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.

Ethan Mark

C onventional accounts of the two conflicts tend to lump Japanese and Asian experiences into one basket with the shared labels ‘imperialism versus nationalism’ and ‘resistance versus reaction.’ 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 the siren, 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 harmonious, Asian-oriented 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, Brits, 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 the Dutch colonial 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. More than this: in its very contradictions, the Japanese occupation of Indonesia was the ‘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 direct- ed at Southeast Asians, the message of ‘Greater Asia’ was originally meant for Northeast Asia’s populace. And wittily 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 terms, the bringing of ‘civilization and enlightenment’ to ‘backward peoples,’ the ‘suppression of disorder,’ ‘hordiency’ 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 a backdrop of geopolitical changes 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 fueled by fear of the Soviet Union and its commitment to exporting commu- nist revolution, along with increasing- ly assertive Chinese nationalism. From 1931, the empire-building project in Manchuria became the focus of Japanese national self-determination. Just as the Great Depression and crisis of interna- tional 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.

Yet, despite increasingly sophisticated Japanese attempts to justify the war as a holy mission to establish a ‘Greater Asia,’ the rhetoric of ‘patriotism’ and ‘Greater Asia’ was a time of crisis in the legitimacy of Japanese imperialism itself. Chinese nationalism and popular resistance to Japanese encroachment was a regional play on the global theme of anti-colonialism, which was gaining the moral high ground as the ‘trend of the times,’ articulated by such spokesmen as Mahatma Gandhi and encour- aged 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 interna- tional 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.

The message of ‘Greater Asia’ was originally meant for Northeast Asian consumption. Wittingly or not, Chinese resistance played a critical role in its making, elaboration, and radicalization.

Recalling the earlier struggles and frustra- tions of a Japanese propaganda unit in 1942 column, newspaper editor Shimizu Nobuo articulated the sense of relief and newfound confi- dence among Japanese in Java – as well as optimism about Japan’s victory in resolving Japan’s ‘China problem’ which prefig- ured the Japanese experience in Indone- sia 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 senbuhan).

They argued that Japan and China have the same script and are of the same race (dokken dohka), they are brothers, and they should proceed with hands joined. Someone in the audience meped - 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 always a simple one.

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 by Japan 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 bru- tal 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 premise 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 contradic- tions, ‘Greater Asia’ was no more a vivid sign of its late-imperial times - it was also, in itself, an expression of Japan’s late-imperial logic.