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Collaboration and the Politics of the Twentieth Century

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Collaboration in War and Memory in East Asia: A Symposium

This article is a contribution to a symposium on collaboration in East Asia during the Asia-Pacific War and its aftermath, which addresses some of the most fraught issues in historiography, historical remembrance, and contemporary politics. It also reflects on occupation states and collaboration in Europe and postwar East Asia, while casting important light on contemporary issues of collaboration globally. How are we to assess occupation regimes that emerged in each East and Southeast Asian nation during the Pacific War, as well as in postwar nations including those occuped by the United States or other occupiers. Issues of collaboration in a post-colonial world may be equally salient in reflecting on the experiences of newly independent nations? The issues are closely intertwined with dominant nationalist ideologies that have characteristically obfuscated and dismissed collaborationist politics while establishing their own legitimacy, or what Timothy Brook calls their "untouchability". In the post Cold War milieu, and at a time when politicians on both sides of the Taiwan straits, and across the 38th parallel that divides North and South Korea, are redefining their relationships, it becomes possible to revisit the history of war, revolution, occupation and collaboration.

This symposium on war and collaboration in East Asia and globally features contributions by Timothy Brook, Prasenjit Duara, Suk-Jung Han, Heonik Kwon, a response by Brook and a further response by Margherita Zanasi. The authors examine war and collaboration in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Manchukuo, in history and memory and in comparative perspective. The symposium includes the following articles:

1. Timothy Brook, Collaboration in the History of Wartime East Asia
2. Prasenjit Duara, Collaboration and the Politics of the Twentieth Century
3. Suk-Jung Han, On the Question of Collaboration in South Korea
4. Heonik Kwon, Excavating the History of Collaboration
5. Timothy Brook, Collaboration in the Postwar
6. Margherita Zanasi, New Perspectives on Chinese Collaboration

Japan Focus anticipates and welcomes responses to the symposium. These will be published in future issues. MS

Ang Lee's 2007 movie, Lust, Caution (Se, Jie) based on a short story by Zhang Ailing, is a deeply unsettling exploration of enmity and collaboration filtered through the medium of the erotic.[*] The Chinese head of the Japanese Secret Service in 1942 Shanghai, Mr Yee, develops a sexual relationship with the winsome Mrs Mak who is a secret agent for the resistance and seeks to lure him to his assassination. The film maker skillfully utilizes the torrid sexual encounters between the two to register their ever-changing and volatile feelings of lust, hatred, violence and love.

In one scene, Mrs Mak, whose true name is Wong Chia Chi, is very confused and overwhelmed by the gradual overtaking of her real self by her performance as lover. She reports to her superiors in the resistance, "He knows better than you how to act the part. He not only gets inside me, but he worms his way into my heart. I take him in like a slave.....Every time when he finally collapses on me, I think, maybe this is it, maybe this is the moment you'll come and shoot him, right in the back of the head, and his blood and brains will cover me!"

Lust/Caution

But it is not only Wong Chia Chi who is seduced by the enemy. The steely Mr. Yee himself admits as much in a tavern filled with drunken Japanese officers. Responding to her comment that he actually wants her to be his whore, he says, alluding to the Japanese, "So you see, I know better than you how to be a whore." Lust, Caution may be read as a critique of ideologies such as

imperialism or nationalism, and the instrumentalization of people that they entail. It focuses not on alternatives ideologies, but on the seething realities that ideologies miss, on the confusions of will and desire, the necessities of survival and other bodily matters.

Although presented in a less intimate register, Timothy Brook's essay, and the fuller account in his book,[1] also seeks to explore collaboration through the complex tissue of motives, actions and results: how people intended to behave, how they actually behaved, and what consequences resulted from their choices in the face of a ruthless occupation and war. Where the nationalist sees a stable, if not Manichean, distinction between imperialist and nationalist, invader and invaded, occupier and occupied, the historian must explore the unstable multifaceted terms of the relationships at the level of individual and social choice.

Brook argues that collaboration and resistance have been judged harshly not only by nationalist yardsticks but by norms of humanitarianism and other moral expressions that also do not do justice to the historical record. At the local- or even micro-level we see how a single act could have unimagined repercussions, as when lower level "collaborators" succeed in derailing the entire edifice of the occupation's administrative structure; or when the resistance of the guerilla forces to the occupation could subject an entire population to devastating Japanese military recrimination. Brook also pays equal attention to the mentality of the Japanese agents who try to recruit Chinese supporters at the lowest levels of this enterprise. We are left to decide just how self-delusionary was the Mantetsu agent who saw himself fulfilling the great mission of saving China and Asia in the face of the unimaginable horrors perpetrated by his military.

South Manchurian Railroad . . . symbol of Japanese power and industrialization

Brook's book is worth reading because his provocative conclusions, presented here, derive from a close empirical study following demanding methodical procedures of historical investigation. Brook hews closely to his principal sources and texts, which he both utilizes and interrogates. He cross-examines Chinese and Japanese, collaborative and denunciatory, occupier and resistor texts, often with regard to the same phenomenon, if not the same event or person to challenge the reader's comfortable assumptions.

The study gives us a picture, first of all, of how the Japanese military and associated agencies sought to establish administrative power. It provides a crucial piece of the story of the most ambitious effort at building a regional empire in twentieth century Asia at the ground level. Although Brook selects his cases from the lower Yangtze valley including Shanghai and Nanjing, they allow us to see the patterns of similarity and difference quite well and even hint at systematic differences along an urban-rural continuum.

It is instructive to compare collaboration in Central China with that in Manchukuo and Hong Kong, two places where I have done some research. Two aspects seem to have been crucial to the Japanese pattern of soliciting collaborators among the Chinese: the rhetoric of pan-Asianism and the massive expansion of government and state-sponsored institutions or a kind of imperialist state-building. Both were integral to the new imperialism, which I have discussed elsewhere;[2] it reflected a new relationship between the imperial power and the colonized. The conquered was to be actively mobilized for the imperialist's long term project of regional domination under the rhetoric of sameness or brotherhood (pan-Asianism) rather than difference or othering between colonizers and colonized. State expansion was a necessary part of this strategy for purposes both of mobilization and surveillance of the occupied population.

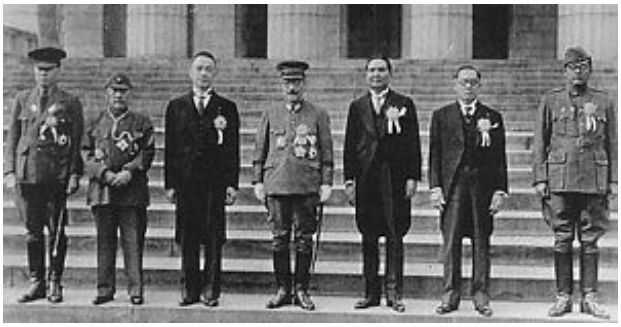
In Manchukuo, where warlordism preceding the Manchurian Incident of 1931 had produced significant alienation, the Japanese were able to not only rout the Guomindang and military opposition early, but also enlist the support—whether through active or passive co-operation-- of significant segments of the elites who had not yet been exposed to a high degree of Chinese nationalist consciousness. Over time, the occupation regime, in this case, the Guandong Army and its agents, came to be engaged in a contradictory program. On the one hand, it created large-scale opportunities for Chinese to participate in government and other state-sponsored or supported projects under the rhetoric of pan-Asianism. These included the infamous Concordia Society (Kyowakai) and the vast networks of redemptive societies, such as the Red Swastika or the Morality Society which were tied in myriad ways to the Social Welfare Department and other jiaohua (enlightening) agencies of the government. On the other hand, the domination by Japanese elites and power structures, their extractive policies and their racist attitudes towards Chinese made the situation intolerable for growing numbers of Chinese. As the heavy demands of the war fell increasingly on the puppet-state, especially after Pearl Harbor, Chinese alienation from the regime became mass-based.

Despite the late date of the Japanese invasion and occupation of Hong Kong (December 1941) when (in hindsight) the Japanese empire was foredoomed, the military utilized similar techniques to generate passive support. The astonishing speed with which the Japanese were able to wrest control of so much of Asia from the Western powers had a considerable impact on local populations in the initial stage. In Hong Kong, as in Manchukuo and Central China, Japanese local agents initially mobilized local "peace restoration" committees called Rehabilitation Advisory Committees. The rhetoric of reformist pan-Asianism was utilized both to bring the elites into a framework for collaboration as well as gain some measure of popular acquiescence for the takeover.

To US Consul Robert Ward, who left Hong Kong just before the takeover, the ideological appeal of pan-Asianism was most threatening. He saw this appeal, particularly to the poor and dispossessed, of overturning the European dominated world order in terms similar to the way analysts regard the appeal of Muslim fundamentalism today. In perhaps the most dramatized episode of pan-Asianism, the Japanese military forced British men to pull rickshaws carrying Chinese and Indians. For the professional classes,

Ward notes the importance of the tremendous expansion of the institutional infrastructure of government offering jobs and responsibilities which contrasted sharply with the situation under British colonial rule before 1942.[3]

The rhetoric of pan-Asianism was crafted differently in each case. In Manchukuo, the concord of nationalities was designed to draw in elites from the minority communities to combat the political effects of Han Chinese numerical preponderance and win minority communities to the new Japanese order. This did not mean completely writing off the Han Chinese. Pan-Asianism was also expressed through the regime's active sponsorship of Confucianism and the redemptive religious societies. In Hong Kong, pan-Asianism brought in the Eurasian elites such as Robert Koteval and others into the regime, but the Chinese high elite were more reluctant collaborators. They began to withdraw even more as it became clear that the Japanese were never going to be able to achieve their goal of creating Hong Kong as economic, ethnic and ideological hinge between the northern and southern parts of their empire. As the war proceeded, the influence of the China faction within the Japanese army was eclipsed by the dominance of the Southeast Asia group which saw the colony rather more as a portal and supply base for penetration into Southeast Asia.



Participants at the 1943 Greater East Asia Conference include Tojo Hideki (center), Wang Jingwei, to his right, and Subhas Chandra Bose of India, far right

While we may reject pan-Asianism as a cynical ploy, we cannot reject its importance in shaping the terrain in large areas of Asia in the years 1937-45. By providing a working format for many groups, at least in the initial stages of the occupation, it worked functionally as a means of integrating the Japanese empire. Religious and historical cultures which did not necessarily regard the nation-state as the ultimate or terminal community could operate within this framework as long as their values and interests were not seriously violated. Brook provides considerable evidence that religious and popular rhetoric and traditions represented an important source for legitimacy which occupation regimes tried with some success to mobilize. This was a central plank of the Japanese strategy that originated in Manchukuo and was wrapped up in pan-Asianist rhetoric.

This impact is discernible at two levels: in popular, especially rural culture, and in a more middle-class synthesis of tradition and modernity –such as the Red Swastika Society that Brook often mentions—which lay behind the flourishing redemptive societies numbering in the thousands all over China and among Chinese overseas. I cannot agree with Brook's rather dismissive understanding of this Japanese strategy as being directed only at ultra-conservative and old people and, thus, by implication, lacking historical significance. To be sure, the Japanese military was overly manipulative of this strain of culture and ultimately became too brutal even for these societies to endure. But the appeal to older Chinese traditions and their constituencies was not an ignorant stab in the dark. Consideration of the role of religious groups in a more stable period in Manchukuo (before 1937) reveals that the followers often believed that their universalist religious goals were more important than identification with the nation-state.[4] Moreover, they also believed that the Manchukuo state supported these ideals better than the KMT or Communist regimes. When the statist and militarist goals of the Japanese regime trampled on their religious ideals they also abandoned their support for the regime.

Thus, despite the domination of nationalist morality in understandings of mid-twentieth century occupations and resistance, other ideologies and ideals—religious in this case-- were hardly missing. While in the Chinese case these ideals were often, though not always, co-opted by the Japanese imperialists, this was not always the case. In contemporary Iraq, instead of nationalist resistance the resistance is deeply embedded in myriad religious and ethnic causes, interests and ideals, each of which is apparently more valued than the territorial nation of Iraq. In this situation, the distinction between collaborator, non-collaborator and resistor appears to have been radically obliterated as brutally witnessed by the rise in the death-toll everyday. Reflection on Iraq may also allow us to re-think the Chinese and Southeast Asian wartime situations in terms of the relationship between nationalist and religious ideologies and movements.

But the situation in Iraq is also likely to make some critics of nationalism a little nostalgic for the clarity it was able to impose on a messy situation. We may have reached the point in history where neither imperialism (whether with its "civilizing mission" nor pan-Asianism) nor nationalism is capable of generating coherent ideologies that can mobilize or fulfill popular aspirations. What we have today is exactly what the filmmaker Ang Lee and some critical historians have found to have been the seething reality underlying the pieties of nationalist and imperialist rhetoric (and practice). Only, the pieties —even the new ones--are in shreds, and the situation in many contemporary hot spots represents a war of all against all. Moreover, it is hardly a situation where an imperialist power can divide and rule; rather in Iraq, the superpower is being hounded if not (yet) chased out by the fierceness of a divided resistance.

Have we reached a point in the globalization and localization of the world, where global and local interests articulate to make intermediate movements such as nationalism impossible? Has collaboration itself become such a moving target that it can no longer be defined? Has it become something of which teenagers might say, "That's so twentieth century!" Do we have the resources in our historical repertoire and conceptions to grasp it? Can we formulate alternative moral standards to judge and understand human loyalties?

Notes

* Many thanks are due to Haiyan Lee for her astute and helpful comments on the first draft.

[1] Timothy Brook, Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass, 2005.

[2] See for instance, Prasenjit Duara "The New Imperialism and the Post-Colonial Developmental State: Manchukuo in Comparative Perspective" Japan Focus Jan 30, 2006.

[3] Robert Ward, Hong Kong under Japanese occupation, 18-33.

[4] See Prasenjit Duara, Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern, Rowman & Littlefield, Boulder, Co. 2003, chapters 3 and 4.

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