmen as Mahatma Gandhi and encouraged by the Marxist-Leninist critique of imperialism and Woodrow Wilson's acknowledgement of the 'right to national self-determination'. Just as the Great Depression and crisis of international capitalism made the securing of empire seem more important than ever to Japan – and to Britain, Holland, and France – empire as such was becoming harder to justify, internationally as well as domestically.



Mirror image? Cartoonist Ono Saseo's 1942 depiction of Japanese-Indonesian cultural resemblances also seems to suggest a more 'civilized' Japan.

terms, the bringing of 'civilization and enlightenment' to 'backward peoples', the 'suppression of disorder', 'banditry' and the like. From around the late 1920s, however – alongside increasing calls for domestic social renovation – a more aggressive expansionism came to the fore. The push for internal reform and external expansion emerged against the backdrop of socio-economic dislocation in the wake of the Great Depression, which brought suffering domestically and heightened protectionism and competition between the imperial powers internationally. The shift was further

The Japanese ideology of 'Greater Asia' that took shape in the 1930s arose in, and reflected, this specific 'late imperial' context. The nominal political 'independence' of Manchukuo, along with its rhetoric of 'racial harmony and brotherhood' – in what was little more than a Japanese puppet-state – were expressions of its contradictions. Above all, tenacious Chinese resistance in the subsequent full-scale war in the Chinese heartland produced the social and ideological conditions whereby what had started as a relatively straightforward imperialist mission had to become, in the eyes of

many Japanese, something much more noble and profound. This Chinese resistance came as a shock to most Japanese, who expected to deliver a quick, decisive blow to the 'renegade' forces of Chiang Kai-shek when the conflict began in mid-1937. But as months turned into years, the Japanese found themselves in a military and moral quagmire; continued mobilization of a tired populace and 'pacification' of the 'inscrutably' resistant Chinese demanded a cause that transcended the old justifications for empire – ideally, a cause that could transcend empire itself.

Yet, despite increasingly sophisticated elaboration, Japanese attempts to justify the war as a holy mission to establish a 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere' and 'liberate Asia' from Western colonial domination – ideas that resonated profoundly in Japanese society – largely failed to strike a chord among Chinese. The shocking brutality of the conflict, continued Japanese racism and arrogance, the complex structure of Chinese domestic social and political relations, and, if this were not enough, the accumulated weight of history in the form of a common perception of Japan and the Japanese as scheming, self-aggrandizing 'imperialists' – in tandem with longstanding assumptions of Chinese cultural superiority over their geographically smaller, 'peripheral' neighbour – inhibited local receptivity to Japanese claims of acting as 'Asia's liberator', let alone any legitimacy as 'Asia's leader'.

It is only against this highly charged and contested Northeast Asian formative background that Japanese ideology and propaganda in Southeast Asia – with its revolutionary evocation of an empire that could transcend imperialism, an Asian brotherhood that could transcend capitalism, an Asian modernity that could transcend Western modernity – can be understood. For reasons discussed briefly above, Java's population proved more open than their Chinese counterparts to ideas of a Japanese-sponsored 'Asian' alternative to Western rule and modernity. For their part, Japanese responses to this situation – in many ways almost a sense of religious redemption for themselves, their nation, and its imperial project – must be understood in the context of frustrations built up in the course of the China conflict. They reflect the degree to which Chinese resistance had threatened to undermine the legitimacy of Japan's empire – and how much Japanese had invested in the imperial project.

Recalling the earlier struggles and frustrations of a Japanese propaganda unit in China in a mid-1942 column, newspaper editor Shimizu Nobuo articulated the sense of relief and newfound confidence among Japanese in Java – as well as the continuing fixation on resolving Japan's 'China problem' which prefigured the Japanese experience in Indonesia and elsewhere. Where Chinese resistance had previously left Japan's imperial spokesmen 'wordless', the warm Southeast Asian reception now seemed to provide Japan with a long-sought 'reply.'

There is a story of the China Pacification Unit (Shina senbuhun).

They argued that Japan and China have the same script and are of the same race (dōbun dōshu), they are brothers, and they should proceed with hands joined. Someone in the audience replied - Alright, but China is the older brother.

It is said the members of the pacification unit had no words to answer this for some time.

How wonderful if they had been able to reply immediately.

It is a problem of history – when you are properly aware of Japan's history, the answer is extremely simple.

Japan has always been leader of the Asia-Pacific sphere from ancient times – if you know this history, that is enough.

Japan has always been constructing China - if you know this history, that is enough.

We are now seeing this truth with our own eyes in the Greater East Asia War.

We must be aware that this truth before our eyes has been continuously repeated in China since ancient times.

What is true in China is, again, true in the southern regions. Japanese people, take great pride!

It is an irony of history that Shimizu's closing assertions were eventually to prove correct, albeit hardly in the way that Shimizu, and the many Japanese whose views he represented, might have hoped. As Indonesians who lived through Japan's increasingly exploitative and brutal three and a half-year occupation will attest – and despite Japanese claims and Indonesian hopes to the contrary – it was inevitable that the imperial chickens Japan had raised in China would eventually come home to roost in Southeast Asia. For all its idealism, the promise of 'Greater Asia' was no match for the inexorably imperial political, economic, and cultural logic of Japan's wartime regime. But more than this: in its very contradictions, 'Greater Asia' was not only a vivid sign of its late-imperial times – it was also, in itself, an expression of Japan's late-imperial logic. ◀

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