Communal Welfare Associations and the Agricultural Settlements of Wartime Singapore

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Most accounts of wartime Singapore focus on the surrender of Britain's "impregnable fortress" to the Japanese in February 1942. The defeat dealt a massive blow to British military prestige, and to the notion of white superiority in warfare that helped to prop up the colonial system in Southeast Asia. Yet these racist assumptions were not the only prop in this system, and Singapore's war did not end with the British surrender. The subsequent three-and-a-half year Japanese military occupation of the island-city also weakened a much more important foundation of regional colonialism: it undercut the social prestige of a cosmopolitan group of Chinese, Malay, Indian, Arab, and mixed-race Eurasian elites who supported the colonial system, not because they were overawed by white racial superiority, but because they accrued economic and social benefits from it. During the war Japanese administrators compelled these elites to head semi-official communal institutions that were used to implement occupation policies. These policies, such as the campaign to jump-start agricultural development in Malaya and Singapore, were often disastrously executed and tarnished the reputations of local elites by association. Their loss of credibility encouraged everyday Singaporeans to embrace new political and social alternatives in the postwar, late colonial period.

Before the Second World War a British administration policed Singapore, an ethnically diverse, predominantly Chinese city, but they also consciously limited colonial interventions into the local society and economy. Individual administrators may have written up grandiose plans for the development of Singapore, but the government often lacked the will and, more importantly, the financial means to implement them. This was especially true if their policies faced opposition from the local Asian population, whose sentiments the British ridiculed in official reports but deferred to in practice (Yeoh 2003, 314). Except in cases where local movements posed a direct threat to the colonial system, the British relied on powerful Asian elites to maintain social order through a variety of religious, linguistic, and clan-based institutions. These elites were able to bolster their reputations through cooperation with the British, presenting themselves as liaisons between the myriad communities of prewar Singapore and white colonial society.

The Second World War upended these social accommodations. The Malayan Campaign

began when Japanese soldiers landed in Northern Malaya and Southern Thailand early on the morning of December 8, 1941, and ended when Singapore surrendered on February 15, 1942. Singapore was renamed Shōnan 昭南 shortly afterward and integrated into the Japanese Empire. But the violence did not end with the British surrender. Within a few days the Japanese military police, or *kempeitai* 憲兵隊, sent out a notice ordering all Chinese males between the ages of 18 and 50 to report to registration centers throughout town. After a quick interview, those the *kempeitai* considered a threat to "public peace" were put in trucks, taken to remote areas around the island, and shot, in what would come to be known as the Sook Ching 肅清 Massacre (Kratoska 1998, 95–99).

After a violent and uncertain month of direct military rule, the local Japanese military administration set up a civilian government for the Shōnan Tokubetsushi 昭南特別市, or the Shōnan Special Municipality. With the advent of "civilian rule," life in Shōnan settled into a new wartime normal, though Japanese soldiers, especially the *kempeitai*, were an ever-present threat. War planners in Tokyo had instructed Southeast Asia's military administrators to use pre-existing colonial state structures to run the Empire's new territories (Shingapōru Shiseikai 1987, 20–22). The non-European staff of the colonial administration was ordered to report to work over the course of February and March. These mid-level bureaucrats, along with the general population, set themselves to the simple task of survival, but the communal elites who had worked with the British to maintain stability in prewar Singapore found themselves thrust into new quasi-official roles.

The creation of the Oversea-Chinese Association (OCA) was the most prominent example of this process in the first months of the occupation. In his memoir of the war Shinozaki Mamoru, a former employee of the Japanese consulate, recounted a meeting with Dr. Lim Boon Keng that took place early in the occupation. Shinozaki claimed that he and Lim, a respected Anglophone Chinese leader, worked to establish the OCA as an organization that could protect local Chinese from the abuses of the military (Shinozaki 1976, 52–57). Despite its supposed intent, the OCA was soon co-opted by the military administration department, which demanded that they compensate Japan for the millions of dollars that Southeast Asian Chinese had sent to support Chiang Kaishek's war of resistance. A representative of department chief Col. Watanabe Wataru reportedly "suggested" that the Chinese in Malaya could prove their loyalty to the Emperor by offering the army "50 or 60 million dollars in cash" (Tan 1946, 6). The funds were to be collected from the Chinese population of Malaya by OCAs created for each of the Malay states. Thus the first contact most Malayan Chinese had with these new bodies, ostensibly run by their leaders and in their communal interest, was through this act of mass extortion.

The OCA continued to operate as the "voice" of the Chinese community throughout the occupation. Once the OCA handed over its $50 million forced donation it passed under the

control of the Shōnan municipality (Shinozaki 1976, 67). Meanwhile, in August that year Shinozaki joined the Shōnan municipal welfare department, or the Shōnan Tokubetsushi Minseibu 昭南特別市民生部. Shinozaki had extensive prewar contacts with local society and over the course of the occupation built up a number of communal associations that, like the OCA, could serve as a direct line between the municipal administration and the people of Shōnan.[1] By early 1944 the people of Singapore had been split into different welfare association, such as the Eurasian Welfare Association (formed Oct. 1942), the Malay Welfare Association (Dec. 1943), the Arab Welfare Association (Dec. 1943), and the Indian Welfare Association (April 1944). Many of those tapped to head these new bodies had been the leaders of the communal associations of prewar Singapore. Their role, standing between their communities and the Japanese, was superficially similar to that which they had played under the British. Yet Japanese administrators treated these associations as simple conduits for the implementation of policy, which made it impossible for their leaders to pretend to be independent liaisons between their communities and the state. This led to the erosion of their credibility in the eyes of most Singaporeans.

One of the most vivid examples of this process was the scheme to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people from Shōnan to agricultural settlements in the jungles of Malaya in late 1943 and early 1944. The Japanese invasion decimated the fleet of civilian ships that kept prewar Singapore and Malaya fed with Thai and Burmese rice. Faced with the prospect of mass starvation in Malayan cities, and the growing threat of an Allied invasion, the Japanese administration adopted an ambitions plan to send 300,000 people from Shōnan to grow food in rural Malaya. Their goal was to restructure the Malayan economy, making it agriculturally self-sufficient, while removing local residents (with their suspect loyalties) to sites that were unlikely to become major battlefields (Shinozaki 1976, 97–98). Safely in the jungles, these new agriculturalists would plant vegetables, tapioca, sweet potatoes, and rice to feed Malaya's cities. The military administration delegated responsibility for the scheme's implementation to the special municipality, which further delegated the task to Shinozaki because of his relationship to the ethnic welfare associations and, through them, the local population (Shinozaki 1976, 98).

Two sites were chosen for Shōnan residents: a site at Endau, on the east coast of Johor, and one in the middle of the peninsula at Bahau, Negri Sembilan. Inspection parties toured the sites and concocted plans for vast, technologically advanced agricultural settlements. The OCA was given complete responsibility for developing the Endau farm site, while planning for the Bahau site mostly fell to Dr. C.J. Paglar, head of the Eurasian Welfare Association, and Adrien Devals, the Bishop of Malacca (many Eurasians were Roman Catholics). The first batch of 150 Eurasian "pioneers" left for Bahau on December 28, 1943, while approximately 300 Chinese settlers left for Endau on February 1, 1944. That summer the Shōnan municipality attempted

to set up Malay and Indian settlements in the neighboring Riau Archipelago as well (Kratoska 1998, 278). Yet the emigration of other ethnic groups never compared to that of Eurasians and Chinese: Herman Marie de Souza, a teacher and close associate of Shinozaki, estimates that some 2,000 left for Bahau (De Souza 1985), while an article from December 1944 claimed that 7,000 had settled in Endau *(Syonan Shimbun* 2604a).

Things did not go well for the new settlements, which prevented the number of immigrants from ever approaching the official goal of 300,000. The Negri Sembilan military administration felled the jungle around the Bahau site and built some rudimentary barracks. It supplied rations to the settlers until they started cultivating the land, but they were expected to clear the felled jungle, build their own homes, and till the tough, clay soil on their own. In a few months, after most of Bahau's settlers arrived, malaria tore through the community. Those afflicted were too weak to build houses or grow food. Malnutrition then spread through the settlement, making its residents even more susceptible to malaria. By August 1944 the humanitarian disaster was so extreme that even the propaganda papers in Shōnan were filled with appeals for donations to the Bahau Settlement Fund (*Syonan Shimbun* 2604b). De Souza estimates that by the end of the war 500 of the 2,000 settlers had died, his mother among them (De Souza 1985).

The Endau settlement did not experience disaster on the same scale as Bahau. Malaria was less pervasive on the coast and the OCA did not rush settlers out to Endau as they had been to Bahau. But there were other dangers. The Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), fought a guerilla war against the Japanese for the entire three-and-a-half year occupation. A majority-Chinese organization, the MPAJA produced propaganda that was particularly critical of the "collaborators" who ran the OCA. Convoys of settlers, OCA officials, and their Japanese counterparts were ambushed while travelling between Endau and Shōnan. The MPAJA even went so far as to assassinate prominent OCA leaders within in the settlement itself. Gay Wan Guay and his wife saw collaborators killed in the settlement (Gay 1984), while nurse Lee Hock Seng recalls performing post-mortems on an OCA official and his assistants killed leaving the village restaurant (Lee 2005). In the end it was Shinozaki, and not the OCA, who was able to negotiate a truce with the MPAJA (Gay 1984; Shinozaki 1976, 112). While the OCA managed to fend off humanitarian disaster at Endau, they were completely unable to counter this political challenge.

The flawed settlements in Bahau and Endau played into a larger process that discredited local elites in the eyes of their communities over the course the war. Formerly respected leaders ran communal bodies that acted as little more than unofficial branches of the Japanese military and civilian administrations of Shōnan. Brother Patricius O'Donovan, a priest at Bahau, had this to say about Paglar during a visit to the settlement:

> "Across the Settlement … rang out the sharp piercing clangour of the gong … announcing the arrival of the colony's patron Mr. Shinozaki and his aide-de-camp, Dr. Paglar, a man who did much for the settlers, even though at times his efforts went unacknowledged and underappreciated. This was partly because he always appeared in Japanese uniform." (O'Donovan 2008, 83)

Paglar and the members of the OCA were not only seen as simple subordinates to bureaucrats like Shinozaki—at times they were also physically made to look like representatives of the Japanese occupation state.

The treatment of local leaders as simple conduits for the implementation of Japanese policy made it impossible for them to pretend to be independent liaisons between their communities and the state. As a result, by the end of the occupation many old elites were referred to as puppets by locals, and specifically as hanjian 漢奸 or zougou 走狗 in the Chinese community (Chia 1986). These elites did not disappear after the war, but those who maintained social power most successfully did so by asserting their independence from the British colonial state as nationalist politicians. The most successful of these politicians came from a younger generation who worked in the lower levels of the Japanese bureaucracy but were not directly associated with the many failings of occupation policy. Japanese approaches to social control discredited earlier modes of cooperation with the colonial state, and this new generation took different approaches to politics and the state-society relationship that guided Singapore on its path to independence.

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Notes

1 The Indian Independence League and Indian National Army are a fascinating exception among these associations that lie beyond the purview of this paper (Lebra 2008).